

# An Uncomfortable Fit: Fatness, Femininity and the University

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**Amy Gullage** is a PhD student in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning and the Graduate Collaborative Women and Gender Studies Program at OISE/UT. Her work examines fatness in relation to whiteness, gender and claims to citizenship within the Canadian context, particularly how these notions get taken up within schooling practices and curriculum.

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## Abstract

Drawing on interviews conducted with self-identified fat women undergraduates, this paper examines how universities construct and reproduce dominant understandings of fatness. Specifically, three inter-related discursive practices are discussed: manoeuvring physical space on campus, constructing subversive subject-positions and confronting the silence and denial of fatness.

## Résumé

En basant sur des entrevues avec des étudiantes au niveau du baccalauréat qui s'identifient comme ayant de l'embonpoint, cet article étudie comment les universitaires construisent et reproduisent une vision commune sur ce qu'est faire de l'embonpoint. En particulier, trois pratiques discursives interdépendantes sont discutées: l'espace physique de manoeuvre sur campus, la construction de sujets-positions subversifs, et la confrontation du silence et la dénégation de l'embonpoint.

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## Introduction

This paper is based on interviews with self-identified fat women that were conducted as part of my Master's thesis research which sought to examine the discourses and experiences that shape fat women's lives and construct them as particular subjects within university institutions (Gullage 2007). Drawing on poststructural feminist theory, three prevalent discursive practices that shaped fat women's experiences in university institutions emerged from the interviews. Specifically, the inter-related practices of manoeuvring physical space on campus, constructing subversive subject-positions, and confronting the silence and denial of fatness all contributed to the challenges of negotiating university as a fat woman. While the purpose of this paper is to think critically about fatness, the goal of this work is not to "clear things up" but rather to complicate prevailing understandings of fatness, femininity and university student experience.

## Theoretical Framework

This project was informed by a feminist poststructuralist perspective through which the body is understood as having numerous socially constructed meanings ascribed to it. These meanings are reflective of dominant social beliefs, norms, and practices of a given time and place and do not reflect a natural order or a given reality. Furthermore, while the multiple meanings ascribed to bodies do not reflect a natural order, such meanings become real in that they affect peoples' lives in many, often contradictory, ways. Poststructuralist theory develops a framework that views identities and bodies as fluid, unstable and constantly in flux. It allows for an understanding of multiple truths and ways of knowing. According to Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, the body is a "locus of knowledge production" and "...notions of health, of physical ability, are not

absolutes, nor pre-given qualities of the human body, but function both as norms and as practices of regulation and control that produce the bodies they govern" (Shildrick and Price 1999, 433).

As Jan Wright argues "research drawing on a post-structuralist perspective offers a powerful means to make visible the relationships between the ways individuals construct their sense of self/their identity and the sets of social meaning and values circulating in society" (Wright 2004, 29-30). The fat body is typically understood through the dominant medicalized discourse of obesity. Central to this discourse, as Michael Gard and Jan Wright posit, is that body fat is bad for your health and is caused by excess food consumption and lack of physical activity (Gard and Wright 2005, 68). This discourse is "concerned with the maintenance, representation and regulation of an already gendered, racialised and sexualised body through highly codified and institutionalized forms of health practices" (Rail and Beausoliel 2003, 3).

Carla Rice, whose work examines girlhood, fatness and identity, recognizes schools as particularly generative of identities (Rice 2007, 159). June Larkin and Carla Rice, in their examination of the connections between body-based harassment and girls' practices of body modification, found that the emphasis within elementary schools on healthy eating and healthy weights often resulted in problematic eating practices and body dissatisfaction (Larkin and Rice 2005, 228).

Expanding on this work, the premise of my study is that as educational institutions, universities are also implicated in the construction and reproduction of dominant discourses of body size and desirable subjects. The perpetuation of dominant discourses and the construction of subjects occur in many different sites at the university: formal and informal, academic and social, public and private. Indeed, the university experience often blurs these boundaries. Of course, people are already constructed as particular subjects prior to coming to university; however, universities can evoke new forms of subjectivity which may or may

not contradict existing understandings of the self.

### **Methodology**

I applied a qualitative feminist methodology drawing on discourse analysis to emphasize subjugated discourses. This approach was used in order to interrogate the experiences of fat women within university and how their experience and knowledge intersect with knowledge production and power within university institutions. While there are diverse theoretical, political and moral positions with which feminist researchers engage, what makes feminist methodologies distinct are "the particular political positioning of theory, epistemology and ethics that enables the feminist researcher to question existing 'truths' and to explore relations between knowledge and power" (Ramazanoğlu with Holland 2002, 16).

Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Janet Holland claim that "feminist research is politically *for* women; feminist knowledge has some grounding in women's *experiences* and how it *feels* to live in unjust gendered relationships" (2002, 16, original italics). She outlines a few broad approaches to research that are applied in feminist methodology: 1) feminist methodologies acknowledge that social life is shaped by theory, culture and ideas but does not come only from theory or language. Knowledge is historically produced in particular social, political and intellectual conditions and situations; 2) feminist methodologies view the power to produce dominant and valid knowledges as not equally accessible to all; and 3) feminist methodologies seek to question how power is implicated in the process of producing knowledge (Ramazanoğlu with Holland 2002, 13-14). A feminist methodology is used in this research in order to explore the experiences of fat women within university and by investigating how their experience and knowledge intersect with knowledge production and power within university institutions.

Michel Foucault defines subjugated knowledges as a "whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve

knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (Foucault 1972, 2). I want to highlight and theorize from the knowledges produced by fat women as they understand and experience their day-to-day lives at university by treating them as active knowers or "agentic subjects." The identity of fat women is not conceptualized as a fixed constant. Rather, the experiences of fat women, however fragile they may be, are used as a starting point to develop an understanding of fat subjectivities and of the social relations that shape everyday experience of being fat.

As Jan Wright explains, Foucault locates power in specific institutions wherein particular techniques of power are "channelled and brought to bear on individuals in systematic ways" (Wright 2004, 21). For Wright, then, a school, through its architecture, organization, curriculum and daily practices, draws on "particular regimes of truth (discourses) to legitimate its existence and to define what it does" (2004, 21). Therefore, the university as an institution can shape the everyday activities and lives of fat women. However, the purpose of this work is not to view their experiences as foundational nor to see their understandings of how fat subjects are constructed at university as able to be generalized to all universities and all fat women. Rather this research project asked: How do universities construct, reproduce and maintain gendered fat subjects?

In order to answer this question, I recruited students from two universities in Southern Ontario in order to compare and contrast the experiences of negotiating fatness at university. The two universities are quite different: one located in a large urban centre with a large, diverse student population and the other located in a large town with a smaller, more homogenous student population. I address at length the similarities in discursive practices that the participants experienced and engaged with on both university campuses. Unfortunately, a discussion of the differences between the universities and how these differences enabled variations in discursive practices is beyond the scope of this paper.

While I was interested primarily in interviewing women who self-identified as fat and who had a non-normative body due to fatness (I discuss this recruitment criterion at length in the following section), in order to have a meaningful discussion regarding how the institutional order of the university shapes fat subjects, I wanted the participants to also be familiar with discussing power relationships and to have an awareness of the theory and debate surrounding women's relationships with their bodies. I therefore targeted my recruitment to Women's Studies students and students interested in social justice and equity. Participants were recruited via postings on a university Internet forum, emails sent out through listservs and by snowball sampling. I expected that interviewing undergraduates would allow for a wide range of experience on the university campuses because they spend the greatest amount of time on campus (for example, attending classes, joining university-based academic and social clubs, and living in university residences). As a result of this high intensity experience, undergraduates have potentially the greatest opportunity to be aware of and engage with the institutional order that constructs fat subjects.

A total of six women were interviewed, three individually and three as a group. The interviews took place on the participants' respective campuses and all were semi-structured. Each one-to-one interview took approximately ninety minutes to complete and the group interview took approximately two hours. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The interview transcripts were analyzed for recurrent language and experiences and then coded using these emerging discourses.

Initially, I wanted to organize one group interview for each campus. However, the recruitment at one of the universities was more difficult than I had anticipated. Potential participants from this university contacted me over the course of three months (from December 2006 to February 2007). I was concerned I would lose participants by waiting for others. This project was approved by my university ethics board and was conducted in accordance with ethics protocols and as such

I also became increasingly concerned with causing participants undue harm and stress as a result of discussing their body and experiences with fatness in front of a group of strangers. To address these concerns, I decided I would interview these participants individually as they contacted me. In contrast, the three participants that were interviewed in a group were all friends from the same university and felt comfortable discussing their bodies and experiences in front of each other. The combination of individual and group interviews was used as a means of compiling rich and compelling research data while also reflecting an awareness of the needs of the participants involved in the research project.

### **The Challenge of Defining Fatness**

Since fatness is a socially created category, there is no real fat body. However, some fat bodies are more regulated and restricted than others. While many women of normative body size can understand themselves as fat, my purpose was to learn from women that have bodies that are socially understood as non-normative due to their size. Therefore, I recruited participants who identified as being "plus-sized" as the effects of the normalizing practices of body shape are reflected in this categorization. The criterion that participants must self-identify as plus-sized was an attempt to seek out only those who identify as fat and who have had to deal with their bodies being defined by an external regulatory system of standardized clothing. The term plus-size was an imperfect but useful means of recruiting women who understand themselves as fat and also negotiate a social world which regulates and restricts them due to the size of their bodies. This definition was necessarily limiting and could not capture the complexity of fat identities. Of course, women's experiences with fatness go beyond clothes and fashion.

During the interviews all the participants spoke about their awareness and understanding of their bodies in relation to fatness; some reflected fatness as a seemingly fixed aspect of their identity while others spoke of becoming fat or the moment they realized they were fat. Carla Rice argues

that the "[c]onsequences of body size standards and stereotypes are especially exacting and far-reaching for girls and women," as, due to their gendered experience, they face frequent evaluation of their appearance (Rice 2007, 158). She goes on to argue that in women's narratives "memorable anti-fat attitudes received through cultural representations gain meaning and momentum in everyday interactions" (2007, 164) and when these messages begin to resonate across various situations they can have profound implications on women's and girls' sense of body and self. Such implications can be read in how the participants in my study came to understand themselves as fat.

How the participants understand and explain their experience with being fat is crucial in determining how discourses of fatness get constructed, maintained and reproduced. The participants' self-narratives are examples of how they have come to understand and construct themselves as fat subjects. Their narratives are located in family, with friends and at school. It is in these locations and through these relationships where they take up the position of "the fat kid" in the family or the "fatso" in the classroom. The participants' experiences and identifications with fatness demonstrate that when they came to university they already had long and complex relationships with fatness. These experiences do not negate the argument that universities construct and reproduce fat subjectivities. They do, however, speak to the complicated web of discourses and experiences that constitute fatness. Their responses also speak to the multiple discourses of fatness and how these discourses become intricately related to their bodies. At both universities these personal narratives echoed one another:

Barbarella<sup>1</sup>: I think I have always been a fat kid. I was always the fat kid. Like I always just thought of myself as being fat and I remember being called fatso in grade two. So to me it has always just been... like I mean I can't even conceive of not being fat I guess.

Emma: I was young. But I used to be a skinny kid. Up until I was about eight. And I remember, I know this is

silly, I remember sitting down on a chair and my thighs spread out and I was like "Wow, I have big thighs" and that was when I first realized it [laughing]. That was before anyone called me fatso, which did happen. But I just realized myself, like, I was aware that I was physically getting bigger. I was like "oh, that's interesting - that never happened before." So yeah, that's me.

Sam: When I was ten, I was still skinny. A lot of things happened with my family and I just started eating. Over the summer from grade five and grade six, I gained a whole lot of weight. So I went from being the really tall awkward lanky kid to being a really, really tall, really, really big kid. So, I came back to school and everyone started calling me fat and everyone started calling me all sorts of names. So it was then that I ballooned, I guess [laughing]. I gained a hundred pounds in a year. It really changed my body and changed my perception of myself a lot.

Leah: Since I was capable of independent thought [I was aware of myself as fat]. So...possibly from the time I moved back to Trinidad. I must have been four or five. I always knew I was fat then. Yeah. There was one period in my life that I did a crash diet that was remarkably healthy but I hated it. I've always been consistently as large as this.

Spenta: I have always been aware of my body weight since I was young...My dad is very body conscious. He is a bit of a fitness freak. I have always been conscious of my body weight. He always had reinforced that I am on the heavier side and I need to lose weight. Not...he has good intentions I know.

Zoey: I think in grade three. My uncle made a joke about a birthday present where he said "I am going to get you a can of SlimFast for your birthday." [Amy has a shocked expression] I know! My mother's brother said that to me. I kind of laughed and my mom was upset and then I thought about it later and thought I guess that wasn't funny. You know. It was pretty messed up. When I look at pictures now as an eight year old kid I am like "what was he talking about?" You know what I mean. I was not a very heavy kid until probably grade six. Maybe larger than average but I was not a plus-sized kid I don't think.

Throughout the interviews, many of the participants spoke about identities that

interlock, intersect and/or describe how they identify with fatness. Two participants identified as queer. Sam spoke of her experiences of discrimination on campus based mainly as a result of a non-normative gendered body and her sexuality. She described a recent incident in a campus washroom where she was accosted by two women and told that she "didn't belong there." Although she interpreted this verbal assault as being related to sexuality and gender non-normativity she admitted that "it is hard to tease out what is really the problem." Another participant, Zoey, spoke of how stressed she felt during first year university as a result of being the first person in her family to go to university. She spoke of her need to "prove everyone wrong" and to demonstrate to her family members, some of whom had not finished high school, that her decision to go to university was the right one. Two participants, Spenta and Leah, spoke about race and how their experiences at university and their understanding of their bodies coincided with moving to Canada. Both Spenta and Leah spoke about the Western ideals of feminine beauty, body shape and weight compared to larger, curvy ideals for women in Pakistan and Trinidad, respectively.

How the participants came to understand and experience fatness within the specific context of a university institution is examined through three discursive practices. These practices, manoeuvring fat bodies in university space, constructing a subversive fat woman subject position, and confronting the silence and denial of fatness, are described below.

### **Manoeuvring Fat Bodies in University Space**

A defining space within university institutions for students is the classroom or lecture hall. These institutional spaces are used to define how particular subjectivities will be enacted and serves to establish regulatory practices within the schools. While such space is often treated as natural or neutral, it is reliant on and serves to perpetuate discourses of normalcy and requires bodies to be disciplined in particular ways. Therefore, how classroom space is physically structured

depends on the assumptions of who a university student is and how she should be accommodated within the institutional space.

All of the participants spoke about the furniture used in classrooms and not being able to sit properly or comfortably in class. The desks in lecture halls were mentioned most often by the participants because they had a difficult time manoeuvring into them. Leah described how the knowledge of having to deal with the desks requires her to use her body in particular ways. She stated that: "Those [desks] also frustrate me because you have to pull the table rest out. I hate that! It really restricts the mobility I have. (...) I am very conscious of it. So once again I sit in the back to hide the fact that I feel like this - that I am trapped by these chairs." Sam also spoke about the negative attention she received from other students when she manoeuvres into the desks. Some participants explained that they would go early to class in order to avoid being stared at as they manoeuvred into the small lecture hall desk-chairs.

When asked if and how her body was accommodated within university spaces, Spenta stated: "I think that university definitely, even the structure of class, is designed for a certain kind of person and as a result excludes a lot of people who are not that kind of norm or ideal or whatever. [...] I think it has a lot to say about who belongs here and who doesn't belong here." Sam spoke about the connection between space and normative femininity. She stated "I take up space, as you can tell I am not very feminine." She was frustrated that within the institution, particularly within classrooms and lecture halls, she could not take up the space she needed. The statements highlight the way space evokes regulatory practices which cannot be separated from how space interlocks with identities related to gender, race, class, sexuality and ability. These universities' spaces are used to construct a definitive understanding of what it means to be at university and it is quite telling that these are spaces where fat bodies do not fit.

Living in residence increases the amount of regulation through surveillance experienced by the participants. The

participants who lived in residence relayed how experiences of their bodies and actions were regulated by other students or by their own assumptions of what other students would think.

How students are to use their bodies is always highly regulated and monitored in residences. For example, on Emma's floor in residence, students were encouraged to post the number of times they went to class as well as the number of times they went to the gym. She explained that "they tried to organize everybody [to] go to the gym and there were score cards where you could say how many times you went to the gym and then you get like a prize." Emma went on to explain that the score cards were posted in the hall of the residence floor, available to be seen by all floor members as well as any visitors to the floor.

Spenta explained how, in her co-ed dorm, women with slender bodies were encouraged to walk semi-naked in the halls. She understood this act to reflect dominant gendered expectations of women's bodies and male heterosexual desire. Spenta knew that because of her body in this space she could not seek out this kind of male attention. Her interpretation reflects a common-sense understanding of bodies, sexuality and university spaces.

Lastly, the participants spoke about athletics and recreational spaces on campus. In spaces based on discourses of health and wellness, fat bodies become a site of cultural contradiction and unease and as a result are highly visible. All participants spoke of having to confront these spaces on campus. It is important to note that all participants had experiences in gyms or on sports teams prior to attending university and while some stated they never really enjoyed working out they were explicit as to their unease and dislike of athletic and exercise space on their university campus. These spaces were understood by participants to be used solely by people who had reached ideal physical fitness and were totally confident and competent when using exercise equipment. Regardless of their actual skill level, the participants understood that in these spaces their bodies would be read as problematic and unhealthy.

The two university campuses construct and maintain dominant discourses and conditions of the social relations of fatness within institutional spaces. These discourses are manifested in both the institutional organization of space and in the everyday experiences within the space. Drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Elizabeth Grosz argues that "[t]he body is fundamentally linked to representations of spatiality and temporality....[W]e do not grasp space directly or through our senses but through our bodily situation" (Grosz 1994, 90). Feminist critics of Merleau-Ponty, including Grosz and Iris Marion Young, challenge his notion of the body-subject as it lacks the specificity of gender, sexuality and race (Young 1990).

Notions of bodies, space, gender and race are interlocked. As Radhika Mohanram (1999) argues, identity cannot be understood through notions of power without examining how space functions within this understanding (Mohanram 1999, xv). By drawing on these theories, university spaces cannot be understood as natural or neutral but, rather, they play a significant role in how we come to understand ourselves in them. The practices of surveillance and the use of classroom space, along with expectations of other campus spaces, such as students' residences and athletic centres, construct and perpetuate normalizing discourses of the body. As the participants have vocalized, their fit (or lack of fit) within the university campuses has both subjective and educational effects. For the most part, the university spaces the participants encounter on a daily basis constructed and reinforced the notion that their bodies did not belong at university.

### **Constructing the Subversive Fat Woman on Campus**

Being able to "fit in" particular spaces or failing to do so relates to our sense of who we are and what is expected of us. Central to our common sense understanding is not only what we are, but also what we are not. We make sense of our social world from both the categories to which we belong and those categories to which we do not (Davies 1992, 23). The following section outlines how the

participants have constructed alternative identifications against the perceived institutional expectations of women and femininity at university.

Discussing how they understood fatness and university life, the participants revealed that they came to understand themselves in relation to and against the typical "college girl": the woman who acts ditzy, possibly hides her intelligence and is only at university to "get a guy." They also did not want to be a part of the institutionalized mainstream campus culture and used their bodies to challenge normalizing regimes that regulated the body on campus. In response to the dominant understandings of femininity on campus, the participants constructed what I have termed as subversive fat woman identity.

Kathleen LeBesco asserts that fat bodies are not "simply an aesthetic state nor a medical condition, but a political situation" and therefore conceptualizes the revolting fat body as one that rebels, protests and overthrows authority (LeBesco 2004, 1). Through LeBesco, theorizing fatness is understood as a challenge to the normalizing constructs of the bodies and uses fatness as subverting dominant understandings of the body (2004). The subversive fat woman identity also reflects the radical confrontation that L'ea Kent calls in order for fat women to fight abjection (Kent 2001, 130). For Kent and for many of my participants, it is necessary to challenge processes of abjection that render fat women's bodies as synonymous with offense and horror (2001, 130). The subversive fat woman discourse echoes Kent's call to confront fat abjection as an attempt to represent a self that is not body-neutral nor disembodied but rather reflects a vision for fat women that no longer disdains their flesh or their subjecthood.

All participants maintained subject positions that questioned dominant understandings of fatness. Fat women within the university demonstrate the limitations and fallibility of the idealized, "college girl." The fat woman's body as demonstrated by exclusion from institutionalized normalizing practices of the university does not matter in the same way, as she represents the limitedness and instability of the normalizing practices. The

participants spoke of how they failed to be produced as ideal feminine subjects on campus and how they embraced this failure. Sam expressed how her gender non-conformity along with her fatness is constantly used to upset expectations of femininity and womanliness on campus. Emma stated that:

The things I felt excluded from were things I never would have done anyway. So I was kind of glad....The thing is I felt like obviously, I'm not the kind of person that gets approached by a person recruiting for a sorority. That kind of thing - that doesn't bother me....So, it is okay....The way I am isn't so bad because if I did look like the stereotypical hot girl, I'd miss out on a lot because of that.

Emma described that had she not been fat she would have been expected to act and be a certain way within the university community. She negotiated between resisting exclusion and finding community as a result of fatness. This negotiation is demonstrated in how she understands her fatness as a category of exclusion and how she interprets it as allowing her access to other experiences and communities. Emma's fatness has allowed her to go against the dominant expectations of women at her university.

In a similar vein, Barbarella, knowing people look at her body, plays with this gaze stating that "now [at university] it's like if I am going to be different, I am going to be really freakin' different. Like the way I dress has enabled me to be more comfortable with my body."

Barbarella, whose fashion style is eclectic and unique, uses clothes to reclaim her visibility on campus and to subvert expected norms of what women are supposed to look like on campus. Radhika Mohanram argues that bodies always exist within representations (Mohanram 1999, 43). Barbarella knows the norms of dress and representation of femininity she should apply while on her university campus and therefore, when she dresses to be "really freakin' different," it is her way of "speaking her fatness." This notion of "speaking your fatness" was developed by Eve Sedgwick to encourage fat people to renegotiate the

"representational contract between one's body and one's world" (cited in Murray 2005, 230).

Like Barbarella, Spenta discussed how she uses her visibility on campus to challenge assumptions about fatness. Spenta discussed the link between fatness and femininity and understands dominant expectations about women's bodies to be related to women achieving a stronger position of power. Feminist theorists have argued that as women achieve more positions of power within the workplace, women's bodies are to be smaller and take up less space (Bartky 2003; Bordo 1993). Spenta constructed her fatness as a way to challenge traditional expectations of women as well as using her size to challenge stereotypes of fat people. She stated that:

Obviously, my body size helps to do that. So I try to use that in a positive way. I do feel that I am more visible, of course. I really think that it is the solution to people looking at you and looking away. They don't want to see a big person. I will go and I will stand in their face....If people don't want to talk about something I will talk about it more.

Spenta uses her size to resist dominant expectations of what it means to be fat and a woman.

Fat bodies are hypervisual due not only to their physical size but also due to the normalizing gaze and the judgement of poor health. As Annemarie Jutel argues "a particular look reflects well-being, a well-being that in turn is evidence of devotion to self-improvement practices" (Jutel 2005, 119). The participants use the visibility of their bodies at university to renegotiate understandings of fatness on their own terms.

The participants use their fatness to disrupt dominant forms of femininity within universities and their narratives of disruptive acts are important to how they understand themselves. They use their bodies and the unease which they evoke to start dialogues that alert others to questions, problems and challenges to the dominant understanding of fatness and normativity. Their interventions have been central to making meaning of and through their bodies while at university. However, their important interventions which

seek to disrupt how fat women and fatness in general is understood are limited by institutionalized regulatory practices, disciplinary regimes and normalized discourses within the university that serve to perpetuate and maintained gendered ideals of the body. These institutional regulatory practices and disciplinary regimes are outlined in the following section.

### **Confronting the Silence and Denial of Fatness**

The participants in this study stated that fatness is rarely, if ever, discussed within their university lectures. Many echoed Sam's claim that experiences of what it is like to "actually be fat" were absent within university classrooms, thus constructing a discourse of silence and denial of fatness. The discourse of denial is not surprising and both reflects and perpetuates the dominant discourse of fat as a problem/fat as pathology. Leah stated that fatness is not brought up in her classes and goes on to point out that "[i]t is not something that is ever brought up in an institutional context." Spenta interpreted the denial of fatness in her classes as directly linked to the construction of knowledge. She asked "and whose knowledge is worthy of teaching - what kind of knowledge? (Sarcastically) Obviously, we don't want to teach about people who are fat. Who cares about people who are fat? It is their problem. They are lazy." Zoey was similarly concerned that fatness was not discussed in her Bachelor of Education program. The cohort is centred on students who, due to various marginalized identities, may fail to do well in school. The class discusses issues such as racism and homophobia but has never discussed fat phobia as a potential risk for students. This widespread institutional silence of fatness within universities reproduces and maintains dominant discourse of fatness.

The participants' concerns for the lack of acknowledgement of fatness were not limited to lecture material. Leah, Spenta and Sam all mentioned the absence of professors who represent diverse identities. Spenta links this lack of representation of marginalized identities to how the university constructs and reproduces knowledge. Similarly, Sam

questioned how professors, especially in disciplines such as Women's Studies, fail to acknowledge how their bodies normalize dominant discourses. She claimed:

The people you look at in Women's Studies and are like how are you here? Those people really identify with J [a Women's Studies professor]. It's interesting there are so many Women's Studies profs that are tiny. Like J comes in her miniskirts and pretty boots. I think a lot of profs don't realize that they embody that normative femininity without challenging it in any way. Like I don't get along with her at all because I challenge everything she says.

It is very telling that in the conversations on how fatness is or is not discussed and how the participants feel excluded, they brought up how the bodies of their professors also reflect, reproduce and maintain the discourse of silence and denial. Why are only some bodies, primarily the bodies of Women's Studies professors, commented on by the participants? It is possible that the participants are expecting something more from their professors who are women and/or feminists. The bodies of Women's Studies professors are read as manifesting their feminist politics. Therefore, the participants are highly critical of thin bodied Women's Studies professors as they understood their physicality to be clearly marking them as actively participating in and maintaining the construction of hegemonic ideals of femininity.

While institutionalized discourses of body normativity shape fat women's experiences on campus they also play a role in how a woman's teaching body is understood. Women's Studies classes or classes based on equity issues were the only places that participants identified as institutionalized spaces where fatness could potentially be discussed in a critical way. The participants understood and interpreted Women's Studies classes as a place to have conversations of fatness that do not reinforce and maintain a denial and silence of fatness. Initially, the participants viewed the discipline of Women's Studies as an area in which fatness could be examined using alternative discourses. However, when probed, most stated that the extent and degree to which

fatness was discussed was limited and they suggested that these classes gave them the general skills in which to examine social issues and the construction of identities. Leah stated that fatness was "touched upon but it is not critical" and that her Women's Studies class did not really help her understand how all her identities interlock. Zoey was a bit more optimistic, stating that her undergraduate courses in Women's Studies exposed her to theories related to the body; however, she did not discuss any specific theories related to fat bodies.

As the participants pointed out, in Women's Studies, even when bodies are taken to matter, only certain aspects and perspectives really count. The bodies that matter, to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler, are those that are validated and legitimized through lecture material, required readings and classroom discussion (Butler 1993). Several participants experienced Women's Studies classes that give much attention to anorexic and bulimic bodies and the negative effects of women's magazines on women's self-esteem. They commented that when bodies were discussed in Women's Studies classes they often only served to reinforce a normative conception of women's/feminine body.

### Concluding Thoughts

The discursive practices illustrated above speak to the complexity and difficulty confronted by fat subjects as they negotiate university institutions. Universities function as pivotal institutions that construct and reproduce dominant understandings of fatness. As many of the participants discussed, individuals may question and speak back to such practices at university; however, it is only through systemic institutional change that a significant challenge to the dominant understanding of fatness can be achieved. Such a challenge is necessary as these dominant discourses of fatness inform how we understand our bodies and ourselves.

### Endnote

1. Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

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