

**“They Didn’t Know Fat Was Awesome”: Fat Activism and Fat  
Community in Toronto, Canada**

by

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## **Abstract**

My project focuses on fat activism as a direct challenge to the discourses of the so-called “obesity epidemic.” Looking at the embodied experiences of fat activists, including my own, I look at the multiple ways fat activism is carried out in the Toronto area. I situate these experiences of fat activism in two ways. One, I look to examine both individual and group activism within and against the negative stereotypes of fatness that come from obesity epidemic discourse. Using food, fitness, and fashion, I explore how our experiences as activists work to reinscribe fatness in more positive and celebratory ways. Secondly, I investigate the individualizing discourses of obesity and the loneliness and shame these create for fat individuals. As a response to this, I examine fat community creation as a fat activist project. Within this, I explore counter-discourses of fat activism and how they work both to support fat people and revalue fatness as an embodied experience. Finally, I look at these counter-discourses to investigate issues of inclusion and exclusion within fat community.

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## **Introduction**

I watched as Charlotte Cooper, a well-known British fat activist and scholar, stood in front of a room full of fat activists, fat-identified individuals, academics, and various other community members in Toronto. Charlotte wore a tiara lit with multi-coloured twinkle lights broadcasting the word “epidemic.” During her performance, she spoke about her own experiences as a fat activist and emphasized the need to recognize fat activism in all its forms. Her words filled the room, pronouncing this a fat positive space: “I invite you to look around because this is what fat community looks like tonight.” This was an exciting moment for fat activism.

Fat is not simply a physical state. Fat is not the discriminatory medical definitions that are so widely disseminated, nor is it the antithesis of beauty. Rather, for Charlotte Cooper and other fat activists – and I include myself in this community - fat is an identity. Fat is radical. Fat is political. Yet this political and radical identity must tangle with dominant medical and social norms. Fat stigma and the dominant beliefs encouraged by pathologizing obesity discourses maintain that fat is unhealthy and unattractive. “Fat” is ultimately equated with “bad” (Beausoleil and Ward 9). In the process, fat – as identity – comes to be seen as devalued or marginal.

Fat and weight-based discrimination often go unexamined despite the heavy saturation of fat stigma in many Canadian societies. The current focus on an obesity epidemic contributes to and supports many of the dominant forms of fat stigma and weight bias that currently occur. Obesity discourses perpetuate problematic stereotypes

that imagine fat people as lazy, unhealthy, and gluttonous. Furthermore, the obsession with weight loss and health that comes from the obesity epidemic has resulted in a panic surrounding fatness (Beausoleil and Ward 1). Fat panic, in turn, is necessarily linked to the discrimination and stereotypes of fat individuals that are so prevalent today. In response to all of this, fat activists like Charlotte Cooper have worked and continue to work to challenge dominant conceptions of fatness. Their activism rethinks fat from a more political, more positive, and often celebratory perspective. This work and its potential for change – that is, fat activism and its possibilities – are the focus of my thesis.

I first discovered fat activism four years ago while I was living in Toronto. I was a third year undergraduate student with body image issues and a big interest in feminism. Body wise, I was larger than the socially accepted norm. In a class I took about gender and health I was assigned to critically explore the obesity epidemic and its negative social effects. I discovered critical articles that looked at the links between socioeconomic status and obesity, the individualization of health, and access to healthy foods (Herndon; Guthman). However, I was left wanting and needing more than just an analysis of the war on obesity. I wanted to find something positive, something that challenged the dominant ideas that obesity and fatness were bad, and promoted alternative messages and new ways of conceptualizing the fat body.

What I found, was Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off (PPPO). PPPO was a Toronto-based fat activist performance group founded in 1997 (Altman Bruno, *Health at Every Size Blog*). During public performances, group members handed out “fat facts,”

performed cupcake walks, and stood on the street asking passersby: “Do you think I’m fat?” (Johnston and Taylor 949). They wanted to remove the shame from being fat. As Allyson Mitchell, a founder of the group, writes: “what happens when a bunch of fairly femme-y fat dykes throw around phrases like ‘fat and happy’ or ‘fat and proud’? I’ll tell you what happens. We smash stereotypes” (217). PPPO altered my way of thinking about bodies and talking about fatness. As a group and as individuals, PPPO and its members challenged thin ideals and celebrated fat bodies. They gave people new ways of thinking about and challenging fat stigma. They were fat activists and they made me want to be a fat activist too.

A year later, I was part of a small group of students who planned a film night on our university campus. We called it a Fat Film Night. It was a night to celebrate body size diversity and bring together fat activists, students, professors and community members, and a night where we proudly used the word “FAT!” It was also my first real experience of fat activism, my first understanding of “fat community,” and my first taste of being part of it all. It was then that I knew that I wanted to continue on this path of fat activism.

### **Locating Myself**

I have a history of embodied experiences of fat stigma and of body dissatisfaction. I also have past experiences of body acceptance and fat activism. This combination of experiences is what led me to my current project. I have always struggled with body image issues, never feeling like my body was quite right. Growing up, the combination of teasing from classmates and not being able to buy clothes from the same stores as my friends contributed to my understandings of myself as the fat girl.

I was also an athlete. Until three years ago, I played competitive volleyball. Not only did this increase the pressure I felt to be thin, but it also exposed my body as different, “other” to the athletic norm. This is largely because competitive volleyball is a spectator sport; that is, one’s body – encased in a spandex uniform – is always on display. As a woman suffering from body image issues, I was torn: publicly, I was front and centre in the game; privately, I was struggling. These issues were further exacerbated through comments made by my volleyball coach during my first year of university. She told me I was “too fat” to be an effective volleyball player. As a result of this combination of factors, I felt anxiety about my body size every time I stepped onto the court. I began to believe that I needed to change my body by dieting and working out. In this way, I felt that I could improve myself, not only as an athlete but also as a person. In other words, I internalized not only fat shame, but also the accepted “redemption” narrative.

Two years later, I transferred to another university. My new volleyball coach had a very different perspective. “I don’t care what your body looks like, I care how you play,” she said. This was a turning point. I began to gain confidence in my body, and shortly after this, discovered size acceptance and the fat activism movement. I started questioning norms around bodies and health, and I even started participating in fat activism. Today, I identify myself as a fat activist, a fat athlete, and as someone who is fat positive. My fat activism permeates every aspect of my life, from my personal relationships to my academic work.

Fat activists like the members of PPPO have both informed and motivated my research on fat activism. They have also motivated me to explore my own embodied experiences as fat. However, I also recognize that, in a fat context, I am privileged by my body size. I border a “normative body type” and, as such, am able to move in and out of corporeal norms of body size. I also acknowledge that my experiences of fat stigma and body dissatisfaction are my own: they are specific and particular to my personal histories. As a middle-class, white, cis-gendered, able-bodied woman who identifies as heterosexual, I am further privileged in the ways I experience my fatness. That is to say, as a fat woman, I do not experience or face additional marginalization or discrimination because of my class, race, or ability.

### **My Project**

My research focuses broadly on fat activism in Toronto and on the multiple ways fat activists describe and understand their embodied experiences. I look both at how fat activists make meaning of their experiences and how they negotiate their identities within the larger contexts of obesity, health, and beauty. Through interviews with fat activists, and attendance at and participation in fat activist events, I explore not only how discourses of obesity and beauty impact my participants’ understanding of their experiences as fat, but also how such discourses fuel their work as fat activists. In addition to this, I examine what I call fat positive discourses (or rather, counter-discourses to obesity) themselves. I look at how my participants understand their experiences as members of a fat community and consider issues of inclusion and exclusion. Finally, I use my own experiences as a way of exploring my personal forms of

fat activism, alongside those of my participants, within these larger sociocultural contexts.

I state at the outset that I object to the term “obesity.” This term situates fatness within a medicalized and pathologized discourse. Further, it has been used to discriminate against fat bodies. As such, I reject both the term and its discourses, and am particularly attentive to the negative impact they have had and continue to have on the lived experiences of fat individuals. Given the prevalence of the term within both contemporary scholarship and politics, I am unable to work around it. Normally, I would voice my objections through the use of scare quotes; however, I have, in the context of this thesis, chosen to leave them out for the sake of readability.

## **Situating My Research**

### History of Obesity Discourses

Obesity discourses have a long history in a North American context. In her article, “The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States,” Laura Fraser states that a hundred years ago, beautiful women had plump bodies and used corsets to emphasize the fullness of their hips (11). Fat was also regarded highly in men. Peter N. Stearns maintains that a good-sized belly on a man showed prosperity and significant wealth (9). For both men and women, fatness was attributed to positive traits and often linked to high class and social status. However, Fraser observes a conceptual shift concerning fatness that occurred sometime around the end of the nineteenth century. She explains that as a result of economic shifts, more food became available to more people, and fat was no longer read as a signifier of high social class (12). Rather, thinness became a way for

“well-to-do” individuals to physically distinguish themselves from the stockier lower class and immigrant populations (Fraser 12). In other words, body size came to be linked with discourses of citizenship and national belonging. Indeed, as Amy Erdman Farrell observes, by the early 1900s fat was regularly linked with ethnicity and thinness became a sign of good American citizenship (76).

This link between body size and citizenship was most notable during times of war. Eating properly became a patriotic duty, a situation that provided opportunities to “publicize the attack on fat” (Stearns 23). The military made it clear that dieting was essential to reaching peak individual health, the kind of health that would allow people to fight for their country and be productive in the American nation’s time of need (Stearns 24). Deborah McPhail suggests that similar ideologies pervaded the Cold War era, a period during which questions of obesity fuelled social and political anxieties about the “soft” American nation and the impending war (“Tubby” 1030). Obesity was considered a risk and citizens were perceived as lazy and *unfit* for battle. Within this ideological system, good citizenship status was directly correlated with so-called ideal body weight.

Contemporary ideologies are not all that different. As Julie Guthman observes: “thinness... [is] viewed as a reflection of self-control and personal responsibility regardless of whether it is even consciously pursued” (193). That is to say, thin individuals are often considered good citizens even if they are not directly engaging in diet and exercise to maintain their size. Fatness thus remains linked with ideas of good citizenship and citizen responsibility.

## Obesity in a Contemporary Canadian Context

Today, fat is considered a serious global issue. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared that fat – or rather, obesity – has reached epidemic proportions on a global scale (McPhail, “WHO” 23). According to McPhail, this concern with global obesity problems contributes to and sets the stage for the continuing proliferation of more local (national, provincial, and city-wide) discussions regarding obesity (“WHO” 23). In Canada, some of these local discussions have been undertaken by organizations such as the Canadian Obesity Network (CON), whose vision is “to reduce the mental, physical and economic burden of obesity on Canadians” (CON 2012). Interestingly, CON has recently begun focusing on addressing the social stigma associated with obesity, as part of its strategic goals (CON 2012).

Despite this recent effort to recognize the negative social effects of naming an obesity epidemic, fat and weight stigma are still prevalent within Canadian society. The British Columbia Ministry of Health website, *Healthlink BC*, provides public access to information encouraging weight-loss as a necessary part of a healthy lifestyle, in the process wrongly equating fat with bad health (Healthlink BC 2012). In Ontario, as Jennings observes, many pages on the official Province of Ontario’s “Healthy Ontario” site show both a strong anti-fat stance and a heavy promotion of Body Mass Index (BMI) as a direct indicator of health (90). This is reflected in comments made by Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health, Sheela Basrur, who wrote, in a 2004 report on healthy weights: “an epidemic of overweight and obesity is threatening Ontario’s health” (Basrur). Basrur also called the Ontario obesity rates “alarming” and stated that the

epidemic was caused, in part, by Ontario citizens' lack of willpower (Basrur). In both British Columbia and Ontario, obesity is still considered a health crisis, and one that has been caused by individuals.

In Eastern Canada, meanwhile, many scholars report that the rates of obesity are increasing, with Atlantic Provinces such as P.E.I. and Newfoundland and Labrador being areas of particular concern (Beausoleil and Ward 4). In fact, government documents from New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island go as far as to define obesity as a disease (Beausoleil and Ward 7). In response to these concerns, provincial governments have introduced a range of public health campaigns. Prince Edward Island's *Strategy for Healthy Living* promotes active living as a solution to obesity yet also, and problematically, promotes using the BMI as indicator of healthy weights (Beausoleil and Ward 8). In Nova Scotia, meanwhile, the *Active Kids Healthy Kids Strategy* promotes increased physical activity and advocates healthy eating to address the assumed health risks associated with being overweight. (Beausoleil and Ward 7). Through approaches such as these, health is constructed in terms of physical activity, or perhaps more accurately, in terms that pit activity against sloth (Rail 146), an approach that further entrenches dominant fat stereotypes.

Claims about the alarming rates of obesity, such as those made by WHO and various provincial health organizations and campaigns, provide a foundation for mainstream obesity science (Campos; Rich and Evans; Ward). Many critical obesity scholars note that this alarmist approach to obesity contributes to an overall obesity panic (Beausoleil; Campos; Ernsberger; Gard and Wright; McPhail "Tubby Hubby"; Ward). In

response, these critical scholars work to challenge mainstream ideas surrounding obesity. For example, in *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality, and Ideology*, Michael Gard and Jan Wright argue that obesity talk is more about preconceived notions of fatness than about actual evidence (3). Critical obesity scholars contend that knowledge and “facts” are based on assumptions rather than evidence, and the most common measure for obesity, the BMI, is an arbitrary tool (Gard and Wright; Beasoleil; Wann, “Foreword”). Wann explains that in 1998, the BMI cut-off points defining obese and overweight were lowered, thus overnight causing an increase in obesity statistics (“Foreword” xiv). Indeed, as Deborah Lupton suggests, a poststructural perspective on obesity maintains that the condition of obesity did not even exist until a decision was made that “a certain constellation of body characteristics should be given this name” (8). However, although critical scholars have pointed out the inherent contradictions and questions surrounding obesity facts and challenged the mechanistic view of the body and promotion of dieting and weight loss that comes from obesity discourses, obesity is still perceived as a threat to society (Rail et al. 260).

### The Impacts of Obesity Discourse

Although many critical scholars are working to debunk the so-called scientific “facts” of obesity science, my research focuses more on the repercussions and negative effects that this hyper-awareness of obesity has created. In 2006, the US Surgeon General announced a war on obesity, heightening awareness around weight gain and insisting that obesity is a threat (Lyons 79). In 2013 the American Medical Association declared obesity a disease (CBC 2013). A war on obesity implies a subsequent war on fat

individuals, a reality that has resulted in a general conflation of fatness with bad health and thinness with wellbeing (Beausoleil and Ward 1). The misconception that all fat individuals must be unhealthy reinforces diet and weight-loss culture as the best and only means to achieving health, and further, labels all those who do not fit normative ideals of thinness as being “at risk.” Labeling bodies as “at risk” not only increases fat panic and fat stigma, but can also lead to low self-esteem, body image issues, and disordered eating (Beausoleil; Beausoleil and Ward; Larkin and Rice; Rail). In addition to this, obesity discourses have permeated public conversations, with the result that fat people have come to be viewed as not only unhealthy and unattractive, but also, in popular culture and interpersonal interactions, as revolting (LeBesco, *Revolting* 5). In LeBesco’s words, fat individuals become “agents of abhorrence and disgust” (*Revolting* 5).

Medicalized discourses about the obesity epidemic hold fat people responsible for their “condition,” maintaining that fatness signifies a lack of control or restraint (Nichter 39). Obesity discourses often dictate that fat individuals need to change, and, in the process, offer them a way, through diet and exercise, to change for the better (Wright 2). Thinness, meanwhile, becomes read without question as a sign of personal responsibility (Guthman 193).

### Fat and Weight Stigma, Phobia, and Discrimination

Fat stigma, like all other forms of stigma, is relative to context (Farrell 7). Because of the North American panic around obesity, our Canadian society is saturated with fat stigma, fat prejudice, and fat hate. Although areas such as race and gender have a rich tradition of research, social action, and advocacy, fat and weight are areas that lag

behind in progress and policy making (Brownwell; Rice “Embodied”; Wann *Fat!So*). Carla Rice posits that appearance and size should not be ignored or considered within more accepted analytical categories, such as race, gender, and class (“Embodied” 246). After all, body size is also an integral part of one’s identity and experience. Furthermore, because weight is considered by many to be an acceptable form of discrimination, fat hatred and stigmatization often go unchallenged and unnoticed. Indeed, the practice of fat discrimination is sometimes even congratulated. As Marilyn Wann, a fat activist and fat theorist, observes, “every person who lives in a fat-hating culture inevitably absorbs anti-fat beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes, and also inevitably comes to occupy a position in relation to power arrangements that are based on weight” (“Foreword” xi). Societal fat oppression, therefore, affects and/or is affected by everyone.

Fat stigma often operates under the guise of health. As noted previously, healthist discourses often place responsibility for health on individual bodies (Beausoleil; Beausoleil and Rail; Guthman; Ward), which results in an understanding that fat is both a physical stigma *and* a character stigma, in that negative assumptions are made about a person based on the presence of fat (Farrell 7; see also Gard and Wright; Ward). Allyson Mitchell, a fat and queer theorist and fat activist states, “we are told and we tell ourselves that our lack of ‘control’ or ‘restraint’ can be read on our bodies and in doing so we frantically attempt to escape our fat (ie. develop eating disorders, personal trainers, diets etc.)” (217). As a result of this stigmatization, it is not uncommon to hear that fat stigma is beneficial because it acts as an incentive for individuals to lose weight, a statement that operates under the assumption that fat people *should* lose weight.

Because fatness is seen as an individual problem, fat individuals often face extreme discrimination in various healthcare settings. For instance, any and all health-related issues are blamed on and related back to size, with weight loss being prescribed as a solution (Harris 48). In addition to this, sometimes healthcare settings are ill-equipped to treat fat patients: not only do healthcare centres sometimes lack equipment that meets the size requirements, but they may also – through the actions of individual doctors – refuse to perform medical procedures (such as operations) until fat patients lose weight (Harris 49). A recent example of this pertains to fat women’s lack of access to fertility treatments (Abraham, *Globe and Mail*; Gillis, *Toronto Sun*).

Fat stigma can be found not only within the health sector, but also in a variety of spaces including schools, workplaces, gyms, housing, and in everyday social interactions, to name a few (Lupton; Lyons; Huff). With the overarching belief that thin is the only way to be healthy and happy, fat stigma operates in society to maintain thin privilege and weight-based power relations. Fat stigma, then, permeates every aspect and area of Canadian society.

### Gender and Fat Stigma

While it is important to acknowledge Carla Rice’s point that fat, as a matter of social justice, should be considered as a stand-alone marker of identity, it is nevertheless clear that gender plays an extremely important role in the stigmatization of fat bodies. Deborah McPhail notes that there is a feminization of fat, stating that the “fat body, by its sheer mass, represents the abject, and, as such is inherently feminine” (“Tubby Hubby” 1025). In a patriarchal society, women are particularly susceptible to fat stigma and

abjection since fat women, as both fat and female, are too much abject embodiment and too much “exaggerated femininity” for the patriarchy to handle (McPhail, “Tubby Hubby” 1026). Similarly, as women have traditionally been relegated to the private sphere and expected to take up as little space as possible, fat women are further stigmatized for taking up too much public space (Hartley 70).

What intensifies fat stigma for women even further, as Royce observes, are the increasingly narrow beauty standards to which women in North America must adhere (Royce 151). As LeBesco maintains, “fat is the antithesis of the beauty ideal of the day; tight, lean, and toned” (*Revolting* 1). Indeed, Carla Rice posits that “consequences of body size standards and stereotypes are especially exacting and far-reaching for girls and women, who encounter frequent evaluation of physical appearance and difference as part of their social experience of gender” (“Fat Girl” 158). Rice examines how negative social and medical messages around fatness contribute to women’s experiences or understanding of “becoming the fat girl.” These messages impact young women’s emerging social identities, particularly gender (Rice, “Fat Girl” 158). Many other scholars agree that concerns about health are used to mask deeper concerns around body ideals, beauty, and attractiveness, as what is healthy becomes intrinsically tied to what is beautiful (Rice, “Fat Girl” and “Embodied”; Beausoleil; Rail; Larkin and Rice; Ward).

### Fat Activism

Fat activism challenges negative assumptions and stereotypes of fatness and works to change the way fat people are treated and thought about in society. Fat activism emerged in the 1960s, around the same time as the gay liberation movement, second

wave feminism, and anti-war movements, among many other civil rights movements of the period (Farrell 140). Similar to other “rights” movements at the time, which were based on a collective identity and centered on challenging the oppressions they faced, fat activists mobilized around the collective identity of “fat” (Farrell 140). In 1969, Will Fabrey founded the American organization, National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). Originally called the National Organization to Aid Fat Americans, it still remains an important source for American fat advocacy today (Solovay and Rothblum 4). A few years later, in the early 1970s, a radical fat activist group from the U.S., the Fat Underground, reclaimed the word fat and penned the *Fat Liberation Manifesto*, which argued that fat people are entitled to full rights as human beings, and ended with the statement “Fat people of the world unite! You have nothing to lose!” (qtd. in Solovay and Rothblum 4; Farrell 143). In Canada, meanwhile, fat activism emerged with the founding of numerous Fat Women’s Organizations (FWOs). Among them, two—The LG5 (Lesbiennes Grosses Cinq, 1984-1992) from Quebec and a Canadian chapter of NAAFA in Ontario and Saskatchewan—sought to align themselves with the American movement (Ellison, *Large* 8).

Historically, fat activism has intersected with other rights-based social movements, among them feminist, queer, and disability movements. Movements that are based on identity politics, like the disability rights movement, or the black, feminist, gay and lesbian rights movements, resonate with fat activism as they are based on physical characteristics (Lupton 30). As Lupton posits, these movements require members to

identify with the stigmatization and marginalization associated with these characteristics in order to challenge them (30).

In fact, Charlotte Cooper observes that early feminist scholarship challenging feminine body and beauty norms, as found in works by Susie Orbach or Susan Bordo, can be viewed as contributing to contemporary fat activism, particularly fat feminism (“Queer Auto” 32). Deborah Lupton states that fat activists are overwhelmingly women who adopt a feminist politic of fat embodiment and who are themselves often fat (30). Lupton insists that this form of fat feminism, often inherent in fat politics, will not “melt away” the flesh of the fat body through political and discursive resistance, but it is by “changing the meanings of the flesh that changes the experience of living in a fat body” (81). Ellison also remarks that some Canadian Women’s Organizations— such as The Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women and the Calgary Action Committee on the Status of Women —were “explicitly feminist” and held “Fat is a Feminist Issue” consciousness-raising groups (*Large* 9). These groups were part of a larger movement of feminist health professionals working to challenge “weight preoccupation” (Ellison, *Large* 9).

Contemporary fat activism continues both to challenge the ways in which fat is understood in society and to intersect with other rights based movements and communities, in particular the LGBTQ movement. Fat activists use a variety of terms to define their work, including “fat pride,” “fat acceptance,” “size acceptance,” and “fat positive” (Lupton 29). Fat activism is performed in a number of ways and takes on multiple shapes and forms. These include ‘zines, blogs, activist organizations and

performance groups, as well as the everyday activism of lived fat experience. Among the most successful of the fat activist 'zines has been Marilyn Wann's groundbreaking *Fat!So?*, which has since been turned into a book. Online blogs and communities, known collectively as the "fat-o-sphere," are integral to the contemporary fat activist movement as they provide ways not only for fat people to connect from afar but also to easily access fat positive material (Harding and Kirby xii; Cooper, "Queer Auto" 19; see also *Big Fat Blog*; *Big Hips Red Lips*; *Dances with Fat*). Blogs such as Charlotte Cooper's *Obesity Timebomb* ([obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com/](http://obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com/)) use the internet not only to connect with others but also to resist dominant constructions of fatness. Similarly, fat activist organizations—for example, NoLose, an organization for fat queers and allies - organize conferences and create communities in which fat individuals can come together (Cooper, "Queer Auto" 19; NoLose 2013). Performance groups, like the former Toronto-based PPPO and the still active Fat Femme Mafia (now going by "FFM"), use public demonstrations as a means to challenge notions about body size and feminine beauty ideals (Johnston and Taylor 942). In addition to these manifestations, fat activism can be performed by individuals in small, everyday actions and can be as simple as enjoying an ice cream cone dramatically in public, for example (Cooper, "Queer Auto" 27).

Fat activism has also taken hold in the academy through the publication of such works as *The Fat Studies Reader* and the development of interdisciplinary research areas in Fat Studies and Critical Obesity Studies. In addition to this, the Health at Every Size Movement (HAES), which has gained some recognition within mainstream public health, also challenges the equation of fatness with health by emphasizing self-acceptance and

healthy daily practices regardless of a person's weight change (Burgard; Bacon). My work thus looks both to draw from and add to the existing literature on critical obesity studies and fat studies.

### **Thesis Outline**

In chapter 1, I develop my theoretical frameworks. I use four conceptual frameworks to investigate fat activism. These include feminist theories on embodiment, critical approaches to obesity, fat studies, and literature on community. I put these in conversation with one another to explain how I examine the embodied experiences of fat activists, both as individuals and as a community, and to explore their actions as acts of resistance to mainstream obesity discourse.

In chapter 2, I outline my methodological approach and research design. In this chapter, I explore autoethnography, self-reflexivity, discourse analysis, and feminist and fat positive approaches to doing research. I then describe my research design and my use of semi-structured interviews and personal experiences. Finally, I look at both the ethics of my research and the process of analysis.

In chapter 3, I focus on fat activism as a form of resistance to the biopedagogies of obesity. Drawing on interviews with research participants, I look at embodied experiences of fatness and fat stigma within the context of obesity, focusing in particular on the constructions of fat bodies as gluttonous, ignorant, and lazy. I then look at the ways my participants use food and fitness as a way to resist these constructions. Finally, I connect discourses of beauty and health in the context of obesity and look at how fashion is a particular site of resistance against these.

In chapter 4, I extend my analysis to consider community building as a fat activist project. I theorize fat activism as a response to the individualizing discourses of the obesity epidemic. I look at the counter-discourses of fatness taken up by fat activists in this community and the importance of them. Finally, I look at how these discourses might also work to exclude some people from a fat community, in order to explore who belongs or is excluded from it. Discussing the idea of belonging through difference, I then explore the possibilities of fat community.

Finally, in my concluding chapter, I reflect on my research processes, explore some further suggestions for fat activism, look at applications for my research, and make some concluding remarks.

It is my hope that this thesis provides ample details and a rich analysis of fat activism within the context of the obesity epidemic in order to contribute to the growing field of fat studies literature. I hope my participants' stories and experiences are highlighted throughout this project and remain at the heart of the analysis. Finally, as a fat activist, I hope this study itself serves as a form of fat activism, resisting obesity discourses through the act of challenging them in my writing.

## **Chapter 1: Theory**

Four main conceptual frameworks inform my research on fat activism: embodiment, critical obesity studies, fat studies, and theories about community. Drawing predominantly from poststructural feminist theorists who work in areas of the body, body image, and critical obesity studies, I develop a theoretical foundation through which I explore the experiences of fat activists within the larger context of obesity. I begin by exploring the concept of embodiment and fatness, with a particular emphasis on Elizabeth Grosz's ideas on corporeal embodiment. Next, I look at critical obesity scholarship, emphasizing poststructural feminist approaches to examining obesity and obesity discourses. In this section I describe the notion of "biopedagogies of obesity," using Foucault's theories of biopower as a foundation. Following this, I employ fat theories of revolt to examine how fat activists can resist biopower in order to create counter-knowledges and counter-discourses to the biopedagogies of obesity. In this section I seek to bridge the embodiment of fatness, and the experiences of being fat that come from a panic around obesity, with the actions of fat activists and the embodiment of fat pride. Finally, in the last section, I explain my conceptualization of community to show the importance of fat community to the fat activist project. I am particularly interested in community building as a response to the individualizing processes of normative obesity discourses.

### **Embodiment**

Central to the feminist philosophical project has been the repositioning, reconsideration, and retheorization of the body outside of normative patriarchal and racist conceptual frameworks. In the process, some thinkers have sought to make the body the centre of political and theoretical actions (Grosz 15). Elizabeth Grosz explains that for so-called corporeal feminist thinkers, “the body is neither brute nor passive, but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, representation” (18). My research aligns with this particular approach as I aim to make the body central to my analysis. I do not seek solely to interrogate the fat body, but rather want to explore how obesity panic, fat stigma, and fat activism impact the embodied experiences of fatness.

Looking at the embodied experiences of fat activists necessarily requires taking into consideration how the overarching power structures, discourses, and dominant understandings come to attach meanings to the fat body. The meanings attached to fat bodies, and the ways in which fat individuals come to understand their bodies, emerge from the political, the historical, the cultural, and the social. To see fat as simply biological would be to ignore how fat hatred and fat discrimination have come to exist and deny the unique experiences that come only to those who are fat. In this sense, when examining the conversations I have had with fat activists about their lived experiences, I operate from the understanding that meanings are attached to certain bodies, and this affects and influences their embodied experiences as fat.

To examine the embodied experiences of fat activists, I employ the work of Elizabeth Grosz, drawing in particular on her concept of corporeal embodiment. Grosz,

who builds on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, states, “I am not able to stand back from the body and its experiences to reflect on them; this withdrawal is not able to grasp my body-as-it-is-lived-by-me. I have access to knowledge of my body only by living it” (86). Examining the body as it is experienced in relation to larger social and cultural contexts allows for an exploration of the subjective, emotional, and social aspects that shape specific personal realities. These are not true realities, but understood or perceived realities. Therefore, when Grosz discusses embodiment, she is not interested in the abstract; rather, she is interested in how the body is “experienced and rendered meaningful” (33).

In relation to Grosz, Tonja van den Ende explores the notion of embodied differences and identity. She conceptualizes embodied differences as “being lived and experienced in and through the body, and as constituting an important part of one’s identity” (142). Embodied differences, or rather, the experience of embodying difference, become important to an individual’s sense of identity. For van den Ende, identity is never static. It is a conscious and unconscious continuous process of construction and becomes individual to each person (145). Yet, as she observes, the embodied experience cannot be simply purely subjective. It must be understood as a network of personal, social, and cultural meanings (van den Ende 145). Therefore, although identity is individual, it is understood through embodied experience in relation to larger contexts. Because such contexts are not static, identity, too, is not static.

To examine questions of embodied experience and identity, it is important to look further and explore how bodies take on meaning in larger social and cultural contexts.

Elizabeth Grosz calls this corporeal inscription. She observes that inscriptions of cultural and personal values and norms categorize bodies into socially significant groups (142). In the process, the body is involuntarily marked by external forces. However, Grosz argues that it is also corporeally inscribed through “voluntary” procedures, behaviours, habits, and life-styles (142). By this she means to suggest that, through “voluntary” actions, bodies become open to dominant power structures and become marked, or inscribed, with certain meanings. These corporeal inscriptions impact the embodied experiences one has.

Through corporeal inscription, the body is marked as an appropriate or inappropriate body for its cultural context and requirements (Grosz 142). In other words, inscriptions such as body size mark the body as socially in/appropriate. Bodies inscribed as inappropriate will have embodied differences, to borrow from van den Ende, and will become marked as “other,” less than, and not good enough. It is in this sense that the body “is marked, scarred, transformed, and written upon or constructed by the various regimes of institutional, discursive, and nondiscursive power as a particular kind of body” (Grosz 33).

Building on Grosz’s notion of corporeal inscription, Margit Shildrick insists that certain bodies, in their assumed failure to approximate to corporeal norms, are radically excluded (38). This radical exclusion leads to embodied experiences of marginalization and stigmatization on the part of those who are witness to this body, and shame on the individual who must live this experience. Shildrick posits that bodies marked by difference can be theorized as monstrous, stating, “the monstrous is not simply alien, but always arouses the contradictory responses of denial *and* recognition, disgust *and*

empathy, exclusion *and* identification” (40). Embodied experiences of difference elicit these kinds of contradictory responses, for example, of disgust and empathy, towards someone who is considered different. Thus, it is possible that van den Ende’s notion of identity can be explored through Shildrick’s idea of exclusion. It is through embodying difference that some people are radically excluded and further, radical exclusion is based on larger power structures. It is then through the process of individual and societal inclusions and exclusions that our identities are formed and reformed through our experiences of embodied difference.

Like Shildrick, Linda Alcoff discusses the idea of seeing bodies of difference. She calls this process “perception” (Alcoff 268). How a body is perceived depends on the ways existing power structures have inscribed or marked different bodies. Alcoff explains that the way we perceive others is not a simple act of seeing, but rather is a result of the knowledges we have acquired. She posits that, “the realm of the visible, or what is taken as self-evidently visible...is recognized as a product of a specific form of perceptual practice, rather than the natural result of human sight” (268, 269). Thus, rather than simply seeing a body, perception is a perpetual process of reading and rereading bodies according to the dominant knowledges available to us. Perception is, to borrow John Berger’s terminology, a “*way of seeing*” (Berger 8; italics mine) that then becomes a form of “knowing” the body of the other. Perception and “knowing” are both deeply embodied experiences. Samantha Murray insists that we viscerally respond to others through the ways in which we “know” their bodies and what they mean to us

(“Corporeal” 363). The way we respond to others’ bodies therefore depends on how we perceive them, and this perception is based on markers or inscriptions of difference.

In my work, I use theories of embodiment and difference to explore the importance of the fat body to the experiences, identities, and actions of my participants. It is through combining Grosz’s theory of corporeal embodiment and van den Ende and Shildricks’ experiences of embodied difference and exclusion, in conjunction with the concepts of inscription and perception, that the embodied experiences of fatness can be productively explored. Theories of embodiment are thus a necessary part of my research. Indeed, the corporeality of fatness and the embodied experiences of being fat are paramount in exploring how my participants understand and negotiate their experiences as having/being fat.

The corporeal inscriptions and the reading, marking, and negative perception of fatness are all ways in which fat stigma and hatred are perpetuated. When “thin” is the culturally appropriate body type (and fat bodies are seen as not actively complying with specific norms), a fat body becomes marked as inappropriate. Corporeal inscription is therefore important in relation to this research because health and beauty norms become inscribed on bodies, in the process delegating fatness as “not normal.” Additionally, because differently situated fat bodies will be inscribed with different meanings, inscription is important to understanding diverse embodied experiences of fatness. Furthermore, it can be argued that inscription and perception ultimately fuel fat activism. In this way, fat activism can be theorized as a process of re- or counter-inscription, whereby fat activists work to challenge dominant narratives and to inscribe new, positive

corporeal meanings of fatness. Finally, it is through exploring the embodiment of fat pride or fat positivity that comes with fat activism that different possibilities can be theorized for the embodiment of fat.

### **Critical Obesity Concepts**

In addition to corporeal feminisms/feminist theories of embodiment, I also draw on poststructuralist feminist theories. More specifically, I am indebted to the work of poststructural feminist scholars working in the area of critical obesity scholarship and body image. By combining theories on embodiment with a poststructural feminist approach, I am able consider the ways in which the lived body can be brought into conversation with contemporary theoretical formulations (Somerville 47; see also Beausoleil; Rail; McPhail “Tubby Hubby”; McPhail, Chapman and Beagan; Ward). I do this to examine how experiences of fatness can be examined within the larger contexts of obesity, health, and beauty.

According to St. Pierre, poststructural feminists do not aim to find out “exactly” what is going on (477). Rather, through an examination of discourse, power, and language, poststructural feminism examines how subjects come to understand their experiences and how bodies come to take on discursive meanings. A poststructural feminist perspective thus maintains that reality is made, not found (Rail 14).

Poststructural feminism is particularly concerned with the deconstruction of language; that is, “to make visible how language operates to produce very real, material, and damaging structures in the world” (St. Pierre 481). In my research, I consider how individuals understand and make sense of their own experiences of fatness and realities

of fat through the language available within certain normative power relations. Most notably, I examine the power structures and available language within the context of the obesity epidemic. Part of this examination includes using the terms “fat” or “fatness” rather than “obese” and “obesity” as I am critical of the medicalization of bodies that these terms imply. Following scholars such as Deborah McPhail, Jan Wright, Natalie Beausoleil, and Pamela Ward, I take a critical approach to obesity in order to question and challenge mainstream and biomedical understandings of fatness, and the social and cultural implications these understandings create. Critically examining obesity and discourses of obesity allows me to explore fatness and the meanings around fatness in our current North American panic around body size and fat (Beausoleil and Ward 1). This fat panic comes from a hyper-emphasis on obesity, weight loss, and dieting, and impacts what it means to embody fatness. As Michael Gard and Jan Wright point out, what is striking about the current situation of obesity panic is the extent to which talk about obesity, obesity science, and knowledge claims have infiltrated everyday talk (17). It is this infiltration of everyday talk that most concerns me as I am interested in how obesity discourses affect the everyday embodied experiences of fat activists.

In order to better understand a poststructural feminist approach to critical obesity studies, I begin with an overview of Foucault’s examination of power. Foucault states that power is everywhere, comes from everywhere, and is produced from one moment to the next (*History* 93). That is to say, power is enacted and re-enacted across and through multiple sites in multiple ways. For Foucault, power cannot be “acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from

innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (*History* 94). Foucault insists that power does not exist between those who rule and those who are ruled but rather comes from below, working differently than earlier forms of sovereign power (*History* 94).

Foucault calls the shift from sovereign power to disciplinary power “biopower,” or the power over life (*History* 138). That is to say that biopower, as Foucault theorizes it, works to control everyday lives of individuals and regularize populations in societies. Foucault’s concept of biopower is crucial to the shift from sovereign power to a “disciplinary society” (*Discipline* 209). In a disciplinary society, individuals and populations are controlled through mechanisms of self-surveillance and self-discipline. Power therefore works via individuals who discipline themselves (Harwood 19). This form of power places responsibility on individuals to be disciplined and fit certain norms; those not doing so are seen as having failed. Foucault uses the term “biopolitics” to examine this self-discipline and self-governmentality, or rather, control of populations, through biopower.

For Foucault, power and knowledge are inextricably linked. Foucault writes, “power and knowledge directly imply one another; there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (*Discipline* 27). Knowledge, which Foucault insists people take as “truth,” constitutes power, and power in turn constitutes knowledge, most notably through, and from, the uptake of discourse. Discourse is defined by Foucault as “practices that systematically form the objects of

which they speak” (*Archeology* 49). Therefore, it is through discourse that knowledge and power work to control individuals and populations.

Drawing from Foucault’s notion of biopower, certain critical obesity scholars such as Jan Wright, Valerie Harwood, Geneviève Rail, and Natalie Beausoleil have explored the notion of biopedagogies of obesity and how these are enacted across social and institutional sites. In particular, these scholars examine Foucault’s necessary linking of power, knowledge, and “truth” in his theories of power relations. In her introductory chapter in *Biopolitics and the Obesity Epidemic*, Jan Wright defines and lays out a foundation for understanding the biopedagogies of obesity. She begins by defining biopedagogies as “disciplinary and regulatory strategies that enable the governing of bodies in the name of health and life” (Wright 8). Biopedagogical practices produce “truths” associated with the obesity epidemic that work to regulate populations and discipline individuals into taking action in the name of obesity (Wright 9). Furthermore, biopedagogies, as Wright argues, “not only place individuals under constant surveillance but also press them towards increasingly monitoring themselves, often through increasing their *knowledge* around obesity related risks, and ‘instructing’ them on how to eat healthily, and stay active” (1, italics original). Those perceived as not following these “instructions” of obesity are considered to be not only immoral, but also, in their immorality, failed citizens.

Building on Wright, Valerie Harwood discusses biopedagogies and their particular relationship to biopower in detail. She insists that biopower works to define societal norms and create normalizing practices and mechanisms, both of which are

evident in the biopedagogies of obesity and health (19). These biopedagogies create societal norms and practices that teach what it means to be healthy, what it means to be fat, and what it means to be thin. Harwood posits, “biopedagogies occur in myriad political sites involved in the construction of identities that instruct and inform meaning” (21). Biopedagogies of obesity, then, have huge implications in the construction of identity in relation to health, body size, and worth. Biopedagogies, in other words, “teach” ways of life (Harwood 21). Furthermore, Harwood insists that biopedagogies perpetuate discourses of truth, which are particularly evident in obesity discourse (24). Obesity discourses thus become forms of knowledge that are taken as health truths and facts.

Expanding on Wright and Harwood, Halse explores how obesity-related discourses become “virtue discourses” (47), connecting the biopedagogies of obesity with individualization, morality, and responsibility. Halse defines virtue discourses as “sets of values, beliefs, practices and behaviours that establish regimes of truth and shape subjects and subjectivities by articulating and constructing particular behaviours and qualities as worthy, desirable, and necessary virtues” (47). Obesity discourses, such as those described by Halse, contribute to the negative stereotypes of fatness that I have previously outlined.

Moving from the theoretical aspects of the biopedagogies of obesity as defined by Wright and Harwood and explored by Halse, I turn to the work of Geneviève Rail. Rail offers an examination of the material and embodied effects of obesity discourse and examines the connections of biopedagogies of obesity with discursive constructions of

health as understood by youth (142, 143). Perhaps unsurprisingly, she observed in her study that youth were influenced by dominant health and body discourses (145). In particular, Rail reports that some participants' constructions of health meant not being too fat, overweight, or obese (145). Furthermore, she theorizes that dominant discourses of health are tied into larger discourses of masculinity, femininity, heteronormativity, and appearance (151). In this work, Rail thus draws explicit links not only between biopedagogies of health and questions of beauty, but also between fat embodiment, fat stigma, and gender issues, also explored by Carla Rice.

Rail also posits that resistance can be theorized with her participants as their notions of being healthy contradicted their actions of "doing health" (150). Her research shows that although her participants knew certain foods were unhealthy, they ate them anyway (Rail 150). Deborah McPhail's work on healthy eating and healthy weights in Newfoundland and Labrador also explores the idea of resisting biopedagogies of health. Her participants resisted, or "delegitimized," biopedagogies of health through voiced skepticism of how achievable healthy eating was and through a general wariness of dominant conversations on health and body weight ("Resisting" 297). For example, one of her participants described other practices, such as drinking water, that she believed were more important to health than the factor of weight (McPhail, "Resisting" 298). Although scholars such as McPhail, Rail, and Beausoleil agree that resistance to biopedagogies of obesity is possible, others disagree. Cliff and Wright insist that the "fear of fat" has been normalized and institutionalized, making it difficult to move away from body pedagogies (230).

But indeed, from a poststructural perspective, there is always room for resistance within regimes of power. Such resistance must happen from within, because, from a Foucauldian perspective, we do not and cannot exist outside of relations of power. As Foucault states, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority” (*History* 95). For Foucault, then, power is not always negative. Rather, power is productive of reality (St. Pierre 491). There is not only a potential for resistance but also, in relation to this, the potential to create new realities. Foucault insists, however, that there is no single point, sole rebellion, and single source of the revolutionary. Rather, multiple resistances are possible within the field of power relations (Foucault, *History* 96). These resistances are not revolutionary in the traditional sense; rather, they are reform-oriented: as mobile and transitory points, resistances shift, fracture, regroup and remold rather than changing power structures altogether (Foucault, *History* 96). In other words, while resistance is intrinsic to relations of power, it can only alter, rather than completely change or reverse, power relations. For Foucault, resistances range from the radical to the small and mundane but always occur *within* existing power structures. One way of resisting, as Valerie Harwood suggests, is through entering discourse. Entering discourse, which serves to discipline the body, can be used to oppose and resist models of domination (Harwood 26). By opening up discourse, and through the creation of counter-discourses, Foucault’s multiple forms of resistance are possible.

Using Foucault’s notion of biopower, I seek to examine the ways in which fat bodies are controlled and self-surveilling, and to explore the possibilities for resistance

available to fat activists within particular regimes. Utilizing theories of biopedagogies as described by Wright and Harwood, I consider the “truths” about obesity and the ways in which individuals and populations are taught what is healthy and beautiful and how to be healthy and beautiful within them. Drawing from Halse, I specifically examine the ways in which biopedagogies of obesity perpetuate knowledge about eating healthy, exercising, and dieting through virtue discourses. This helps me to see how my participants, as fat-identified through dominant norms, understand their realities as fat. Thinking through ideas of failure, individualization, and fatness, I then theorize the importance of fat community building to a fat activist project using the described experiences of my participants. Therefore, like Rail, I seek to examine the embodied effects of the biopedagogies of obesity to understand how my participants describe their experiences with stigma, shame, and isolation within these power relations. From there, I turn to the possibilities for resistance. Using Foucault’s theories of resistance, as taken up by Harwood, I examine how fat activism – which might be seen as the active *claiming* of a fat identity rather than the external imposition of that identity – resists dominant understandings of obesity and partakes in projects of creating counter-discourses to the obesity epidemic, focusing on how my participants’ actions are creating new realities within these power relations. In addition to this, I also investigate the power relations and counter-discourses that emerge within various contexts of a fat activist community itself.

### **Fat Studies**

I find it appropriate to bridge the gap between critical obesity concepts and fat theory through my previous discussion of resistance, as I believe that fat studies, as a

field, is a form of resistance in and of itself. Fat studies scholars resist and reject mainstream understandings of fatness through their work. I myself situate my own research within the field of fat studies and have relied heavily on fat theorists as I designed, conducted, and analyzed my research. As a field, fat studies goes to the root of weight-based belief systems (Wann, “Foreword” ix). That is to say that taking a fat studies approach requires an examination of thin privilege, fat stigma, and the power relations that are based on size, without necessarily challenging or debunking the science behind mainstream obesity claims. It is essential, when using fat theory, to keep the lives of fat people “at the heart of the analysis” (Solovay and Rothblum 2).

I use fat theory to explore fat politics in relation to biopolitics and to examine my participants’ experiences of resistance as fat activists. In particular, I examine their embodied experiences as fat activists and the actions they take to reinscribe new meanings of fatness. In this thesis, the embodied experiences of my participants, as fat but also as fat activists, allow me to explore how my participants understand and have constructed a fat-positive identity within and against mainstream obesity discourse. Particularly relevant in this regard is what Kathleen LeBesco describes as a discourse of “revolt,” which works to reinscribe fatness, and how theories of “small talk” and “out of control” can be used to examine the different actions of fat activists within the realm of revolt. I also look to Samantha Murray’s critical examination of fat politics and self-love to investigate the tension of being a fat activist surrounded by fat hatred.

LeBesco articulates the notion of revolt as follows:

Viewed, then, as both unhealthy and unattractive, fat people are widely represented in popular culture and interpersonal interactions as revolting- they are agents of abhorrence and disgust. But if we think about “revolting” in a different way, we can recognize fat as neither simply an aesthetic state nor a medical condition, but a *political* situation. If we think of revolting in terms of overthrowing authority, rebelling, protesting, and rejecting, then corpulence carries a whole new weight as a subversive cultural practice that calls into question received notions about health, beauty, and nature. (*Revolting* 1-2, Italics original)

LeBesco insists on a discourse of revolt to explore the possibilities for fat resistance. By using this approach, LeBesco seeks to shift the focus away from the scientific and medical and towards the social and cultural. More specifically, the language of revolt, as imagined by LeBesco, effectively shifts the focus from the stigmatized fat body onto the terrain of social activism, in the process offering a new way of looking at and living in fat (LeBesco, “Queering” 75). Furthermore, by examining fat within larger social and cultural contexts, it may be possible to separate health from body size and, from there, examine new, positive realities for fat embodiment.

One way LeBesco believes revolt is possible is through entering discourse. In particular, she believes that this kind of resistance is possible through public performances and acts as well as smaller, individual forms of action. She examines how public performance enables subjects to play a role in how they are inscribed with meaning (LeBesco, “Queering” 81). By energetically and sometimes wildly saying what they do, groups and activists can “use rhetoric to enter themselves into discourse in

significant ways” (LeBesco, “Queering” 82). For LeBesco then, entering discourse becomes a way of resignifying the fat body through these types of public displays. LeBesco also insists that revolt is possible by examining the “power of small talk” (*Revolting 2*). She states that less attention is paid to the kind of interpersonal agency implicated in smaller everyday conversations people have with each other that “can help troubled meanings to change over time” (*Revolting 2*). It is precisely these smaller actions that can be integral in creating change on an individual level. Meanings surrounding fatness can change one small conversation at a time.

Marilyn Wann, like LeBesco, insists on a revolting or rebellious type of resistance, as she insists: “you don’t have to apologize for your size” (*Fat!So?* 12). As a response to the stigmatization and discrimination that render fat an invisible identity or experience, Wann advocates practices that stress lack of control. She argues:

If we *were* out of control, every time someone made a nasty comment about weight, we’d just sit on them until they apologized. If we got really good and out of control we’d boycott the diet industry and show them who’s boss...fat people out of control? I can’t wait! (*Fat!So?* 84, italics original)

Wann, like LeBesco, insists on the necessity of a fat positive, out of control kind of resistance; the kind of resistance that becomes part of the process of revolting.

What is evident through this “out of control” approach to activism is the importance of loving one’s body and being vocal about it. However, while this rhetoric of self-love inherent to fat politics is evocative and seductive, it may, nevertheless, be important to consider Samantha Murray’s observations. Murray emphasizes that this

rhetoric cannot deny the insecurity, inadequacy, and loneliness that still comes from living and being fat:

Fat politics talks about the fat body in terms of its possibility for resistance and the political implications of changing one's attitude. But even for the activist, this moment of resistance is an ongoing internal conflict rather than a moment of discursive rupture. ("Out" 159)

In other words, resistance is a constant struggle and everyday reality for fat activists. It is this embodied reality that I look to examine within my work.

By employing LeBesco's theory of revolt, and exploring its necessary connection to a non-apologetic approach to activism, I am able to examine how embodied experiences of fat, in a fat activist context, become political experiences that challenge the prescribed cultural norms around fatness. Thinking of fat in terms of revolt opens up space to theorize resistance within biopolitical regimes of power, particularly through and against the biopedagogies of obesity. Looking at the embodied experiences of fat activists requires me to investigate how fat positivity and subjectivity are realities of my participants. I explore how they each participate in a discourse of revolt and "get out of control" to reinscribe meanings of being and experiencing fatness, while at the same time not ignoring the struggle of doing so.

## **Community**

Finally, I employ theories of community in order to explore the inclusions and exclusions that mark the fat activist community in Toronto. An examination of fat community building is an intrinsic element in understanding the nature of fat activism as

a social justice project. In my work, I examine the embodied experiences of my participants within and outside of an assumed community, in order to explore the importance of belonging and to theorize how fat activists resist the loneliness that comes from an emphasis on an individual responsibility for “health.” In addition to this, I consider how community can be understood as a form of resistance to, or as a way of mobilizing resistance within, the power structures of the obesity epidemic

Both the term community and its meanings have been widely debated within the social sciences. Benedict Anderson insists that many factors contribute to the understanding of a formed community. Historically, he explains, increasing communications, such as the book and newspaper, allowed more people to think about themselves and to relate to others, creating new forms of “imagined community” (Anderson 36). Imagined communities, he posits, arose historically when groups could think of themselves as parallel to others, for example, immigrant communities with shared culture and experience (188). The imagined community is thus built on the grounds of commonality. Anderson’s contemporary imagined community is meaningful in that its limits transcend the boundaries of geography. Shared experience becomes the most important and critical aspect to belonging. These ideas are echoed in the work of Johnston and Longhurst, who also draw on the notion of an “imagined community” as one based on shared interests and beliefs (61). It is this definition of community from which I operate. I believe a community is built on shared experiences, ideas, and thoughts, not on location. This point is critical for my research as a large portion of fat community is built online. The imagined community, or just community as I am using it,

has value and worth to the members who identify themselves as part of it, and for that reason, the concept of fat community is particularly important to explore.

To begin my own exploration, I turn to the work of Andrew Mason. Mason employs value theory to examine the value or importance of a community to individuals as part of a collective. Mason posits that there are three ways in which a community is most valuable to the individual. First, community can be a necessary condition for the existence of an individual (Mason 55). In other words, communities help individuals to understand or claim an identity and it is through community that individuals are able to exist as they choose. Secondly, communities allow for the realization of the important value of autonomy, and third, communities allow for the realization of the various positives in one's life (Mason 55). Communities therefore provide strength to an individual to find make their own choices and find their own voice, while simultaneously providing support and encouragement so that individuals can focus on the positive aspects of their life. Belonging to a community can therefore positively impact individuals, particularly those who are marginalized as a result of their differences, identities, and experiences.

But it is, as Anderson has pointed out, equally important to consider exclusion (7). The work of Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst might be helpful in this regard. Johnston and Longhurst explore the idea of simultaneous belonging and exclusion, a framing that enables them to explore the idea of community through theorizing the notion of belonging through difference. As they state: "communities are about being on the inside, which means they are ultimately about being on the outside. They are about

belonging which means they are also about being excluded” (Johnston and Longhurst, 61). Drawing on the work of Iris Marion Young, Johnston and Longhurst criticize the notion of community because it privileges ideals of unity over difference (63). Instead, they posit the productive potential of building community through difference, an approach that might respond effectively to the contradictory politics of inclusion and exclusion that have conventionally marked questions of community formation. This understanding of community through difference is also reflected in the work of Rowe, who articulates the possibility of “radical belonging,” which “functions through reversing, or perhaps more aptly, *multiplying* the sites or resistive communities that interpolate us” (179). Both belonging through difference and a radical belonging allow for a close consideration of the politics of inclusion and exclusion that come from the formation of community.

Within this, it is also necessary to acknowledge the importance of community for individuals who may belong in different ways. Fat activism is not a monolithic project. Indeed, a consideration of multiplicity allows me to examine the possibilities of a variety of fat activists and activisms, working in a variety of spaces, and belonging to a complex and multi-faceted community. This community is further expanded through the actions and engagements of activist allies. While my work examines the creative potential of fat community building, it also explores the boundaries and tensions that emerge within the fat community. Drawing on the words of my participants and reading them through the lenses offered by Mason, Johnston and Longhurst, and Rowe, I critically examine the complexities of both inclusion and exclusion. I also look to the possibilities of

community in order to see the potential for fat community building. In doing so, I open up space to examine the fat activist community as not one hegemonic group but rather as a radical collection of diverse individuals who belong *through* their differences.

Examining community in this way can help build a more radical, queer, feminist, and fat vision through a belonging in communities of difference (Rowe 35). This is important as my participants have diverse, embodied experiences of difference, yet all identify as part of a fat community.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I laid out the theoretical foundation for my project on fat activism and the embodied experiences of self-identified fat activists. By first exploring theories of embodiment, I stressed the importance of making the fat body central to my thesis, as it is the embodied experience of fatness that my participants discuss and it is this experience that forms the basis of their activism. Next, I examined the impact of the biopedagogies of obesity on the embodied experiences of my participants. Examining the “truths” that discourses of obesity perpetuate helps in understanding how my participants’ shifting identities as fat and experiences of fat stigma fuel their desires to resist dominant constructions of fatness. Fat theories, particularly LeBesco’s theory of revolt, enable me to investigate the multiple and varying acts of resistance to obesity discourses described by my participants. Finally, I introduced theories of community. By using theories of community to think about new ways of belonging, I showed how fat community is both a tool for – and a product of – resisting the discourses of the obesity epidemic. As part of this effort, I included Samantha Murray’s writing on fat politics and her

conceptualization of the realities of loving your body all the time as important elements of my work. My participants' experiences reflect this tension between biopolitics and fat politics and it is important for me to explore not only the positive aspects but also some of the issues that occur within fat activism. In the next chapter, I build on this theoretical framework and explain in detail my research process from my methodological approach through to my data analysis.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

To conduct my research, I used a qualitative methods approach. A qualitative approach to research aims to understand how individuals make meanings of their social worlds and in Hesse-Biber's words, "privileges the exploration of the process of human meaning making" ("Qualitative" 455). As a researcher, I recognize that I have no immediate access to my participants' lived experiences; that is, as Mauthner and Doucet point out, the stories they tell and the conversations we have are purposeful, motivated, and selective (315). It is not the whole story, then, but rather the particular pieces they tell that reveal how they understand their experiences, their identities, and what may be important to them in relation to a larger context.

In this chapter I outline my research process in detail from the methodology through to my data analysis. I begin by explaining my methodological approach to my ethnographic study, including my own autoethnography, feminist researcher reflexivity, poststructural discourse analysis and the process of "doing" fat-positive research. Next, I justify my use of mixed qualitative methods and describe my methods of choice, which include memory writing, semi-structured interviews and participant-observation. I then discuss what these methods looked like in action during the data collection or fieldwork stage of my research process. Finally, I will explain my data analysis.

### **Feminist, Fat Positive Ethnography**

## Critical Ethnography and Autoethnography

I chose to use a critical ethnographic approach to examine the experiences of fat activists in Toronto. According to Hammersley and Atkinson, ethnography is “an integration of both first-hand empirical investigation and the theoretical and comparative interpretation of social organization and culture” (1). In other words, ethnography is the combination of the examination of culture and its connection to theory. A critical ethnographic approach takes this one step further. John Van Maanen insists that critical ethnography pushes researchers to move beyond traditional ethnographic interests and frameworks and to write ethnographies where “the represented culture is located within a larger historical, political, economic, social, and symbolic context” (432). Critical ethnography not only describes what is happening but looks to broader contexts to make sense of individual and group experiences. In the process, critical ethnography not only reflects but addresses inequalities (Cooper, “Queer Auto” 77). This approach allows me to observe not only what is happening and what is being said, but to go further in examination to explore how these relate to larger contexts outside of this space. Charlotte Cooper insists that critical ethnography permits researchers to adopt poststructural approaches to research that involve fat or fat individuals (“Queer Auto” 76). A critical ethnographic approach enables me to combine my observations with my theoretical perspectives in order to examine fat activism within the larger contexts of obesity, health, and beauty, and, from there, to examine the impacts of discourse on experiences. Furthermore, to enrich my ethnographic data, I chose to utilize my own experiences in my writing through the use of autoethnography.

Cooper observes that autoethnography is an ally to critical ethnography. (“Queer Auto” 77). By this she means to suggest that autoethnography, like critical ethnography, places the researcher’s experiences within larger contexts, thus adding to a critical

ethnography and providing a richer analysis. An autoethnographic approach enabled me to examine my own experience alongside those of my participants.

In her work *The Ethnographic I*, Carolyn Ellis defines autoethnography as “research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social and political” (xix; see also Ettore 536; Chang; Cooper “Queer Auto”). Heewon Chang insists that the stories of autoethnographers must be reflected upon, analyzed, and interpreted within their broader sociocultural context in order to provide a detailed analysis alongside other data (46).

In my thesis, I include my personal reflections as part of my primary data, using them to explore my experiences within the broader cultural and countercultural contexts of obesity and fat activism. For example, in the following excerpt I write about my experience at an event entitled, *Queering Fat Activism* with Charlotte Cooper. I wrote:

It was the largest fat community event I had been to, Charlotte was an all-star. I kind of wanted her Tiara. In this moment I felt more comfortable in my body, in the shorts I was wearing. I felt completely concentrated in the words she speaking, rather than the position of my body, or making sure my shirt wasn't clinging to my stomach. I looked around and realized or rather felt inspired that there were this many people in Toronto working on or interested in fat positivity.

I then examined how I described my comfort in the space, focusing on my body and body size, and then related the function of the fat activist space to these feelings. Normally I would feel more body conscious, as dominant health and beauty discourses dictate that thinness is beautiful, yet, this fat activist event challenged that, creating what I

experienced as a more comfortable space. I therefore sought to relate my own autoethnographic writing to the broader idea of health and obesity, for critical feminist approaches to autoethnography require this connection of the personal story to larger social structures (Averett; Denzin and Lincoln).

The above excerpt shows how my autoethnography required me to bring not only my stories and myself to the surface, but also my body. Ellingson observes that the bodies of researchers remain largely absent from certain accounts of research (299). As a feminist researcher who focuses on embodiment, it is important for me to include myself and my embodied experiences in the work I am doing. Tami Spry writes, “*what happens within the observer* must be made known” (711, italics original). My participation in fat activist events allowed me to write myself into observation; that is, as an observer, I also observed myself. My own personal connection to and experience with my research topic helped me to bring myself into the research. Spry insists:

When the body is erased in the process(ing) of scholarship, knowledge situated within the body is unavailable. Enfleshed knowledge is restricted by linguistic patterns of positive dualism – mind/body, objective/subjective – that fix the body as an entity incapable of literacy. (203)

It is thus important for me to follow Ellingson and Spry, and include embodied accounts of autoethnography in my work. As Ellingson states, writing the researcher’s body as a part of the text can assist in revealing the interconnectedness of the research and writing processes: “when the body speaks in this way, it incorporates lived experience in a way that is impossible in detached prose” (303). I cannot separate my embodied experiences

from the research I am conducting. My body and my history of embodied experiences as fat are inseparable from the words I write, and through autoethnography, I necessarily become an embodied researcher, placing my body and embodied experience into my work and analysis.

Drawing on the work of Butler-Kisber (65), my embodied autoethnographic narratives use narrative dialogue, self-study, and memory work to construct stories of my own experiences. I utilized both past experiences, which I wrote about through memory writing, and participant observation, both which are discussed later in this chapter. Heewon Chang states that “personal memory is a building block of autoethnography because the past gives context to the present self and memory opens up a door to the richness of the past” (71). What is recalled from the past forms the foundation for my ethnography and as an autoethnographer, I can then openly acknowledge my personal memory as a form of data generation. I discuss my use of memory work as a tool to do so in the following section. Furthermore, as Ellis and Chang observe, a researcher’s story is not the focal point but rather, enhances understandings of a topic (Ellis; Chang). As Ellis insists, “including the subjective and emotional reflections of the researcher adds context and layers to the story being told about participants” (62).

What is central to autoethnography is the practice of self-reflexivity. As Chang observes, writing autoethnography can evoke self-reflection (52). However, it is important for me to distinguish the difference between autoethnography and self-reflexivity. As I have stated previously, autoethnography takes the researcher’s story and examines the thoughts, experiences and emotions of that story within larger sociocultural

contexts. Reflexivity (which I explore in detail in the next section) is a reflection of myself as a researcher and my influence on the research process. Thus in my autoethnography, I use self-reflexivity in order to be “be thoughtful, reflexive, ethically self-aware” of the stories that I am constructing and analyzing (Etherington 31-32). This suggests that autoethnography itself can also be subject to a self-reflexive lens.

Throughout my work, I both acknowledge the relevance of autoethnography to my process and critically examine and reflect on my decision to use it.

### Feminist Research

My approach to ethnography and autoethnography has been largely informed by feminist methodological approaches to “doing research.” As numerous scholars have observed, feminism is a perspective, not a method (Speer; Harding; Hesse-Biber “Introduction”). According to Sandra Harding, feminist research lies not in the tools through which a researcher gathers data, but rather, in the ways in which these tools are used (2). Furthermore, Mauthner and Doucet observe that feminist analysis is not a discrete phase of research but instead is an ongoing process that permeates every aspect of it (124). These considerations shaped every step of my research from the initial formulation of a research topic to the writing stage of my thesis.

One component that has been central to much feminist research has been an insistence on starting from the perspective of the participants. Numerous scholars have argued that feminist research processes often open up spaces for women and marginalized groups to be heard (Harding; Olsen). Feminist research thus allows for research to be conducted on, by, and for individuals and groups who may often be left out

or marginalized further by mainstream research processes. Because fat hatred is still a prevalent form of discrimination, this point is particularly critical to my research as I attempt to put the voices of fat individuals at the centre of my work.

As noted previously, part of my feminist approach to doing research was engaging in the process of researcher self-reflexivity, often considered a distinguishing feature of feminist-informed research projects (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman 493). Reflexivity means critically reflecting on one's own lived reality and experiences and making explicit the power and power relations involved in the research process (Holland Ramazanoglu 118). As Kim Etherington writes:

I understand the researcher reflexivity as the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of inquiry. If we can be aware of how our own thoughts, feelings, culture, environment and social and personal history inform us as we dialogue with participants, transcribe their conversations with us and write our representations of the work, then perhaps we can come close to the rigour that is required of good qualitative research. (Etherington, 31-32)

More specifically, I am indebted to Carla Rice's conceptualization of embodied self-reflexivity ("Embodied" 263). Rice posits that the researcher's and the participant's physicality are frequently overlooked in discussions of reflexivity ("Embodied" 246). In her work, she reflects on her "body secrets," those embodied experiences she concealed from her participants, and how this impacted her own research. Rice insists that an

embodied reflexive approach allows a researcher to examine how bodily difference and subjectivity impact data collection and interpretation (“Embodied” 249).

I examined two things in particular in relation to my own reflexive practice. First, I considered how my body, which borders on what Rice calls a “culturally appropriate size” (“Embodied” 250), might impact both my participants’ views of me, as both a person and a researcher, and my own experiences or knowledge of being fat. I also considered whether my borderline normative appearance would create a boundary for shared experiences. Second, I considered my personal history of embodied experiences as fat in order to help me to understand and relate to my participants. More specifically, I thought about whether these experiences prompted me to ask certain questions at certain times, because I could relate to what my participants were saying (and/or whether these presumptively “shared” experience may also have excluded other questions altogether).

Rice further comments that she seeks to counter her “cautious disclosure” with accountability for the ways in which her personal experiences have influenced her interpretation of women’s stories (“Embodied” 255). Through embodied reflexivity I attempt not only to be accountable for how I interpret my participants’ words, but also, to be attentive to the ways that my openness about this history may have impacted my interactions with participants. In all of this, I remained cognizant of the fact that my embodied history of fatness, my identity as a fat athlete, and my political positioning as someone who has recently come to situate herself as fat-positive, all affect my research process.

I wrote or recorded my embodied reflexive thoughts before, during, and after interviews and events, as well as during the data analysis phase of my research. For example, following a discussion of the concept of “not fat enough” with a participant, I wrote the following reflexive passage:

My desire to justify my own position and identity as fat, prompted me to ask her this question. I felt like I couldn't identify as fat and I felt denied my own embodied experiences. In that moment, her idea of what constituted fat made me feel defensive and caused me to ask her a follow up question about people who have had embodied experiences of fat, why couldn't they fit within this community? Maybe this shows my own attempt to belong within the community we were talking about, to have her see that I belong. I might not have asked this particular question had I not experienced such doubt and confusion around my own position as fat activist.

This kind of writing allowed me to explore how my own embodied identities and experiences not only affected how I understood what my participants were saying but how I shaped the interviews process as well as the analysis phase.

### Poststructural Feminism

I approach my research from a poststructural feminist perspective. As noted in the previous chapter, a poststructural feminist approach helps me to understand how specific social relations, language, and institutional practices in the areas of health and beauty affect how my participants construct their sense of embodied self and identity (Beausoleil 94). Feminist poststructuralism acknowledges the lived, embodied realities and subjective

experiences of individuals. This is important, for it is how individuals make sense of their lives and their understood realities that acts a starting point for understanding the ways that discourses continue to “structure social relations” (Baxter 30).

Furthermore, a poststructural feminist approach enables me to gain insight into how language comes to constitute reality (Ward 65). Discourse, poststructuralist thinkers contend, is never simply linguistic; rather, it organizes ways of thinking into ways of acting in the world (St. Pierre 486). Foucault insists that we must see discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (*Archeology* 49). In relation to Foucault’s point, Baxter explains, “discourses are forms of knowledge or powerful sets of assumptions, expectations and explanations governing mainstream social and cultural practices” (7). Discourses then impact, or govern, the ways in which individuals and groups construct and understand social and cultural norms. Indeed, as Starks and Trinidad observe, language mediates and constructs how we understand our reality and defines the social roles that are available to us (1374). As it is impossible to discuss fatness in our current cultural context without recognizing the power of the obesity epidemic, I wanted to explore how my participants discussed their experiences in relation to the overarching dominant discourses of obesity. By being aware of how the experiences of my participants relate to or resist the dominant discourses on health and beauty (as dictated by the biopedagogies of obesity), I am able to explore the ways in which my participants understand their embodied experiences as fat.

I utilize a feminist poststructural discourse analysis (FPDA) in my work, drawing from the work of Judith Baxter. Baxter defines a FPDA as “an approach to analyzing the

ways in which speakers negotiate their identities, relationships, and positions in their world according to the ways in which they are located by competing yet interwoven discourse” (1). FPDA aims to demonstrate how subjects can shift between different positions of power, and different forms of identity, within a given moment or context (Baxter 49). That is to say that this form of analysis does not assume that discourses fix subject positions, but looks at the ways in which they move in and out of multiple, and sometimes competing, positions of power within and against certain discourses. Baxter further posits that since FPDA has an explicitly feminist focus, locating and analyzing contexts where silenced or marginalized voices may be heard is extremely important (54). Additionally, an FPDA approach acknowledges the possibilities for women and marginalized groups to adopt relatively powerful positions within certain discourses and recognizes their capacity to “resist, challenge, and potentially overturn discursive practices that conventionally position them as powerless” (Baxter 55). Thus, my examination of fat activists follows this form of analysis in that I do not see my participants as solely victims or targets of fat stigma. Rather, by looking at the ways they describe their experiences, I investigate how they resist dominant discourses of obesity through their individual and group forms of activism.

### Fat Positive Methodology

My methodological approach has also been influenced by what I term a fat-positive methodology. I came to this methodology through a process of what Marilyn Wann calls “doing fat studies” (“Foreword” ix). “Doing fat studies” includes challenging understandings of fatness as a disease and as unhealthy, and seeing the beauty in all sizes.

It offers no opposition to the simple fact of weight diversity but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality (Wann, “Foreword” x). This methodology aligns with the principles of fat activism and the ideologies of my participants; that is to say my research included no size judgments, no preconceived notions of who is healthy, and no engagement in diet or exercise talks unless facilitated by the participants. In addition to these ideologies, a fat positive methodology requires me to be conscious of my language choices throughout my research process. This means I used the term fat to identify my participants because this is the language with which they choose to self-identify. This conscious engagement with fat also helped me to more deeply explore resistant or counter-discourses.

Fat activists use fat as a way of politicizing their embodiment and as reclaiming the word for positive use. According to my participant Sarah, whose thoughts echo those of many of my participants:

I think [reclaiming fat] is just a matter of confronting a word that’s had a lot of power over people...I think it’s important to really embrace it in [my] vocabulary because it’s no longer that monster in the closet or that thing that that’ll smack you in the face when you least expect it. It doesn’t have that negative power anymore. It’s literally just a word in the dictionary that has no negative connotation.

## **Methods**

I conducted my research using a qualitative mixed methods approach. Using a combination of methods allowed me to examine fat activism from different angles, giving

my research more depth and making it more reliable (Ristock & Pennell 51). I conducted an ethnographic study of the fat activist movement in Toronto and an autoethnographic study of my experiences as a fat activist using a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and memory work.

### Semi-structured Interviews, Participant Observation, and Memory Work

I engaged in semi-structured interviews with nine self-identified fat activists in the Toronto area. Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to enter our interview with a set of questions to be discussed (see appendix A), but also allowed dialogue to develop organically, outside of a set research agenda. This enabled participants to openly express their insights and opinions beyond the interview schedule (Speer 797). As Speer points out, this approach helps to facilitate the collection of participant-led talk about pre-defined topics (797). Throughout the interviews, I worked from the premise that interview content is a joint production (Mauthner and Doucet 124). My position and location influenced what my participants said and in turn they influenced the questions I asked. Together we produced an interview experience that was unique to our specific interaction. However, I must emphasize that my participants' views, ideas, and stories were not and can never be independent of the conditions of this production (Riessman 315); that is, they are specific to the social and cultural context in which they were produced. These interviews on fat activism highlighted the socio-cultural oppressive nature of obesity. It would have been impossible to conduct these interviews, given the current state of panic around fatness, without participants sharing similar stories of size discrimination. As such, my research interviews were collaborative conversations that

involved a give and take between two speakers operating *within* the constraints of broader social discourses (Riessman 315, italics mine).

To complement my participants' interviews, I also used a critical ethnographic approach of participant observation. According to Gobo, the value of participant observation lies in linking the actions and behaviors observed in the field to the opinions and attitudes of the participants discussed in the interviews (26). I took part in a small fat hangout and two plus size fitness classes as a participant observer. Participation in these activities allowed me to examine how fat activists negotiate fat identities, community, and activism in specific fat positive spaces. More specifically, I looked for what was being said and done in these spaces, and how these activities and conversations related to broader social ideas. I kept a field notes journal where I recorded observations, possible analysis topics and themes, and reflexive notes, both during and after the events and activities.

In addition to this, I also utilized memory work as a tool by drawing on my past experiences with fat stigma and as a fat activist. In particular, I focused on my participation in two fat activist events: a large community event featuring guest speaker, Charlotte Cooper, and a university campus event entitled Fat Film Night. This type of memory work involves recalling and collecting data, or memories, from the past and writing about your personal interpretation of those experiences (Chang 71). These then serve as textual primary data for the research. In my work, I combined initial writing exercises about past experiences – which served as a catalyst to develop my project – with thematic writing that allowed me to bring broader concepts into focus. By utilizing

the tool of memory work, I was able to then develop a research design that included the interviews and observation I discussed above.

## **Methods in Action**

### Context and location

I conducted my research in the local context of Toronto, Ontario. I chose Toronto for two reasons. One, I have personal ties there. As someone who has participated in fat activism in Toronto before, I not only wanted to go back and contribute to the growing community but I also wanted to use my connections to jump start my research process. Two, Toronto is home to a vibrant and growing fat activist community, which made it an ideal site for exploring concepts such as “community” and “belonging.” I undertook my fieldwork in the Fall of 2012. My research process lasted approximately 10 weeks including recruitment and interview stages. During this period I conducted nine semi-structured interviews and attended three events.

### Participant Recruitment

Corresponding to the current literature on fat activism, I recognize that fat activism can take on many and multiple forms. Because of this, I spoke to anyone who self-identifies as a “fat activist” (for example, performance activists, online bloggers, academics etc.). My participants thus shaped my definition of fat activist and the participants themselves defined the parameters of involvement for my research. I made my initial contact for participants based on past relationships with two fat activists in the area. From there, I used a snowball method, utilizing their connections to identify other

possible participants. I also sought participants through an advertisement or “call-out” (see appendix B) placed on a Facebook page entitled *Plump it Up Toronto* (“About” *Plump it Up Toronto*) and the Fat, Awesome, and Queer (FAQ) group’s Facebook page (“About” FAQ). *Plump it up Toronto* is a Facebook page and “fat positive network in Toronto” (“About”). Their page offers subscribed members a way to keep in touch with each other, notify each other of upcoming events, share ideas and experiences and seek help (“About” *Plump it Up Toronto*). It is a public page open to any interested parties. FAQ’s Facebook page states, “this is a group for seriously awesome people who want to organize around fat positivity and body acceptance” (“About” FAQ). This page also serves to inform its members of any upcoming events hosted by the group or by others in the community. It also allows members to connect and share their stories. It is an open group, meaning anyone is free to join, although their “rules of engagement” state that all members are required to be respectful, anti-oppressive, and body-positive (“About” FAQ). Finally, I recruited participants at a fat activist hangout. Using a varied recruitment strategy allowed me to connect with as diverse a group of participants as possible.

### Participant Profiles

I interviewed nine fat activists. Some of my participants – Sarah, Allyson, Jen, Dorianne, and Michelle– chose to use their real names. Pandora Roxstar and Janelle Flemming chose their own pseudonyms. Jamie and Sandy, meanwhile, were assigned pseudonyms. In the descriptions that follow, I draw on my participants’ own understandings of their identities.

**Sarah** is a twenty-five year old, female-identified, Portuguese fat activist from Toronto. She is a fat fashion blogger and fat fashion enthusiast who has her own blog: *Big Hips, Red Lips* (<http://www.bighipsredlips.com>). **Allyson** is a queer, fat-identified, artist, professor, and feminist from the Toronto area. She is one of the founders of the former fat activist group Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off. **Jen** defines herself as follows: “a fierce fat femme and founder of Fat, Awesome and Queer (find us on facebook!) Learning to love her fat amazing body is something she's always working on, along with finding the perfect red lipstick.” **Dorianne** identifies herself as “a fat, queer, kinky, poly, cisgendered female feminist who writes fiction, reviews theatre, and talks about sex on the radio.” She is a part of the FAQ group in Toronto and is helping her partner raise a baby son. **Michelle** identifies herself as a “fat nutritionist.” She is a fat activist and feminist working in the Toronto area and, like Sarah, has her own blog: *The Fat Nutritionist* (<http://www.fatnutritionist.com/>). **Pandora Roxstar** is a fat, woman of colour, artist and fat activist. She also identifies herself as a “fatshionista.” **Janelle Flemming** is a fat woman, sex worker, and fat activist. **Sandy** is a queer, woman of colour fat activist and fat activist supporter, and working professional from the Toronto area. **Jamie** is a fat, heterosexual, cis-gendered woman of indigenous heritage who is a graduate student and fat activist in the Toronto area.

### Interview Places, Spaces, and Time

Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes. With the permission of my participants, I recorded all conversations with a digital recorder. The conversations took place in a variety of settings and spaces across the city of Toronto: three in coffee shops,

two in participants' homes, one in my on-campus office, and three in restaurants.

Participants chose spaces and locations that were most comfortable and convenient for them. Our conversations explored four general topics/themes: definitions of fat activism, forms of fat activism in which participants were involved, the nature and idea of fat community and the obesity epidemic.

### Fat-Activist Events

In addition to the interviews, I attended three fat-activist events. These events enabled me both to observe fat activism in practice and to consider my own self-identification as fat activist. These events were advertised to members of the FAQ Facebook page. These events were small in size and scope, and included a fat hangout at a local coffee shop and two plus size fitness classes. I also draw on my past experiences at larger fat activist events including a community event featuring a keynote presentation by a well-known British fat activist, Charlotte Cooper, and a University of Toronto campus-organized Fat Film Night.

### **Ethics and Representation**

I adhered fully to ethics guidelines as set out by Memorial University of Newfoundland's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR). In addition to this, I involved my participants at many stages of the research in order to represent their stories and experiences as accurately as possible, while still recognizing the impossibility of complete and accurate representation.

Before the interviews began, I gave my participants a verbal overview of my research project. Then, in order to mitigate any possible misunderstandings, I verbally

reviewed the informed consent form (see appendix C) with my participants. After this, they signed the forms. The consent form provided a brief outline of the project's objectives, general timeline of the interview, and confidentiality information. All participants received an electronic copy of their signed consent form. At both the hangout and fitness events, I made my position as researcher apparent to all those in attendance, letting them know I was using the classes only to talk about my own experiences and observations at the hangout and gym. All materials stated that participation in my project was completely voluntary and participants could pull out at any time. Participants were reminded of this right when they received the transcription of their interview. All of my participants decided to remain part of the study.

All written research data was stored on a personal password-protected computer that only I had access to. I stored all audio recordings from my interviews in a locked drawer in my personal residence, with additional copies stored digitally on my password protected computer. Any hand-written research notes were also stored in a locked drawer in my personal residence and in typed form on my computer. Only my co-supervisors and I had access to the recordings and written data. All data will be retained for five years in regulation with Memorial University's ICEHR guidelines.

A central dilemma I faced when writing up my data was how to keep my participants' voices and perspectives alive while still recognizing my own active role in shaping the research project. I opted for a collaborative approach. I provided a copy of each interview transcript to my participants so they could read it thoroughly, ensure they were represented accurately by their words, and choose which parts of the interview to

keep and which parts to exclude. This allowed my participants to collaborate with me by finalizing which parts of our conversations could and should be analyzed. Additionally, during the interview process I asked participants to speak about the specific events I attended in order to collaborate on the observations and possible meanings I drew from my own participation. My initial thoughts and research aims were also voiced in interviews in the form of questions to ensure that my participants could speak directly to my initial assumptions. Although I still am not able to fully represent my participants' experiences, these actions enabled me to represent them as thoroughly as possible.

### **Data Analysis**

I turned to my interview transcripts, my reflexive journal, field notes, and memory work, to begin my analysis. Using a feminist poststructural discourse analysis, as previously described, I sought to understand how language constructed social identities and how speech was produced, negotiated and contested within various social contexts (Baxter 54). Denzin and Lincoln state that, "the process of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are neither terminal nor mechanical. They are always emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished" (479). Analyzing data therefore is not one specific, smooth process with a clear ending point. Every researcher will analyze and interpret data differently and I am aware that my analysis is just one of many that could come from this particular data set. Therefore I recognize that both my theoretical position as a poststructural feminist and my social identity as a fat activist informed my reading and interpretation of my transcripts, field notes, and personal writing.

I began my analysis with the belief that discourses of obesity constructed and produced particular meanings of fat in particular contexts, and that these meanings would impact my participants' identities as, and subjective and embodied experiences of, fatness. With this perspective, I followed the approach taken by Pamela Ward who explores how participants use language to construct their ideas of health, beauty, and sense of self within the broader context of the obesity epidemic (83). I also sought to examine how my participants' sense of self shifted contextually, and how their embodied experiences as activists could be analyzed as forms of resistance to dominant discourses.

Drawing on the work of Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, I coded my interview and autoethnographic data using a combination of approaches. I relied on deductive thematic analysis but also engaged in an inductive approach, which allowed themes to emerge directly from my data (83). This allowed me to approach my initial reading of the data with a set of themes based on research questions, but also to make notes and develop new themes as I read. After coding, I ended up with two broad themes of "fat activism and obesity" and "fat activism and community." Within these broad themes, there were also numerous sub-themes, including "fatness and food," "fatness and fitness," "Not fat enough," and "the bubble of community," among others.

Finally, I worked from the assumption, as articulated by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, that analysis "[is] an iterative and reflexive process" (83). That is to say, data analysis is not a discrete phase of my research process nor is it confined to the moments when I analyzed interview transcriptions or field notes. Rather, data analysis was part of every step of my research.

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I described my research methodology, methods, design, and practice, outlining my approaches to feminist and fat-positive ethnography and autoethnography. In the coming two chapters, I examine two major themes that have emerged from my research. The first chapter explores how obesity discourse has contributed to my participants' experiences with fat stigma but also how their actions as fat activists challenge commonly held "truths" about health and beauty. In the second chapter, I examine the creation of fat community, and explore how its creation helps resist against individualizing discourses of obesity. I also discuss how counter discourses of fat positivity within the community work to include and sometimes exclude people from fat activism.

### **Chapter 3: “Overweight is a Lie”<sup>1</sup>: Resisting the Biopedagogies of Obesity**

In this chapter, I investigate discourses of obesity, considering in particular how these discourses influence my participants’ experiences of shame and stigma and how they impact fat identities. I make the link between health and beauty discourses to explore a “fat is beautiful” approach to fat activism. I also draw on my own experiences.

I begin by considering my participants’ experiences of fat stigma and shame. This sets the stage for my discussion of the *what* and the *why* of fat activism. It also opens up space for me to explore how fat activists are variously positioned within discourses and counter-discourses of obesity and how these activists have multiple definitions and approaches to their activism. I then move into specific forms of resistance, considering fat performances of “healthy eating” and fitness. Finally, I explore how the biopedagogies of obesity not only teach what is healthy, but also by extension, what is attractive. In this final section I look at how fat activism works to reinscribe fat as beautiful and sexy both in addition to and in spite of the idea of health.

#### **Embodied Experiences of Stigma and Shame**

Obesity discourses encourage both individuals and populations to eat healthy, be active, and lose weight in order to fight the so-called obesity epidemic. In this context, fat bodies are subject to both external and internal surveillance. In the process, fat

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<sup>1</sup> Quote by my participant Dorianne, Fat, Awesome, and Queer

individuals, as failed citizens, come to be seen as targets in need of fixing. My participant Jamie expressed this experience as follows:

People read us all the time. And they think they understand things about how we eat, how we exercise, how we live, the choices we make, why we make those choices. I've recently discovered that there's a lot of psycho-babble about how, why we're fat. And I didn't know this existed. I did not know that there was so much garbage about why I'm fat.

As Jamie notes, these kinds of assumptions are made based on the presence of her fatness.

In addition to this, the fat body is, as indicated previously, also read through lenses that equate thinness with morality or virtue. When asked about her experiences as fat, Jen stated, "if shame made people skinny, I would be fucking 100 pounds." What Jen's statement exemplifies is the role fat shame plays in regulating fat bodies. As Sally Munt explains, "shame becomes embodied, and the body begins to speak for itself in specific ways and...the body itself can be a source of shame" (2). Fatness thus becomes a bodily marker for shame, and the threat of shame becomes a tool for control. The body as a site of shame is only brought into being because of what dominant ideals of health dictate "through the idealization of norms" (Munt 2). Yet, as indicated by my participant Janelle, shame and shame-based campaigns do not necessarily succeed. Janelle states, "I'm healthy. I eat pretty well, I exercise every day, the only thing that makes me unhealthy is all this fucking stigma." Her words confirm conclusions offered by Natalie Beausoleil and Pamela Ward, who insist that a shame-based approach often increases

body dissatisfaction, poor body image, and disordered eating, not weight-loss or “health” (Beausoleil and Ward 1).

These experiences of shame, stigma and stereotyping are all too common. As fat, many of my participants discussed their past and current struggles with embodying fatness and their experiences of what Carla Rice terms “being the fat girl.” For example, when I asked Allyson why she decided to get into fat activism, she explained:

[I experienced] fat stigma or fat oppression, in relation to other subjectivities, through a lifetime until I was about twenty-seven. Didn’t really have the language for it, was always put on diets, and had that you know, really similar fat girl story of how I came to know my body as fat.

The experience of dieting is one way that people come to understand themselves as fat. They identify as having fat and as needing to change through an attempt at weight loss. Allyson’s statement of “knowing her body as fat” through experiences of stigma and dieting speaks clearly to the ways in which many of my participants discussed their embodied experiences of being fat. As Elizabeth Grosz states, “I have access to knowledge of my body only by living it” (86). Thus, living in a fat body and knowing your body as fat comes from experiences such as dieting, being weight-bullied, and not being able to find clothes that fit. These experiences impacted ways in which my participants discussed their feelings of worth as they related to the size of their bodies.

Sarah recalls:

In elementary school that was, or not even just in elementary but school in general, I had a very hard time speaking up for myself because no matter what I

said, no matter what I did, no matter how right or wrong I was, it was thrown in my face that I was fat. Shut up you're fat, it doesn't matter you're fat.

Dieting, an activity that requires individual self-control and action in response to presumed bodily failures can be understood as an experience of knowing your body as fat. In this, my own experiences reflect those of my participants. As I wrote in my research journal:

I remember the first time I heard the words. "Jess is kinda fat." Me? I thought I was just like every other kid. Normal. "Jess is kind of fat." I was in second grade, it was recess, I felt ashamed and embarrassed and speechless. What do you say when you realize you are fat? As a kid I couldn't always shop at the same stores as my friends, I didn't fit in the clothes. I remember everyone shopped at La Senza Girl, so trendy. Not me, they didn't carry my size. Maybe I was "kinda fat." As I grew older and went through high school, I had tried dieting and went to the gym. I was "getting in shape," "being healthy." I wanted to look more like other girls in my class.

As a result, I spent my childhood and teenage years knowing I was different, knowing I was not "normal."

In her work, "Becoming the Fat Girl," Carla Rice insists that "critical comparisons and comments [are] the most memorable sources of cultural knowledge about body size binaries" (164). My own experiences of embodying fatness, like those of my participants, came from normalizing social structures: friends, classmates, diets, and so forth. Furthermore, I was an athlete, and, like my participants, I participated in

physical fitness activities and tried to “eat healthy.” Yet, I know that not all of this was for training or health; it was also about weight loss.

The more my participants talked about their experiences with fat shame and fat stigma, the more evident it became how incredibly gendered some of these experiences were. As fat women, my participants experienced a particular kind of discrimination, experiences that confirm the insights of McPhail, Royce and others. Ideas that fat women are “too much abject embodiment” (McPhail, “Tubby Hubby” 1026), “take up too much public space” (Hartley 70) and fail to meet feminine beauty norms (Royce 151), become very real in the ways that my participants discussed their realities as fat women. Janelle, for example, stated: “like you know, just for dating, or for like being a human being in a personal context, like you can’t do anything without like, ‘fat bitch,’ it’s like what the fuck dude.” “Fat bitch” aligns fat stigma with sexism; that is, it brings together weight- and gender-based discrimination. Thus, when both weight-based and gendered power relations come into play, fat women face considerable discrimination.

However, Sandy, who identifies as a fat butch, explains that fatness can also work *productively* with gender performance:

As a fat butch, I have a lot of privilege. Because I don’t have to get dressed up and fit my fat body into a dress and fit my fat feet into shoes and you know strut around trying to be sexy in a fat body, in terms of some like, you know, normalized femme image. I don’t have to do that. I can put on my suit and shine up my cufflinks, you know, and I’m you know, I’m good. Right. And most of my jazz is covered, I can strap ‘em down and I can do my masculine thing. And it’s

actually, a lot of femmes tell me ... you know transphobia and homophobia aside, it's actually a fairly comfortable, if you have enough privilege, place to be. So that fat butch is not uh, it has some cards to play.

Sandy's experience illustrates the complexities of gendered dimensions to fat stigma. While Sandy described experiences of family members or friends commenting on her size or stating concern for her health, she is nevertheless able to leverage fatness in the performance of her sexual and gender identity. In the process, by embodying masculinity – which is often correlated with the right to occupy space – she experiences less fat stigma than a fat woman who embodies a more feminine appearance.

These experiences of fat stigma have often been described as integral to the process of becoming a fat activist. This process is, however, never linear. Indeed, as Samantha Murray reminds us, being fat positive is not a single moment of discursive rupture, but an ongoing internal conflict (“Out” 159). I do not mean to imply that experiences of fat stigma lead to moments of enlightenment when people decide to be fat positive and are subsequently no longer impacted by stigma; rather, I want to illustrate experiences of fat stigma operate in conjunction with a fat positive “revelation” that contributes to my participants' identification as fat activists. As fat activists, they still continually experience fat shaming and are affected by the stigmatization and discrimination that obesity discourses create and maintain.

Michelle discusses the moment she discovered the Health at Every Size Movement and how this revelation altered her way of thinking,

Well I remember the moment when I decided like, holy shit, health at every size is a thing, and uh, I think it's the right thing probably, and that was after reading a book called *Losing It* by Laura Fraser. It was a critical, she was a journalist, and it was a critical look at the diet industry. So that's when my mind was really changed because at that point I was a really ardent dieter, I had been losing weight, and I was into it and I thought it was the right thing to do and I was doing great. But there had been a concern in the back of my mind like ok, I've lost this weight now, I should be happier and I should be healthy right, and I wasn't. I was sick, I was injured, I was hungry all the time. And I hated my body, and I looked in the mirror and I hated my body, I thought I was gross and my first impulse was well like I need to keep losing weight, because maybe if I weigh 100 pounds then maybe I'll find happiness.

This description highlights the experience of knowing one's body as fat, but also exposes a significant shift in embodied subjectivity. Health at Every Size offered Michelle a new way of thinking about and being fat and healthy.

Conversely, Jen had a different experience of how she came to value her body as fat. Jen's revelation occurred after being hit by a truck. She describes her new awareness as follows:

So like my whole life I had hated my body. I had been on diets since I was twelve, I was like a big weight watchers user, and so my weight had cycled my entire life. Because I, when I was really young I danced from the ages of 5 to the ages of 12, so I was surrounded by weight bullying on the regular. Um but, because I was so

big, this truck hadn't been able to kill me and I was finally, like, my body is amazing, because it saved me. And also I'm so fucking tired of being told that my body's no good because it saved me to be this fat and also watching my body heal itself was also this amazing process.

The combination of watching her body heal itself, and recognizing that it was her body size that saved her life, helped Jen revalue and reinscribe her body as "worthy." These kinds of embodied revelations, moments that each of my participants described as profound, shifted or altered the way in which they identified with or experienced their fatness. This shift is integral to how they describe their realities as fat activists. In the next section I explore how my participants describe what it means to them to be a fat activist and how fat activism utilizes counter-discourses to those of the obesity epidemic.

### **The Experience of Fat Activism**

Fat activism is experienced and enacted in multiple and varying ways and means different things to different people. In order to flesh out my understanding of fat activism, I asked my participants to describe what fat activism meant to them. Below are some of the responses they gave. Allyson described it as follows:

When I really felt like I was a fat activist, rather than just critically fat or a fat activist supporter or an ally...was when I started doing direct action using my body in public spaces. To me that's what felt like fat activism....When I felt most active as a fat activist was when I was working with Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off. It was a group that we had a name for, we met regularly, we did stuff, and it felt like a process, that something was happening.

Allyson's description of "feeling like a fat activist" is inherently tied to taking action with her body. Putting her body in public spaces, performing, was part of her experiences of identifying as fat activist.

In contrast to Allyson, Janelle's primary focus as a fat activist was self-acceptance. She observes:

I think to me fat activism is very personal. It's about, I guess the biggest thing for me is, it's about accepting my body. That's like the basis, that's like you know, the hardest thing I find. And it's about recognizing fat phobia and calling it out. And for me that usually takes the form of like friends and family, it's usually uncomfortable, and it's about, I don't know, just about trying to get a different perspective and different information out there about health and about aesthetics.

Fat activism, according to Janelle, operates not only to change perceptions of fatness but also to change how individuals feel about their own bodies. Self-acceptance is something that I heard frequently in regards to being a fat activist. For many of my participants, body acceptance was an important step in identifying as a fat activist. Like Janelle, Sarah's definition included an aspect of self-acceptance, but is also broad and can be applied to a multiplicity of activisms. She insists:

I think fat activism is just, I had actually heard it describe the other day as coming out fat, just in that you're not really ashamed of the word or your body and that. I think that fat activism is a little different, just a little bit different in that you're not only willing to accept who you are but you're willing to fight for the rights of fat bodies and what that means, and present it in a way that is personal to you.

For Sarah, fat activism involves both self-acceptance and fighting for the rights of fat people.

It is difficult for me to capture and describe all the ways fat activism can be defined; nevertheless, there are some points of commonality. My participants insisted that identifying as fat, calling out fat stigma and discrimination, and learning to embody fatness in a positive way were all integral to fat activism. My own definition of fat activism is similar to Sarah's. It involves both self-acceptance and individual action to change the way fat people and fatness are constructed. In my research journal, I noted the following:

As a fat activist, I've found most change has occurred in my personal life, from talking with friends and classmates, to the ways in which my family now understands my work. Primarily, as an academic, I feel my activism is in part the process of writing this thesis. To write about fat activism, becomes a form of activism itself.

While much of my activism occurs in a personal setting, my academic work is more public. I therefore find a balance between the two in my own form of activism.

Some participants acknowledged that group-based activism, such as, in Allyson's case, or in Jen and Dorianne's experience with Fat, Awesome, and Queer, was a particularly pertinent element of fat activist experience. Dorianne, for example, noted that being part of a group formalized her identity as a fat activist.

However, others, including myself, also identified the importance of small, individual activations, what Kathleen LeBesco has theorized as "the power of small talk"

(*Revolt 2*) and Charlotte Cooper has imagined as “micro-moments.” For example, Dorianne insists that part of her activism involves changing people’s minds, one step at a time. She explains:

People are much more likely to change their perception because somebody that they know, somebody that they, you know, trust or respect says oh hey look, and I’ve got this support for it, I think that that’s it, you know, it’s changing people one at a time.

She maintains that she tries to help people divorce weight from health in everyday conversations by, for example, addressing assumptions that her food choices are linked to dieting when she eats “healthy” food. These types of activist micro-moments are fleeting, yet can be just as effective as larger actions and sometimes often more difficult to engage in. As my participant, Sandy, stated: “individual activism is an individual expression of courage.”

What I found central to all my participants’ understanding of fat activism was the importance of both using the word fat and identifying as fat. Fat is a scary and harmful word. To consciously engage the word fat is – like second wave feminism’s claim to the word “bitch” – a gesture of neutralization and reclamation. Many of my participants insisted that, in an effort to neutralize the word fat, they used it, in Jen’s words, as a “descriptor.” To describe oneself as fat, alongside thin, or short, or tall, can aid in removing negative meanings associated with it. As Jen explains:

I’m a fat person. I’m comfortable with being a fat person. It’s hard to be comfortable with myself all the time and as most, I’m sure most people have that,

but I am not ashamed of being fat and so when people turn around and use it as an insult, like it's something I'm supposed to be sad about, it's a descriptor, it's ok that it's a descriptor.

Other participants discussed the reclamation of "fat" as a way of transforming their relationships to a word that had been used against them. For example, as Sarah suggested, "the importance of me accepting that word, [fat], was basically for me to confront my "bogey man."

Furthermore, my participants commented on the political power inherent in identifying as fat. They argued that reinscribing fatness as a positive and celebratory subjectivity paves the way for completely new and critical conversations. Jamie said: "to come out as accepting you're fat, it sets a whole new tone. A whole new perspective for people." Only one participant, Pandora Roxstar, stated that she alternated between using the term fat and other descriptors to identify herself:

I think I use all of those, like sometimes I'll say I'm a plus size woman, sometimes I'll say I'm big and beautiful, um, I don't know I guess they're all interchangeable to me. But I guess fat is the word that was used most to hurt me so I think there's power in reclaiming fat, owning it yourself.

Most fat activists avoid using terms such as "plus size" or other descriptors such as "chubby" or "plump." What Pandora Roxstar's statement shows is that although she uses many terms to signify that she is not thin, she still feels that "fat" is the most powerful word. As I mentioned above, fat is a powerful and painful word for most fat individuals. Pandora Roxstar, like many of my participants, uses the term "fat" as a way to take back

power from those who have consistently used the word to hurt them throughout their lives. My participants reclaim it as a tool of resistance and use it to underscore that fat can be something positive.

Using “fat” in a positive way can be part of the project of revolt that Kathleen LeBesco describes. Not only does the concept of revolt enable change at a social level – that is, in the relationships that self-identified fat people build with others – but it can also enable individuals the make sense of their own embodied experiences. Dorianne observes:

I’m an adult now, and people don’t come up to me and say, oh you’re fat, but they did in school, and I can remember those. I can have those memories now and not feel ashamed all over again. I can have those memories now and be like, oh, those kids just didn’t know, they didn’t know that fat was awesome.

To be able to look back on painful experiences and make sense of them through the lens of fat activism is an important part of rethinking fatness.

I want to return now to the biopedagogies of obesity, which, as a reminder, work to create societal norms and practices that teach what it means to be healthy. I argue that the forms of activism in which my participants engaged can be read as resistance to these biopedagogies. Because it is nearly impossible to experience one’s fat outside of the context of obesity, resistance must occur within and against these discourses. In the following three sections, I explore specific experiences of resistance against dominant stereotypes and stigma. Fat activism, in these instances, takes two approaches. First I

look at how my participants operate from a Health at Every Size perspective to reinscribe fat as healthy and beautiful. This approach involves “recognizing that body shape, size, or weight, are not evidence of any particular way of eating, level of physical activity, personality, psychological issue, or moral character; and confirming that there is beauty and worth in EVERY body” (Burgard 43).<sup>2</sup> As Dorianne states, “we’re still trying to make people realize that you can be fat and healthy. I mean until that is a thing that people agree with, instead of knee jerk reacting to no no no that’s not humanly possible.” Second, this approach takes what I would term a “fuck it” approach; in other words, it gets “out of control” as Marilyn Wann insists (*Fat!So?* 84).

This second approach is not an apologetic or an assimilationist politic, rather, it aims to create agency and new experiences for fat individuals (LeBesco, *Revolt* 117). For example, Jen discussed the idea of eating whatever you want in public, regardless of its “health” status, operating from a belief that food choices should concern solely the person making them. I explore both of these approaches as part of the embodied experiences of resisting obesity discourses. I situate these approaches within the context of specific fat activist engagements: food, physical activity and beauty. It is worth noting that all of these – but beauty in particular – can also be read as particularly gendered areas of bodily expression and experience.

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<sup>2</sup> The HAES movement also emphasizes the enhancement of health without focusing on weight loss, size and self-acceptance through respecting body diversity, the pleasure of eating well based on internal cues of hunger and appetite as well as enjoyment rather than food plans and diets, and the joy of movement but for pleasure rather than regimen (Burgard 43).

## Food and Fat Activism

One of the most powerful components of obesity discourse is the idea around healthy eating and the meanings that get attached to food and food choice. The biopedagogies of obesity dictate that we should be eating “healthy” foods and making “healthy” food choices. Pamela Ward insists that there is a moral imperative linked with food choice and food consumption within dominant health discourses (109). This line of thinking creates what she calls a binary assumption that food is either good or bad (Ward 109).

My participants’ stories are filled with negative experiences surrounding food consumption: experiences that are intrinsically linked to, as Ward’s study shows, fatness. According to Aphramor and Gingras, “the *large* body [is] seen as noncompliant, disobedient, and undisciplined” when it comes to food habits (98). Ideas around food choice, then, are directly tied into ideas around how a body looks. Furthermore, McPhail, Chapman, and Beagan, insist that there is a belief that fat people do not understand healthy eating and that they cannot control themselves when it comes to eating unhealthy (304). This research makes evident stereotypes of fat people as both ignorant and gluttonous when it comes to food choices. Food choice and consumption come to be used as means to control deviant bodies and in the process, become essential components of an obesity narrative. Fatness, in this narrative, manifests dietary moral weakness.

Fat activism, as it relates to food choice and consumption, can be radical. This becomes evident in Jen’s comments:

I think eating in public, as a fat person is a revolutionary act...as a society we feel like we have the right to police the food choices of fat people. We do it in restaurants, we do it in supermarkets, people are constantly judging your choices and sometimes it's verbalized, sometimes it's looks. It's, you sort of, you live with a certain level of anxiety around food that is elevated when you're out of your house or, I mean, when you're eating, whatever you choose, it's wrong, food is bad.

This idea that "whatever you choose it's wrong, food is bad" does not simply perpetuate the idea that fat people should be making "healthier" choices. Rather, it highlights the insistence that fat people should not only be eating less, but they should not be eating at all.

Many of my participants discussed similar experiences with food and fat stigma.

The following is an excerpt from my interview with Jamie:

**Jamie:** So, my sister and I think like, and sometimes like I'll say to her (laughs) like sometimes we'll do something and she'll go "if people see you, they're gonna think it's cause your fa-aaat" (sing-songy) (laughs).

**Jessica:** [(laughs)].

**Jamie:** like what did I, I brought her cannelloni one day and she goes, and we were actually coming here to study at the library... and then I offered her cannelloni and she goes, [Jamie] that's such a fat girl thing to do (laughs).

**Jessica:** [(laughs)].

**Jamie:** and I'm like, no other people do this. She goes, they don't know when other people do it, they don't see when other people do it, they just see it when we do it.

**Jessica:** [yep.]

**Jamie:** and I'm like, it's not just fat people, eating cannelloni, and she goes...

**Jessica:** [no] it's not a fat people's food (laughs).

**Jamie:** ya exactly (laughs)...that's carrots (laughs).

**Jessica:** [(laughs)].

**Jamie:** So (pause) and she goes yeah, but when people see us they think it's cause you're fat, not because you want a treat or cause you're hungry. Or because you need a break.

**Jessica:** [yeah.]

**Jamie:** and that's so true right.

What this conversation highlights is Jamie's experience, and that of her sister, of being fat and eating in public. Within discourses of obesity, the language around healthy eating constructs how my participants understand their realities as fat and the social roles that are available to them. Jamie's experience illustrates the way she and her sister understood their eating of cannelloni in public. For fat people, food consumption is not considered a pleasurable act that brings people together; rather, it is seen as a site of scrutiny and judgment. Jamie explains many reasons for eating cannelloni, and yet her experience shows that as a fat person, her "social role" – like Jen's experience cited earlier – is to *not* eat, especially not in public. Jamie's comment about carrots as "a fat

people's food" fits into the dominant discourse that fat people should be choosing healthy foods because these food choices will result in weight loss. It additionally reveals that she is, as a fat person, fully aware of dominant obesity discourses and messaging. Jamie also clearly understands the moral equation that underpins questions of dietary choice:

"[unless] it's salad right? In which case you're a good fatty." Within mainstream society, salad signifies self-discipline and is symbolic of an act of bodily responsibility.

The above excerpt also demonstrates Jamie's and my ability to have fun and make light of conversations around fat stigma. Charlotte Cooper insists that fun is integral to fat activism as it defies conformity ("Timeline" 71). By simply joking about the fact that carrots are a "fat people's food" and acknowledging the sheer ridiculousness of that line of thinking, this conversation in and of itself can be read as a form of fat activism. Indeed, within Cooper's conceptual framework, this conversation can be understood as a "micro-moment" of resistance to dominant social discourses of obesity.

Along with experiences of public food consumption, my participants also described other ways of resisting dominant constructions of fatness and food. One participant, Michelle, identifies herself as a fat nutritionist. She incorporates her activism into her work in order challenge conceptions that fat is inherently unhealthy. When asked why she identifies this way she explained:

I think I identify that way because there's a big, um, well it's a stereotype. There's a big stereotype about whether fat people know anything about eating or nutrition. Uh, and I like to bug people and say like, hey, it is possible to be a fat person who has a whole degree in nutrition. And it's a science based degree in nutrition, it's

not like the uh, there are some like sort of not evidence-based degree programs available in nutrition but this is a Dieticians of Canada mainstream, kind of conventional, evidence-based nutrition degree. So I tell people that because there's the assumption that fat people don't know how to eat and don't know anything about nutrition.

Michelle's work challenges the previously discussed ideas around fat people, food choice and ignorance. Her embodied experiences as a fat nutritionist resist the discourses of obesity that would otherwise dictate her position as fat. As a professional who is both fat and a nutritional expert, she embodies a contradictory position. From a poststructural perspective, Michelle's description above highlights both her experiences of stigma, in people's assumptions that as fat she knows nothing about nutrition, but also her subject position as an activist. As I discussed in chapter 3, Judith Baxter insists that women and other marginalized groups are able to adopt powerful positions within discourses to resist practices that position them as powerless (55). In this sense, Michelle's adoption of the position of a fat professional allows her to shift from victim of fat stigma to a more powerful position and to occupy a more positive embodiment of fat.

As part of a project of revolt, Michelle is interested in entering the discourse on healthy eating, and reconstructing fat individuals as "knowing." She is further interested in challenging how people think about fatness and food and considers her experience as a nutrition counsellor and as an activist intertwined. Looking at conversations with her clients, it is easy to see how these interactions are part of Kathleen LeBesco's theories of

the “power of small talk” (*Revolt 2*). Michelle explains the challenges that emerge in her work with clients:

It’s challenging commonly held assumptions about nutrition and body weight and it’s inherently political to do that I think; to try and disrupt the sort of power structures around eating and weight. And so even if I’m doing, I don’t know, even if I’m just doing it one on one with a client who wants to learn to do intuitive eating without losing weight, um, that person then goes out into a world and challenges that idea every single day then and they make their way in it and they influence that world, through their actions, by setting an example, and also sometimes by talking to people and changing their minds.

Part of fat activism is allowing and encouraging individual fat people to change their minds about their bodies and the ways in which they understand their bodies as fat.

Michelle’s work further resists larger biopedagogies of obesity that teach fat people how to eat, but she also works to help individual fat people find a more positive embodiment and develop a more positive relationship to food.

One of my participants, Dorianne, also considered challenging assumptions about her own food consumption as a means of fat activism. Specifically, she addressed the expectation that fat people *should* eat certain foods for the sole purpose of weight loss. This belief stems from an idea that individuals should engage in the activity of dieting if they are over a certain weight. To diet, then, is to show self-control and discipline. As Allyson Mitchell states, “we are told- and we tell ourselves that our lack of ‘control’ or ‘restraint’ can be read on our bodies and in doing so we frantically attempt to escape our

fat (ie. develop eating disorders, personal trainers, diets etc.)” (17). Attempting to “escape” fat becomes a responsibility for fat people and it is thus assumed that any and all “healthy” food choices must necessarily be part of the process of dieting. Dorianne explains: “but I eat well, you know, and people will do that at work too, they’ll say like, oh you have this great, wonderful vegetarian meal that you made for yourself, is this a diet? No it’s just how I eat.” By confronting people, Dorianne works to resist notions that fat people need to lose weight and maintains that fat people can both eat healthy and be fat. She does not want her vegan meal to be considered morally valuable; nor does she want to be imagined as a “better” person for eating it.

Some of my other participants resist dominant understandings of fatness and food through their belief that, regardless of what kind of food they are eating, judgments should not be made about their food choices. While in *Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off*, Allyson and her group members tried to address the issue of food and fat shaming by integrating food and eating into their public actions. She explained, “part of why we tried to incorporate a lot of food in our performances and food directly related to the body, was about trying to keep the shame element, the experience of shame, within the performance of fatness.” *Pretty Porky* and *Pissed Off* challenged experiences of fat shame by eating confidently and proudly in public.

Bodily autonomy, as it relates to food choice, is another issue many of my participants take up. Many stated that as fat individuals, they felt as though their bodies were policed and they were stripped of their rights to eat in public spaces. Furthermore, within a discourse of obesity it is often *only* fat people whose food choices are put under

a microscope as we read the “failure” on their bodies as an invitation to “help.”

Regarding this, Jen explains:

So going out to eat lunch with your friend and having a slice of cake is a political act. Eating a salad and telling someone who’s like congratulations fat person, you’re eating a healthy choice, um, and telling them to fuck off because you can eat a salad or you can eat a pile of fries and it’s none of their god damn business.

This is the no apologies approach to fat activism Marilyn Wann insists on. Not caring what others think about your food choice is a political act. Not feeling the need to justify your food choice is a political act. In this sense, eating itself becomes a political act and to eat proudly in public is to take part in creating a positive experience of fatness. For Jen, telling someone to “fuck off” shifts her experience of eating from “bad” or “good” “fatty” to fat-positive individual who feels no need to provide justification for her food choices.

Like Jen, Pandora Roxstar also takes a no-explanations-needed approach when she eats in public. She states: “I’m on a date with a guy and I’m getting a cupcake. I would do that because some girls are so like scared to eat in front of their boyfriends and I just think it perpetuates such f’d up body image issues.” Pandora Roxstar’s experience further highlights the gendered aspects to food consumption. A gendered discourse on food consumption perpetuates the idea women are expected to take up as little public space as possible and are also expected to eat less. This gendering of food and food choices works to maintain and strengthen gender inequality (McPhail, Chapman, and Beagan 538). As it is assumed that fat women in particular eat the wrong foods and too

much of them, Pandora Roxstar's choice to eat a cupcake on a date illustrates her resistance to these assumptions and expectations. As a fat woman, she embodies both a feminist and a fat positive form of resistance by eating what she wants in a situation saturated with gendered power differentiations.

Finally, it is worth noting that Jen's, Sarah's, and Pandora Roxstar's interviews took place over a meal. Therefore, as we discussed acts of resistance with food, we were ourselves also engaged in the project of revolt, eating in public as fat women.

By resisting discourses of obesity, my participants illustrated how it is possible to shift embodied experiences of fatness from negative to positive and how resisting the biopedagogies of obesity can occur within and across multiple sites related to food knowledge, consumption, and fatness. A similar strategy can be used when exploring the topic of fatness and fitness.

### **Physical Activity and Fat Activism**

Just as obesity discourses have constructed fat people as undisciplined in relation to food choices, so too have they constructed fat people as undisciplined with regard to physical fitness. Because obesity discourses often conflate good health with thinness, exercise or physical activity is often understood solely in terms of weight-loss. It is then understood to be impossible for fat people to take part in physical fitness unless their motivation is to lose weight. As Jamie posits, "there are a million reasons people walk right? But the only reason a fatty would be walking is because she knows she needs exercise." This line of thinking insists that as good, self-disciplining citizens, fat people should be engaging in these activities in order to be "healthy." Fat, in this equation is

neither active nor healthy. Schuster and Tealer call this “the-working-at-being-fat-myth”, an assumption that fat people avoid exercise in favour of a sedentary lifestyle (320). This myth, combined with an understanding that weight-loss is the only possible desired outcome of physical activity, creates negative embodied experiences for fat individuals.

Dorianne discussed her experiences of going to the gym and her coworkers’ reactions to it, describing that many of her coworkers congratulated or commended her for engaging in physical activity. She stated: “it became a thing where people were like oh, well you’re going to the gym, that’s so great that you go to the gym all the time. First of all, as if it was some ethical or moral value, where really it’s something that is selfish.” These reactions demonstrate the generalized understanding that working out is considered a moral process of bettering oneself.

What is most common, however, is the tension between the biopedagogies of obesity that demand fat people exercise and the stigmatization those same bodies face in spaces of physical fitness. Thus, North American culture has done an excellent job in making exercise accessible only to those whose bodies already fit a narrow ideal of what is fit and healthy (Schuster and Tealer 230). LeAnne Petherick points out that in spaces of physical fitness, particularly physical education, worth – or value – is placed on individual healthy bodies, or thin bodies, by extension isolating and punishing those who are perceived as not healthy (718). Jenny Ellison states that aerobics, dieting and plastic surgery are emblematic of normative forms of femininity; the healthy body is a slender body (“Jane Fonda” 313). However, she states that for health or aesthetic purposes, fat

women did not belong in aerobics classes, regardless of their individual fitness levels (313). On this, Jen stated:

If you go to the gym and you, you're just trying to get into shape or doing whatever you want to do with your body and you get mocked for being at the gym and working out, even though you're a fattie and you're supposed to be at the gym and work out so you can get skinny. Like, there's so many, there's so much fat phobia everywhere you go.

Jen's description illustrates the discrimination directed against fat people that occupy space in public gyms. This type of discrimination can often lead to an increased anxiety around or a dread of going to them. Indeed, as Lindy West observed in a blog post for the online feminist newsmagazine, *Jezebel*, the anxiety and fear experienced by fat people at gyms comes from "entering a building where you know that every person inside is working toward the singular goal of *not becoming you*" (West 2012, *Italics original*). These comments echo, almost word for word, those made by my participant Michelle, who stated: "being aware that everyone in [the gym] is invested in a project to not look like me."

Fat activists can, however, articulate resistance. Jamie, for example, uses her fat activist group as a way to challenge dominant constructions of fatness and fitness on campus. The following is an excerpt from our interview:

**Jamie:** There's a lot of fat problems on campus. For instance, Fit at Founders is a program they have at Founders College.

**Jess:** Fit at Founders?

**Jamie:** Fit at Founders. Which I believe is an exclusive title. I think it's, it excludes the disabled and the fat for sure, and anyone who doesn't consider themselves fit, because there are people who are thin and don't consider themselves fit...

**Jess:** [yep]

**Jamie:** the program is an excellent one. This is the sad thing. It has four things that they do. One day they do yoga, one day they do meditation, one day they do zumba and one day they do self-defense. It's all free for undergrads and it's like an hour and a half a day. Why shouldn't everyone be welcome in that space?... I find that there's so few spaces to make fat community right?

**Jess:** [right].

**Jamie:** And, so I think it's particularly important to make sure that there isn't oppression in titles like Fit at Founders, where the only reason they chose it was because of alliteration. So you're telling me that alliteration is more important than inclusion...and if I show up, they're going to be like, what the fuck?

Jamie thus identifies herself in this situation both as someone whose body does not belong in the Fit at Founders space and as someone who is going to do something about it. She inhabits both a position of marginalization and an agentive position as activist.

Making spaces of physical fitness more inclusive, like Jamie is attempting to do on campus, is an important part of fat activism. I had the opportunity take part in two fitness classes at a size inclusive gym in Toronto called Fit Zone Plus. While Fit Zone Plus is not specifically identified as a fat activist gym, this space – and others like it – can

be understood as integral to fat activism. Fit Zone Plus works to include bodies of all sizes by creating a supportive and, in the words of Schuster and Tealer, “body-judgment free zone” (Schuster and Tealer 231); a “zone” where no judgments or assumptions about health or ability are made based on the size or weight of a person. The yoga class I participated in created this kind of accepting and comfortable environment.

I was nervous waiting for the members of the gym to file in and the instructor to start the yoga class. I had only done yoga once or twice and was not very good at it. I’m not flexible at all. The class was just myself and two other women, both who were quite welcoming and warm towards me. The instructor was incredibly helpful throughout the class, providing aid to anyone who needed it in terms of getting in and out of positions. About ten minutes into the class, I forgot about the tight shirt I had decided to wear that day, the same shirt I was pulling and tugging at waiting for the class to begin. I felt less self-conscious being in this space knowing that both the instructor and other women were supporting me. It was an environment of mutual support and it was fun. It was a fun experience.

What Fit Zone Plus does is recognize that all bodies are capable of participating in physical activity and that, as a result, all bodies should have access to a comfortable space in which to do so. Being in this supportive environment, I did not feel judged by my body size or feel as though I was being read as lazy or incapable. Rather, during this yoga class, I felt this was a place I could come and enjoy physical activity. In this sense, Fit Zone Plus would appear to fit into the ethos promoted by the HAES movement, which emphasizes the joy of movement for pleasure rather than regimen (Burgard 43). It

also would appear to be an excellent example of resistance. McPhail and Skyes insist that it is not equal participation in terms of physical fitness that we need but rather spaces that work to directly validate and legitimize fat bodies with the idea of physical fitness (91). I believe that this kind of resistant space is found within Plus Zone Fitness.

Part of the resistance against the discrimination and stereotypes of fat individuals in gyms and spaces of physical health comes in smaller forms. For example, Dorianne uses an individual approach to activism to revalue fatness in the context of fitness. She takes acceptance one-step further by legitimizing the fat body as one that can participate in exercise but not for the purposes of changing. As Dorianne discussed, “[people at work would] be like, so what’re your goals, what’re your weight loss goals? And I’d be like, I don’t have any, I really don’t have any and then that would be challenging for people.” Dorianne challenges dominant assumptions that fat people *must* be working towards thinness through the means of physical activity. In this subject position, she insists her fat body is something that does not need fixing because, for Dorianne, physical activity has nothing at all to do with weight loss. By making this stance overt, she challenges dominant narratives that explicitly link physical fitness with weight loss.

Like Dorianne, Jamie uses her activism as a way to put fat physicality front and centre. By utilizing dance as a form of activism, she takes what might be termed a “no apologies” approach to her fatness. In fact, she hopes to organize a fat dance mob as a way both to take up space and partake in fat activism. As she states,

I’m hoping it’ll be “Fat Bottom Girls” by Queen, out in front of the Square, because I think that seeing fat people dancing is not something you see often,

right? And I think that it would just be funny, just, I think it would be funny. I'm going to be honest with you, in my mind it's like yes, screw you, I've got a fat ass, I'm shaking it, and I'm laughing at you.

Jamie's use of dance to resist dominant constructions of fatness mirrors Marilyn Wann's unapologetic approach to being fat. Her corporeal specificity as fat is thus reimaged and reconstructed as a positive and celebratory embodiment through "shaking her fat ass." As a fat activist, she challenges the discourse of obesity by claiming her right not only to public physical activity, but also, to her enjoyment of her body and its movement.

In addition to constructing fat bodies as excessive, dominant discourses of obesity also actively conflate health with attractiveness. In the following section, I explore the experiences of my participants within the context of fat and beauty.

### **Fat is Beautiful**

Experiences of fat stigma in relation to appearance and attractiveness are very common aspects of my participants' described realities. These experiences, in turn, also become very important sites for their resistance. Dominant discourses around body size have negatively shaped the embodied experiences of many of my participants. They have also negatively shaped my own experiences. Pandora Roxstar recalls her past:

Um yeah, because, I don't know, my parents have been quite fat-phobic to me, um and I was always told not to wear like, short skirts because they only look good on skinny people or basically just told me not to dress the way that I do because fat people are expected to wear baggy clothes and hide as much as they

can, you know, hide their bodies as much as they can, and it's not ok to have curves and it's not ok to have chub, you know.

Having people tell her what she should and should not wear impacted her experience of being/having fat. Experiences like the one Pandora Roxstar describes above instilled in her that her physical body is not acceptable. The experiences – with their emphasis on hiding and secrecy – also speak to the invisibility of a positive fat identity.

This notion of invisibility is perhaps most acutely experienced in the area of retail fashion. All of my participants discussed the challenges of shopping for clothes, noting in particular the near impossibility of finding plus size clothing. Even when such clothing *was* available, it tended to be much more expensive. Indeed, one of Allyson Mitchell's first performances with PPPO took retail fashion as its central theme. Mitchell and her troop wore tight-fitting clothes, carried signs that said "FAT!," and paraded along Toronto's Queen Street West, a popular shopping district. They asked passersby: "Do you think I'm fat?" (Mitchell 218). This stunt was performed in direct response to embodied experiences of fat shame and exclusion. As Mitchell states: "we were trying to take the fear out of fat by putting it out on the sidewalk- that same sidewalk we'd walked down in shame, knowing the only fashions we could purchase in the area were socks, shoes, purses, and barrettes" (218).

While Mitchell no longer performs fat activism in the same way, she still resists bodily norms around clothing and fatness. During our interview, she explained to me:

When I do something like speak publicly, I often stop myself from wearing something that hides fat and I push myself to wear something that puts it front and

center so that it isn't censored or hidden. I feel that, largely because of the work that I did with *Pretty Porky* and *Pissed Off*, that I have to keep doing it.

Allyson's embodied history of fat activism impacts the individual actions she now takes. By putting fat front and centre she has reinscribed – and continues to reinscribe – fat as something that is “worthy” of being noticed.

Sarah also uses fashion as a primary source of resistance. However, she has taken a very different approach. In addition to having organized fat clothing swaps in the past, she currently writes and hosts a fat fashion blog entitled, *Big Hips, Red Lips*. About her blog, she explains,

I think like my blog, the only rule is “fuck the rules.” It's like if you have always dreamed of, in my case doing something sort of pin up, fuck the rules. If you wanna wear stripes go for it, there's nothing different or nothing wrong with your body that means that you can't and the only thing that's really preventing you from enjoying that is your perception of why you can't wear that.

Sarah's statement illustrates the powerful role that dominant discourses of beauty and body norms play in dictating who can and cannot wear certain items. Her approach to the “rules” of fashion is to simply ignore them: “Fuck the rules.” In this way, her resistance takes on an “out of control” approach. She does not apologize for her body size; rather she celebrates it and embodies a fat positive approach to fashion. Oftentimes, fat fashion is referred to as “fatshion” by fat activists and in keeping with this, Pandora Roxstar self-defines herself as a “fatshionista.” Her self-identification as such shows her positive embodiment of fatness. Both Sarah's and Pandora Roxstar's use of fashion as a resistance

to body ideals takes the form of LeBesco's individual activism. That is to say that through their clothing choices and their identification as fat fashion enthusiasts, they can enact change on a small level.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored the experiences of fat activists within the contexts of health and beauty. Specifically, I examined the multiple ways that my participants described their acts of resistance both within and against mainstream obesity discourses. First, by resisting constructions around fatness and food consumption, my participants sought to reinscribe and revalue fat bodies as healthy and as autonomous. Second, by challenging assumptions that fat people are lazy and inactive, my participants actively resisted the ideas that fat is a result of non-activity. Finally, through reinscribing fat as beautiful, my participants challenged and resisted normative feminine beauty ideals of thinness. In the next chapter, I will explore in detail the individualizing discourse of obesity and the creation of fat community as a fat activist response.

## **Chapter 4: Building and Belonging: The Importance of Fat Community**

In this chapter I focus on the importance of fat community and the politics of inclusion and exclusion. To set the stage for my discussion on the importance of building fat community, I begin by examining the individualizing effects of obesity discourse. I then situate “community” within the context of my participants’ own definitions and understandings, and draw on these frameworks in order not only to assess their embodied experiences, but also to understand both the inclusionary nature of fat activist community building and the barriers that may prevent such projects. This leads me to the second half of this chapter where I explore the counter-discourses of fat activism. More specifically, I am interested in understanding who belongs to fat community and who is excluded from it. I investigate the concepts of self-acceptance, “not fat enough,” and a “universal” fat experience to explore how the discourses of fat community might exclude some people. This leads me into my last section where I explore the idea of belonging through differences, to conceptualize new possibilities for thinking about fat community in Toronto.

### **Obesity Discourse as Isolating**

As I have discussed throughout the previous chapters, obesity discourses are individualizing; that is, they place responsibility– and concomitantly shame – for body size on individuals. As Wright insists, “Public Health campaigns, hand in hand with the media and television shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, emphasize the individual act of weight-loss for overall individual, and public, well-being (8). Within a fat-phobic society,

fat bodies are hypervisible: overly present in the public consciousness, they are subject to constant external scrutiny. A fat-phobic society also simultaneously silences any possibility for positive fat identity, in the process rendering fat invisible. Fat bodies, as Mitchell observes, are merely containers that house thin ones that are waiting to come out (214). This invisibility is also evident at a more concrete level, as the activism around fashion and fatshion discussed in the previous chapter, demonstrate. In the process, fat becomes an invisible identity (LeBesco, “Queering” 76).

Indeed, fat bodies are excluded bodies. Carla Rice, for example, asserts that “fat girls” are understood, within dominant discourses, as socially unfit. As a result, they come to understand themselves this way as well. This point is echoed by Amy Erdman Farrell, who suggests that the disciplinary power of social surveillance often leads fat people to avoid public spaces altogether (165). Lived realities of exclusion, invisibility and silence speak to a need for fat community and a need for spaces in which fat individuals can feel included and make connections with others who may have some shared experiences.

Consider, for example, the following comments made by Jen:

We all suffer a certain level of anxiety all the time because we’re so used to going out in the world and being cut-eyed, criticized, judged. That you’re constantly dealing with a barrage of you’re not good enough from the whole wide world, makes you really fucking anxious all the time.

Michelle argued, “the obesity discourse has gotten worse... the intensifying of that rhetoric has made people create more fat community in self-defense.” Janelle speaks to the value of fat positive community, stating:

It’s very lonely to be, you know, to be an outcast and to be oppressed and to not have anyone who gets that. You know, it’s just nice to be around people who are not always obsessed about their weight, which seems to be the case with almost everyone I know, whether they’re fat or not.

Janelle’s statement highlights both the social obsession with body size and her own discomfort within such spaces. My own experiences as a fat athlete confirm Janelle’s experiences. I was confronted with teammates and coaches whose fat phobic comments served as a constant reminder to me that my body did not fit. Janelle credits fat community as a way of escaping this culture of social and self surveillance.

### **What is Fat Community?**

During my interviews, I asked my participants to explain what fat community meant to them. For Sarah, fat community was built around a shared experience of fat embodiment. She describes it as follows:

When I think community in terms of the fat community, I just look at it as a collection of people who share similar experiences. Um, though not all the same, and we haven’t experienced the same degree of, of you know fat stigma...or you know there are smaller fats and larger fats, there are many different varieties, but I think we all share similar experiences that I think we can learn from. Um, and I

just think that that's what makes it a strong community and that's what makes it a very wholesome community at the same time.

Sarah's understanding – which associates collective strength with shared experience – mirrors the premises of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community." Like Sarah, Pandora Roxstar's definition of community included the idea of a similar fat experience; however, she also pointed to what she saw as an inherently political aspect. She explained:

I mean, to see a bunch of people, to see a bunch of fat people together is, I think is revolutionary. Because, you know, we're supposed to be feeling isolated, we're supposed to feel down on ourselves, so for us to get together and take up space where we are and just do our thing, like that is making a statement. So I think a part of it, for me, a lot of community is about like having that solidarity and having that sort of fight you know what I mean, to have that respected and recognized.

While fat community can provide support and build solidarity for members, it should also be understood, in Pandora Roxstar's words, as a "revolutionary" act. The physical enactment of fat community challenges common constructions and depictions of fatness. Fat community then helps to create more positive and celebratory experiences of fat. Pandora Roxstar's approach, while building on Anderson's seminal formulation, appears to gesture more directly toward the argument put forward by Kathleen LeBesco, which re-imagines the "revolting" nature of fat.

Sandy's definition of fat community is rich in detail:

I think fat community has nothing to do with geography. It may have something to do with language and culture, but it is imperative for, you know, academics for analysis, for you know, fighting against the powers that want to destroy us and make us want to kill ourselves, who want to take away our rights, we need to know what activists are doing. We need to know that people are living normal live. We need to know that people are surviving and thriving. We need to have sex with each other and be as kinky as we want to be in a safe space. We need to have conversations about our gender and our queerness, and when we are in fat community it makes those conversations, I truly believe, more meaningful to the people who want to be there. Including people, their partners, you know partners who are not fat. You know, fat community I think is NoLose, I think it's people who identify that they want to be together at certain times. I think fat community can happen when someone like Charlotte [Cooper] visits and becomes a flashpoint and a rally point. I think fat community can happen around art. When Allyson Mitchell has an opening or a book, I think fat community can happen in an institutionalized setting like Academia, so I think it can happen anywhere, I just want it to happen.

Sandy's definition shows the versatility of fat community. She insists that it should involve not solely fat individuals, but their partners and friends as well. Sandy believes that fat community is a site for fighting against the "powers that want to destroy us." Taking into consideration that obesity discourses are a part of these powers, Sandy's

definition then illustrates directly how building fat community is an integral part of fat activism.

Finally, Jamie defines fat community in a more subtle way. She explains:

When I started reading and encountered Samantha Murray and Ellison and like so many good authors and they were talking about these things, like, oh my god these people know what I'm feeling, they know where it's at. That was community for me. I didn't need to meet them, right, like Cooper, Ellison, I didn't need to meet these people because I've lived it and they know what I've lived and that for me was community.

Jamie's definition of fat community includes a sense of togetherness that comes through the discovery of fat positive material. Like Anderson's "imagined community," Jamie's definition draws on the solidarity of shared experience, even when those experiences are shared by those that one has never even met – and, indeed, may never meet. Jamie's approach is also reflected in the growth of the web-based fat activist community. Blogs, fora and Facebook groups all provide ways for individuals who may live at considerable geographic remove from one another to build communities based on shared thinking and experiences.

My own understanding of fat community reflects elements of each of Sarah, Sandy and Jamie's definitions. As I noted in my research journal:

While the first time I felt like I was really exposed to fat positive material was the day my *Fat Studies Reader* arrived, I first felt like I experienced community the night I hosted a Fat Film Night. For me, to be in a room full of people who were

not only accepting of fatness but also proud of it, was something new. I remember the moderator of the film night saying she didn't care for fat acceptance. She didn't want to be accepted, she wanted to be celebrated. When the films were done, everyone in the audience took turns sharing their experiences. It was the first time I felt like other people understood. People get what it's like to not be skinny.

My ideas around fat community thus centre on shared embodied experiences of difference. Like Anderson's "imagined community," I felt a sense of belonging as I read the *Fat Studies Reader*, knowing I had some common experiences with the authors and other potential readers. However, as my excerpt above illustrates, my most memorable or powerful experience with fat community did have an element of geographic proximity.

In addition to offering insight into the nature of fat community, my participants also offered insight into things that they did *not* associate with fat community. Thus, while many participants stressed that fat community existed to support fat individuals, they also indicated that this support was not premised on the vilification of non-fat individuals; that is, fat community was not "anti-thin." As Janelle observed:

"[I'd] be like oh look at that skinny bitch, give her a sandwich, and then I realized I was doing the same thing. And I was like ok, that's not cool." Just as fat shaming is inappropriate, so, too, is thin-shaming counterproductive.

Sarah, meanwhile, insisted that fat community was premised not on valuing certain bodies over others; rather, it was premised on bodily inclusion more broadly speaking. She stated: "I hate phrases like 'real women have curves,' because who says

that? What is a real woman anyways?... You know what I mean, like who decides what a real woman is? Not me, not you, so phrases like that aren't helpful." She told me that she much preferred phrases such as "all bodies are good bodies and every body is beautiful [because] it doesn't make anyone feel like they can't love their bodies too."

Fat community manifests itself in different ways. According to my participants, there was not one "right" way to mobilize fat community. Sandy, for example, commented that the Internet has changed fat community, allowing more and more people to connect. As Jen, who created FAQ, explained:

I started a group called Fat, Awesome and Queer, um, and so I'm trying to get together a bunch of folks in Toronto to hang out with and be fat and queer together, I want to sort of create my own bubble of fatness and awesomeness and queerness, um, a space where people can go and talk about their experiences and do whatever feels good to them, to protest against the constant bombardment of messages that they're not good enough; they're not fit enough; they're not pretty enough; they're not whatever enough; they're not enough. Um and if they buy stuff, or put stuff on their face or um, cut their hair in a certain way or spend money, that they'll, that that'll make them good enough. But you can never spend enough money. You can never be rich enough, or thin enough, or enough in a consumer society. So I'm trying to create a space where (pause) where everyone is enough. Just being themselves.

FAQ has a Facebook page through which the group gains online members. This online presence also serves as a means of planning personal hangouts. For Jen, who coordinates

the Facebook page, fat community is built both online and through physical interactions. I would like to suggest here that Jen, and by extension the FAQ group has created a mobilized form of Anderson's "imagined community," By this, I mean that while their online page cultivates and strengthens fat community, they give community members the option to add geographic or face-to-face interaction to community membership. Of course, my own definition of community allows for a solely online or "in the flesh" form of belonging. What is most important to highlight with Jen's work is the value of the online community being built through FAQ. Online fat community is an invaluable resource in combating the loneliness and isolation that comes from being a fat person and it provides a way to create bonds without having to face the body anxiety and fat shaming in a public space.

Jen's approach to building fat community is just one of many. Fat community can be built in multiple ways and created through one on one interactions, through reading fat positive materials, through hosting clothing swaps, and so on. Therefore, creating fat community is much like defining it; there is no right or wrong approach and there is no set answer.

### **The Importance of Fat Community**

Amy Erdman Farrell argues that individuals who are not fat can often take for granted having a space that recognizes and welcomes them (165). Thus, Farrell insists that fat community functions to create supportive, comfortable spaces for fat people. These spaces provide an escape from fat discrimination and welcome fat people unconditionally (Farrell 165). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in defining fat

community, many of my participants also emphasized its importance. All of my participants discussed the paramount importance of fat community in combating the stigmatizing and isolating experiences of having and being fat. When asked about the importance of fat community, Allyson responded:

I think it's paramount. It's the only way that I know of, from my subjective experience, to live through, and be able to have the strength, to have people to bounce ideas back and forth about, to feel like you're not isolated, and to feel brave enough to step out of the front door into public spaces in the way that you want to embody fatness as different than you may even feel it. You may want to fake it. You need your friends to be able to do that with, I think.

Allyson's response explores the tension between loving one's body and feeling anxious about it, and demonstrates the importance of fat community in relation to relieving this tension. Allyson suggests that fat community can help individuals embody a politic of fat positivity even if they are still dealing with body dissatisfaction. Indeed, as Sandy explained: "when we're in community I mean, you should see us, we're just strutting around like peacocks, everybody's jockeying for position, and we're looking sexy, and flirting, and basking in the glow of all the fatties in their glory." Like Allyson, Sandy understands fat community as a supportive space for fat people, a space that can create an environment where fat individuals can not only enjoy one another's company but also, in the solidarity of a fat community, come to embody a fat politic. Members of fat communities can be proud and celebratory of their particular embodiment, a process that opens up space for the re-inscription and revaluing of fat bodies as sexy.

This is clearly evident in Jamie's comments about her experience at the Charlotte Cooper event:

It was amazing to be with other fat positive people... That's the largest group I've ever been with, with a bunch of fat positive [people]. The space was so open, and I thought to myself "Is this how thin people feel?" And I don't know. But like the freedom, uh, do you even recognize the privilege if you're thin?

Michelle had a similar experience at this event. As she explained:

Nobody in this room is going to look at me and be like what a disgusting slob you know and it's just nice. You don't realize you're carrying that with you most of the time, at least I don't. But there's a certain tension that's there under the surface and whenever I have an opportunity to go into a place where I can let that go then it's nice. So it meant a lot.

My own experiences, too, which I recounted in Chapter 2, circle around similar themes. Not only was this a particularly inspiring night for me, but it was also a night where I could let go of my body anxiety. It was a night where I did not need to worry about anyone critiquing my clothes, food choices, or my body in general.

These shared experiences at this community event speak volumes about the privilege of body size in North American society. If mainstream society provides a comfortable space for normatively sized bodies, fat community spaces often provide a feeling of comfort and freedom for fat bodies. In these spaces, which must be understood as spaces of resistance, individuals are free to wear what they want, and further, are liberated from body anxieties and the concerns that might arise from social surveillance.

Johnston and Longhurst posit that communities are both a site and product of social action (62). All of the experiences cited above explored the idea of community as a product of social action; that is to say, fat activism *creates* fat community and, fat community, in turn, shapes embodied identity. However, my participants also discussed fat community as a *catalyst* for action. In other words, fat community was not just a product of social action, but also a site of social action. Thus, for example, participants who were part of FAQ planned and organized actions such as eat-ins, button making, and stickering the city. When I attended a fat hangout with FAQ, the hangout not only provided a comfortable and fun time, but also served as a platform for planning actions. In particular, they discussed their planned sticker-making get together and brainstormed possible future events, among them a Valentine’s Day “Love Letters to Fatties” letter writing event.

However, not all of my participants were convinced by the activist element of fat community. While Pandora Roxstar agreed that community spaces were important, she did not think this went far enough. She explained:

So like rioting, that’s a huge part of community to me ... and I also feel like, that Fat, Awesome, Queer community, I feel like we still haven’t taken on like a much more, taken on an approach in that sense, like fighting back. Like I mean, I think it’s equally important to get together and have these spaces...[but]I’d like us to rage more.

Fat activism, for Pandora Roxstar, would certainly include more active “revolt,” in LeBesco’s sense of the word.

What is clear from all of my participants' discussions, however, is the importance of fat community to the lived experience of fat. I call this the "bubble of fat community." This bubble has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, the bubble can enable the emergence of counter-discourses. As Pamela Ward suggests, fat community spaces can take the pressure off fat people to perform as they would in broader social settings (229). This notion is reflected in comments made by my participant, Michelle, who insists that fat community is "a place where people can come, as fat people, and talk about their experiences as fat people, or even just to talk about anything, and not having to worry about their obesity becoming the forefront of discussion." The bubble of fat community thus works in a way, as I have discussed earlier in this chapter, to combat isolation as well as the stigmatization of fatness.

However, this bubble can also present problems. Many of my participants discussed the comfort and safety they felt in a fat activist or fat community space, but these feelings are transitory and elusive. After all, fat individuals must still negotiate the realities of a fat phobic society. Thus, while Janelle experienced fat community as a welcome escape, she was immediately confronted with a much harsher reality once she left the space. In this way, fat community "doesn't erase after I leave that community and I'm on my way home and there's some asshole in car who's, like, 'move you fat bitch,' and it, it just erases all of that" (Janelle). Although it is worth taking into consideration Allyson's previous point insisting that fat community allows individuals to step back into the public embodying fatness in a different way, this is, as Janelle observes, difficult to do.

Another issue that emerged in relation to the bubble of fat community, was the notion of “preaching to the choir.” That is to say, when in fat community, it is not necessary to convince anyone that dominant constructions of fatness are problematic. As Dorianne observed, in relation to the Charlotte Cooper event:

I mean the problem with events like that is it’s usually a lot of speaking to the converted. There’s nobody going to attend this event who thinks that fat people are horrible and need to jump on a treadmill and stop eating Cheetohs, like, nobody, nobody is showing up there thinking that, um, but it does help strengthen us as a community and it’s absolutely worth it for that.

Dorianne’s point highlights an issue within fat community. If altering and shifting the discourses of obesity and health is part of the fat activist project, and if this activism should be understood as a project of revolt, then activism would need to move beyond the parameters of fat community. In other words, fat activism would need to change the minds of those who are not already committed to body diversity and the principles of Health at Every Size. Michelle emphasized this point in her commentary: “I would like to do a better job at sort of reaching across the aisle, or whatever they say, and not speaking so much to the choir and trying to actually change people’s minds.” Thus, while the bubble of fat community can protect individuals, it has not shown itself fully capable of changing social norms.

### **Belonging and the Discourses of Fat Community**

Fat activism works to produce counter-discourses; that is, resistant discourses designed to shift power relations, alter messaging around fatness, and celebrate fat as a

positive embodiment. In the process, however, these counter-discourses also serve to shape the ways in which fat activists themselves construct and understand their own norms. In other words, fat activism produces its own normative discourses. As a result, fat activist communities can be as exclusionary as they are inclusionary. As Mason suggests, the term “community” can itself be problematically used to hide internal divisions and power relations (17). It is also worth recalling the arguments put forward by Johnston and Longhurst, who insist that it is possible to be both inside and outside; that is, to claim belonging even as one is excluded (61).

These tensions arose in the course of my interviews as well. Pandora Roxstar commented:

I guess, I think, ok, there’s one thing I do want to say because it’s sort of what I’m struggling with a little bit... like the concept of, like, being a fat activist and still being concerned about being fat. You know what I mean, like, going on a diet, I feel like I couldn’t say that in like a fat activism hangout...yeah, like I would be worried about a backlash against that, so I just keep it to myself. But, just because of the way, how I feel about myself, has nothing to do with anybody else...so I guess I worry about the backlash and like, (pause) like, and also like, suddenly not being part of that community just because you lost weight. That doesn’t change the fact that I was fat for years.

In a community where “riots not diets” is a common ideology and ideas of resistance centre on loving one’s *fat* body, Pandora Roxstar’s experience of dieting, partnered with her identification as a fat activist, might be considered contradictory. She fears a sense of

exclusion for dieting and her experience thus illustrates the ways in which discourses of fat community construct what it means to be a “good” fat activist. I explore these tensions in the following sections. I focus specifically on self-acceptance, the concept of “not fat enough,” and the assumed “universal” fat experience.

### The Discourse of Self-Acceptance

One particularly salient aspect to fat activism is the idea of bodily self-acceptance. As Marilyn Wann writes, “Dorothy made her wish by saying ‘there’s no place like home.’ Well, I’m not Glenda the Good Witch, but I’m here to tell you that all you have to say is the magic word, fat. Say it loud, say it proud: Fat! Fat! Fat!” (*Fat!So?* 18). Indeed, normative discourses of fat activism dictate that fat pride is essential to challenging dominant constructions of fatness. However, this rhetoric of self-love ignores the experience of struggle and the lived realities of being fat in a world that still devalues the fat body. Self-acceptance therefore, cannot possibly come from one single moment of change, but rather, as Murray has stated, is an ongoing and individual struggle. This is reflected in comments made by my participants. Pandora Roxstar, for example, notes that, “I still, like, I struggle with like fat shame...like, it’s everyday, it’s an everyday struggle where I have to, you know, just check in with myself and be sweet to myself you know.” Similarly, Sandy stated, “I think we all wrestle with you know, the idea of the grotesque with, you know, incredible pain.” Body acceptance – and further, body celebration – are therefore not enough. Fat activism must acknowledge this reality.

I also experience these struggles. On the one hand, I want to be a “good fat activist”; that is, I want to embody fat pride. On the other hand, however, I continue to confront body image issues. A recent shopping experience left me feeling defeated. In my research journal, I wrote:

For the most part, I feel pretty body confident, but sometimes it’s hard to love yourself, to love your body, when everything is telling you your body is wrong. My body is wrong. Recently I went dress shopping for an event I had to attend. It took two days, ten stores, and no dress to break me. It was me, I was the problem, it was my body. In that moment the dreaded thought crossed my mind. “Maybe if I just lost a couple pounds...” Somebody thinner would’ve found a dress in no time. All these options to choose from and yet retail got the best of me again.

These experiences of struggle suggest that Murray’s theory is worthy of more serious consideration. Being fat positive, or being a fat activist, does not mean that body dissatisfaction disappears forever. Thus, there is a continual tension between fat politics and biopolitics; they cannot escape one another. Fat politics, as currently imagined and practiced, cannot trump biopolitics. From a poststructural perspective, fat activists constantly shift subject positions within and through both sets of discourses. They can feel bodily acceptance or bodily shame from one moment to the next. Sarah insists on the importance of being vocal about this struggle, stating, “I think how I’m a fat activist on a daily basis is just... I think I’m pretty open with where I’m at emotionally. I try to show the good and the bad.” Perhaps by adopting this openness about the struggle, fat

community can work towards a more inclusionary politic, one that reflects a more realistic journey of resistance.

### Not Fat Enough

Counter-discourses of fat activism insist that a reclamation of fat is important for the political project of revolt. Yet, as I have already intimated, such discourses can be exclusionary; that is, just as mainstream understandings police the boundaries of body normativity, so too do fat discourses police the boundaries of fatness. Social surveillance within the fat community often inverts conventional size privilege: while mainstream society valorises the thin body, fat community places its emphasis on the “fat enough” one.

Dorianne, who identifies herself as a “smaller fat,” explained that she was concerned about not being welcome in a fat community because of her smaller size. She commented, “for me a lot of it also has been getting to know that I can be in these places, without being criticized from the other end for being a smaller fat...[but] I think I was more afraid of that than it actually existed.” Dorianne’s concern about not being fat enough was more a perception of what she thought fat community would be like, rather than her reality, particularly her reality as a member of FAQ. In contrast to Dorianne, Allyson told me that during her time with PPPO, she and her group’s members had been told by others in the community that they were not fat enough to be fat activists. She stated:

I really think that anyone who wants to can belong to a fat community. I really do.  
But that’s not to say that I haven’t experienced a kind of, I don’t know what the

word is, uh (pause) a fat hierarchy, or litmus test, or something like that. For years I would hear second-hand, that there were some fat activists in Toronto who would say... that *I'm* not fat enough to be a fat activist or that people who were in Pretty Porky and Pissed off weren't fat enough to be fat activists. Interestingly enough, the critique that I heard back wasn't necessarily around class, or racialization, or anything like that. It was about size. And so, that's a really kind of fucked up thing to try and wrap your head around. When you have been told you're fat your whole life, you know, and feel your body is fat, you can't buy clothes in the clothing stores for normal people, you know all the things that measure fatness, from the measurements on the back of a package of pantyhose to nicknames, and then have fat activists tell you that you're not fat enough. I think it's like really stupid and really damaging, and infuriating.

What Allyson's experience highlights is the contradiction between the embodied experience of fatness and the denial of that experience within the fat community.

In contrast, Janelle stated that people simply claiming the identity or lived experience of fat does not necessarily mean they understand or should be part of fat community. She insisted, "I've had, like, people I don't know who, just by looking at their Facebook photos, they're not really fat, and they're like 'oh ya my experience,' and it's like, ok, that's your experience, but you know, you're a size eight." A "size eight" would fit within what Carla Rice deems a "culturally appropriate size" ("Embodied", 250); however, it can be problematic to dictate an arbitrary cut-off point for who is permitted to have fat experiences. As Allyson argued, "exactly, exactly! Do you have a

weigh-in? How triggering could that be? Could you imagine?” Pandora Roxstar agreed, stating, “saying oh you’re not angry enough or not fat enough, I think that just discredits the movement and takes away from the revolution, you know?” Both Allyson and Pandora Roxstar highlight the dangers inherent in excluding people from fat community on the basis of arbitrary size restrictions.

Recognizing size privilege is thus something that becomes a key component of fat community. As a “smaller fat,” I recognize that my experiences with fatness are privileged because of my smaller size, and, as part of this community, I do experience feelings of confusion and guilt because of my size privilege. Sandy echoes these concerns:

You’re feeling a million different feelings all the time that you’re there. You’re feeling disgusted, you’re feeling in awe, you’re feeling like, turned on, you’re feeling shame, you’re feeling guilty; guilty because I’m able bodied, I’m not super sized, I’m a professional, I make a living, that I have a partner, that I can walk up the stairs, that I can shop in a store... it’s the first time you’re at a NoLose and you realize you’re not that fat.

Thinking about one singular fat experience can be problematic and confusing. It seems to me that a shift in focus from exclusion towards inclusion might be productive; that is, instead of using size privilege towards exclusionary gestures, fat community might instead direct it towards inclusionary ones. On her blog, Sugar Yum Yum insists that it is necessary to step away from the problematic binary system of fat or not fat. Rather, she recommends looking at “degrees of fatness” (Yum Yum “Degrees” 2012). She writes:

The way society treats and judges and shits on 200 pound people is bullshit. If you're towards the smaller side of fat, your struggles are real and they suck and they need to stop! And I will yell and scream for your right to own and control your body and to be treated with dignity and respect with my dying breath. But our struggles in this world are different. And acknowledging that doesn't diminish **your** pain or **your** feelings. It just fucking validates **mine**.

(Yum Yum, "Degrees," 2012).

Operating from a "degrees of fatness" perspective can help to validate different experiences of stigma and in so doing, can allow for a critical examination of size privilege within fat community.

#### Fat is not a Universal experience

Fat activism is sometimes premised on the notion that fat is a universal experience. Activists unite under the guise of the "fat experience." But this unity can mask other forms of difference. In this section, I want to look at some of the racial divides in fat activism. I will then look at the idea of belonging through difference as a way to find a more inclusive and "radical" belonging (Johnston and Longhurst; Rowe).

Not only can fat community impose size privilege, but it can also assert racial privilege. For example, Jamie said:

I think there's a lot of colour blindness because I don't, I don't often come out as a racialized woman but I am. My mother and my grandmother are indigenous from South America, so, even though I don't identify as indigenous often because

I'm very privileged to come out as white, I don't think I need one more thing for people to [critique].

Jamie experiences enough discrimination from her body size that she chooses not to "come out" as a racialized woman; to self identify as both fat *and* racialized would intensify discrimination. Pandora Roxstar, too, is a fat woman of colour. She discussed some of her experiences as follows:

But, I feel like I walk so many different worlds you know, and I've learned to sort of be comfortable in my skin regardless of where I am, in terms of race. And actually I went to a fat, FAQ hangout, and I was the only person of colour there, you know, and I feel like that was in my mind a little bit, like woah, I'm the only brown person here, like the only person of colour here, and it's being vulnerable in those spaces. You know, sure I can hold my own, but that doesn't mean that I should always have to, and that people should like do that work of dismantling white privilege and making spaces more accessible and I feel like the host, I don't want to name any names, but I feel like the host did do that and she was really sweet; so she made me feel comfortable but I mean, I wish there was more representation in that sense.

Such statements highlight the necessity for a more diverse understanding of the fat experience, one that takes into consideration not just body size, but intersecting axes of body oppression. As the only woman of colour in a fat positive space, Pandora Roxstar's voice and unique embodied experiences with fat stigma might get lost within more dominant fat narratives; indeed, Jamie's comments suggest that fat individuals may

engage in a process of self-censorship, silencing their own racialized experiences and understandings of fat. These experiences speak to the lack of representation from people who experience fat discrimination in varying and diverse ways. While some attempts to increase the diversity within the fat community – the “It Gets Fatter” video campaign “started by fat queer people of colour, for fat people of colour!” (“Fatter” 2013) is a prime example – fat activism was described by some of my participants as a particularly white movement. Sandy stated:

And we struggle with fat community on racism, we struggle on classism, [but] I think we’re not so great with the race stuff. Yeah, Because I think that certain racial and ethnic communities have different norms around fat, so we have to find a way to talk to them, to reach out to them, do some outreach.

Comments such as these – and those of Jamie and Pandora Roxstar – suggest a need to find ways of building community *through* rather than against differences; that is, as Rowe stated, to consider community as “radical belonging” (179).

### **Belonging Through Difference**

Rowe’s notion of “radical belonging” is, as I discussed in chapter 2, a more inclusive and productive approach to community that, according to Longhurst and Johnston, seeks to build alliances across difference (64). Through the building of alliances of difference, fat community can be more inclusive of size differences, race, ability, class, and sexuality, and it can recognize and value the different experiences of each individual activist. Such an approach can allow for an understanding of belonging

that is predicated on van den Ende's notion of "embodied differences"; that is, that differences are experienced in and through the body and constitute an important part of our identities (van den Ende, 145). Fat activism can unite and organize around these embodied differences and identities.

Fat activism aligns with the politic of "radical belonging." Pandora Roxstar insists that there can be solidarity in positions of marginalization, such as the position of fat or queer or racialized. What is particularly important about these intersections are the possibilities for fat activism. The idea of solidarity through the othered position and the interruption of meanings can lend a hand to the retheorizing of fat community. Alliances can be built within community through a solidarity of differences, and it is possible to interrupt meanings attached to bodies while still recognizing the multiplicity of different embodied experiences.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I explored the complexities of fat community. I drew connections between the individualizing discourses of obesity and community building as a fat activist project. I then looked at how my participants defined fat community based on their experiences. I also stressed the paramount importance of fat community to my participants' lives and experiences. As Jen explained, "it's pretty much saved my life." Within an examination of importance, I described the both the positive and negative aspects to creating what I called a "fat bubble." I also defined counter-discourses of fat activism within fat community and discussed how they work within and against obesity discourses to revalue fat bodies and the subjective fat experience.

In addition to this, I considered some of the issues and tensions that arise from the counter-discourses of fat activism, with a particular focus on belonging. Utilizing my participants' described realities, I looked at the concepts of self-acceptance, size privilege, and the universal fat experience in order to examine how fat identified individuals can sometimes be excluded from community. Following this, I explored the idea of a "radical belonging" to see how fat community could create a more inclusive politic based on belonging through differences. A more inclusive politic would only strengthen fat activism and help fat activists to further resist normative obesity discourses.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Obesity discourses dominate social and cultural understandings about bodies, health, and beauty. The biopedagogies of obesity perpetuate “truths” about who is healthy and what is healthy behaviour. Fatness, in this context, is the antithesis of health and beauty. This project focuses on fat activism and fat community in Toronto. I set out to explore how a contemporary Canadian focus on obesity impacted and fueled local fat activism and how these activists work to resist negative stereotypes of fatness.

By interviewing fat activists, attending fat community events, and discussing my own experience as a fat activist, I sought to examine how fat activism is working to reinscribe fat as healthy and beautiful and how building fat community is an important project in combating the isolation and stigma that many fat individuals face. My participants described to me a number of ways they resist dominant constructions of fatness, particularly through the use of food, fitness, and fashion. Furthermore, they insisted on the paramount importance of building fat community as part of a fat activist project. Though some tensions within the community were discussed, many agreed that it is critical to align through their differences, not aside from them.

I offer four important insights that emerge from this research project. First, it is still quite evident that obesity discourses impact the lives of fat people in negative and harmful ways. Indeed, as my participants’ stories reveal, the “truths” about fatness that are perpetuated by the biopedagogies of obesity work to stereotype and stigmatize fat individuals. Second, it is clear that fat stigma fuels fat activism; that is, my participants

use their experiences as a motivator for their activist work. Fat activism, as a project of revolt, challenges the biopedagogies of obesity. More significantly, it creates counter-discourses of fat positivity. Third, fat community – which produces and is productive of fat activism – is a key component of both the fat activist project and fat activist experience. Finally, it is clear that fat activism creates its own exclusionary discourses, in the process realizing the contradictions inherent in the concept of “community” itself. These insights can provide useful frameworks upon which others might develop further scholarship in fat studies.

There remains considerable research to be done. While my research spoke to the concerns of fat activists in the Toronto area, those who chose to participate were all female-identified. Thus, I could not address issues around male or trans experiences of fat identity and/or activism. As such, I was unable to adequately assess the gendered and sexed nature of fat identity, fat activism, fat community and fat politics. Nor was I able, within the context of this particular study, to fully explore the racial politics of fat activism. One third of my participants self-identified as women of colour; all of them mentioned problematic silences around questions of race within the fat community. Does this suggest that fat community reproduces structural racism? Or is there more at play? This is an important avenue for further study. Finally, although the literature points to the possibility of productive conversations between fatness and dis/ability, I was unable to explore this in the context of this particular research project.

What I hope can be taken away from this project is not only the importance of fat activism but the possibilities for it. By looking at the varied actions of my participants, it

is easy to see how fat activism can be applied in multiple sites. Body positivity and fat acceptance can and should become more socially acceptable and become part of a cultural conversation. Thus, I would suggest that taking principles and ideologies from fat activism and applying them to schools, resource centers, health centers and so on, would expand the conversation of critical fatness and would broaden the resistance efforts against mainstream obesity discourse. I also believe that in doing so, this has the potential to open up and expand fat community, in order to create a more inclusive and therefore productive community of activists.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Sample of Interview Questions**

#### **Proposed Interview Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews:**

1. Explain what it means to be a fat activist.
2. Describe your approach to fat activism.
3. When did you feel like you became a fat activist and why?
4. How do you define community? And how do you define Fat Community?
5. How do you feel fat activism is impacted by an emphasis on “obesity”?
6. What are your recommendations for fat activism?

## **Appendix B: Sample of Call-Out**

### **“Call-out” for ‘Plump it Up Toronto’ site:**

Do you identify as a fat activist? Are you currently in Toronto?

I am a graduate student working on research about fat activism in Toronto. I am looking to speak with self-identified fat activists in the area about fat activism, fat stigma, and fat community building. If you're interested in talking, please email me, Jess, at

[jmk774@mun.ca](mailto:jmk774@mun.ca)

Thanks!

### **ICEHR Statement:**

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

## Appendix C: Sample of Informed Consent Form

### Informed Consent Form

Title: (may change) Breaking Down Stereotypes and Building Community: Fat Stigma and the Community Organizing of Toronto Based Fat Activists

Researcher(s) Jessica Khouri,  
Department of Women's Studies (To be 'The Department of Gender Studies', September 2012),  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
jmk774@mun.ca 709-697-0145

Supervisors: Dr. Sonja Boon  
Department of Women's Studies (To be 'The Department of Gender Studies',  
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[sboon@mun.ca](mailto:sboon@mun.ca)  
(709) 864-2551

Dr. Natalie Beausoleil  
Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine  
[natalie.Beausoleil@med.mun.ca](mailto:natalie.Beausoleil@med.mun.ca)  
709-777-8483

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled "*Breaking Down Stereotypes and Building Community: Fat Stigma and the Community Organizing of Toronto Based Fat Activists*"

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study at any time. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Jessica Khouri, if you have any questions about the study or for more information not included here before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

## **Introduction**

My name is Jessica. I am graduate student in the Department of Women's Studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland. As part of my Master's thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Sonja Boon and Dr. Natalie Beausoleil.

With the current level of fat stigma created by "the obesity epidemic," my research will examine contemporary fat activists in Toronto and their work in promoting positive messages about fatness.

### **Purpose of study:**

My research seeks to address the fat stigma and discrimination created by the "obesity epidemic" in Canada and examines fat activism as a response to this. I will be talking with fat activists and attending fat activist events to explore the fat activist movement in Toronto. My research explores fat activism as a promotion of alternate messages on body size and will examine what the fat activist community looks like in Toronto. Additionally, my research seeks to explore the possibilities and limits of the movement, and question who and what gets considered activist/ism.

### **What you will do in this study:**

I will be interviewing you, a self-identified fat activist or fat/body image scholar, to discuss what fat activism is, what fat community looks like in Toronto, and who is part of it.

### **Length of time:**

Interviews will be 1 hour in length.

### **Withdrawal from the study:**

Should you wish to withdraw from the study, all recorded and written data will be destroyed and no longer used in the study.

### **Possible benefits:**

Though there are no direct known benefits to you, this research will help contribute to a growing body of literature that is working to critique the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body

### **Possible risks:**

Because of the personal nature of the topic, it is possible that discussing fat stigma and body image may cause you discomfort. Should you feel uncomfortable at any point in the interview, we can stop or change the topic of conversation. A copy of the transcription

will be made available to you and anything you wish to be taken out will not be used in the research.

### **Confidentiality vs. Anonymity**

There is a difference between confidentiality and anonymity: Confidentiality is ensuring that identities of participants are accessible only to those authorized to have access. Anonymity is a result of not disclosing participant's identifying characteristics (such as name or description of physical appearance).

### **Confidentiality and Storage of Data:**

- a. Your real name will not be used in the research. You will be assigned a pseudonym in an effort to maintain your anonymity.
- b. All electronic data will be stored on a personal, password-protected laptop, which will be both at my home and at my school. All written data and copies of digital recordings from interviews will be stored in a locked drawer, in my personal residence, and copies will be stored in my co-supervisors', Dr. Natalie Beausoleil's, office. Only my supervisors and I have access to this data. Data will be retained for five years and will be destroyed then. All electronic data and digital recordings will be deleted and written notes will be shredded.

### **Anonymity:**

Every reasonable effort will be made to assure your anonymity and you will not be identified in any reports and publications without explicit permission.

### **Recording of Data:**

With your consent, I will be using an audio-recorder to conduct this interview.

### **Reporting of Results:**

The results of this research will be reported in my Master's thesis. I will also be presenting them in a speaker's series through the Department of Women's Studies at Memorial University. There is a possibility results may be published in journal articles or presented at conferences in the future. Data will be reported using direct quotations but under your pseudonym in an attempt to protect your anonymity.

### **Sharing of Results with Participants:**

Should you wish, I will provide you with a completed copy of my thesis.

### **Questions:**

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact: Jessica Khouri at 709-697-0145 or [jmk774@mun.ca](mailto:jmk774@mun.ca).

### **ICEHR Statement:**

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

**Consent:**

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will be destroyed.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

**Your signature: (replace italicized text as these are examples)**

- I have read and understood what this study is about and appreciate the risks and benefits.
- I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.
- I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation at any time.
- I agree to be audio-recorded during the interview group
- I do not agree to be audio-recorded during the interview group
- I agree to the use of quotations and that my name to be identified in any publications resulting from this study.
- I agree to the use of quotations but do not want my name to be identified in any publications resulting from this study.
- I do not agree to the use of quotation.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher's Signature:**

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.