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Studies**

White, F.R.

This is an accepted manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies on April 18, 2021, available online:

<http://www.routledge.com/9780367502928>

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Fat and Trans: Towards a New Theorization of Gender in Fat Studies

Francis Ray White

Usually when the words 'trans' and 'fat' appear together the ensuing conversation will feature some serious hand-wringing about processed foods, cholesterol and the pros and cons of banning something... That is not the type of trans fat under discussion here, rather the aim of this chapter is to explore how and why bringing Fat Studies and *Transgender* studies together could produce new ways of thinking about gender in Fat Studies. On the face of it Fat Studies and Trans Studies appear to have much in common; they are both interdisciplinary fields, both oriented towards anti-oppressive goals and they both have a common interest in elaborating theoretical accounts of non-normative embodiments. However, despite this shared ground the two fields have, as yet, rarely intersected and as I will argue, this has resulted in accounts of gender in Fat Studies which both exclude the experiences of fat transgender people and limit understandings of the relationship between fat and gender.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first will review the existing academic literature that does deal directly with issues of fatness and transness. Despite its small size this work does offer some possible ways to conceive of the intersection of fat and trans. Key is the question of whether fat

and trans are posited as separate states to be compared – how is the experience/treatment of being trans similar or different to that of being fat? – or whether identities/embodiments forged at the intersection of the two are considered. Identifying this tendency, alongside the strengths and limitations of existing approaches, is necessary in order to further theorize fat and gender as inextricably linked.

The second section will discuss a selection of writings in Fat and Trans Studies that deploy the tropes of fluidity or liminality in their attempts to account for the ambiguous, unfixed, ambivalent or monstrous construction of either fat or trans identities and bodies. Often drawing heavily on poststructuralist and/or queer theoretical perspectives these pieces invoke fluidity or liminality but overwhelmingly only relation to *either* fatness *or* transness. By comparing the differing, sometimes contradictory, uses these tropes are put to my aim is to illustrate how a simultaneous consideration of fat *and* trans remains under-theorized, and a ‘single axis’ approach that implicitly assumes all the fat people are cis and all the trans people are thin prevails. The final section returns to the question of gender within Fat Studies to ask what a trans perspective could bring to the way Fat Studies ‘does’ gender. Taking on the implications of the previous two sections, the aim for the final discussion is to critique existing work in Fat Studies, not to castigate it, but to suggest that its cis-centrism precludes a full realization of fat’s central role in the production and destabilization of binary gender.

Fat/Trans So Far

Only a small body of literature specifically addressing the interrelationship of fat and trans has emerged thus far in Fat Studies. While there has been discussion in online and activist spaces, (for recent examples see Aprileo, 2018; Bay, 2017; Luna, 2018) and without wanting to draw a rigid binary between activist and academic discourse, the theoretical development of these debates has been limited. However, it is possible to outline three main directions the existing academic literature has taken: first there are the approaches that focus on trans and fat anti-discrimination law (Glazer & Kramer, 2009; Vade & Solovay, 2009); secondly there are discussions of trans participation and inclusion in fat activism (Cooper, 2012, 2016; Lampe, 2016; LeBesco, 2016; White, 2014); and finally there are the autobiographical/autoethnographic accounts of fat/trans authors (Barker, 2009; Bergman, 2009; Burford & Orchard, 2014; White, 2014; Zach, 2015). It is notable that the overwhelming majority of this work has been published in Fat Studies rather than Trans Studies; it is also dominated by white trans masculine authors and experiences.

Dean Vade and Sandra Solovay's "No Apology: Shared Struggles in Fat and Transgender Law" (2009) was arguably the first significant attempt to bring together fat and trans analysis. In it they highlight how in discrimination cases claimants who are fat or trans are more likely to be favored by the courts, "as long as they show a strong desire to conform to societal gender and body norms" (p. 173-4), in other words if they apologize for their non-normativity. Vade and Solovay's rejection of this and call for the protection of

“civil rights for everyone, not just those who fit in boxes” (p. 174) is vital, however, their approach to thinking about the ‘shared’ features of fat and trans experience is limited. In their opening sentence they refer to, “people who are transgender, fat, or both” (p. 167), but in what follows the “or both” option disappears and discussion is confined to people who are fat (and implicitly cisgender) or trans (and implicitly thin). They then discuss either fat people’s failure to uphold *bodily* norms or trans people’s failure to uphold *gender* norms, but not fat people’s failure to uphold gender norms. In other words, they do not consider the extent to which gender normativity is predicated on the possession of a slender body. Thus, there is something of a gap, especially given how many (cis) fat writers attribute the failure to achieve a normative gendered embodiment to fat (see the final section of this chapter for a fuller discussion of this).

The tendency to compare and contrast fat and trans experiences in approaches such as Vade and Solovay’s also has the effect of erasing the experience of those who are both fat and trans (see LeBesco, 2014 and Lee, 2014 for examples of this in different contexts). Happily this omission is beginning to be addressed, especially in relation to fat/trans participation in fat activism. Much of this work highlights the incommensurability of fat and trans political discourses, either around the malleability of the body (Burford & Orchard, 2014; White, 2014), narratives of identity origin (Lampe 2016) or ideas about ‘body acceptance’ and/or positivity (Burford & Orchard, 2014; LeBesco, 2016), resulting in what Lampe calls the impossibility of a coherent fat/trans subjectivity. Moreover, attempts to make visible ‘LGBT’ contributions

to the history of fat activism, often do not distinguish between LGB and T.

Although examples exist in other contexts – Ingraham’s (2015) discussion of size diversity in queer porn for example – in general, as Burford and Orchard note, “promises of inclusion fail to deliver. Indeed sometimes the ‘t’ appears to be mere relish adorning and ‘inclusifying’ the main meal of lesbian and gay” (2014, p. 61).

One such example is Charlotte Cooper’s “queer and trans fat activist timeline” (2012) which does valuable work gathering and archiving fat activist history, but does not provide explicit detail about whether and in what sense either the activists or the activism they engaged in was ‘trans’. Cooper’s (2016) longer work on the genealogy of fat activism features a high ratio of trans or genderqueer participants, five in her sample of thirty-one fat activists (p. 43), and although some details of their experiences as fat and trans do emerge (p. 149), they are not analyzed. Further, she notes that feminism’s, “struggles around race, imperialism, trans people, or class...also reflect problems within fat activism” (2016, p. 102), but does not expand on what it might mean for trans participation in fat activism that significant US fat feminist networks were forged at/through the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, a space which is notoriously trans exclusionary, particularly of trans women (p. 138, see also Davis, 2008, p. 114). Nor does Cooper explore what prompted NOLOSE to abandon its ‘women-only’ conference policy in 2004 (p. 149). It is clear that further research into trans people’s involvement in and/or exclusion from fat activism would be welcome, and may help to explain both the seeming absence of trans feminine voices in Fat Studies, and the

presence/predominance of particular theorizations of gender.

The final strand of existing literature is the autobiographical or autoethnographic writing by people who are fat and trans or non-binary. Such authors often reflect on their experiences of moving through the world, or being read as, both fat men and fat women. S. Bear Bergman's descriptions of this in "Part-Time Fatso" (2009) are particularly evocative. They note how, "when I am taken for a man, I am not fat" (p. 139) whereas, "as a woman, I am revolting. I am not only unattractively mannish but also grossly fat" (p. 140). Zach (2015) similarly observes that, "I can always tell if I'm being read as male because people will never comment about my weight" (p. 94). Many stories in this genre bring up differences around food that are dependent on how the author is presenting or being perceived at the time. Sam Orchard notes how as a man dining at friends' houses, "I'll be offered more, and seconds without hesitation..." (2014, p. 69, see also Barker, 2009). This and the availability of men's clothes in regular stores are used to exemplify the gendered nature of fatphobia and its disproportionate impact on women and those presenting/being read as female. Despite this, although a trans feminine perspective on this dynamic has been articulated in some online/activist writings (for example Burns, 2016; Mey, 2013) it has yet to feature in more academic Fat Studies analyses.

While these insights are undoubtedly fascinating, they do, in places, reproduce the 'compare and contrast' approach, which assumes fatness is an attribute of a body that is already male or female (White, 2014). However,

Bergman and Burford and Orchard begin to complicate this through their more detailed discussions of how the presence or location of fat on the body produces certain attributions (or not) of gender. Orchard describes how, “within transmasculine communities, I felt as though my weight was seen as feminine, or rather, as feminizing, as in: ‘urgh, look at my curves’” (2014, p. 63). He also notes the general perception of fat as both a ‘failure’ of femininity, and something which makes one, “too curvy to be seen as male” (p. 69). In different contexts though, Orchard notes, “there’s something about bulk that can be read as a masculine indicator” (p.69), which aligns with Bergman’s admission that:

It’s my fat for which I am sometimes most grateful when I want the world to see me as a man...this is an option for me because my natural physiognomy (mesomorphic musculature and masculine fat distribution) allows me to get read as a man (2009, p. 141).

Bergman also mentions how, “my girth and breadth allow my smallish breasts to be read as ‘fat boy tits’” (p. 141). It is this type of attention to the gendering properties of fat which has potential for development in theorizations of gender within Fat Studies. It is to the gender producing/disrupting qualities of fat that I will turn in the following sections.

Fluidity

If the existing literature on fat and trans tends to maintain fatness and transness as discrete phenomena, the aim of the following discussion is to

explore ways to bring them together via an examination of fluidity and liminality. These tropes have been invoked in both Fat and Trans Studies in the service of rejecting essentialist notions of embodiment and/or identity and retheorizing them as shifting and unfixed. However, fat and trans theorists have deployed ideas of fluidity and liminality in differing and sometimes contradictory ways. Thus, the following discussion asks how these deployments can be made to speak to one another in order to open up new possibilities for theorizing both fat/trans embodiment and gender within Fat Studies.

In “Situating Fluidity” (2008), Erin Davis argues the concept of ‘fluidity’ has been enthusiastically taken up by queer, postmodern theorists seeking to “destabilize gender categories rooted in biologically deterministic gender paradigms” (p. 98), and that trans folk have come to exemplify multiplicity and the social constructedness of binary gender, because they, “have histories and bodies that do not reflect hegemonic expectations” (p. 98). However, Davis highlights how debates around trans fluidity have foundered over the desire of some trans individuals for precisely the kinds of coherent and stable identities fluidity is supposed to subvert. Davis’ critique of this centers on the experiences of her trans research participants for whom ‘fluidity’ or unintelligibility threatens social inclusion (p. 123, see also Wilson, 2002). Hence they “typically present themselves as a man or a woman” (p. 105), or adopt a “traditional feminine image” (p.108) in order to for their gender to be intelligible enough to get by. How might such an embrace or evasion of fluidity work in relation to fat (trans)gendered embodiment? The possibility of a

'traditional' feminine/masculine image may not available in the same way for fat people. Sam Orchard, for example, reports that as a (female-identifying) teenager, "my weight contributed to my feeling that I was 'failing' at being a girl" (2014, p. 69). Despite having a history that reflects 'hegemonic expectations', here Orchard's gender is destabilized by his fatness, rendering it less intelligible and more fluid.

If fluidity, as Davis notes, "implies an escape from the constraints of gender assumptions and a refusal to stay within one category or another" (p. 101) to what extent is fat fluid? This question is addressed by Kathleen LeBesco (2014) in her 'meditation' on fatness and fluidity. She proposes the concept of "size-fuck" (p. 52), a play on gender-fuck, as a way to critique the fat political orthodoxy that casts weight change, particularly intentional weight-loss, as a betrayal of fat activism/acceptance. Drawing explicitly on queer and trans uses of fluidity, LeBesco wonders whether Fat Studies could revalue fluctuations in weight in order to reject the fixity of the body and essentialist models of the self (p. 53). Thus, in the context of her own changing weight she notes, "like a genderqueer person, I like presenting an incoherent identity" (p. 53). "Size-fuck" is undoubtedly compelling, but ultimately LeBesco reproduces the 'compare and contrast' model where fat and trans experiences are likened, but not thought to overlap. What if LeBesco was not just 'like' a genderqueer person, but in fact 'was' one? What if the distinction between gender fluidity and size fluidity was collapsed? What if we fully acknowledged that fat is central to securing gender 'within one category of another'?

Sellberg and Sellberg (2014) offer an alternative reading of the fluidity of fat that helps elucidate these 'what ifs'. They discuss the literal fluidity of fat as a corporeal substance; "fat is a 'wobbly' substance, and a simultaneously substantial and insubstantial fluid" (p. 305). They argue that fat's presence in the body is not only excluded from anatomical representations throughout history, but from fat feminist analyses of fat which:

Tend to focus on how fat as an *exterior addition* to the idea of the female body beautiful affects our sense of self, but seldom touch on how fat as an *interior part* of us always already functions within the continual constitution of said self. (p. 305)

As such the Sellbergs' question the notion of fat as something laid 'on top of' some more solid sense of self and instead suggest that fat, in its fluidity is, "both outside and inside the body, but it is also both outside and inside the organs. It muddles the borders and defies classification" (p. 307). The question here is whether this 'muddling' can be extended to gender? In a sense, yes it can: "Whether we look at a male or a female body" they say, "what is really striking about human corporeality is the contrast and juxtaposition between fluid and solid, muscle and fat" (p. 307). In which case, if gender is a configuration of muscle and fat, and fat, as Sellberg and Sellberg have noted, 'defies classification' then the fluidity of both fat and gender is one and the same. Although Sellberg and Sellberg do not set out to attend to fat/trans embodiment, theirs might be the most usefully intersectional account of fat and gender in the existing literature, because it

proposes a model that does not assume the fat body is not a trans one or vice versa.

Liminality

Davis, LeBesco and Sellberg and Sellberg all caution against an unreserved embrace of fluidity because not all bodies are capable of infinite or permanent weight or gender change; as Sellberg and Sellberg warn, “fats have both fluid and solid states” (2014, p. 311). One way around the tension between change and fixity that dogs theorizations of fluidity can be found in Katariina Kyrölä and Hannele Harjunen’s (2017) model of fat liminality. Typically, liminal states are thought to be temporary, periods of in-betweenness that are passed through on the way to somewhere more fixed. This is very much how Wilson (2002) takes up liminality in relation to the embodied experiences of her trans research participants, specifically to describe a phase, “which all people transgressing ‘normative’ gender boundaries will at some stage occupy...it is a ‘space’ where genders are suspended and remodeling occurs” (2002, p. 431-2). For Wilson’s participants the liminal phase is a temporary, necessary evil to be endured in order to reach a more fixed end (2002, p. 432). Kyrölä and Harjunen, however, use the concept to capture the way their research interviewees related to fatness as a transitory phase, and desired to move through it, though many of them had been, and would likely remain, fat their entire lives (2017, p. 103). Embodying this type of liminal fatness meant, “nearly all of the women seemed to consider their ‘real’ body size to be thin, or saw it as a self-evident goal” (p. 103).

In “Monstrous Freedom” (2015), Lesleigh Owen also discusses fat as a liminal state, not in terms of it being temporary, but in relation to its monstrosity. Owen describes fatness as, “that scary, liminal, shadowed place where certainties fizzle and boundaries fade” (2015, p. 2). In the context of dualistic constructions of biological/social, inside/outside, attractant/repellant, Owen argues fat cannot fully occupy either ‘side’ and it is this which makes it ambivalent and ‘monstrous’ – “fat bodies are scary and repulsive precisely because they throw cause and effect into question, blur supposedly sharp lines between seeming opposites” (2015, p. 2). This fear of indeterminate states is also echoed in Wilson’s research where one participant states, “you can’t be not one thing or the other. I don’t know what you can be classed as, to me you are nothing” (2002, p. 438, see also Davis, 2008, p. 124). Wilson’s argument, made in 2002, does not address what would now be known as genderqueer or non-binary people, who may absolutely desire to be ‘something’ that is not one thing or the other. However, what is clear is that liminality for Wilson refers almost exclusively to gender, while the lines Owen’s fat monsters ‘blur’ do not appear to threaten the integrity of gender boundaries. Ironically, in a throwaway comment Owen notes that, “monsters exist to scare us...as cautionary tales to help scare good girls and boys into normalcy” (2015, p. 3). It may be more apt to say that as a monster, fat is a cautionary tale that helps scare us into *being* ‘good girls and boys’ – the legibly gendered kind – lest we slip into liminality.

Given the different configurations of liminality Wilson, Kyrölä and Harjunen and Owen assign to trans and fat bodies, in what sense might a fat/trans body experience liminality? Sonny Nordmarken's (2014) experience of gender transition provides an interesting case study. Nordmarken describes starting to take testosterone and experiencing the liminal 'in-betweenness' of gender illegibility (much as Wilson (2002) describes it), but as time passes he finds:

My legibility as male (rather than female or "indiscernable") becomes clearer to others, my legibility as a person, as human, becomes clearer to others...for the first time in my life, I feel how it feels to be seen as a "normal" male body. This is the shape, the articulation of gender normative (2014, p. 43-4).

However, what if the extent to which Nordmarken's newly acquired gender normativity is predicated on his slenderness is considered? He describes his body as, "sinewy and wiry...a leaping lizard type of body", referring also to his "waifiness" (2014, p. 42). Hence, it is clear that Nordmarken is not 'fat' and although he remarks on the, "hormones moving flesh in my body, shifting like tectonic plates, pushing fat deposits and muscle densities into new formations" (p. 42), the 'configurations of fat and muscle', to echo Sellberg and Sellberg (2014), that emerge produce a non-liminal state uncomplicated by the type of fat liminality Kyrölä and Harjunen theorize. While testosterone can undoubtedly produce embodiments that are legibly male *and* fat, they would still not be the 'normal' male body Nordmarken achieves because, as

Owen (2015) notes, “fat bodies defy markers of averageness, that modern representative of ‘normalcy’” (p. 8). If fat bodies are not ‘normal’ does that push them into a liminal state? Wilson asserts that, “cultural gender texts inform a culture’s members of how far the gender categories can stretch before stepping over into a problematic liminal state” (2002, p. 439-440). Could it be that it is not just the assumed temporariness of fatness that makes it liminal, but also its ability to ‘stretch’ gender categories into in-betweenness?

Perhaps the bigger question here concerns the fantasy that liminal states are escapable at all. Even Nordmarken, with his newfound gender legibility, enters other states of illegibility and liminality in his embodiment as a “feminine sort of masculine being” (2014, p. 43) and as a queer man. Thus even for what Nordmarken calls “shape-shifters”, as opposed to Kyrölä and Harjunen’s ‘shape-unshifters’, there is no truly ‘other side’ to come out into, and the fantasy of gender transition is like the fantasy of weight-loss in that they both promise, but cannot deliver, some kind of fixed/permanent state of the type already deconstructed in theories of gender, and size, fluidity. As Kyrölä and Harjunen suggest, “the problem is not that corporeality is a mixture of persistence and malleability, of material and immaterial forces, but that the boundary between ‘essential’ and ‘removable’ corporeality becomes too fixed and unrelentingly managed” (2017, p. 113). This allows for analysis to be refocused on the construction and regulation of ‘fixed’ versus ‘in-between’ bodily states and enables fatness to be positioned as more involved in the production of supposedly ‘fixed’ gender states than previously thought. It is

this suggestion I will explore in the following section in relation to some examples of how gender has been made intelligible within Fat Studies.

Gender and Fat Trans-Formed

There is certainly no shortage of gender analysis in Fat Studies. The aim of this section is not to provide a comprehensive review of that literature, but to draw out some of the assumptions underpinning it and how they could be re-theorized using the concepts of fluidity and liminality, as well as Trans Studies approaches. Work in Fat Studies has often positioned fatness as something which causes gender to 'fail'; for Cecelia Hartley (2001) fat is, "a reminder of all that a woman cannot and should not be" (p. 66). Jeanine Gailey (2014) similarly observes that fat (female) bodies, "tend to demonstrate characteristics associated with both masculinity and femininity" (p. 112, for further discussion see White, 2019). These theorists make valuable contributions to theorizing the experience of (cis) fat women, what they do not do is develop the implications of gender fluidity in their statements; nor do they consider women who are 'failing' at normative femininity as in a potentially liminal state.

The same tendency appears even in queer Fat Studies work. In her analysis of the performance of fat, Stefanie A. Jones (2014) argues that in a heteropatriarchal model of gender, "the fat feminine body is...necessarily expelled from the paradigm of heteronormativity, the fat body is regulated to the periphery, left in a no-man's land of desire" (p. 41). Fat bodies are queer for Jones in the sense they disrupt, "the current arrangement of fields" relating

to desire (p. 41). However, she does not also consider how they might 'queer' or disrupt the very categories of gender those desires are supposedly lodged in. Despite the notion of a 'no-man's land' being tantalizingly close to that of a liminal state, Jones does not allow the category of woman to "stretch" (Wilson, 2002, p. 439) that far. Work such as this contradictorily keeps fat people within fixed gender categories whilst simultaneously asserting their exclusion from those same categories and thus implicitly adheres to a binary model that assumes gender is assured/fixed through some, usually unstated, bio-essentialist foundation.

This is problematic, not only because it reproduces cisnormativity, but because it precludes a fuller consideration of the active role of fat in producing a legibly gendered body in the first place. Michelle Green's (2015) discussion of the construction of fat women's gender is a case in point. She suggests that:

Fat women do not find the 'doing' of gender as accessible as slim women, and therefore it is hard to 'undo' gender with the politicized force Butler claims. Fat subjects, and particularly fat women, find it harder to undo gender because they find themselves excluded from the practice of gender (p. 186).

This implies that there is something, an already-gendered 'doer', perhaps, behind fat women's 'doing' of gender. Not only is this precisely the opposite of Butler's point that, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of

gender” (1990, p. 25), but it assumes that gender exists independently of fatness. Furthermore, if fat women are excluded from ‘doing’ gender, or more accurately from doing heteronormative binary gender, then aren’t they actually ‘undoing’ gender? If, as Green implies, fat women are not fully able to access the category of woman, but they are equally not legible as men, then not only does this suggest some sort of other liminal option, but also that gender intelligibility is absolutely reliant on particular configurations of muscle and fat (Sellberg & Sellberg, 2014, p. 307), rather than on a pre-gendered doer.

The irony of Green’s inability to recognize the “gender trouble” (Butler, 1990) fat women might cause is further compounded by invoking a direct comparison with trans people. Quoting Natalie Boero (2012), Green asserts that, “not unlike transsexuals learning the appropriate doing of gender as adults, fat people, particularly women, have often been excluded from normative patterns of gendered behavior, interaction and embodiment” (as cited in Green, 2015, p. 186). Neither Green nor Boero develop this analogy, and thus never interrogate how it is not just that this process is ‘like’ the one trans people may experience, but it is that process. Davis affirms this when arguing that, “given mainstream assumptions of sex/gender congruence, transgendered individuals’ gender claims are particularly precarious and subject to public dispute. Yet *all individuals* are held accountable to gender expectations and negotiate their self-presentations accordingly” (2008, p. 125, emphasis added). Rather than bemoaning fat people’s inability to do gender, a fat/trans approach to Fat Studies could help ‘de-exceptionalize’ trans experiences of doing gender by revealing the embodied processes by which

any/all gender is assumed thus destabilizing not only binary gender, but also the cis/trans binary.

Given the previous discussion, if the presence or absence of fat is central to gender legibility, then how might weight-loss (or gain) be understood through this lens? Already in the literature there are comparisons between weight loss and gender transition. Lee (2014) likens her desire for a thin(ner) body to those of an ex-partner who transitioned from female to male: “perhaps I related to a desire to change the body to fit your idea of who you are” (p.93). However, she draws a distinction between the different political value attached to these two projects, saying, “his desire for change included shedding other people’s expectations that he would conform to his allocated female gender and upbringing, whereas my desire for change was about conforming to what I thought a woman should be” (p. 93). Trans modifications are cast as transgressive, whereas the desire to be thin is mere capitulation to patriarchal notions of female embodiment. Framing the difference between these projects in this way alludes to debates around the ethics of body modification articulated by trans and fat rights advocates (see White, 2014 for a fuller discussion of this). However, it also precludes consideration of Lee’s ‘transition’ from fat to thin as a gender transition, even though it is clearly ‘about’ gender. Green similarly discusses weight-loss as involving a, “reassertion of heteronormativity” in the face of gender norms that, “render this social group [fat people] less gendered, if not de-gendered” (2015, p. 186). If failing to conform with ‘what a woman should be’ is ‘de-gendering’ and thus places someone outside of binary gender, then the process of weight-

loss as a means of bringing them back into the binary fold can arguably be conceived of as a kind of gender transition.

Conclusions – Fat as a Gender-Fluid

In this chapter I have attempted to offer a critique of some existing approaches to trans and gender more generally within Fat Studies, with the aim of suggesting how it might move beyond the additive or comparative models of fat/trans embodiment that currently dominate the limited literature that exists. Reconfiguring the tropes of fluidity and liminality might offer one route towards this end. My intention in drawing on these tropes was not to erase the different ways in which fat and trans people might relate to fluidity or liminality, but rather to chip away at the assumption that ‘fat people’ and ‘trans people’ are discrete groups; be that in order to acknowledge the existence of fat/trans people, or to recognize the role of fat in both cis and trans gender (un)intelligibility.

There may be definite benefits to this approach. Within current theorisations fat is presumed to exist as a layer on top of some pre-existing gender; it may cause that gender to ‘fail’, but not in ways that ultimately bring its existence into question. This has tended to mean fat is viewed as having a negative effect on gender, or at least on the possibilities for social recognition within an economy of heteronormative binary gender. Entertaining the possibility that fat does not cause gender to fail, but edges it into a liminal state ‘between’ binary genders, not only opens up space for the subversion of

that binary, but also enables us to think about what fat 'does' – the positive role it plays in producing legibly gendered bodies.

Admittedly, embracing liminality as a practical strategy, even in the hope of destabilizing binary gender, may be an unattractive option given the relentlessly negative tenor with which liminal states are regarded. Kyrölä and Harjunen's (2017) version of fat liminality is not experienced by their participants in particularly positive terms, whilst Davis' (2008) trans participants are similarly skeptical about gender in-betweenness. As Davis notes, "gender identities are ways to gain social recognition" (2008, p. 123), and the lure of that recognition when the alternatives may mean invisibility at best, and violent erasure at worst is understandable. However, an alternative approach can be identified in the shift from 'liminal' to 'monstrous' found in the work of Owen (2015) and Stryker (2006). Owen's enticing declaration that, "there is a freedom in being a monster" (2015, p. 9) perhaps offers something other than liminality's literal 'nothingness' with which to replace the certainties of social recognition. Stryker further endorses this approach arguing it will provoke, "the establishment of subjects in new modes, regulated by different codes of intelligibility" (2006, p. 253).

I would like to conclude by suggesting a 'new code of intelligibility' is what is required to develop a fuller account of fat/trans identity and embodiment. When we think from the position of fat/trans not only are the gaps in existing theories of fat and gender opened up, but more importantly new possibilities for theorizing gender emerge. This project is not about

attempting to come up with a unified theory of ‘the’ fat/trans subject position, because this position does not exist. Even aside from the multiple vectors of race, ethnicity, class, location, age and sexuality, fat/trans existence is shaped, literally, by volume and distributions of fat and by a spectrum of gender identities, and a range of bodily interventions or ‘transitions’. As a necessarily unfixed location, then, fat/trans can perhaps operate as the juncture that reveals the unsustainability of separating gender and fat for anyone.

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