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Queering Fat Embodiment [Book Review]

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This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article published in *Sexualities* 19 (5-6) 615-616 2016. The final definitive version is available online at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1363460715624457>

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Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes and Samantha Murray (eds.), *Queering Fat Embodiment*, Ashgate: Farnham, 2014. 170pp, £60.00, ISBN 978-1-4094-6542-3 (hbk).

In her chapter in this collection Kimberly Dark describes how, as the fattest and thus least feminine of her childhood friends, she was always the designated John Travolta in their reenactments of *Grease*. This perfectly exemplifies the potential queerness of fat embodiment. Fat bodies are trouble; neither Pink Ladies nor T-Birds, and rarely deemed to be 'the one that I want'. They haunt the high school dance of heteronormativity like the marauding rival gang in the parking lot. *Queering Fat Embodiment* unpacks these troublesome intersections of size, gender and sexuality and draws together strands of analysis that have until now hovered at the edges of both fat and sexuality studies.

As Jackie Wykes' eloquent introduction suggests, this collection aims to highlight not only 'the ways that heteronormativity operates as a regulatory apparatus which underwrites and governs the discourse on – and management of – the fat body' (p. 4), but how questions of sexuality are always implicated in questions of the body, and vice versa. More than this the emphasis on 'queering' provides a means to articulate how such 'regulatory apparatus' might be disrupted, subverted or challenged by fat scholarship and activism. Ten new essays by established and emerging authors take a range of approaches to this challenge and offer a deliberately queer mix of theoretical interventions, specific case studies and autoethnographies.

Opening the book, Robyn Longhurst gives an overview of four areas of queer theory which have been and could further be drawn on in fat studies. Longhurst identifies performativity, the trope of the 'closet', the shame/pride

dichotomy and queer phenomenology as queer perspectives for rethinking or unthinking fatness. Stefanie A. Jones goes further to explore the possibilities and limitations of a 'social performance understanding of fat embodiment' (p. 31). Arguing against a purely deconstructionist approach that celebrates the 'queerness' of fat bodies within heteropatriarchal culture, Jones instead conceives queerness as a position relative to the current configuration of heterodesire. As such a configuration could, in the future, include the desirability of fat bodies, a queer approach must seek to denaturalize and unfix positions within normative structures.

Throughout the book the tensions between different applications of queering persist, and rightly so. Questions around the use and usefulness of the 'coming out' trope in fat activism resurface often, alongside those of fat shame/pride. Does fat pride queer the meaning of fat embodiment? Cat Pausé's discussion of online fat activism makes this argument, suggesting queering as a kind resignification or revalorization of fat. Jenny Lee views the shedding of fat shame as a 'coming out' that rejects the undesirability of fat bodies and queers the fat body that not only has sex, but does so with the lights on. Similarly Scott Beattie argues for the queerness of depictions of heavier, hairier men in 'bear art'; their disruption of the norms of gay representation opening up alternative worlds of desire, attractiveness and bodily experience.

For other authors the queerness of fat embodiment is manifested in the often contradictory and unpredictable gaps between lived experience and fat politics. For example, Margitte Kristjansson's analysis of the relationship between fatness and consumption asks whether being a fashionable fat

woman is queer, or if fashion can ever be progressive for fat women?

Kimberly Dark's aforementioned stint as John Travolta unexpectedly taught her about assertive femininity and how to nurture the Travolta in her butch lovers. James Burford and Sam Orchard engage in what they call a deliberately 'messy text' (p. 62), a conversation about fat transgender embodiment and Orchard's web-comic series *Rooster Tails*. The conversation format combined with personal narrative allows them to reflect on the shifting meaning of fat embodiment and gradations of body policing, for someone identifying variously as a girl, lesbian, butch, transmasculine, gay male and queer.

Elsewhere fat embodiment is queered in order to open up potentially difficult and destabilizing issues within fat studies. Kathleen LeBesco, one of the first theorists to explore the links between fat and queer, challenges one of the fundamental assumptions of fat studies/activism, namely that intentional weight loss is always and unambiguously an assault on fatness. Zoë Meleo-Erwin demonstrates a similarly fruitful usage of queer approaches in her re-examination of the relationships between fatness and disability. Meleo-Erwin proposes that 'a queering of both disability and fatness provides a stronger critique of neoliberal healthism' (p. 99). This deployment of 'queer' is one that intervenes in both fat and disability studies, leaving neither unchanged in the ongoing quest for more 'livable worlds' (p. 109).

Queering Fat Embodiment is an indispensable volume that poses some contentious but necessary questions for the future of fat scholarship, and certainly demonstrates the productive intersection of fat and queer theory. It speaks to the increasing sophistication of fat studies and to the insights its

scholars are bringing to the fields of gender, sexuality and studies of embodiment.

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