

On Being the 'Fat Person': Possibilities and Pitfalls for Fat Activist Engagement in Academic Institutions

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Article abstract

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On Being the ‘Fat Person’: Possibilities and Pitfalls for Fat Activist Engagement in Academic Institutions

Calla Evans, May Friedman

ABSTRACT This article addresses the possibilities and pitfalls for fat activist engagement in academic institutions through the framework of the ‘fat person.’ Drawing from Emily Henderson’s (2019) ‘gender person’ in academia framework, we connect our own experiences as fat studies scholars, teachers, and activists with the experiences of other scholars in our field to construct a framework of understanding the role of the fat studies expert, or the ‘fat person,’ in the academy. The raw material for this article was written over the course of two extended online chat sessions between the authors, which took place during the summer of 2020. Our conversations were seeded by our prior histories as fat people and fat academics, and by our pre-existing collaborations: as supervisor and graduate student, co-researchers, and through teaching together in a fat studies course. Throughout this article we draw on scholars in our field who have explored their experiences as fat academics, fat researchers, fat students, and fat teachers. We argue that this framework is a useful step in furthering understanding of what it means to be positioned as the ‘fat person’ within an academic institution. We are embedded in the strength of our communal and embodied experiences, and at the same time, we are also aware of the potential ethical challenges of working from a place that is firmly grounded in community knowledge. Our hope is that other scholars, particularly fat studies scholars, will build from the framework we are suggesting here to further understandings of how the ‘fat person’ is constructed—and resisted—within the academy.

KEYWORDS Fat studies, the “fat person”, epistemological justice, fat phobia, emotional labour, microaggressions

This article addresses the possibilities and pitfalls for fat activist engagement in academic institutions through the framework of the ‘fat person.’ Drawing from Emily Henderson’s (2019) ‘gender person’ in academia framework, we connect our own experiences as fat studies scholars, teachers, and activists with the experiences of other scholars in our field to construct a framework of understanding the role of the fat studies expert, or the ‘fat person,’ in the academy. We argue that this framework is a useful step in furthering understanding of what it means to be positioned as the ‘fat person’ within an academic institution, especially at a moment where some social justice struggles are foregrounded while others are sidelined. We are embedded in the strength of our communal and embodied experiences, and at the same time, we are also aware of the potential ethical challenges of working from a place that is firmly

grounded in community knowledge. Our hope is that other scholars, particularly fat studies scholars, will build from the framework we are suggesting here to further understandings of how the ‘fat person’ is constructed, and resisted, within the academy.

Context and Methods

This article was inspired by Emily Henderson’s 2019 article titled “On being the ‘gender person’ in an academic department: Constructions, configurations and implications” that was published in the *Journal of Gender Studies*. Drawing from Lucy Ferguson’s (2015) original framework of the ‘gender person’ within international development organizations, Henderson applies this framework to understand the messy and often contradictory position of ‘gender people’ within academia. Henderson’s unpacking of the role of the ‘gender person’, that is a person who researches and/or teaches about gender but who is not working within a gender studies department at their academic institution, mirrors many of the thoughts that we have had about being the ‘fat person’: that is, a person who publicly engages in fat studies and is known as the go-to fat studies expert within our non-fat studies departments and positions within our academic institution. As we will explore throughout this article, many of Henderson’s findings about the contradictory nature of the ‘gender person’ position can be mapped onto our own experiences as the ‘fat person.’ Henderson’s (2019) key frameworks for understanding the role of the ‘gender person’ within academia are:

- The ‘gender person’ is a broker of gender knowledge;
- The ‘gender person’ participates in and is subjected to the devaluation and simplification of gender knowledge;
- The ‘gender person’ faces the political question of whether they should do gender work even if it is unpaid or unrecognized; and
- The ‘gender person’ engages in an ongoing process of compromise and negotiation over the status of gender knowledge. (p. 735)

Many aspects of this framework are deeply familiar to us as singular brokers of scholarly and embodied expertise in varied academic settings. Some of the tensions are borne of being scholars of a field that is still indeterminate and unrecognized; in order to situate ourselves, then, we must first situate the growing field of fat studies.

Fat studies, briefly, is a nascent field built upon a foundation of fat liberation and fat activism (Cooper, 2016; Farrell, 2019; Pausé & Taylor, 2021). Fat studies lives in contrast to academic fields which pathologize fatness and frame fat as an “epidemic” that must be “eradicated,” instead focusing on fat as a culturally produced and variable category and experience. One of the key objectives of the field is epistemological justice: a rejection of empirical and positivist orientations in favour of a reframing of who is able to claim knowledge and expertise about the lived fat experience (Cooper, 2016; Stoll & Thouné, 2019). This objective puts those of us who identify as fat studies scholars at an interesting and important juncture: as embodied fat people and fat scholars, what is our role as the ‘fat person’ in our academic institutions? Does

that academic role operate in service of, or in opposition to, the overall goals of fat activism as a movement and fat studies as a field? Here, we begin by situating ourselves and our own orientations to being “the fat person”.

Situating Ourselves

It is impossible for us to do this work without situating ourselves, including our embodied realities. The core of our research is informed by our bodies; at the same time, our bodies sometimes speak more loudly than our research, which requires that we identify both how we see and how we are seen.

I (Calla) am a queer, white, cisgender woman. I am a settler on this land. I have recently returned to academia as a “mature” graduate student after a 15 year-long career as a lifestyle photographer. My experiences in academia and as a photographer are always informed by living in a fat body that is often larger and louder than those around me. It was only upon my return to academia that I began to call myself a fat activist and even then, it was with initial reluctance. I also live in a largely able body and madness weaves its way through many of my experiences in the world.

I (May) am a cisgender, racialized (Arab) woman. My experiences in academia are always informed by living in a fat brown body with immigrant working class origins; my embodiment is also mediated through my experiences of parenting young people while moving through the academic world. I live in a largely able body and have ambiguous relationships to queerness, mental health, and madness. I am a mid-career academic with tenure, which supports my capacity to reach into fat studies in my scholarship and teaching.

The raw material, or data, for this article was written over the course of two extended online chat sessions between the authors, which took place during the summer of 2020. While almost the entirety of our text exchange is included in this article, it has been reorganized for clarity. Our design of this collaboration draws loosely from life writing research methods. Critical approaches to life writing consider the ways that writing texts such as letters, blogs, memoirs, autobiographies, and other artefacts help construct a sense of self (Kadar, 2005). We follow other fat studies scholars who have engaged with similar life writing methods such as Cooper and Murray’s (2012) reflection on fat activism, and Burford and Orchard’s (2016) email exchange turned dialogic text on issues surrounding fat trans* embodiment and cultural work. Lee and McAvan (2021) position auto-ethnographic methods such as those mentioned above as conscious political acts that directly challenge who speaks for fat people. Our (May and Calla’s) conversations were seeded by our prior histories as fat people and fat academics, and by our pre-existing collaborations: as supervisor and graduate student, co-researchers, and through teaching together in a fat studies course. Throughout this article we draw on others in our field who have explored their experiences as fat academics, fat researchers, fat students, and fat teachers.

While we are not the first fat studies scholars to write about the experience of being fat studies academics (Senyonga, 2020), nor are we the first to write about these experiences in dialogue with others (see McPhail et al., 2017), we felt an urgency to consider our specific

orientation to the topic. In particular, we sought to use the lens of our prior relationships and conversations to consider the ways we have experienced this scholarship in spaces that are not explicitly oriented toward fat work. It is our hope that this article draws those experiences together and offers a productive framework for beginning to understand the ‘fat person.’ We do not intend this concept to be limiting or reductionist but instead aim to open up possibilities for theorizing around what it means to be fat studies scholars and activists and how those positions operate within academic institutions. Our intentions are especially important as there is currently no academic “home” for fat studies and those of us who practice in this field are spread across various disciplines and institutions.

In Dialogue

We found many points of resonance as well as differences in our shared experiences as fat studies scholars as well as simply as academics in fat bodies across a range of intersections and experiences. Here, we consider our orientation to being the “fat person” across several axes: as members and activists in our fat communities, as scholars, and as teachers. We decided that dialogue best allowed us to explore these consonances and bifurcations and to view the truths that emerged in the in-between space of our experiences. We offer our conversation here in hopes of initiating further dialogue between us and with others to bolster and challenge fat research and activist spaces.

On Activism

Calla: Do you consider yourself an activist? Do you consider your scholarly work to be activism?

May: I do. I talk to my students about the “big broad tent of activism” (Ross, 2017) and how we need to have a range of strategies and tactics. And I always say that we’re better off if we use tactics that we love. My primary tools right now are parenting, teaching, and writing; and I do see these as activist spaces, albeit imperfect ones.

Obviously, academia is far from an innocent space—though I’d argue there are no innocent spaces.

Calla: I have two questions/thoughts: 1) Do you sometimes feel that you have less credibility in fat studies by not necessarily coming from an activist background first? and 2) do you feel a part of a broader fat activist community?

May: That’s interesting.

There’s a certain kind of activism that feels very... raced and classed to me... that I’ve always been an uneasy participant in, even before kids took over my life. While I have considered myself an activist for a long time (albeit not necessarily a fat activist till more recently), I also want to interrogate what we mean by activism.

I think that the work I do to change attitudes in a range of settings is activist work. It's me using the privilege and gross coloniality of my academic position to interrogate taken-for-granted knowledge and potential to make change—that's activism to me.

Calla: Yes, I agree 100%. In many ways I've felt a pressure to be more public about my fat activism since coming into this work, but for me, amplifying other voices in academic contexts, like Ash and the infinifat project [Calla's MA research project which focused on those at the largest end of the fat spectrum] feels... more productive.

May: Well again big broad tent. I am too shy to be a "traditional" activist.

Calla: I do find myself seeking out fat friends and fat community more now though. I think about [Charlotte] Cooper's concept of micro-fat-activism and consider how I shape my community and friend groups as a type of micro-activism.

We are not the only fat studies scholars who found their fat activist voices through engagement with fat studies academic literature and scholarly work, nor are we the only ones to consider their teaching and academic practices as fat activism. Indeed, for many fat scholars, particularly those who are engaged in social justice aligned work, once they discover the field of fat studies it can be impossible to ignore the importance of such work. Stoll and Thoun (2020) describe their own experience as:

The further down the proverbial rabbit hole we went, the more convinced we were that we could no longer do research on social inequalities while ignoring the salience of fatphobia, and we could no longer engage in social justice activism that did not also include fat bodies because, to be clear, fat is a social justice issue, too. (para. 2)

However, there are several factors that complicate the conceptualization of fat studies-aligned academic work *as* fat activism, some of which we mention in our exchange above. According to Cooper (2016) one of the main objectives of fat activism, particularly as it intersects with and manifests in the academy, is a reframing of who is able to claim knowledge and expertise about the lived fat experience. Historically, knowledge around fatness has been constructed by "obesity" experts and that knowledge was and continues to be weaponized against fat people. Fat activism, and the field of fat studies, positions the fat person as the knowledge expert at the center of a new fat epistemology. Yet there remains the looming question of whether or not this reframing or recentering of fat knowledge is even possible within neoliberal, colonial institutions such as universities and other academic spaces? Which fat bodies assume primacy, and which stories are subsumed? While on the surface there is the appearance of possibilities for change (the increase in demand for our fat studies course, for example) many fat activists would challenge our view of teaching *as* activism as they consider academic spaces with well-

justified suspicion or even rejection (Read, 2021). We see our academic practices as integral to our fat activism because we are, in many ways, non-traditional academics and we approach our academic practices differently than others in the academy. Specifically: people like us did not used to be here, and so the presence of our intersectional fat bodies in academic spaces does feel radical. Yet it can often feel as though the activist potential of our positions within the academy is limited through the historical structures that underpin universities such as ours. In other words: we want to honour the work we are doing as important but also be clear-sighted about its very real limitations.

May: What would the world look like if we were less obliged and apologetic? If we just assumed people need to do their OWN work on confronting fat stigma instead of being so grateful for anyone who will listen? Because I feel like I'm starting with "I'm sorry" so much of the time, which is not how I feel about race, for example.

Calla: I think this loops back to what we saw in class earlier this year. I'm hopeful that with the current climate of "body positivity" and other conversations maybe we will be able to be less apologetic soon.

I also think back to our first meeting and how much I stumbled over even using the word fat and THANK YOU for being kind and patient with me but also telling me to just use the damn word.

May: I don't feel like we've arrived at a point where we're allowed to be indignant. But maybe that's because I don't do the same kind of activism as other, more indignant fat folks.

Calla: Yes, but I wonder who gets to be indignant and who doesn't and does that really shift? I am becoming more and more aware of how my ability to perform as the "good" grad student means that I'm able to push the fat studies agenda. But what would happen if I wasn't doing everything as prescribed? Yet this feels like the only way I know how to do this? I "can" be the good grad student and therefore talk about fat work in more spaces and hopefully that opens the door for more grad students to come and do this but maybe I am just playing the good fatty.

May: Yup. I am deeply, deeply obedient in many areas so I can be disruptive here (within certain constraints). Which may answer the activism question again: that we are using our own tools and tactics and doing our best to make them effective within our own constraints and limitations. But when does speaking from the middle open space for the margins and when does it foreclose that space? We will never be able to answer that—all we can do is keep asking.

If I think I know the answer, I am the problem.

Our experiences both inside and outside of the academy as described in the exchange at the opening of this section connect with Henderson's (2019) first gender person framework: "The 'gender person' is a broker of gender knowledge" (p. 732). We both describe experiences where we have been approached as brokers of fat knowledge and fat activism because of our positioning as the 'fat person' or fat expert. Sometimes we are approached formally (we have been invited countless times, together and separately, to speak about fat studies and fat activism within our university) and other times informally, as May discusses below. Yet being the broker of fat knowledge in both personal and formal settings comes with unique sets of limitations that are important to acknowledge:

Calla: Do you find that people seek you out now? Both academically and activism-wise? Or, I should say, both within the academy and outside?

May: Yes to both? I'm the go to person for fat talk in a weird way. I'm on a zillion PhD committees because so few of us do this work (and maybe also because this is another way to perform "good academic" so I can gain "permission" to study something counter cultural).

And any mom of a fat kid, or person who is finally confronting their eating disorder or teacher who realizes that fat talk has colonized their classroom I'm the person now. Sometimes I love that and sometimes I feel like the Mammy for everyone's BS.

Calla: YES.

May: But I also feel this obligation—when a parent emails me and asks how to support their fat kid—I am tired at the thought of replying but also feel a deep sense of responsibility to help that person make different choices.

Calla: On a personal level, being brokers of fat knowledge can be viewed as a fulfilling part of our fat activism practice. I actively engage in a public fat activism practice on social media and experience personal satisfaction when friends or others tell me that they have been inspired by my work, either by questioning their own anti-fat bias or engaging in fat activism themselves. Yet my own fat activism and the fat communities I engage with on a daily basis will always be informed and, therefore limited, by my own positionality and positions of privilege. I sometimes shy away from amplifying fat activist voices that refuse to fit the narrow confines of what an "acceptable" or palatable fat activist practice looks like, particularly on limited and limiting spaces such as social media platforms. These "less acceptable" voices represent important and often ignored aspects of fat knowledge. Neither myself and my experience as a fat person, nor the activist communities that I engage with and their experiences, should be held up as wholly representative of fat activism and the possibilities fat activism offers us.

There are similar limitations operating on the 'fat person' as fat knowledge broker within academic institutional contexts. As mentioned above, we have been invited to give presentations

and talks about fat studies, fat issues, weight stigma, and fat activism in a variety of academic settings. These opportunities offer the possibility of critical conversations that work towards many fat activist goals: challenging anti-fat biases, encouraging fat acceptance in the classroom, engaging with fat epistemologies, etc. However, we are mindful that these seemingly progressive events often put us, as the ‘fat persons’, in the position of having to convince our audience of the validity of our arguments in the face of pervasive anti-fat and fat-phobic attitudes. Similar to our experience in the classroom, we often rely on kid gloves to navigate these hostile receptions, reducing our fat knowledge down to the most palatable chunks and leaving behind community-based knowledge, which may be viewed as too radical or oppositional. This reduction does a disservice to our contention that our teaching and academic practices can be activism: when we elevate only the most acceptable forms of fat activism it is at the expense of the individuals who are most in need of fat liberation. At the same time, in our experience, fatness and body size are often left out of or given only cursory attention in many institutional conversations around equity, diversity, and inclusion (colloquially known as EDI), which leaves both of us understandably dubious of any meaningful attention towards the oppression of fat people within the academy in general and our institution specifically.

Leaving fat studies outside of institutional conversations about equity, diversity, and inclusion is deeply troubling. When we give talks or teach, we find that the impact of weight stigma has an enormous effect on fat people; side-stepping fat results in enormous self-regulation, eating distress, and health anxiety for people of all sizes. In the intersections, these impacts are more dire: we argue that to sidestep analyses of weight and the “obesity epidemic” in conversations about white supremacy, colonization, and capitalism is to miss the very real connections between these oppressive institutions and their impacts on all of us (Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019). We find ourselves increasingly insisting that conversations about anti-Black racism, anti-Indigeneity, ableism and other indignities attend to connections between and experiences with fat hatred. Yet all of this work is exhausting to both body and mind.

The position of the ‘fat person’ as fat knowledge broker is also, in many ways, an unsustainable one. As May mentioned above, she is “the go to person for fat talk” and serves on a large number of PhD committees “because so few of us do this work.” The pressures of being one of a seemingly few people engaging in the work of fat activism come from many angles. As body positivity and other fat positive aligned social movements gain popularity, more members from our personal communities feel they can approach us as knowledge brokers, increasing our emotional labour (Friedman & Poole, 2016; Graham, 2013). Within our academic institution the same increase in opportunities for engagement exist, as evidenced by the increasing number of speaking engagements for May and myself, however there seems to be little support for hiring or attracting more than the current number of ‘fat people.’ This lack of support is similar to Henderson’s findings around the ‘gender person’ and their institution’s apparent satisfaction at checking the diversity box with no or little meaningful engagement with increasing opportunities for others in the field. While we are far from alone as the only ‘fat people’ at our academic institution, we are still few, and those who also engage in fat-studies-oriented work are spread across different departments feeding feelings of loneliness as well as resulting in us, as

fat people, being spread ironically thin. Without meaningful institutional support, the position of the ‘fat person’ can be unsustainable. Finally, our role as public intellectuals may reify the same type of ivory tower elitism that we seek to dismantle—the “master’s tools” of academia may be too blunt for the type of radical social change that we seek.

On Being ‘Fat Scholars’

Calla: I want to start by considering our different orientations—me as a grad student and you as an established researcher—and asking about how your fat-focused work has been received at our institution. Or in institutions more generally, not just ours.

Do you find it challenging to communicate the value of this work to funders/partners? Especially as it pushes back against dominant views which pathologize fatness?

May: Yes to all of it.

Quite honestly, I don’t think I would have become a fat scholar before I had this job [tenured professor in the School of Social Work], and if I had to do this work in a more visible way. It’s so clearly swimming upstream, at least in social work. But when I was early into my tenure-track job, I decided that the gap in knowledge between fat studies and social work needed to be filled, and that I was the fool that was going to fill it.

Then, and now, I’ve been less invested in grants than publications—I like to write and I do a lot of discourse analysis which is financially a pretty unconstrained method, so I just ran with it. But I did run into roadblocks in terms of publications and certainly in terms of institutional respect.

These are porous fields that threaten established identity scholarship and there are complaints and critiques lobbed from both directions ... conservatives think we’re trying to justify ill health and progressive folks who are otherwise allies often think we’re trying to side step analyses of race.

Calla: And if we look at the history of fat studies that critique from the left certainly lands.

May: Absolutely! But that’s also why I want to do it—because I think fat studies has an obligation to meet that critique, not to vanish. I don’t buy that thinking about fat occludes thinking about race—as Strings (2019) shows, they’re entangled and a strong analysis of Indigeneity and colonization that ignores the impact of size policing and healthism is missing an important piece as well (Robinson, 2020). I want to thicken fat studies (Friedman et al., 2020), not erase it.

At the same time that we are considering the ways that we want to radicalize our academic and activist practices, we’re also mindful of the constraints under which we perform, the ways that

we are still “making nice” in order to function within the constraints of both the institution and the broader politic:

May: I’m mindful that it’s impossible to please everyone, but sometimes it feels like doing fat studies work makes it impossible to please anyone, that we’re always reacting and defending. At the same time—isn’t the whole academic pursuit about putting on intellectual spanx? About contorting ourselves to be what funders/supervisors/colleagues/journals need us to be? And then letting the bulges show once we’re in? But then—that’s the problem with “passing.” If some of us pass, we actually strengthen the gate against folks who don’t.

Calla: I think that’s an important consideration as well, about strengthening the gate, when we think about being invited in as the “fat expert.”

May: So the question is always: when is it fair for me to play the game in order to put important knowledge into the world, and when am I complicit with upholding systems of normativity by trying to just fit within existing systems?

And the answer, of course, is that we’re always doing both—if we’re working within academia (the canonical example of the master’s tools) then we’re always complicit. And yet—I still think we’re doing something radical and important, somehow.

The ongoing struggle to advocate for the legitimacy of fat work and academic work aligned with the goals of fat studies has been addressed by many scholars in our field. Taking off those spanx and “coming out” publicly as a fat studies scholar is a particularly fraught position due to systematically entrenched, pervasive, and ever-present fatphobia both inside and outside the academy. In the field of fat studies, the act of “coming out” as fat or reclaiming one’s fat identity is often framed as a transformational practice of reclamation and resistance that can serve as a “first step” into fat activism (LeBesco, 2004; Murray, 2005). According to Murray (2005), however, the transformational process is one of ongoing negotiation that can be fraught with risk. As she states:

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. (Murray, 2005, p. 159)

Murray is focused primarily on the ways in which “coming out” as fat, as constructed by many mainstream fat activist movements, leave little room for ambiguity or diversity of fat experiences. As such, it reinforces the very dominant narratives and expectations it proposes to resist, so we can extend her line of thinking to the often fraught process of “coming out” as

the “fat person.” Doing fat work is profoundly counter-cultural, which makes us vulnerable, perhaps especially if we aim to do intersectional and accountable research. Our advocacy for a deeply intersectional approach may thus be motivated by two competing desires: first, a need to understand fat in all its complex manifestations, and second, a desire to somehow legitimize the need for fat equality by acknowledging the ways fat life is tangled into other more “legitimate” justice fights such as anti-racist activism and scholarship.

Laurie Stoll and Darci Thoune (2020) discuss the public reaction to their fat studies scholarship in their *Inside Higher Ed* article titled “Building a Bridge to Hate? When Fat Studies Goes Public.” Reflecting on the negative public attention their work has received, particularly in right-wing online spaces from which they have received death threats, Stoll and Thoune state that they often feel reluctant to discuss the harassment they receive due to the emotional toll it takes to publicly present themselves and their work, once again, for scrutiny. Indeed, a quick perusal of the comment section of their article overwhelmingly evidences their argument, to an almost comical degree. However, similarly to May’s reflection above, both Stoll and Thoune state that they feel they cannot *not* do this work. They recognize the privileged positions they occupy in the “coming out” process as tenured faculty members and view this privilege as imbued with responsibility, especially since they also recognize that this privilege is not often afforded to precariously positioned graduate students. Bobbi Reidinger (2020) exemplifies the vulnerability of junior academics in her *Inside Higher Ed* article, “The Elephant in the Room: A Fat Woman in Academe.” Reidinger reflects on her personal strategies to negotiate weight stigma and anti-fat bias within her academic institution; strategies which mainly focus on methods with which to establish her scholarly competency and naming the ‘elephant in the room’ by coming out as fat to her academic audiences. Reidinger reports her strategies have been “generally successful” and Calla, as a graduate student, has also found relative success with the strategies she employs to navigate similar challenges. However, Calla remains aware of what can be lost through employing such strategies, as she reflects below.

On Being a ‘Fat Studies Grad Student’: Calla.

Reidinger’s (2020) experience of being acutely aware of how her fat studies work and herself as a fat scholar are perceived in the academy closely mirrors my own. At a later point in my conversation with May, I reflect on fat studies scholar Charlotte Cooper (2016) and her experience with securing funding for her PhD based on a proposal that more closely aligned with expected fat-discrimination scholarship. Once she secured her funding she was able to design and complete an arguably more radical research project that built on her experience as a fat activist and tapped into the vast knowledge of her fat activism communities. To quote from May above, she put on her “academic spanx” in order to rearrange herself and her work, making it more palatable to conventional academic funders. As a graduate student who has publicly “outed” myself as a fat studies scholar, I struggle with reconciling two very disparate aspects of my experience. While I am often afforded valuable opportunities such as lecturer and consulting positions as the ‘fat person’ within my institution, an institution which espouses their commitment to diversity and inclusion and within which I have been able to carefully

cultivate an accepting and validating academic bubble, I face numerous challenges in securing funding and support for my work outside of my academic home. I often wish I could put the (fat) genie back in the bottle, so to speak, and I feel an ever-present pressure to position myself as something other than the ‘fat person.’ At the same time, as a literal fat person in the world and as a fat activist, it is impossible for me to divorce myself from my desire to contribute, loudly and often, to the field of fat studies.

Fat Scholarship

In this way we can connect the experiences described above (both our own and those of other scholars) to two specific aspects of Henderson’s (2019) ‘gender person’ framework:

The ‘gender person’ participates in and is subjected to the devaluation and simplification of gender knowledge.

The ‘gender person’ faces the political question of whether they should do gender work even if it is unpaid or unrecognized (p. 732).

While Henderson discusses the devaluation of knowledge and lack of recognition that the ‘gender person’ experiences within their academic institutions, something which we reflect on in our exchange above, we would like to suggest that the ‘fat person’ faces additional risk in navigating their position and the reception of their scholarly work. Fat studies work is still not well established and holds positions contrary to all the positivist trends that guide funding and publishing decisions; we are also suspicious of the ways that the roots of fat activism in Black feminist thought (Strings, 2019) may also contribute to this scholarship being particularly maligned or undervalued. This is not to say that the ‘gender person’ may not also face similarly hostile and abusive receptions of their work as Stoll and Thoune (2020) reflect above. Key to Henderson’s understanding of the ‘gender person’ in academia is the tension between an institution which on the surface espouses the value of “gender work” and yet does not meaningfully engage with or support this work, nor the person doing it. However, it is important to acknowledge that the additional risk taken by the countercultural position of fat studies work can result in scholars concealing such work until they are in a position of relative privilege, such as tenure, and can discourage graduate students and emerging scholars from engaging in fat studies or from publicly “outing” themselves as a scholar who does this work. Reflecting on May’s comment about how our techniques for “passing” within the academy can often strengthen the gate, we can see how even coming out as the ‘fat person’ within an academic institution can reinforce the very narrow boundaries around who is a respectable fat person and who is not, ideas which we explore further in relation to fat activism, below.

Fat academics, whether their work aligns with fat studies or not, face discrimination and discreditation within academic institutions (and these vulnerabilities only become more acute at the intersections of race and other maligned identities—see Senyonga, 2017). According to Reidinger (2020), “they become perceived as an insincere communicator and therefore less credible” (para. 8). Kelsey Ioannoni (2020) employs Gailey’s concept of the hyper(in)visible fat

woman when reflecting on her own experience as a fat academic researching experiences of fat-based discrimination in health care spaces. While Ioannoni's fatness extends and strengthens her credibility towards the fat participants she is working with in her project, oftentimes her fat body serves to discredit her work when it is received by health care professionals. Natalie Ingraham and Natalie Boero (2020) reflect on similar experiences in both gathering data in locations hostile to fat bodies as well as presenting that research in similarly hostile environments. As with Ioannoni, Ingraham and Boero recognize the embodied value their fatness holds when working with fat participants while simultaneously reflecting on the "thick skins" they have had to develop in order to push ahead with their work in the face of personal and academic attacks. Christina Fisanick (2007) posits that fatness serves to intensify and amplify the gender-based discrimination faced by female academics and as a result, fat women academics feel the need to overperform when compared to their thin counterparts. Elena Andrea Escalera (2009) found that students experience an increased level of anxiety when faced with a fat professor in the classroom and as such, fat teachers may espouse mainstream rhetorics around fatness to mitigate student stress and increase the likelihood of students perceiving them as credible instructors. All of these findings resonate for us in our experiences in the classroom, especially in context of an undergraduate fat studies elective which we co-taught in winter 2020.

On Being 'Fat Teachers'

Following our experiences as research collaborators and as supervisor and graduate student, we had the opportunity in winter 2020 to work together teaching a fat studies elective course. May had taught the course once before and was excited by Calla's contributions to developing the class, which reached the maximum capacity for enrollment with fifty students. While we thought we had some sense of what to expect, we were continuously surprised by the reactions of students and the deep emotional pitch that the class kept reaching. We also noted the increasing number of graduate students contacting May for potential supervision.

Calla: It was incredibly heartening to see how many students enrolled in the fat studies class this past Winter term.

May: And how few of them were the students we maybe think are going to be in a fat studies class—so many of them had what I would consider normatively sized bodies.

Calla: I think that's tied to the rise in visibility and awareness of mainstream body positivity movements (BOPO), but I'm okay with that if we can just get their butts in seats (more about seats in a second!) and introduce a more critical framework to their understanding of fatness.

We opened the class by asking students about their relationship to fat:

What is your relationship with fat?



Figure 1. Word cloud from the first week of our fat studies undergraduate course.

May: I found that both heartening and heartbreaking—that so, so many of them are fighting with their bodies or have harrowing stories of fat stigma being deployed against them or the people they love.

Calla: I’ve often thought about the tension between the students bringing those experiences into the classroom (and needing the space to work through them) and my desire, as a fat person with lived experience of fat discrimination, to want to push things further, faster.

May: So body positivity is interesting—again, how co-opted and commodified does something need to be before we decide it’s too corrupt to be of use? I don’t know the answer—some days I feel like BOPO is like Pride™—total rainbow consumerism with no substance—but I also do feel like the proliferation of rainbows has made the world safer for (some) queer folks and I think that BOPO gets some folks in the door. But who does it leave in the gutter?

Calla: How can we ensure that the class is critical and academically rigorous (re: “valuable”) but also supports these very real experiences? I feel like the rise in BOPO means people think they understand my work, when really, they are applying a very thin, weak proxy to my work.

May: There’s also the tension between not wanting this to be therapy but also teaching in a space that is so silenced in mainstream thought that students are confronted with something that many have never had space to discuss, or even think about until now.

Lotta tears in fat class.

We seek to acknowledge the labour that comes from making space for students to engage with hard ideas. Patti Lou Watkins, Amy E. Farrell, and Andrea Doyle Hugmeyer (2012) explore the ways in which fat studies teachers navigate these and other challenges, particularly when structuring their fat studies courses within a variety of institutional homes. May names the ways that being a safe fat supervisor may result in increased academic and emotional labour; similarly, in the classroom, both Calla and May grappled with how to safely support students through the perils of their own internalized and external experiences of fat phobia:

May: I once had a student come up to me bawling—not in our class—and say “I have been informed about how to deal with racism—to acknowledge myself as a Black woman my whole life—but I’ve NEVER been allowed to consider the ways that my weight has led to oppression.”

Calla: That’s a really powerful statement. And I think it speaks to how pervasive and internalized fatphobia and anti-fat bias is. In many ways it feels permissible to discriminate against fat people openly, even when you are hating on yourself. This was especially evident when we asked them what they’d change if they weren’t worried about their body’s size and shape:

What would you do differently if you believed that your decisions would have no effect on your size?



Figure 2. Word cloud from the second week of our fat studies undergraduate course

May: Oh hell yeah. It’s an internalized garbage fire. Every time I think I understand how powerful fatphobia is in taking people’s attention and forcing them to self-regulate, I am surprised again. Like—I think I get it and it’s ALWAYS more than I think.

Calla: What was the most surprising thing for you with the final assignments in our class? Or heartening?

May: I felt really proud that we had created space for folks to confront this in themselves. Especially since all students were in either social work or a related human service field—their confrontation may lead to different practices both privately and professionally.

I was also heartbroken because the level of suffering was so much greater and more pervasive than I could ever have imagined. And it all becoming disembodied by Covid made it even harder—I just wanted to hug them all very much.

In the midst of this distress and high emotional pitch, we wanted to honour student truths but also grappled with our own roles as educators and purported experts at the front of the class. As touched on in the prior discussion of the fat researcher position, the fat teacher is often faced with unique fat-based discriminations when they stand in front of a classroom. They receive worse student evaluations than their thin counterparts (Reidinger, 2020), experience fat-oriented microaggressions from colleagues (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018) and have similar challenges as fat students when accessing physically constraining academic spaces such as desks and chairs (Brown, 2018; Hetrick & Attig, 2009). These challenges are compounded for researchers living with other intersections, as Senyonga (2017) articulates in considering the experiences of fat Black and queer academics. We are viscerally aware of these hostilities, so to frame ourselves as not only fat scholars, but also fat studies scholars, was simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying.

Calla: How does this connect with our experiences being brought in as “experts.” What are the things that are really obviously missing from that conversation? On the one hand, it benefits me greatly as a grad student to have these opportunities but they often feel shallow.

I have to admit, I feel sometimes like a bit of a zoo animal, brought in for the sensationalism of “fat” work. I am far more conscious of how my fat body is read at the front of the classroom in those settings.

May: Yup! I think there’s a sense that this can be done in a pat way—like thinking about racism for white folks.

Calla: And that you and I are both “acceptable” fat people, right?

May: For sure. It’s hard because there is always so much unacknowledged pain in the room. If they acknowledge fat is OK, their own practices become suspect in terms of how they treat others or do their professional work, but also in how they live their own lives in their own bodies, so this is very dangerous work for people to accept.

So yes, we're the friendly, small enough, white (or white-passing) enough fatties that they can nod at, but...

Calla: I feel like we often have to start at a different point when talking in those spaces as opposed to with students, in some cases the traditional power dynamics in the student/teacher relationship work to our advantage in these situations.

May: For sure. Established scholars may understand our compassion as patronizing.

Calla: I feel that in those spaces, the “expert” spaces, we need to do more work to humanize fat people, which is extra painful as a fat person our/myself.

According to Watkins and colleagues (2012), fat studies syllabi are often structured in a way that anticipates and attempts to compensate for the expected negative reception of fat-positive materials which challenge dominant narratives of fatness as unhealthy, fat people as lazy, etc. These anticipatory techniques connect directly to the fourth aspect of Henderson's (2019) 'gender person' framework: “the 'gender person' engages in an ongoing process of compromise and negotiation over the status of gender knowledge” (p. 732). Fat teachers, particularly those who teach fat studies aligned courses, are constantly engaged in this process of negotiation and compromise around their knowledge of fatness and then tension between wanting to amplify fat knowledge while being acutely aware of how their fat bodies undermine the credibility of said knowledge in academic contexts. As a result, such faculty lean into legitimacy in other respects—overperforming or being exceedingly flexible with students, for example, in order to smooth the bulges of fat existence.

This process of compromise and negotiation is reflected in the conversation above. While we experienced joy and, arguably, relief in the quality and level of critical thinking demonstrated by our fat studies students at the end of the course, many of our conversations prior to the start of class surrounded troubleshooting ways to negotiate the anticipated challenges to the seemingly radical ideas that underpin the field of fat studies. At a later point in our conversation, we asked:

Calla: What do you think they [students in our fat studies class] struggled with the most in terms of frameworks of understanding? Where is there the most work left to be done?

May: 1) they are still absolutely convinced that fat will kill you. And I get it—many days I have a hard time shaking that understanding myself, it's so pervasive.
2) they are still not convinced (some of them, I should say) that this is intersectional and omnipresent, that it's entangled with all of the other shit and oppression and garbage that is all around us. So fat liberation stays personal/private while other fights are not.

In many ways, the process of compromise and negotiation feels particularly urgent because of how fat bodies, especially when teaching fat pedagogy, are received in the classroom. In their 2017 article, “Exposed social flesh: Toward an embodied fat pedagogy,” Deborah McPhail, Jennifer Brady, and Jacqui Gingras discuss the “corporeal risks” fat teachers face and reflect on their own embodied experiences navigating these risks as teachers at their respective institutions. According to McPhail et al. (2017), it is necessary to consider a “theory of fat pedagogy that truly incorporates fat in all of its embodiedness” and that addresses “the ways in which the body constitutes and is constituted by the teaching and learning of critical weight and fat studies” (p. 18). Similar to McPhail et al., May and Calla reflect on how many of our methods of negotiating the risks that come with being a fat teacher teaching a fat studies course operate in service of the “good fatty”/“bad fatty” dichotomy (Bias, 2016). As May states:

May: How important was it that we were nice nice profs who were so flexible and compassionate while teaching about something hard to swallow?

Calla: YES!

May: If we were righteous or “difficult” would that class have been as transformative? What do we gain by making fat studies palatable? What do we lose? “Spoonful of sugar”, indeed.

Our students are often already dubious of many of the claims we are making in our fat studies classes. Not only are fat scholars and teachers considered less credible than their thin counterparts in general (Reidinger, 2020), a fat teacher espousing lessons such as the ones May mentioned above (fat won’t kill you; fat flesh isn’t related to specific habits; fat oppression is intersectional) are often seen as untrustworthy and self-serving. Our attempt to make fat studies more “palatable,” by being the kind and compassionate “good fatty” may protect us individually and personally from the emotional toll of confronting fatphobia and anti-fat bias directly in the classroom but does it do our students any favours? While they may find the May-and-Calla flavour of fat easy to digest, what happens when they confront those who are less able, or less willing, to perform the good fatty dance? McPhail et al. grapple with a similar tension. As Deborah McPhail states in her personal reflection after choosing not to confront her students who laughed at a video of a fat person of colour but do not laugh at her:

While I think that this type of honesty in the classroom might really be at the heart of truly unlearning fatphobia, which rests on racism and classism in particular, I don’t know if I can afford the many hours of therapy that I would require after that discussion. I don’t know if I could ever bring my body into that great a focus. (McPhail et al., 2017, p. 23)

And yet, while there is embodied riskiness in being a fat teacher, there are also exciting possibilities for disruption. As May reflects at a later point in our conversation:

May: I have a lot of internalized shame about not being the type of person who is usually a prof—as a side note: when I was hired, I had to get headshots and it was a terrifying experience for a wide range of reasons, but in no small part because I realized that I don't think profs should look like me—something in the intersection of race and fat makes me want to hide from the lens.

So if I'm a weird choice to be here, then I'm going to use this platform to try to disrupt. Like—lean into the imposter syndrome and ask hard questions.

Calla: As an older graduate student, who returned to academia at the midpoint in my non-academic career, I have felt similarly: while I may not be the “typical” graduate student, and I experience all of the accompanying imposter syndrome symptoms, I simultaneously feel as though I have less to lose than many of my younger colleagues and am therefore in a more stable position to ask the “hard questions” and take greater academic risks.

Just as it may feel risky to teach openly as the ‘fat person’ it can also feel equally risky not to. There is a materiality to fatness, felt more acutely by some fat bodies than others, that is, at times, impossible to divorce oneself from. This is similar to, yet also different from, Henderson's ‘gender person.’ As Clare Hemmings (2011, as cited in Henderson, 2019) states in relation to gender studies, “gender tends to (re)attach to women whether we like it or not” (p. 733). As Calla considers:

While there is no hard or fast rule that the ‘fat person’ is a fat person, and there are many prominent fat studies scholars doing necessary work who would not be considered fat, would a fat teacher, teaching a fat studies or critical weight-focused course, be taken more seriously if they ignored their fat body? I would argue, probably not. As a fat teacher, I must address the ways in which my fat body is received by my students, particularly when I am teaching fat studies aligned concepts and materials. My fat body, and my comfort with discussing its experiences and reception in the world, presents an opportunity to confront fatphobia and anti-fat bias in the classroom that I cannot ignore, despite the risks. For me, this connects directly with my fat activism practice. For others, however, this teaching/activism connection is more complicated.

Conclusions: What Could We Do Instead?

Calla: In some situations I am okay with the role of knowledge broker, especially as my friends and family, broadly defined, grow and learn, but at conferences and other academic situations it can feel especially tokenizing and exhausting. But what could we do instead?

May: Well... if I'm being perfectly honest, I just want to bake for everyone and use a lot of butter.

Cake Activism.

Calla: The other day my neighbour almost said that she's going to get "so fat" from all my baking but then stopped herself. She's like 80. Hurray! Small victories!

May: We are pushing our AGENDA THROUGH CAKE.

Calla: I honestly wish everyone would just get fat and then we could all live in peace

May: (But seriously? actively enjoying cake as an activist practice? I actually think I do that, self-consciously sometimes.)

Through the process of collaborating on the writing of this paper, we have reflected on what the next steps may be for not only furthering the 'fat person' framework but also our roles as fat teachers, scholars, and activists particularly during the globally disruptive Covid-pandemic times we are living through. In many ways the shift to education delivery through primarily online platforms means that our fat bodies have become less "present" in front of the classroom or at faculty meetings and gatherings. In other ways the frightening increase in anti-fat rhetoric in consideration of whose bodies are deemed worthy of treatment and access to health care during these times makes our work feel all that more urgent and necessary. While we have laid the foundation for the 'fat person' framework our hope is that others in our field will build from this and continue to reimagine what the possibilities are for the 'fat person' as well as work through the pitfalls. Perhaps we need a radical reframing of what it means to be the fat studies expert—the 'fat person' within an inherently colonial and fatphobic institution. One of the tensions, among many, that we continue to grapple with is the question of the role of the 'fat person' in upholding the very institutions that we seek to critique and dismantle through our positions as activist-academics, researchers, and teachers. This is a question that Henderson (2019) also grapples with in her 'gender person' article, although in arguably more understated terms. She argues for a 'both/and strategy' where "both integration and autonomy approaches are practiced" (Henderson, 2019, p. 740) in service of mainstreaming gender knowledge within academic institutions. At many points when analyzing our dialogue for this article, May would often say "it's a case of 'yes, but'" when reflecting on whether mainstreaming fat knowledge is possible or even desirable within academia. Fundamentally, we stand behind the radical potential and enormous necessity of the work we do at the same time we sit with a deep uneasiness. This position is consistent with fat studies, a field that holds inconsistency and mess, forcing us to endlessly grapple with the spaces beyond and between.

About the Authors

Calla Evans (*corresponding author*) is a PhD student in Communication and Culture. Her research explores fat identity construction and performance, with particular attention to the ways in which fat activist practices enforce boundaries around acceptable expressions of fatness. Calla is a research associate at the Center for Fashion & Systemic Change and the Creative Communities in Collaboration research lab. She also works with Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph as a digital storytelling facilitator. Email: c2evans@ryerson.ca¹

May Friedman is a faculty member in downtown Toronto. Most recently much of May's research has focused on intersectional approaches to fat studies considering the multiple and fluid experiences of both fat oppression and fat activism. Drawing on a range of arts-based methods, including digital storytelling as well as analyses of treasured garments, May has explored meaning making and representation in relation to embodiment and experience.

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¹ Ryerson University is currently in a renaming process, in recognition of the violence committed by Egerton Ryerson in his role as an architect of the residential school system in Canada.

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