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Abstract

Grounded in public sphere and platform theory, this thesis explores networked fat activism on Tumblr. The platform is often described as an enclave space: it is a welcoming and secluded site where marginalized youths can interact. Yet fatphobic antagonism frequently disrupts Tumblr's fat activist network. I argue that the presence of fatphobia on a site described in such utopian terms as Tumblr is unsurprising when considering two factors: platform affordances that de-incentivize trolling from "outsiders," but do not prevent active Tumblr users from interacting with fat activists; and historical conditions that mark fatness as an ideological "threat" that needs to be contained. Rather than do away with the concept of enclaving, which accounts for how marginalized groups distance themselves from dominant publics, this thesis forwards the concept of "enclave ambivalence" to unsettle the neat and clean boundaries of digital activist engagement.

I contextualize networked fat activism through an historical account of pre-digital iterations of the movement. It is by evaluating fat activist counterpublic and enclave practices over time that I arrive at the concept of enclave ambivalence. Enclaving in physical spaces provided fat activists the distance from fatphobia that is missing on Tumblr. Still, firm boundaries on group membership and the erasure of difference flattened the complexity of fat embodiment. On Tumblr, there is no stable, singular meaning of "fat activism," but a set of belief systems that are overlapping yet contradictory. Through a negotiation of the movement's ambivalence, Tumblr's fat activists work to improve it. However, the presence of fatphobic antagonism simultaneously strengthens and destabilizes these efforts. By introducing the concept of enclave ambivalence, this thesis maintains that fat activism on Tumblr is neither utterly utopian nor outright toxic—rather, it is messy, fleeting, dynamic, and complex.

Unsettling Boundaries:
(Pre-)Digital Fat Activism, Fatphobia, and Enclave Ambivalence

by
Sarah E. Bolden

B.A., University of Massachusetts Boston, 2016

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in
Communication and Rhetorical Studies

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Preface

It took losing weight for me to feel comfortable identifying as fat and to feel comfortable supporting and encouraging fat acceptance. For me to only feel comfortable identifying with a group solely because I won't identify with them much longer is deplorable (and essentially unintentionally fat shaming) [...]

[...] It's weird to hear people make comments on my weight loss and call it good and successful and amazing and awesome and keep it up and you go! It's a constant chorus of positive reinforcement – keep losing, you're going to look so good at your goal weight, keep it up, amazing dedication – that inherently serves as negative reinforcement in regards to being overweight. *You are better now than you were before because now you're a smaller size.* I've discovered since I started losing weight that it's a very, very bizarre, unfamiliar “journey” and that it's not inherently good. Even if I get “skinny,” I'll always carry the perspective of a fat person.

Saguy and Ward describe “coming out” as fat as the process where fat individuals learn to recognize their “fatness as a nonnegotiable aspect of self, rather than as a temporary state to be remedied through weight loss.”¹ I did not have the scholarly language for this process when I “came out” as fat in the above Tumblr post in 2013. I was similarly unfamiliar with what is critiqued in fat studies literature as the “before-and-after weight loss narrative,” which frames fatness as a temporary state and promises fat people happiness through the weight loss process.² Yet I had internalized its promise; it is why I made the decision to lose weight when I turned 18. I resented my eagerness to lose weight, my dissonance evidenced above, but secretly I was proud of my progress. I was “out” as fat, but I was a “closeted” fatphobe. This became even clearer when I gained back the weight and my confidence plummeted. Though I called myself a fat activist, I struggled to rid myself of the fatphobia I had internalized. I continued to peruse Tumblr's fat activist tags in the years that followed, hoping to restore this confidence.

¹ Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward, “Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (March 2011): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272511398190>.

² Maya Maor, “Stories That Matter: Subverting the before-and-after Weight-Loss Narrative,” *Social Semiotics* 24, no. 1 (January 2014): 88–105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2013.827359>.

I open this thesis with my own narrative of (un)becoming-fat not to wax poetic about my experiences, but to point out that this project is undeniably personal. Undertaking this thesis, I have sought to understand the complexity of fat activism – its intersections and contradictions – and in so doing, I have also been attempting to unravel my own complex relationship with my size. At the same time that fatness is derided within the dominant public, fat activists and researchers experience pressure to embrace their fatness with relentless positivity: “Research produced by fat activists who do not harbour desires to lose weight, present accounts of their own weight loss, or profess an intolerance of their own bodies, and who represent, even in part, the self-acceptance that is important to fat political movements, remains rare.”³ I do not fit neatly into either side of this binary: I neither loathe myself nor unflinchingly accept myself. By these standards, I am not a “perfect” fat activist researcher. Still, I choose to expose my dissonant, messy experiences as a fat person because this thesis takes the ambivalence of fat activism as its starting point.

In referring to fat activism as *ambivalent*, I mean to invoke both the mixed feelings toward it and contradictory ideas about it. To claim that fat activism is characterized by ambivalence is not to suggest that it is ineffective. Rather, it is to call attention to the multitude of fat activist perspectives that exist. Indeed, this critical self-portraiture emphasizes the necessity of listening to fat activists themselves — those who may not hold academic degrees, but nevertheless generate theory and social change through their lived, embodied experiences. Just as I began to “come out” as fat and critiqued the “before-and-after weight loss narrative” in my blog post, fat activists across Tumblr reflect on their experiences, offer each other support and validation, debate one another, and attempt to negotiate what fatness means to them. In the six years that I

³ Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Bristol: HammerOn Press, 2016): 600.

have spent on Tumblr, I have observed the efforts of a vibrant network of fat activists whose critical and theoretical work I do not hesitate to compare to academic literature on the topic.

Still, Tumblr's fat activists are not recognized as legitimate "obesity experts"⁴ within the dominant public. Their lived experiences and advocacy are too often ignored and silenced. The pages that follow are grounded in the belief that the diversity of their perspectives should be recognized, their voices heard, their bodies validated, and their activism recognized as radical.

⁴ Ibid.

Introduction

This thesis explores networked fat activist rhetorics on Tumblr. The platform is often characterized in academic literature in utopian terms: it is a welcoming, inclusive space;⁵ it is a site for personal and collective empowerment;⁶ it is a unique hub for feminist consciousness-raising;⁷ and it is a safe haven distanced from the antagonism that marginalized youth encounter on a daily basis.⁸ The goal of this thesis is not to underwrite these claims, but to complicate them by addressing the presence of intra-network discourse and fatphobic antagonism within Tumblr's fat activist network. Drawing on public sphere and platform theory, this thesis positions Tumblr's fat activist network within a framework of enclave ambivalence. Neither utterly utopian nor outright toxic, fat activism on Tumblr is messy, fleeting, dynamic, and complex. By unraveling its complexity, my goal is to nuance academic conversations surrounding networked activism.

Though digital activism has been critiqued as ineffective, scholarship on networked counterpublics (NCPs) takes seriously the capacity for marginalized publics to effect social change online.⁹ However, current conceptualizations of NCPs rely almost exclusively on Nancy

⁵ Bryce J. Renninger, "Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind?: Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9 (2015): 1513–1529.

⁶ Alessandra Mondin, "Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images? Blogging, Reblogging and Scrolling Feminist, Queer and BDSM Desires," *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 282–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1287684>.

⁷ Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar, "The Rhetorical Functions of Consciousness-raising in Third Wave Feminism," *Communication Studies* 55, no. 4 (December 2004): 535–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970409388637>; Kyle Ross Larson, "Counterpublic Intellectualism: Feminist Consciousness-Raising Rhetorics on Tumblr" (Miami University, 2016).

⁸ Apryl Williams, "Fat People of Color: Emergent Intersectional Discourse Online," *Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (February 14, 2017): 15, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6010015>; Renninger, "Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind"; Alexander Cho, "Default Publicness: Queer Youth of Color, Social Media, and Being Outed by the Machine," *New Media & Society*, December 12, 2017, 1461444817744784, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817744784>.

⁹ Danah boyd, "Can Social Network Sites Enable Political Action," *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 4, no. 2 (2008): 241–244; Myleea Hill and Marceline Hayes, "Do You Like It On The...?: A Case-Study of Reactions to a Facebook Campaign for Breast Cancer Awareness Month," *The Qualitative Report; Fort Lauderdale* 20, no. 11 (November 1, 2015): 1747–62; Dennis K. Mumby, "Organizing beyond Organization: Branding, Discourse, and Communicative Capitalism," *Organization* 23, no. 6 (November 1, 2016): 884–907, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508416631164>; Sarah

Fraser's definition of counterpublics, which maintains that counterpublics facilitate confrontational politics *and* withdrawal from dominant publics.¹⁰ Scholars such as Catherine Squires have critiqued Fraser's theory for not accounting for the heterogeneity of marginalized publics. Squires develops additional terms to capture this heterogeneity: satellite publics, enclaves, and counterpublics.¹¹ This thesis focuses on the differences between enclaves and counterpublics, applying these concepts to Tumblr's fat activist network. Whereas counterpublics engage directly with dominant publics, enclaves function as spaces of regroupment. Access to enclave spaces, Squires argues, is central to social movements: "Without the enclave, there is no longer a 'safe space' to develop and discuss ideas without interference from outsiders whose interests may stifle tactical innovations."¹²

Understanding how digital enclaves function is important because contemporary fat activism takes place primarily online, where few truly secluded spaces exist. Because Tumblr's platform is public, fatphobic antagonism frequently disrupts fat activist enclaves. The distinction between enclaves and counterpublics blurs as users who wish to enclave themselves must deal with this antagonism. Rather than do away with these categories, which are productive in accounting for how activists network online, this thesis forwards the concept of "enclave ambivalence" to unsettle the neat and clean boundaries of digital activist engagement. While some fat activists on Tumblr may feel prepared to combat fatphobia through counterpublic

Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: Politics and Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.

¹¹ Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (November 1, 2002): 446–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00278.x>.

¹² *Ibid.*, 464.

activism, the presence of fatphobia online can have more deleterious effects on activists who prefer to utilize the SNS as an enclave space. Enclave ambivalence recognizes that the presence of antagonism and heterogeneity of activist voices may interfere with enclave engagement, but nevertheless presents valuable opportunities for education, consciousness-raising, and social change. Indeed, this thesis attends to both the strengths and limitations of enclave ambivalence in Tumblr's fat activist network.

To speak authoritatively about digital activism requires attuning to how activism has functioned offline. This thesis contextualizes networked fat activism through an historical account of pre-digital iterations of fat activism, tracing the 1969 emergence of the fat acceptance movement to its present-day form. This analysis remains grounded in public sphere theory by evaluating counterpublic and enclave practices over time and across different mediums. It is from this history that I arrive at the concept of enclave ambivalence. I forward that enclaving in physical – rather than digital – spaces provided fat activists the seclusion that is missing on Tumblr. While this allowed activists to withdraw from the dominant public, firm boundaries on group membership and the erasure of difference resulted in the development of a single-axis conceptualization of fat activism. On Tumblr, there is no stable, singular meaning of “fat activism” or “fat acceptance,” but a set of belief systems that simultaneously overlap and contradict one another. While pre-digital fat activism emphasized sameness, fat activists on Tumblr actively consider one another's differences and constantly work to (re)define what constitutes fat acceptance. Though scholars have critiqued the lack of cohesion within contemporary fat activism, I explore this ambivalence as one of its strengths.

The history detailed in Chapter 1 also serves an important revisionist purpose. The fat acceptance movement unequivocally paved the way for contemporary fat activism. It is hard to imagine such a vibrant fat activist community forming on Tumblr without the contributions of second-wave feminist fat activists. Still, the second-wave feminist origins of fat activism have been critiqued as lacking an intersectional political approach.¹³ Though I recognize the accomplishments of early activists, I also account for the noteworthy absence of conversations about the racism and xenophobia intrinsic to fatphobia. I build on this critique in my analysis of networked fat activism on Tumblr by locating examples of intersectional fat activism and elevating these activists' voices.

In the section that follows, I trace the application of public sphere theory to digital activism and introduce enclave ambivalence as the framework I will use to analyze fat activism on Tumblr. Next, I provide context on the history of fatphobia, which has long been coded in racist, classist, sexist, and xenophobic terms and justified through temporal rhetorics of social progress and self-improvement (and their inverse, the threat of regression). I then shift to a discussion of fat activism and contextualize the overarching debates and tensions with which the movement has historically contended. In the penultimate section, I describe the methods I employ in this thesis. I conclude the introduction with a chapter outline.

Networking the public sphere

I use the conceptual framework of networked counterpublics (NCPs) as the starting point for my analysis of Tumblr. This framework is useful because it offers a productive language to describe how marginalized individuals network online. However, I argue here that

¹³ Marta Usiekiewicz, "Dangerous Bodies: Blackness, Fatness, and the Masculinity Divide," *Interalia: A Journal of Queer Studies* 11 (2016): 19–45; Kamilie Gentles-Peart, "West Indian Immigrant Women, Body Politics, and Cultural Citizenship," in *Bodies without Borders*, ed. Erynn Masi de Casanova and Afshan Jafar, 2013, 25–43, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1588829>; Williams, "Fat People of Color."

NCP scholarship needs to attune more closely to key distinguishing characteristics of digital culture. Specifically, I draw attention to the blurring of public and private online and the presence of intra- and extra-network tensions and hostility on Tumblr. Though the SNS is understood to be welcoming and inclusive, there is a strong presence of fatphobic antagonism on it. Additionally, while fat activism on Tumblr is sometimes framed in academic literature as a cohesive, unitary group, I use this section to highlight the diversity of fat activist perspectives found on the SNS, which are at times conflicting and even dissenting.¹⁴ Ultimately, through a study of Tumblr's platform and the introduction of Squires's theory of enclaving, I argue that fat activism on Tumblr is marked by "enclave ambivalence." This concept captures the fact that boundaries of group membership cannot always be neatly drawn, which helps to account for the sustained presence of fatphobia and intra-network discourse on the SNS. Though I consider the limitations and risks of this ambivalence, I also draw attention to its merits, emphasizing Tumblr's potential as a space for productive fat activist consciousness-raising and pedagogy.

Publics and counterpublics

To understand why online activist groups can be studied as NCPs, it is necessary to review the origins of counterpublics theory. In 1990, Nancy Fraser published an influential article that challenged Habermas's conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere as a space where individuals, "bracketing inequalities of status," could gather to deliberate about issues of "common interest."¹⁵ Separate from and critical of the state, Habermas's bourgeois public sphere would "[transmit] the considered 'general interest' of 'bourgeois' society to the state" in

¹⁴ Mondin, "Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images"; Allison McCracken, "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (2017): 151–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0061>.

¹⁵ Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere."

order to “subject [it] to...the force of public opinion.”¹⁶ For both Habermas and Fraser, the “utopian potential”¹⁷ of the bourgeois public sphere was never realized in practice. Whereas Habermas attributes its unrealized potential to class struggles and changes in the state, Fraser destabilizes the idea that such a utopian space could ever exist when its conceptualization is premised on exclusion. The idea of a “common interest” was “a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class,”¹⁸ rendering it inherently exclusionary. The interests of marginalized individuals were framed as “private” rather than “common” and “protocols of style and decorum...functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebeian class and to prevent them from participating as peers.”¹⁹ In short, Fraser argues that without a thorough reconceptualization, Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere is an unattainable “utopian ideal” in theory and “an instrument of domination”²⁰ in practice.

Fraser is rightfully dissatisfied with both options. However, rather than do away with the concept of the public sphere, she offers a reconceptualization that accounts for a glaring absence in Habermas’s theory: the sustained historical presence of a “plurality of competing publics” and “[conflictual] relations between bourgeois publics and other publics”²¹ within stratified societies. Fraser develops the concept of “subaltern counterpublics” to describe the “discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”²² She maintains that subaltern counterpublics serve two key functions, operating “as

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷ Ibid., 59.

¹⁸ Ibid., 62.

¹⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁰ Ibid., 62.

²¹ Ibid., 61.

²² Ibid., 67.

spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” as well as “bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics.”²³ Through participation in counterpublics, marginalized individuals work collectively to develop the tools and strategies necessary to challenge dominant publics and forward social change.

Networked counterpublics

As early as 2001, scholars have theorized the applicability of counterpublics theory to digital culture. In her analysis of new social movements online, Catherine Palczewski argues that while the Internet has the potential to be a productive space for counterpublic formation, several constraints impede its ability to facilitate effective counterpublic engagement.²⁴ For example, few websites in 2001 openly engaged in radical activist practices of identity formation. In fact, most users would forgo critical engagement altogether, showing preference for “monologues”²⁵ over substantive interaction. Additionally, structural barriers to access made counterpublic formation difficult: at the time of her article’s publication, white people were more likely than people of color to have at-home Internet access and online activists were overwhelmingly male.²⁶ Of course, structural barriers to access have improved considerably since 2001. As of 2016, Internet usage is nearly equal among White (88%), Black (85%), and Hispanic (88%) adults.²⁷ While gaps in Internet usage remain based on age, income, education, and location, they have narrowed since 2001.²⁸ Moreover, the rise in smartphone usage and

²³ Ibid., 68.

²⁴ Catherine Palczewski, “Cyber-Movements, New Social Movements, and Counterpublics,” in *Counterpublics and the State*, ed. Robert Asen, SUNY Series in Communication Studies (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2001), 161–86.

²⁵ Ibid., 172.

²⁶ Ibid., 169–70.

²⁷ Pew Research Center, “Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech* (blog), January 12, 2017, <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

emergence of SNSs have catalyzed an increase in interactive (rather than monologic) digital communication.

In other words, Internet usage has become more democratized since 2001.²⁹ This is not to suggest that structural inequalities have been eradicated, but to draw attention to the increased presence of marginalized voices online that are advocating for social change. A new wave of scholarship has identified the presence of networked counterpublics online, which, “enabled by digital technology, have new opportunities to create and broadcast knowledge...., elevate and sustain [marginalized] voices and refocus the attention of the mainstream public sphere.”³⁰ Scholarship on NCPs is optimistic about their capacity to effect social change, which is by no means unwarranted: SNSs offer marginalized individuals an unprecedented space where their collective voices can be heard. Woods and Mcvey, for example, cite #BlackLivesMatter as an example of effective NCP advocacy,³¹ Boutros explores how the digital Afrosphere has publicized NCP conversations about race and religion;³² and Jackson and Welles study how Twitter users effectively hijacked the #myNYPD hashtag as a form of NCP protest against the New York City Police Department’s racist practices.³³ These examples demonstrate that NCP

²⁹ Josep-Lluís Micó and Andreu Casero-Ripollés, “Political Activism Online: Organization and Media Relations in the Case of 15M in Spain,” *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 7 (August 9, 2014): 858–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.830634>; James McVey and Heather Woods, “Anti-Racist Activism and the Transformational Principles of Hashtag Publics: From #HandsUpDontShoot to #PantsUpDontLoot,” *Present Tense* 5, no. 3 (2016): 1–9; Cho, “Default Publicness.”

³⁰ Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Welles, “#Ferguson Is Everywhere: Initiators in Emerging Counterpublic Networks,” *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 3 (March 3, 2016): 399, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1106571>.

³¹ Heather Woods and James Alexander McVey, “# BlackLivesMatter as A Case Study in the Politics of Digital Media: Algorithms, Hashtag Publics, and Organizing Protest Online,” *Teaching Media Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2016).

³² Alexandra Boutros, “Religion in the Afrosphere: The Constitution of a Blogging Counterpublic,” ed. Jenna Supp-Montgomerie, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 39, no. 4 (October 2015): 319–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859915608916>.

³³ Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Welles, “Hijacking #myNYPD: Social Media Dissent and Networked Counterpublics: Hijacking #myNYPD,” *Journal of Communication* 65, no. 6 (December 2015): 932–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12185>.

discourses not only allow marginalized individuals to connect with one another and share ideas but also to communicate those ideas to a broader audience.

Although NCP theory accounts for the increased circulation of counterpublic discourses online, Palczewski raises an additional concern about NCP formation that I wish to linger on: a lack of privacy online. She asserts that activist counterpublics need “safe spaces” to

regenerate energies, to be free from the small acts of discrimination that constitute spirit murder, and to be in a space where exploratory discourse is possible, where one is able to make mistakes knowing the opportunity to correct them exists.³⁴

Online surveillance practices, including government, commercial, and social surveillance, impede access to safe spaces online. Palczewski’s unease is valid and she is not the only scholar to raise this point. Echoing her concern about the availability of “safe spaces” online, Jackson and Banaszczyk write that the “ever-shrinking divide between public and private facilitated by online networks can pose as much risk as benefit to those already widely targeted for identity-based harassment, commodification, and surveillance.”³⁵

To understand why a lack of access to safe spaces online may impede NCP activism, it is necessary to recall the two functions of counterpublic activism that Fraser describes: though they operate as “bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics,” they also serve “as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment.”³⁶ The blurring of public and private online means that counterpublic discourses always risk “generat[ing] ‘prolonged public conversations’ that often exceed the group for whom they were ostensibly designed,”³⁷ including dominant publics. This does not pose as much of a concern in examples such as

³⁴ Palczewski, “Cyber-Movements, New Social Movements, and Counterpublics,” 172.

³⁵ Sarah J. Jackson and Sonia Banaszczyk, “Digital Standpoints: Debating Gendered Violence and Racial Exclusions in the Feminist Counterpublic,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 40, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 395, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859916667731>.

³⁶ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 68.

³⁷ Boutros, “Religion in the Afrosphere,” 322.

#BlackLivesMatter or #myNYPD, where NCP discourses are constructed to reach, inform, and educate a wider audience. However, in instances where NCP members wish to withdraw and regroup, exposure to dominant publics is unwanted precisely because it might introduce forms of discrimination into NCPs that those activists wish to avoid.

Contemporary scholars who have written on NCPs rely predominantly on Fraser's work to shape their conceptualization of the term.³⁸ In doing so, the distinction between the two functions of NCPs is inconsistent. For example, while NCPs on SNSs such as Twitter are studied as examples of agitational activism, NCPs on SNSs such as Tumblr are studied more frequently as safe spaces of withdrawal.³⁹ To better distinguish between these two functions of counterpublic engagement, I move to introduce Squires's theory of enclaving to discussions of NCPs. In the next section, I briefly introduce her theory before detailing how specific platform features create digital environments better suited for enclave withdrawal and regroupment.

Enclaves and platform

Squires argues that Fraser's theory of counterpublics does not account for "the heterogeneity of marginalized groups" and risks obfuscating the complexity of their collective engagement:

Differentiating the 'dominant' public sphere from 'counterpublics' solely on the basis of group identity tends to obscure other important issues, such as how constituents of these publics interact and intersect, or how politically successful certain publics are in relation to others.⁴⁰

³⁸ Jackson and Welles, "Hijacking #myNYPD"; Eckert and Kalyani Chadha, "Muslim Bloggers in Germany: An Emerging Counterpublic," *Media, Culture & Society* 35, no. 8 (November 1, 2013): 926–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443713501930>; Renninger, "Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind"; Sarah J. Jackson and Sonia Banaszczyk, "Digital Standpoints"; John Downey and Natalie Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere," *New Media & Society* 5, no. 2 (June 1, 2003): 185–202, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444803005002003>.

³⁹ Renninger, "Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind"; Cho, "Default Publicness."

⁴⁰ Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere," 447.

Grounding her intervention in her research on Black publics, she amends Fraser's theory through the introduction of three types of marginalized publics: satellite publics, counterpublics, and enclaves. In this thesis, I am particularly interested in the distinction between counterpublics and enclaves.⁴¹

Squires describes counterpublics as spaces where marginalized groups engage directly with dominant publics. She lists several strategies utilized by counterpublics: "protest rhetoric; persuasion; increased interpublic communication and interaction with the state; occupation and reclamation of dominant and state-controlled public spaces; strategic use of enclave spaces."⁴² She also describes the key goals of counterpublics: they "foster resistance; test arguments and strategies in wider publics; create alliances; persuade outsiders to change views; perform public resistance to oppressive laws and special codes; gain allies."⁴³ I list these strategies and goals at length to emphasize the scope of counterpublic engagement. Squires additionally notes that "Although counterpublics create more opportunities for intersphere discussions, the members of dominant publics may monopolize these opportunities."⁴⁴ This may not be intrinsically problematic for counterpublics, whose goal is "to argue against dominant conceptions of the group and to describe group interest."⁴⁵ Still, this becomes troubling when overwhelming amounts of threats, violence, or dismissal push counterpublics to enclave themselves.

⁴¹ Satellite publics are groups that "that desire to be separate from other publics" (ibid., 463). Whereas enclaves form due to external oppression, satellite publics voluntarily distance themselves because they "do not desire regular discourse or interdependency with other publics" (ibid., 463). In the case of Tumblr's fat activists, when users withdraw, it is in response to fatphobia, which constitutes enclaving. While satellite publics very well may take shape online, they are not relevant to my analysis of Tumblr, though this remains open as an area for future research on NCPs.

⁴² Ibid., 460.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 461.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Indeed, unlike counterpublics, enclaves are spaces where marginalized groups withdraw from the dominant public due to the oppression they experience. Within an enclave, group members “[hide] counterhegemonic ideas and strategies in order to survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate and planning.”⁴⁶ Squires’s description of enclave spaces is similar to Palczewski’s concept of “safe spaces,” which allow marginalized individuals “to be free of the supervision of dominant groups.”⁴⁷ (173). In fact, Squires writes that “an enclave public sphere requires the maintenance of *safe spaces*, hidden communication networks, and group memory to guard against unwanted publicity of the group’s true opinions, ideas, and tactics for survival.”⁴⁸ While Squires suggests that enclave withdrawal is involuntary, occurring because these groups “are...denied public voice or entrance into public spaces,”⁴⁹ Karma Chávez later amends her theory by arguing that these “spaces are always a necessary part of movement activity regardless of the level of oppression or crisis that groups face.”⁵⁰ By taking concern with a lack of digital privacy, scholars such as Palczewski fear that access to “safe spaces” online - or enclaving - is inhibited. Nevertheless, media studies scholarship points to SNSs such as Tumblr as spaces where digital enclaving is possible.⁵¹ Rather than suggest that Tumblr is a “private” space, it is through platform analysis that Tumblr can be understood as a space that *feels* private.

The distinction between *being* private and *feeling* private is an important one: Tumblr is a public SNS. In fact, I hesitate to use the word “private” at all in this context. Referring to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 448.

⁴⁷ Palczewski, “Cyber-Movements, New Social Movements, and Counterpublics,” 173.

⁴⁸ Squires, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere,” 458 (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Karma Chávez, “Counter-Public Enclaves and Understanding the Function of Rhetoric in Social Movement Coalition-Building,” in *Readings on the Rhetoric of Social Protest*, ed. Charles E. Morris and Stephen H. Browne, Third edition (State College, Pennsylvania: Strata Publishing, Inc, 2013), 362.

⁵¹ Renninger, “Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind”; Cho, “Default Publicness.”

“privacy” when discussing marginalized networks may reinscribe a binary divide between public-as-default and private-as other. Or as Cho explains, this dichotomy “risks rehearsing a hegemonic gaze that assumes that the public is neutral terrain and the private needs to be even further legislated.”⁵² Cho’s concern is not dissimilar to Fraser’s critique of Habermas’s public sphere. Fraser contends that “critical theory needs to take a harder, more critical look at the terms ‘private’ and ‘public,’” describing such terms as “cultural classifications and rhetorical labels...that are frequently employed to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics to valorize others.”⁵³ In particular, she notes the tendency to associate the “private” sphere with domesticity; it is a concept that marks marginalized genders, races, classes, and sexualities as subordinate.⁵⁴ Instead of suggesting that interactions on Tumblr are private, I use the term “enclave” to call attention to the conditions of power that make seclusion a necessity for marginalized publics and to signal the ways in which the platform affords spaces for online interactions that *feel* private.

The public/private binary can be subverted by critiquing what is meant by “public” as well. Bridging public sphere theory with platform analysis, the concept of “default publicness”⁵⁵ wrests publicness from its assumed neutrality and, in so doing, exposes the threat that online visibility poses for oppressed individuals. A platform upholds default publicness (or is public-by-default) when the divulgence of identifying information (such as one’s name, gender, and/or location) is a mandatory requirement to use the platform. Cho explains that while default

⁵² Cho, “Default Publicness,” 4.

⁵³ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 73.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁵ Cho, “Default Publicness.”

publicness often masks itself as neutral through the “[presumption] that being-in-public carries little to no risk,” it nevertheless instantiates a normalizing gaze by

hyper-privileging extant offline networks, hewing strictly to state-validated identity, making the communication archive as readable and traversable as possible, and even broadcasting one’s actions to one’s network without one’s knowledge.⁵⁶

Of particular concern for marginalized individuals is context collapse: when an SNS is public-by-default, the content a user posts may be exposed to “extant offline networks” comprised of a mix of friends, family, classmates, and/or coworkers.⁵⁷ Though the public-by-default setting assumes the exposure of identifying information to multiple social contexts is risk-free, the unwitting disclosure of one’s gender or sexuality on Facebook, for example, can pose immense material risk. For some marginalized individuals, participation in default publicness therefore requires bracketing markers of difference.

Tumblr becomes an inviting SNS for enclaving precisely because its platform affordances help subvert default publicness, providing marginalized users a space where they can “be themselves”⁵⁸ without fear of reprisal. Unlike SNSs such as Facebook, Tumblr does not require users to divulge *any* identifying information to create an account (all a user needs is an email address, which need not be tied to their identity). Cho also observes that Tumblr is not easily searchable. While this may pose challenges for researchers (as I will discuss in my methods section), this is a key feature for users who desire anonymity: “there is so much ‘random noise’ that you are basically ‘unobservable.’”⁵⁹ Further, users can customize their blogs as they see fit: they can choose to not have their blog and its contents appear in Google searches; they can

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁷ Jessica Vitak, “The Impact of Context Collapse and Privacy on Social Network Site Disclosures,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (December 2012): 451–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732140>.

⁵⁸ Renninger, “Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind,” 1520.

⁵⁹ Cho, “Default Publicness,” 14.

disable anonymous commenting; and they can opt not to tag their posts, which helps prevent their content from appearing in internal search results. Finally, Renninger notes that through the culmination of these factors, as well as a de-emphasis on commenting, trolling is by-and-large de-incentivized on the platform.⁶⁰ In short, practices of anonymity on Tumblr remain public (and some users may reveal identifying information), but it is by utilizing specific platform features that users can evade the threat of default publicness. Taken together, these platform affordances make Tumblr feel “secluded”⁶¹ compared to other SNSs. Or, as boyd and Marwick concisely explain, users implement strategies of anonymity in order to “be *in* public without always *being* public.”⁶²

Importantly, perceptions of default publicness — or a lack thereof — influence what Gershon refers to as a platform’s “media ideology,” which describes how “people’s ideas about different communicative media and how different media functions shape the ways they use these media.”⁶³ Because of the platform affordances detailed above, many Tumblr users understand the platform not only as “secluded,” but as an ideologically welcoming and supportive enclave space. For instance, Cho’s interviews of marginalized Tumblr users reveals that these individuals felt they “could let loose, express more intimate and deep emotions, did not feel the pressure of constant surveillance, and could learn a lot about how to make sense of the world around them and its various antagonisms.”⁶⁴ Mondin similarly concludes in her research on Tumblr users that the SNS is “the space where access to queer and/or feminist

⁶⁰ Renninger, “Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind.”

⁶¹ Cho, “Default Publicness,” 9.

⁶² Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, “Networked Privacy: How Teenagers Negotiate Context in Social Media,” *New Media & Society* 16, no. 7 (November 1, 2014): 1052, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814543995>.

⁶³ Ilana Gershon, “Media Ideologies: An Introduction: Media Ideologies: An Introduction,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (December 2010): 290, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1395.2010.01070.x>.

⁶⁴ Cho, “Default Publicness,” 5.

[content] means being able to access ‘great empowering images.’ It is where a plethora of identities, desires, pleasures, practices are represented and a queer intimacy is built.”⁶⁵ These optimistic claims about the platform’s media ideology are not unfounded; in my own analysis of Tumblr, I detail how fat activists work to foster empowerment and inclusion. Still, I wish to complicate these arguments by accounting for why there is a sustained presence of fatphobic antagonism on a platform described in such utopian terms as Tumblr. I do so in the following section by introducing the concept of enclave ambivalence.

Enclave ambivalence

Despite assertions that Tumblr is a welcoming enclave space, scholars must account for the presence of antagonism on the SNS to avoid reductionism. In his analysis of Tumblr’s asexual community, Renninger argues that the SNS’s platform affordances facilitate “communication unhindered by outsiders.”⁶⁶ Though he acknowledges that reddit users, for example, may troll Tumblr’s asexual tags, he maintains that the platform is difficult to search and comment on, de-incentivizing antagonism by “outsiders” who may not be invested enough in trolling to learn how to navigate the SNS. The same may be said about fatphobia on Tumblr: although fat activist engagement risks exposure to dominant “outside” publics, very little fatphobic content is produced by such “outsiders.” What Renninger seems to overlook in his analysis of Tumblr is that antagonism is not only produced by “outsiders,” but Tumblr users themselves, individuals who are well-versed in the platform’s interface.

Because Tumblr is comprised of a heterogeneous network of users with intersecting marginalized identities, antagonism often emerges through “the aggressive policing of

⁶⁵ Mondin, “Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images,” 290.

⁶⁶ Renninger, “Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind,” 1524.

supposedly progressive identity politics.”⁶⁷ McCracken makes a similar argument in her analysis of interactions on the SNS:

Tumblr’s spaces can also be conflicted and challenging as well as supportive, as many young people are introduced to new ideas and interactions in an often highly charged atmosphere. Such contested environments can and often do provide extraordinary opportunities for productive discussion and learning, although they can also reproduce social inequalities or become toxic in a variety of ways.⁶⁸

Given that Tumblr is a “highly charged atmosphere,” users’ interactions can rarely be mapped out in absolute terms. Put differently, an absence of default publicness cannot be conflated with a uniformity of belief systems. While some of the fatphobic antagonism on Tumblr is highly vitriolic, other instances of fatphobia come from users who may identify as feminist, have marginalized identities, and consider themselves to be otherwise welcoming and tolerant people. Their antagonism may stem from ignorance and even genuine (albeit misguided) concern for fat people’s health. This is not, by any means, to suggest that their fatphobia should go unanswered. Rather, it is to point out that “conflict and unity...are far from diametrically opposed”⁶⁹ and that digital enclaving is characterized by an ambivalence that makes it difficult to draw clear group boundaries.

And indeed, it is challenging, if not impossible, to avoid fatphobia on Tumblr given the many forms it takes. Some fatphobic content is directed specifically at fat activists. Fatphobes may: respond to fat activists’ Tumblr posts challenging their assertions; send individual activists antagonistic messages, sometimes anonymously; and tag grotesque images⁷⁰ of fat people as

⁶⁷ Cho, “Default Publicness,” 14.

⁶⁸ Allison McCracken, “Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement,” *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (2017): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0061>.

⁶⁹ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 170.

⁷⁰ A common example is pictures of deceased fat people, their bodies cut open to reveal how presumably “disturbing” their internal organs are.

“#fat activist,” which functions to scare fat activists searching these tags. Other fatphobic content addresses users who are not necessarily fat activists, but may be sympathetic to the cause. Fatphobes may: create text posts “warning” other Tumblr users not to believe what fat activists are saying; post their own narratives about how fatness has negatively impacted themselves or their loved ones; and create entire blogs devoted to undermining fat activism. Finally, there are more ambiguous instances of fatphobia. Though their purpose might not be to denigrate fat activists, these users take concern with the perceived health risks of obesity.⁷¹ They may advocate against fatphobia, but simultaneously deride unhealthy dietary and exercise practices and engage in debates with fat activists on the platform. I maintain that these forms of enclave intrusion are antagonistic because they are disruptive and oppositional, but my analysis of Tumblr considers how hostility fluctuates in fatphobic antagonism on the platform.

Of the content described here, I would speculate that the only examples of fatphobia that regularly come from “outside” users would be antagonistic anonymous messages and some of the more vitriolic content posted with fat activist tags. To dedicate an entire Tumblr blog to anti-fat acceptance advocacy, participate in debates, and create text posts with the intention of circulating them to Tumblr’s audience, users must have a familiarity with the platform and a motivation to engage with other users. Though these antagonists occupy a range of political beliefs, many of the examples described here come from users who identify as feminist and/or progressive but nevertheless view fat activism as a threat to this imagined online community.

Because fatphobia comes from several different audiences, including users who may themselves use the SNS as an enclave space, fat activists on Tumblr employ a range of tactics in

⁷¹ Throughout this thesis, I use the word “obesity” when referring specifically to the pathologization of fatness in the dominant public. In all other contexts, I opt to use the words “fat” and “fatness” instead.

response to the fatphobia they encounter. Some users, recognizing an opportunity to educate others, engage with fatphobic users who they believe are amenable to criticism. While these fat activists may not mind interacting directly with antagonists as part of their advocacy, others are deeply affected by the fatphobia present on the SNS. Phillips and Milner explain more broadly:

On the one hand, communication that is social *and* antagonistic can silence or otherwise minimize diverse public participation by alienating, marginalizing, or mocking those outside the knowing ingroup. On the other hand...that same alienating, marginalizing, and mocking communication can also provide an outlet for historically underrepresented populations to speak truth to power.⁷²

Antagonism on Tumblr is therefore highly ambivalent: while it is never wholly positive, it cannot always be dismissed as toxic hate speech, either. It always runs the risk of marginalizing and alienating fat Tumblr users, but it simultaneously “energize[s] the exchange of ideas”⁷³ and presents opportunities for education, clarification, conversation, and potentially social change. In other words, though “designed to be an enclave,” Tumblr’s fat activist network is still public and thus “holds potential for transforming politics.”⁷⁴ By referring to these interactions as forms of enclave ambivalence, I acknowledge their intersections with counterpublic advocacy.

That fat activists fluctuate in their degree of engagement with antagonists brings me to an additional point about enclave ambivalence. To refer to fat activists on Tumblr as constitutive of an “enclave” is a misnomer of sorts. As a heuristic device, the term provides a “familiar and evocative”⁷⁵ description of a specific type of group membership. Still, the term is “notoriously slippery, and unhelpful (or worse) if applied indiscriminately.”⁷⁶ For example, using the word

⁷² Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*, 14–15.

⁷³ Jiyeon Kang, “A Volatile Public: The 2009 Whole Foods Boycott on Facebook,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (October 1, 2012): 572, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732142>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 574.

⁷⁵ Susan Herring, “Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis,” in *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, ed. Sasha Barab, Rob Kling, and James H. Gray (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 338.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 339.

“enclave” evokes spatial metaphors of physical enclosure. To participate in an enclave implies that one is *in* or *out*—never in-between or here-and-there. Within digital culture, “identity is performed in small, momentary, and fleeting acts,”⁷⁷ unsettling the spatial dimensions of enclaving. Users do “not reside inside or outside,” but “[exist] on threads and nodes”⁷⁸ that overlap, intersect, contradict, and controvert. Entrance into a networked enclave “space” can occur with a like or a reblog, just as departure can take place with an unfollow.

In other words, fat activist enclave engagement on Tumblr cannot be neatly defined because “the actors are many”⁷⁹ and their interactions “do not result in well-bounded texts or moments in time.”⁸⁰ Kang explains that “the agency of activism on social media can be better understood as the temporary product of a weaving-together of users and the social media environment.”⁸¹ Some users may follow fat activist blogs without ever reblogging activist content; others may stumble upon a fat activist post and reblog it, but never otherwise engage with this enclave; for others still, fat activism may comprise their *entire* Tumblr experience, creating curated blogs dedicated specifically to the subject. By referring to “enclave ambivalence,” a goal of mine is therefore to destabilize the idea that a cohesive, homogenous, or unified fat activist network exists.

To this end, while the term “enclave” allows me to readily describe the loose assemblage of fat activists on Tumblr, it should not be taken as an indicator of universal consensus among them. Overgeneralizing fat activists’ beliefs risks flattening users’ experiences: a foregrounding of unity “can come at the cost of ignoring, disregarding, or actively silencing

⁷⁷ Jeffrey T. Grabill and Stacey Pigg, “Messy Rhetoric: Identity Performance as Rhetorical Agency in Online Public Forums,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (March 2012): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2012.660369>.

⁷⁸ Kang, “A Volatile Public,” 570.

⁷⁹ Grabill and Pigg, “Messy Rhetoric,” 99.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁸¹ Kang, “A Volatile Public,” 575.

dissenting...perspectives.”⁸² However, to acknowledge the diversity of intra-network opinions and belief systems risks falling down a slippery slope, so to speak. Boutros, for example, asks, “How heterogeneous can a counterpublic get before it splits into yet more counterpublics?”⁸³ I answer this question by suggesting that “enclave ambivalence” captures the differences in fat activists’ opinions and the tensions that arise among them without destabilizing fat activism as an enclave group. This does not mean that all fat activist beliefs are valid: for example, some fat activists perpetuate racist and classist ideologies about fatness.⁸⁴ A framework of enclave ambivalence recognizes these perspectives as highly problematic, but draws attention to instances where fat activists productively work to challenge and subvert such ideologies.

Enclave ambivalence, therefore, is embedded within Tumblr’s larger media ideology: the SNS is a space where users attempt to teach each other, create community, and negotiate their perspectives. Fat activists not only challenge “outside” antagonists but also educate members of Tumblr’s larger community *and* one another. The production of “lively debate”⁸⁵ is, by definition, an enclave practice. Still, this digital enclaving is ambivalent, fleeting, and messy. By describing these practices as a form of enclave ambivalence, I point to the pedagogical potential of fat activism while taking care to avoid perpetuating “utopian visions of the Internet”⁸⁶ that flatten the ambivalence, intensity, and turbulence of this activism. To better understand the contemporary circulation of fatphobia and fat activists’ responses to it, I provide a brief overview of each in the following section.

⁸² Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*, 170.

⁸³ Boutros, “Religion in the Afrosphere,” 326.

⁸⁴ Williams, “Fat People of Color.”

⁸⁵ Squires, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere,” 448.

⁸⁶ Palczewski, “Cyber-Movements, New Social Movements, and Counterpublics,” 181.

Overview of fatphobia and fat activism

Fatphobia

Fat studies scholars have debated whether it is appropriate to discuss fatphobia when writing about fat activism. Some fear that discussing fatphobia risks de-legitimizing, undermining, or overlooking fat activist efforts by belaboring and reproducing iterations of fatphobia.⁸⁷ Still, the research I present in this thesis reveals that fat activists throughout history, both on and offline, have had to contend with the presence and effects of fatphobia. Additionally, while “fat studies scholars have already written extensively on the language and methods of the ‘obesity epidemic,’”⁸⁸ it remains the case that many of these histories are partial. Usiekiewicz calls attention to the dearth of rigorous, intersectional analysis of fatphobia in fat studies scholarship:

Though fat studies scholars note the intersectionality of fat oppression with race and class, rarely do they address these issues in depth, focusing on the—no less important—efforts to destigmatize fatness. Despite their professed involvement in diversity, fat studies take up the positioning of bodies that are white, cis gender, female, and middle-class, thus ignoring the various ways in which fatness and the war waged against it affect men, people of color, trans people, and the poor.⁸⁹

As Usiekiewicz observes, to frame fatphobia as solely a gendered issue is to problematically overlook how fatphobia intersects with race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. In light of these shortcomings, each chapter of this thesis begins by providing historical context on anti-obesity rhetoric. This context serves two purposes: first, it accounts for why early iterations of fat activism may have overlooked the racialized and classed histories of fatphobia; and second, it

⁸⁷ Cooper, *Fat Activism*; Sofia Apostolidou and Jules Sturm, “Weighing Posthumanism: Fatness and Contested Humanity,” *Social Inclusion; Lisbon* 4, no. 4 (2016), <http://dx.doi.org.libezproxy2.syr.edu/10.17645/si.v4i4.705>.

⁸⁸ Laura Pratt, “The (Fat) Body and the Archive: Toward the Creation of a Fat Community Archive,” *Fat Studies*, November 10, 2017, 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2017.1374128>.

⁸⁹ Usiekiewicz, “Dangerous Bodies: Blackness, Fatness, and the Masculinity Divide,” 22.

situates the contributions of contemporary fat activists who strive to make the movement more intersectional.

While it is the case that mid-20th and 21st century fatphobic discourses emphasize the perceived health risks of obesity, I argue that biomedical anti-obesity rhetoric reifies the sociohistorical moralization of fatness. I situate this rhetoric as a “uniquely modern form of temporality, in which history is assumed to move in a linear fashion from the past to the present to the future.”⁹⁰ By drawing on a rhetoric of temporality, biomedical anti-obesity discourses locate fatness as “an apocalyptic threat to the future.”⁹¹ Although it is widely believed that obesity is eroding the population’s health, the denaturalization of this rhetoric reveals that the threat of obesity is ideological. More precisely, anti-obesity rhetoric

privileges apparent control/discipline over healthfulness...by equating the body’s external appearance as sign of adherence to social norms, sending the social message that the self contained within the body is disciplined (as opposed to “revolting”).⁹²

The fat body, in other words, is moralized as it is pathologized. Situating fatness as an ideological threat hinges on the perception that being fat is a choice. Body size is considered to be a readily changeable state, which makes the belief that there is “no excuse” for obesity alluring in its simplicity. Fatness itself is thus constructed as temporal, “[pushing] us to dis-identify with the past (and with the fat associated with it) and to identify with the glorious future in which our normative identity will be achieved and secured.”⁹³ The temporal construction of fatness is common in the before-and-after weight loss narrative, where “fat bodies are constructed as a perpetual ‘before’ or ‘past,’ something that must be erased to proceed to the

⁹⁰ Elena Levy-Navarro, “Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go From Here?,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (NYU Press, 2009), 5.

⁹¹ Pratt, “The (Fat) Body and the Archive,” 5.

⁹² Sonya C. Brown, “Big Losers: The Rhetorical Vision of the Weight Loss Narrative,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 47, no. 1 (February 2014): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12108>.

⁹³ Elena Levy-Navarro, ed., *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 5.

position of a thin ‘after’ where life truly ‘begins.’”⁹⁴ For fat people, weight loss is a demand in the cultural imagination: never a question of *if*, but *when*. The justification of this fatphobic dehumanization lies in the promise of the before-and-after weight loss narrative: one does not have to live this way. But the underside of this message remains clear: “If you resist self-care, your ‘mismanagement’ merits your unhappiness.”⁹⁵

The perception that fatness is a choice has engendered a “powerful fear...that fat is on the verge of becoming entirely naturalized” and that “‘letting oneself go’ has invaded the mainstream.”⁹⁶ In other words, obesity is “‘imagined as the contagious spread of habits through the density of the social.’”⁹⁷ Anti-obesity rhetoric would have one believe that lurking within the fat subject are not only diseases and disorders, but a distorted — and potentially contagious — sense of logic or truth that fails to acknowledge how problematic obesity is. The threat of obesity therefore demands that individuals of all sizes discipline their bodies and partake in social surveillance practices (such as fatphobia) to mitigate individual and cultural acceptance of fat. It is important to note here that anti-obesity rhetoric is “always already racialized through an imagined ideal citizen-subject.”⁹⁸ Contemporary fatphobic stereotypes have developed from historically racialized and moralized constructions of fat-as-regressive. These stereotypes are contrasted with the “civilized” body, which is traditionally coded as white and masculine. Though naturalized by medicalized discourses of health, contemporary anti-obesity rhetoric

⁹⁴ Pratt, “The (Fat) Body and the Archive,” 4.

⁹⁵ Brenda R. Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*, Console-Ing Passions: Television and Cultural Power (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 51.

⁹⁶ Scott Stoneman, “Ending Fat Stigma: *Precious*, Visual Culture, and Anti-Obesity in the ‘Fat Moment,’” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 34, no. 3–4 (July 2012): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2012.687297>.

⁹⁷ Scott Stoneman, “When Does Fat Matter? Obesity, Risk and the Politics of Futurity,” *Topia* 33 (2015): 199.

⁹⁸ Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 10.

relies on a temporal narrative to safeguard against the racially coded and gendered threat of regression and, in turn, justifies itself through the promise of a better future.

Fat activism

I suggest that a critique of temporality ties together most iterations of fat activism. Fat activists reject the before-and-after weight loss narrative, which “works to suppress the existence of a fully realized fat life.”⁹⁹ Indeed, fat people are symbolically – and sometimes literally – told that they cannot exist comfortably in everyday life without undergoing the weight loss process. Kent explains that “In [the before-and-after] scenario the self, the person, is presumptively thin, and cruelly jailed in a fat body. The self is never fat. To put it bluntly, there is no such thing as a fat person.”¹⁰⁰ Fat activists’ critiques of temporality are thus embodied: they reject the perceived impossibility of fat embodiment by asserting their presence as-is. Frequently, fat activists couple these critiques with the subversion of ideological stereotypes associated with fatness and/or the de-pathologization of obesity. Still, I maintain that fat activism is ambivalent and cannot be framed as a singular, unified, or cohesive movement.¹⁰¹ Though most activists share these broader goals, the fat acceptance movement is characterized by internal contradictions regarding how to achieve them. The research I present in this project unravels these multiple ongoing tensions among fat activists. I provide an overview of some of the most frequent debates here.

One of the most divisive subjects among fat activists is the de-pathologization of obesity. Of universal consensus among fat activists is that fat people should not be discriminated against because of their size. Similarly, most fat activists recognize that body size is not intrinsically correlated to physical health. Nevertheless, some fat activists maintain that individuals of all

⁹⁹ Pratt, “The (Fat) Body and the Archive,” 2.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, “Big Losers,” 75.

¹⁰¹ Cooper, *Fat Activism*.

sizes should strive to live a healthy lifestyle. This stance is sometimes qualified by suggesting that fat people should not be faulted if their poor health stems from medical conditions such as hypothyroidism or PCOS. Yet another perspective is that fatness is a problem, but that individuals cannot be faulted when structural conditions such as single-parenthood, long work schedules, and food deserts in low-income areas preclude access to affordable nutritional meals. However, critics of these approaches interrogate the moral value that is placed on physical health, arguing that the privileging of health “[risks] pathologizing those whose fatness can be more directly attributed to behavior...thus leaving in place culturally dominant logics about normalcy, health, difference, and rights.”¹⁰² In particular, these activists maintain that the moral value placed on healthy lifestyle choices perpetuates fatphobia and can have deleterious effects on fat people’s mental and physical health. These activists advocate for acceptance of *all* bodies, no matter their size, health status, and lifestyle choices. While critics of the moralization of health also critique structural conditions, they do not center obesity as the problem. Rather, they challenge the paternalistic stance of anti-obesity rhetorics and policies, which legitimates the surveillance and discipline of marginalized populations.

Debates about the pathologization of obesity surface because fat activists must contend with the tensions between biological and social constructionist conceptions of fatness. To this end, another debate among fat activists considers what “counts” as fat. Although body fat is biologically material, fat activists reject essentialist determinations of body size. Situating “fat” as a social construct, activists must consider how to demarcate what “fat” is. Is it determined by one’s weight? The size of clothing one wears? The perceptions of others? One’s perceptions of

¹⁰² Zoë Meleo-Erwin, “Disrupting Normal: Toward the ‘Ordinary and Familiar’ in Fat Politics,” *Feminism & Psychology* 22, no. 3 (August 1, 2012): 388–402, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353512445358>.

oneself? In addition to considering what “counts” as fat, activists have “faced the difficulty of establishing a community around an identity that seemed obviously mutable.”¹⁰³ In other words, additional questions about group membership stem from the transitivity of body size. For example, are fat activists who lose weight “traitors” to the movement? Clear-cut answers to these questions do not exist, but activists have historically grappled with them in order to demarcate group boundaries and assess the effects of fatphobia.

Demarcating group boundaries also requires clarifying fat activist politics. In particular, activists have both employed and critiqued single-axis approaches to activism. Compared to a “matrix” approach to activism, which “focuses on simultaneity [and] attends to within-group differences,” a single-axis approach may “falsely universalize the experiences or needs of a select few as representative of all group members.”¹⁰⁴ Single-axis fat activism maintains that fatness is the most central or pressing form of oppression that activists experience. Although single-axis approaches may also consider the intersections of weight with gender and sexuality, they have been historically limited in considering how size intersects with race, class, and ability. When fat activism takes a single-axis approach, it emphasizes sameness to foster in-group unity. However, lack of attention to matrices of oppression erases the experiences of individuals whose fatness cannot be “separated” from or “prioritized” over other markers of their identity.

A final debate I wish to highlight is somewhat unique to contemporary iterations of fat activism. Since the early aughts, body positivity has gained within commercial culture and online. Body positivity is a direct offshoot of fat activism that embraces radical and politicized practices

¹⁰³ Greta Resenbrink, “Fat’s No Four-Letter Word: Fat Feminism and Identity Politics in the 1970s and 1980s,” in *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, ed. Elena Levy-Navarro (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 215.

¹⁰⁴ Vivian M. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries*, Contemporary Sociological Perspectives (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 22.

of self-love and body-acceptance. Contemporary fat activists are relatively split on the effects of body positivity on the fat acceptance movement. Though body positivity celebrates self-acceptance, critics take issue with the co-optation of the movement and point out that its commercialization flattens the diversity of fat representation by privileging the visual circulation of white, straight, cis, curvy (e.g. hourglass-shaped), and conventionally feminine bodies.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, critics of body positivity argue that its focus on beauty, fashion, and appearance “downplays activists’ concerns with the more complicated issues of institutionalized sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia.”¹⁰⁶ Finally, critics of body positivity point out that rhetorics of self-care and personal empowerment have been used to justify fatphobia (e.g. if you love your body, you will take care of it). On the other hand, supporters of body positivity maintain a critique of the lack of diversity within the commercialized body positive movement, but argue that it has radical therapeutic and consciousness-raising potential on SNSs such as Tumblr. These activists recognize self-acceptance and displays of the fat body as transformative in an environment that readily stigmatizes fatness.¹⁰⁷

Methods

This thesis uses a mixed-methods approach to research the development of fat activist practices over time. In Chapter 1, I rely on primary and secondary sources to detail the historical transformations of the pre-digital era of the movement. This research provides historical context to my discussion of fat activism on Tumblr in Chapter 2. In my research on Tumblr, I use

¹⁰⁵ Marie Southard Ospina, “11 Influencers Discuss The Differences Between Body Positivity & Fat Acceptance,” 2016, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/170978-11-influencers-discuss-the-differences-between-body-positivity-fat-acceptance>.

¹⁰⁶ Erin J. Rand, *Reclaiming Queer: Activist & Academic Rhetorics of Resistance*, Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014), 102.

¹⁰⁷ Mondin, ““Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images.””

content analysis (CA) and rhetorical criticism to characterize and critique networked fat activist practices. I outline the methods employed in each chapter in more detail below.

Chapter 1: Historical analysis

Through primary research of fat activist archival material and secondary research drawing on interdisciplinary fat studies scholarship, Chapter 1 explores how fat activists have historically mobilized their bodies “into sites of resistance that can militate against those who sought to use them for political control.”¹⁰⁸ Though it may be challenging to wrest understandings of fatness from a fatphobic archival context, “Archival memory is...an open battlefield for how it is interpreted and who controls it, how it is mobilized and for whose benefit.”¹⁰⁹ Denigrating representations of fatness are not singular and attention to fat activist archives reveals longstanding historical efforts to destabilize such representations.¹¹⁰

The sheer breadth of fat activist efforts across time means that it is impossible to provide an exhaustive overview of its history in this thesis. The origins of the fat acceptance movement date back to 1969 and activists have employed a wide range of resistive strategies throughout the movement’s history. The history provided here is therefore necessarily partial, focusing primarily on iterations of fat activism within the United States. Through an “orientation to the past,”¹¹¹ my goal is to explore historical fat activist counterpublic and enclave practices, which will inform my analysis of contemporary networked fat activism. Drawing on public sphere theory, my analysis of iterations of fat activism attempts to understand: the goals of various fat activist groups;

¹⁰⁸ Matthew Houdek, “The Rhetorical Force of ‘Global Archival Memory’: (Re)Situating Archives along the Global Memoryscape,” *Journal of International & Intercultural Communication* 9, no. 3 (August 2016): 207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2016.1195006>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹¹⁰ Pratt, “The (Fat) Body and the Archive.”

¹¹¹ Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*, 2013, 7, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1332616>.

tensions within and among groups; enclave and counterpublic strategies; and the presence of enclave intrusion and responses to it. Exploring these practices of group membership and counterpublic/enclave interaction allows me to evaluate if and how digital practices of fat activism function differently.

The history I provide in Chapter 1 is situated within an intersectional feminist framework of analysis. This decision is motivated by recent criticisms of fat studies scholarship, and fat activism itself, as lacking intersectional engagement.¹¹² In my initial research, I kept my secondary research on fat activism confined to literature produced by scholars within the discipline of fat studies.¹¹³ This scholarship has been critical in providing a detailed history of fat activism and helping establish and legitimate fat studies as an academic discipline. Nevertheless, Usiekiewicz observes that within this body of scholarship, “fat has been conceptualized with an assumption of a female body” and that “the distinctly second wave origin of fat studies contributed to the disregard of...racial (as well as class and trans) issues.”¹¹⁴ Upon reading this critique, I came to understand my own biases and oversights in my initial research. I realized that the early iterations of fat activism, though productive in their efforts to de-pathologize obesity and establish a feminist philosophy, made fewer strides in addressing the racial, class, and gender dynamics to which scholars such as Usiekiewicz have drawn attention. In my analysis, I recognize the accomplishments of these groups and individuals and I consider their influence on

¹¹² Usiekiewicz, “Dangerous Bodies: Blackness, Fatness, and the Masculinity Divide”; Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (NYU Press, 2011); Levy-Navarro, “Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go From Here?”; Gentles-Peart, “West Indian Immigrant Women, Body Politics, and Cultural Citizenship.”

¹¹³ (Critical) fat studies is an interdisciplinary field committed to the critique of fat oppression and analysis of fat activist practices. There are several key scholars who occupy positions of authority in the discipline, such as Charlotte Cooper, Kathleen LeBesco, Cat Pausé, Esther Rothblum, Sondra Solovay, and Marilyn Wann. Many of these scholars themselves engage in practices of fat activism and their contributions are exceptionally valuable – in particular, I rely on their research on early fat activist efforts in chapter 1. However, it remains the case that there is a dearth of intersectional rigor within this body of scholarship.

¹¹⁴ Usiekiewicz, “Dangerous Bodies: Blackness, Fatness, and the Masculinity Divide,” 27.

contemporary activist efforts. However, I also seek to account for the lack of intersectionality within these groups. To do so, I begin Chapter 1 by providing historical context on the moralization of fatness and discussing how it informed the mid-20th century anti-obesity rhetoric to which the fat acceptance movement would respond.

The archival research I conducted for this thesis also draws on primary sources. There are several fat activist archives located across the United States.¹¹⁵ However, due to time and financial constraints, I conducted a limited amount of research in physical archives. I am thankful for the opportunity I had to visit Harvard's Schlesinger Library, which houses a collection of Judith Stein's archives. Stein played a key role in the early formation of the fat activist movement, and I draw on the material I found at Harvard in my analysis of Boston Fat Liberation. In addition to my visit to Harvard's archive, I found archival materials online. Through the Internet Archive's Wayback machine, I located Largesse's archived materials from the Fat Underground, which includes key documents such as their 1975 Manifesto and Position Papers. I also located newspaper and magazine articles about fat activist efforts; early examples of fat activist zines; and images from fat activist events. To the extent that my research has allowed, I draw on primary materials in my analysis. However, I use secondary literature to frame my archival research and supplement areas where it was limited.

Chapter 2: Content analysis and rhetorical criticism

Content analysis

The decision to perform CA in my analysis of Tumblr was motivated by my social science background. In my early research on Tumblr, I only performed rhetorical criticism,

¹¹⁵ e.g. the Mayer Collection of Fat Liberation at the University of Connecticut; the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY; and the June Mazer Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, CA.

which privileges the focused, detailed analysis of a few selected texts. I could offer a detailed take on what an individual user was arguing in any given post, but I could not forward claims about the overarching trends and patterns I was observing. Though I had a “hunch” that there was antagonism on the SNS, or a “sense” that users were addressing a wide range of topics, I had no data with which to ground these assertions. Building off such hypotheses, “even if [they are] no more than an informal hunch,”¹¹⁶ CA helps to empirically “identify patterns in discourses that are demonstrably present, but that may not be immediately obvious to the casual observer or to the discourse participants themselves.”¹¹⁷ I employ CA in this thesis to warrant the claims that I make about the terrain of Tumblr’s fat activist network, the discussions taking place, and salient themes that surface. In other words, my use of CA grounds my rhetorical analysis and provides preliminary empirical support for the arguments that I forward.

I collected a convenience sample of 198 original fat activist and fatphobic text posts on Tumblr. By *convenience*, I mean that I collected data that was available and accessible to me, employing two strategies to do so.¹¹⁸ First, I explored “popular” and “recent” search displays for the following tags: #fat activism, #fat acceptance, #fat positive, and #fat liberation. Searches can be useful because they demonstrate what content a user may encounter upon searching any of these terms. However, Tumblr’s search algorithm is nebulous and exploring search results left me dissatisfied. I was certain, having myself followed fat activist accounts as a Tumblr user, that more content was in circulation on the SNS than was being displayed in the search results.¹¹⁹ While not all tagged content is displayed in search results, it is also the case that not all fat

¹¹⁶ Herring, “Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis,” 347.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹¹⁸ Herring, “Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis.”

¹¹⁹ I reached out to Tumblr’s support team and their response, available in Appendix C, confirmed that not all tagged content is accessible through Tumblr’s search system.

activist posts are tagged. To better capture the breadth of fat activist content on Tumblr, I employed a second strategy for data collection: searching fat activist bloggers' archives.¹²⁰ Doing so led me to untagged fat activist posts that I would have missed had I confined my search to the tag pages. This allowed me to capture a better representation of the content a fat activist user may encounter on their dashboard.¹²¹

I initially focused on collecting content with a high number of notes¹²² (over 1,000) but as I moved to users' archives, I began collecting material with smaller note counts. I did so because more radical content does not circulate as widely. Even within networked counterpublics, "Visibility...is circumscribed by a political economy that highlights dominant content...[and] reward[s] content that already fits into a predetermined social order."¹²³ While popular FA content is progressive, it tends to be broad in focus. More nuanced discussions about topics like intersectionality and capitalism typically accrue fewer notes, which suggests that certain marginalized voices may struggle to be heard within Tumblr's fat activist network. Wanting to attune to these less heard voices, I made sure to include them in my sample collection and analysis.

After collecting content for analysis, I developed a codebook, which is available in Appendix A. Using Excel, I began the coding process by classifying each post as an example of

¹²⁰ A Tumblr archive ([blogname].tumblr.com/archive) displays all of an individual user's posts/reblogs in a condensed format and in reverse chronological order. The archive can be filtered by month/year and by post type (text, photo, quote, link, chat, audio, video, ask). I filtered archives for text posts and performed ctrl+f searches for keywords such as "fat" and "fat activism." When the posts I found were reblogs, I traced them back to their original source, from which I collected metadata.

¹²¹ Most Tumblr users engage on the SNS through their dashboard, which displays content posted/reblogged by the users they follow in reverse chronological order.

¹²² Notes include reblogs (circulating content onto one's own blog with the option of adding commentary), likes (clicking the "heart" icon on a post, which stores it in a "likes" page independent from one's blog, which a user has the option of making private), and comments (which are accessible by clicking the post's "notes" button, rather than re-circulated as a reblog).

¹²³ Boutros, "Religion in the Afrosphere," 329.

counterpublic advocacy, enclave advocacy, or fatphobia. The content I coded as counterpublic advocacy included *all* fat activist and fat-positive content. It could be said that some of the content I coded as counterpublic advocacy are examples of enclaving, such as intra-network communication (i.e. content produced by and for fat activists). However, it is precisely due to the ambivalence of Tumblr's fat activist network that I opted not to code these posts as enclaving. Fat activist content is theoretically accessible by *anyone*—hence the presence of fatphobic enclave intrusion. Coding intra-network posts as “enclave” content risked marking its circulation as “separate” from other fat activist content on Tumblr, which is simply not the case. Instead, I developed the code “enclave advocacy,” which was applied to posts that describe the presence of fatphobic enclave intrusion on Tumblr; detail the negative impacts it has on fat activists; and/or asks antagonists to leave them (the author or fat activists broadly) alone. Though this content is technically counterpublic advocacy, creating a distinct category was necessary to assess the effects of fatphobia on Tumblr's fat activist network. Lastly, the content I coded as fatphobic included any attempts to undermine, delegitimize, or discredit fat activism; and/or shame, stigmatize, or deride fat people.

Next, I developed thematic codes specific to each classification. I developed 22 codes for counterpublic advocacy; 5 for enclave advocacy; and 8 for fatphobic content. Broadly, the codes for counterpublic advocacy and fatphobic content centered around the (de-)pathologization of obesity, celebrations of fatness, body positivity, and intersectionality. I selected these themes because my research on Tumblr and fat activism/fatphobia suggested they would be the most salient topics of discussion. I developed a preliminary set of codes around specific topics related to these themes (e.g. causal claims, the moralization of health, support and critiques of body positivity, etc.). However, I used an inductive approach as well, developing additional codes as I

familiarized myself with the content I collected (e.g. codes identifying the degree of hostility in fatphobic content). My codes for enclave advocacy were somewhat different. Here, I was more interested in understanding the effects of fatphobia, so the codes I created identified requests for antagonism to stop, descriptions of the effects of antagonism, enclave strategies, indications of successful enclaving, and references to Tumblr's media ideology. The thematic codes I developed were not mutually exclusive, so while each post was coded at least once, most had multiple codes.

A convenience sample has advantages and limitations. Most importantly, it enables the “in-depth analysis of [a] phenomenon”¹²⁴ — in this case, thematic patterns and rhetorical enclave/counterpublic strategies. However, I wish to note two significant limitations to this research. First, by limiting my analysis to text posts, I am not capturing the full range of fat activist content production on Tumblr—image posts are equally popular, if not more.¹²⁵ My findings therefore cannot be generalized to represent all fat activist content on Tumblr. By focusing on textual content, I do not mean to privilege textual practices of fat activism over visual. Rather, my intention is to map discursive conversations and counterpublic/enclave strategies present on within Tumblr's fat activist network. Expanding this research to include visual content is a central goal of mine for future projects.

Second, I am unable to make claims about patterns across time. Due to platform constraints, it is virtually impossible to restrict data sampling to a specific time period on Tumblr. Though Chapter 2 provides a breakdown of the years during which the data I collected

¹²⁴ Herring, “Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis,” 360.

¹²⁵ Because many Tumblr users are minors, and because I did not get IRB approval for this project, I have erred on the side of caution and chosen not to include fat activists' selfies in my analysis. However, an exploration of the intersections between enclave ambivalence and fat positivity through the production of visual content such as selfies is a key area for future research.

were published, I do not forward any arguments about the perdurance of fat activism on Tumblr across time, nor do I attempt to compare the presence of fat activism on Tumblr with its presence on other SNSs. These are important questions to ask, and key areas for future research, but ultimately outside the scope of this project.

Rhetorical criticism

At the heart of my analysis is an exploration of how fat activists utilize Tumblr to subvert fatphobic beliefs and construct positive representations of fatness. I do this through rhetorical criticism that is grounded in “a process of *abduction*, which might be thought of as a back and forth tacking movement between text and the concept or concepts that are being investigated simultaneously.”¹²⁶ In other words, I tease apart fat activist and fatphobic rhetorics across the themes of the (de-)pathologization of obesity, body positivity, and intersectionality. I address not only how fat activists respond to antagonism, but how they engage with one another as well. Rather than understand fat activism as a singular, cohesive group, it is through the inductive exploration of intra-/extra-network tensions that I develop the concept of enclave ambivalence.

In employing rhetorical criticism, I remain attuned to the mediating effects of digital technology on communicative practices. Though my analysis focuses primarily on the content of the text posts I selected to analyze, I do consider how Tumblr’s platform affordances and limitations may influence the production of these messages. An additional point regarding digital communication is that vernacular linguistic practices are common on Tumblr. Users are both deliberate and playful in their communicative strategies (there is a marked difference, for example, in the meaning and tone of a post with proper capitalization and punctuation and one

¹²⁶ James Jasinski, “The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 3 (September 2001): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310109374705>.

without). While my primary focus is rhetorical (rather than linguistic) content, I consider sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and word choice when I believe they serve a rhetorical purpose.

Although I focus on textual content in my analysis of Tumblr, I cannot emphasize enough that the content discussed here is always embodied. One may be inclined to believe that fat activist content on Tumblr is twice-removed from the body by virtue of being textual and taking place “behind” screens (or even thrice-removed when considering its mediation in this thesis). Nevertheless, fat activist rhetoric both *addresses* the body and *affects* the body. The content I analyze in Chapter 2 demonstrates that fat activism has the capacity to influence users’ embodied experiences. Simply put, my goal here is to understand how fat activists embody and understand their fatness. Though the body may not always be visual in my analysis, it is always at the forefront.

Chapter outline

Chapter 1 of this thesis reviews the history of pre-digital iterations of fat activism to evaluate whether pre-digital fat activist practices function differently than online iterations. This chapter answers questions such as: What counterpublic and enclave strategies did early fat activists employ? To what extent, if any, did counterpublic and enclave strategies intersect? Among specific fat activist groups, did intra-community tensions and conflicts arise? If so, how did activists address, negotiate, or resolve them? What forms of antagonism did early fat activist groups encounter, and how did they respond? Additionally, seeking to assess these groups’ politics, I answer questions such as: What were the primary political goals of fat activist groups? What forms of discrimination and oppression were they responding to? What were the different perspectives and approaches that fat activists took in their politics?

This chapter begins with an overview of the history of fatphobia, situating the political goals of early fat activists in response to mounting public panic over the “obesity crisis” within the United States. I then discuss iterations of fat activism in the 1970s and 1980s, exploring their efforts to de-pathologize obesity. I argue that enclave practices during this time allowed activists to distance themselves from the fatphobic public, but resulted in a problematic single-axis approach to fat acceptance. Additionally, I suggest that efforts to de-pathologize obesity were met with disdain from the dominant public, which would result in its de-emphasis in fat activism of the 1990s and early 2000s. These later iterations of fat activism embraced queerness, performativity, and spectacle to unsettle the meaning of fatness in the dominant public. Analyzing these iterations of fat activism, I evaluate activists’ counterpublic and enclave advocacy and the increase in inter-community discourse. I conclude by discussing the implications of this research, emphasizing how they inform my analysis of Tumblr.

Chapter 2 analyzes enclave ambivalence within Tumblr’s fat activist network. This chapter answers questions such as: What type of content circulates within Tumblr’s fat activist network? Is fatphobic content pervasive within Tumblr’s fat activist network? If so, what rhetorical strategies do fatphobic users employ in their content? Do fat activists respond to this content? If so, what strategies and tactics do they use? Are fat activists negatively influenced by this fatphobic content? What strategies, if any, do fat activists take to avoid or mitigate encounters with antagonists? This chapter also explores intra-network conversations on Tumblr to understand the political ambivalence of fat activism. I answer questions such as: Do fat activists on Tumblr differ in their approaches to the de-pathologization of obesity? How do fat activists on the SNS feel about the circulation of body positive content? What discussions take

place surrounding intersectionality? And what rhetorical strategies do fat activists employ in intra-network conversations surrounding these topics?

Chapter 2 begins with historical context on contemporary anti-obesity rhetoric. This history focuses on how the paternalistic rhetoric of the “obesity epidemic” and the emergence of the body positive and Health at Every Size movements have influenced the circulation of fat activist and fatphobic content on Tumblr. I then report the findings from my content analysis. I discuss the presence of counterpublic advocacy, fatphobic content, and enclave advocacy and I review the thematic patterns that surfaced across these classifications and their implications. In the following section, I use rhetorical criticism to analyze selected fat activist and fatphobic content on Tumblr. Focusing on the thematic content identified in my content analysis, I evaluate intra-network conversations taking place around the de-pathologization of obesity, body positivity, and intersectionality. Next, I discuss fatphobic content on the SNS and activists’ responses to it. In the final section, I analyze examples of enclave advocacy and highlight the negative effects of fatphobic content on individual users and the broader fat activist network. I conclude Chapter 2 by reviewing the implications of enclave ambivalence within Tumblr’s fat activist network.

Chapter 1: Pre-digital fat activism: De-pathologizing obesity and celebrating fatness

Introduction

This chapter traces the 1969 origins of the fat acceptance movement through the early 2000s, appraising enclaving and counterpublic strategies during this time. I argue that while fat activists engaged in both enclave and counterpublic activism, sometimes switching between the two, these forms of activism infrequently overlapped. Additionally, I note the relative absence of enclave intrusion; rarely did fatphobes invade enclave spaces. Throughout the chapter, I pay close attention to the strengths and limitations of enclaving given its relevance to my analysis of Tumblr. I suggest that while enclaves served a valuable function as spaces of withdrawal, regroupment, and training, they simultaneously produced a homogeneity that flattened the diversity of fat activists' lived experiences. Deliberate separatism, in other words, contributed to a single-axis conceptualization of fat activism that did not always consider fatness's intersections with additional identity markers.

This chapter also evaluates the political goals of fat activists across time. I suggest that fat activism of the 70s and 80s centered primarily on de-pathologizing obesity. On the one hand, this approach was crucial to the project of validating fat activists' lived experiences. On the other hand, activists had little success communicating their findings to the mass media, doctors, and medical institutions, who dismissed their advocacy. In response to this delegitimization, activists of the 90s and 00s moved away from de-pathologizing obesity. Instead, they celebrated fatness as a unique and positive identity marker and queered fat embodiment through cultural performances. Their goal was not to change the opinions of the dominant public, but to assert the validity of their lives and bodies *regardless* of the fatphobia that they encountered. This allowed activists to reimagine and resignify their embodiment outside of fatphobic contexts.

However, a shift away from de-pathologization did little challenge the surrounding culture of fatphobia, leaving hegemonic anti-obesity discourses in place and generating inter-community tensions. I conclude this chapter by forwarding the importance of a both/and approach to fat activism: one that relentlessly challenges anti-obesity rhetoric while simultaneously producing counter-hegemonic examples of fat embodiment.

In the next section, I provide historical context on the conditions of oppression that would influence the emergence of the fat acceptance movement. I then discuss fat activism in the 1970s and 1980s, focusing on activists' efforts to de-pathologize obesity. In the following section, I explore iterations of fat activism in the 1990s and early 2000s, foregrounding activists' reclamations of fat embodiment and disruptions of public spaces. Throughout both sections, I evaluate the interplay of enclave and counterpublic strategies. I conclude with a review of my findings and a discussion of their implications.

Historical context

In the contemporary United States, obesity is widely recognized as a serious public health issue. Medical research has demonstrated correlations between obesity and diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, cardiovascular risk, mental illness, cancer, and early death.¹²⁷ On the face of it, anti-obesity rhetoric is benevolent. Its ostensible goal is to improve the lives of a population whose documented increase in body weight appears to pose alarming health risks. However, despite the biomedical concerns about obesity that developed in the mid-20th century, there is “little evidence that obesity itself is a primary cause of our health woes.”¹²⁸ The purpose of this section, therefore, is to demonstrate that the pathologization of obesity has

¹²⁷ J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), <http://libezproxy.syr.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=146950&site=ehost-live>.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

simultaneously reinforced and obscured the longstanding moralization of fatness. In describing this history, I contextualize the discrimination that fat activists were responding to at the beginning of the fat acceptance movement.

Though it may not be obvious today, aspects of contemporary anti-obesity rhetoric can be traced to 19th and 20th century colonization and xenophobia.¹²⁹ During colonization efforts in the 19th century, body size became a visual marker that distinguished Africans as “primitive” in contrast to the “civilized” Westerner. Believing “savage” Africans were more prone to obesity than Westerners, evolutionary biologists “attributed [this] to the weakness of their minds, as opposed to the minds of civilized men.”¹³⁰ Put differently, the association between fatness and “weak-mindedness” (which today may be recognized as lack of “willpower” or “discipline”) was folded into scientific rhetoric, but its purpose was to forge a colonial perception of Africans as “savage” and inferior. In the early 20th century, “campaigns against fat really heated up”¹³¹ in the U.S., where anti-obesity rhetoric targeted immigrant populations. For example, eugenicists attributed diabetes rates in Jewish populations to “the passionate nature of their temperaments,”¹³² and obesity rates among immigrant children were blamed on the poor parenting practices of immigrant mothers, who “failed to fit the image of middle-class American citizenship.”¹³³ In short, anti-obesity research has long utilized scientific discourses to legitimate racialized, xenophobic, and gendered ideologies. By the early 20th century, then, at the level of

¹²⁹ It is outside the scope of this chapter to detail this history at length, but I point to the scholarship of Christopher Forth, Amy Farrell, and Sander Gilman for more comprehensive histories: Christopher E. Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust in the Colonial Imagination,” *History Workshop Journal* 73, no. 1 (May 9, 2012): 211–39; Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Sander L. Gilman, *Obesity: The Biography*, Biographies of Disease (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹³⁰ Usiekiewicz, “Dangerous Bodies: Blackness, Fatness, and the Masculinity Divide,” 23.

¹³¹ Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust in the Colonial Imagination,” 233.

¹³² George Pitt-Rivers qtd. in Gilman, *Obesity*, 86.

¹³³ Natalie Boero, “Fat Kids, Working Moms, and the ‘Epidemic of Obesity’: Race, Class, and Mother Blame,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (NYU Press, 2009), 114.

the U.S. nation-state, fatness was already secured as a signifier of otherness in the forms of degeneracy, incivility, and risk.

The 1950s and 1960s saw increased efforts to pathologize obesity. However, biomedical institutions did not invoke racialized ideologies as overtly as scientists had in the past. Though I will argue that anti-obesity rhetoric remained highly moralized, biomedical research was grounded in concerns with the perceived health risks of obesity. Louis Dublin, a statistician at the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, was instrumental in spearheading obesity research. Dublin advocated for the use of a height-to-weight index (which would become the body mass index, or BMI scale) to measure and track obesity rates.¹³⁴ The index was originally “intended for insurance actuary tables,” but Dublin was certain that it verified “weight as a determinant of early mortality.”¹³⁵ Through the 1950s, he relentlessly promoted his findings to biomedical institutions and “doctors, epidemiologists, and the federal government soon adopted these tables to analyze the ‘health’ of the population.”¹³⁶ The embrace of the height-to-weight index, however, was not universal. Debates about its validity emerged as scientists contended that Dublin’s research “overstated the connection”¹³⁷ between body size and mortality rates. Additional research produced during the 1950s offered contradictory data about the magnitude of the health risks of obesity. Causal correlations between obesity and diseases (e.g. coronary

¹³⁴ Both the height-to-weight index and BMI scale take the square of one’s body height and divides it by their body mass. The BMI scale is widely utilized by biomedical institutions such as the National Institutes of Health, World Health Organization, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to measure obesity rates. The BMI scale classifies anyone with a BMI of 18.5-25 as “normal.” BMIs between 25-29 are classified as “overweight” and BMIs 30 and above classified as “obese.”

¹³⁵ Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 19.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Kathleen M. Robinson, “The Fat Acceptance Movement Contesting Fatness as Illness, 1969-1998” (The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2014), 59, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1939990730/abstract/6E8858621D54C38PQ/1>.

heart disease) were weak at best and some studies suggested that excess body fat may *protect* against certain ailments.¹³⁸

Despite uncertainty about the validity of these biomedical truth claims, concerns about the effects of obesity mounted through the 1950s. Vocal critics of anti-obesity research such as Ancel Keys, a 20th century physiologist, “argued that obesity had been singled out...as ‘the current public enemy number one of American health’” and “criticized the emphasis on reducing body weight as ‘propaganda.’”¹³⁹ Indeed, influential proponents of the height-to-weight index had ties to the pharmaceutical and weight-loss industries. Employees in these industries lobbied the U.S. government, served on national anti-obesity task forces, and were named in academic papers on the negative health effects of obesity.¹⁴⁰ The need for grant funding to conduct health research meant that there were “significant incentives to lower the threshold of what is considered overweight.”¹⁴¹ Put differently, diet and weight loss industries were lucrative, which meant that there were clear financial motivations to pathologize obesity.

As the pathologization of obesity developed scientific legitimacy, researchers began to investigate its cause(s). Through the 1960s, biological and physical causes were considered, but a turn to psychology helped to reanimate and legitimate the belief that obesity is a poor choice made on the part of individuals. A journal article published in 1960 sought to “delineate a specific personality type associated with obesity”¹⁴² and forwarded a connection between gender, “dependence,” and obesity. A 1968 journal article hypothesized that obese individuals overeat

¹³⁸ Andrew Brown, “The Elephant in the Room: Fatphobia & Oppression in the Time of Obesity,” *Memorial University of Newfoundland*, n.d., 156.

¹³⁹ Robinson, “The Fat Acceptance Movement Contesting Fatness as Illness, 1969-1998,” 59.

¹⁴⁰ Brown, “The Elephant in the Room: Fatphobia & Oppression in the Time of Obesity.”

¹⁴¹ Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 32.

¹⁴² DORIS L. HIRSCH and W. I. MORSE, “Emotional and Metabolic Factors in Obesity,” *Canadian Journal of Public Health / Revue Canadienne de Sante’e Publique* 51, no. 11 (1960): 543.

because they are “triggered” by “psychic states such as anxiety, fear, loneliness, [and] feelings of unworthiness.”¹⁴³ In a final example, a 1961 journal article stated that obesity was undeniably caused by overeating, which indicated that “we are rapidly becoming indolent” and that “we are increasingly being tempted to eat or drink because we like it, rather than because we need it.”¹⁴⁴ One solution to prevent obesity, this article postulated, was fighting against the “cult of irrationality,”¹⁴⁵ referring to public denial of the relationship between caloric intake and body weight. This psychological research helped to frame fatness as a gendered psychological phenomenon. Additionally, it reactivated the moralized and racialized belief that fatness was evidence of a “lack of restraint [and] weak moral fortitude.”¹⁴⁶

By positioning obesity as an individual choice, it became not only a *health* threat, but an *ideological* threat as well. Because a healthy population represents the collective body’s “disciplining” and “optimization of its capabilities,”¹⁴⁷ researchers worried that a rise in obesity rates indicated a decrease in collective productivity.¹⁴⁸ Concerns about the spread of obesity could not be extricated from the fear that its spread reflected poorly on the ideological strength and security of the nation. For example, in a 1968 article published in *Issues in Criminology*, Gilbert Geis described the “necessity to outlaw equivalently all forms of self-indulgent and intolerable behavior”¹⁴⁹ and called for “*overweightness*” to be classified as a crime. Overweight individuals,

¹⁴³ Stanley Schachter, Ronald Goldman, and Andrew Gordon, “Effects of Fear, Food Deprivation, and Obesity on Eating,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 10, no. 2 (October 1968): 96, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0026284>.

¹⁴⁴ John Yudkin, “Prevention of Obesity,” *Royal Society of Health Journal* 81, no. 4 (July 1, 1961): 221, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146642406108100473>.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁴⁶ Adwoa A. Afful and Rose Ricciardelli, “Shaping the Online Fat Acceptance Movement: Talking about Body Image and Beauty Standards,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 24, no. 4 (July 4, 2015): 457, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2015.1028523>.

¹⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 139.

¹⁴⁸ Robinson, “The Fat Acceptance Movement Contesting Fatness as Illness, 1969-1998.”

¹⁴⁹ Gilbert Geis, “The Fable of a Fatty,” *Issues in Criminology* 3, no. 2 (1968): 211.

he argued, were “violators undercutting the virility and vitality of the Nation.”¹⁵⁰ Though this article may have been deliberately polemic, it encapsulates the ideological forcefulness of anti-obesity rhetoric at its most extreme.

The research published on obesity during the 50s and 60s, the financial motivations of pharmaceutical and weight-loss industries, and the growth of the diet industry helped engender fatphobic sentiments among the public. Gendered, raced, and classed norms of “ultra-slenderness”¹⁵¹ developed as figures such as Twiggy became cultural icons. Fat people were increasingly derided in the popular media, though these representations “offered no explanation for the struggles of fat people other than accusations of weakness and immorality.”¹⁵² Despite debates and uncertainty in the biomedical community regarding the health effects of obesity, thin was officially *in*. Drew Brown offers examples of how American attitudes toward fat transformed during the 1960s: “In 1962, only about 40% of American households were using ‘low calorie’ products, but by 1970, that figure had climbed to 70%; [and] Weight Watchers corporate profits spiked from \$160,000 in 1964 to over \$8 million by 1970.”¹⁵³ It is within this context of mounting anti-fat fervor that the fat acceptance movement would begin to take form.

Fat activism in the 1970s and 1980s: de-pathologizing obesity

In June of 1967, Steve Post, a host on New York City’s WBAI radio station, called on his listeners to organize a “Fat-In” in Central Park.¹⁵⁴ Modeled off the Civil Rights, Gay Liberation, and anti-war sit-ins of the 1960s, the purpose of the Fat-In was to “protest discrimination

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 212.

¹⁵¹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 10. anniversary ed., [Nachdr.] (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2013), 102.

¹⁵² Resenbrink, “Fat’s No Four-Letter Word : Fat Feminism and Identity Politics in the 1970s and 1980s,” 214.

¹⁵³ Brown, “The Elephant in the Room: Fatphobia & Oppression in the Time of Obesity,” 112.

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth M. Matelski, *Reducing Bodies: Mass Culture and the Female Figure in Postwar America* (Taylor & Francis, 2017).

against the fat.”¹⁵⁵ The event drew an audience of 500 individuals both fat and thin. Participants brought food to indulge in, carried signs with messages like “Fat Power,” “Take a Fat Girl to Dinner,” and “Think Fat,” and burned a life-size image of Twiggy.¹⁵⁶

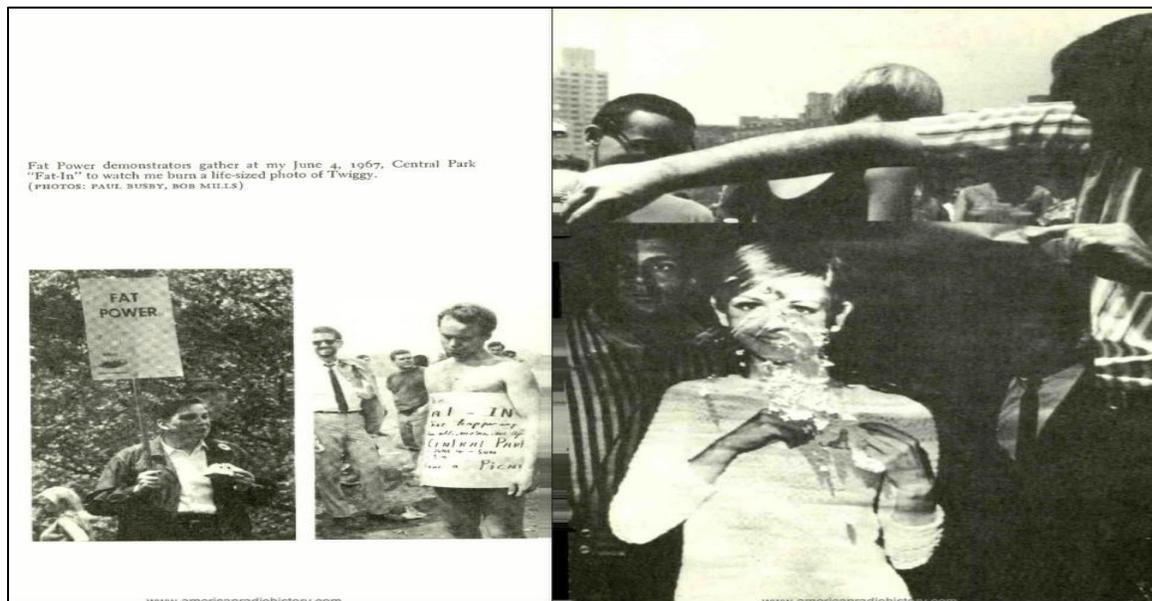


Figure 1: Images from the 1967 NYC Fat-In. Left: demonstrators holding signs; right: Steve Post burns a life-sized poster of Twiggy.

Five months later, NYC resident Lew Louderback published an article in *The Saturday Evening Post*, the title proudly declaring: “More people should be FAT.”¹⁵⁷ In the article, Louderback reflected on the Fat-In, condemned the media’s obsession with weight loss and slenderness, and presented statistics about the failure of dieting and misconceptions of obesity. He described his decision to stop dieting and called on readers to do the same:

There’s something distinctly unhealthy, even sinister, in the anti-fat madness that has swept the country in recent years...Inside millions of Americans are fat men and women. Guilt is the lock that imprisons them. The time has come to turn the key.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 133.

¹⁵⁶ Cooper, *Fat Activism*; Lew Louderback, “More People Should Be FAT,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, November 4, 1967, 10.

¹⁵⁷ Louderback, “More People Should Be FAT.”

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 10.

Louderback's statement strategically inverted the anti-obesity rhetoric of the 1960s: it is fatphobia, not fatness, that is unhealthy. And it is thinness, not fatness, that is a form of moral "imprisonment." Emphasizing the transitivity of body size, he urged readers to liberate themselves from the obsessive pursuit of thinness.

Bill Fabrey, an engineer and NYC resident, read Louderback's article and felt inspired to make a change. Though not fat, Fabrey was a self-described "fat admirer."¹⁵⁹ He had experienced ridicule over the years for his interest in fat women and, after marrying a fat woman, became concerned with the discrimination she faced. Motivated to fight against fat discrimination, Fabrey contacted Louderback with the idea to form the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance¹⁶⁰ (NAAFA). Louderback agreed to help and NAAFA was officially established in 1969.¹⁶¹ The organization's initial goal was to facilitate counterpublic activism, including "advocating for fat people, educating all people, and supporting fat people to raise their self-esteem and overcome feelings that they deserve to be treated as second class citizens."¹⁶² In short, NAAFA intended to shift the conception of fat in the dominant public.



Figure 2: Image from the cover of the first NAAFA newsletter (October 1970). Pictured on the right are Joyce and Bill Fabrey, founding members of NAAFA. On the left are Marvin Grosswirth, NAAFA's Public Relations Consultant and actress Shirley Stoler, "an Honorary Life Member."

¹⁵⁹ Bill Fabrey, "Interview with Bill Fabrey, Amplestuff Owner | LoveToKnow," 2009, http://plussize.lovetoknow.com/Interview_with_Bill_Fabrey,_Amplestuff_Owner.

¹⁶⁰ Initially the National Association to Aid Fat Americans. The organization's name deliberately paralleled the NAACP's to establish legibility and legitimacy as a civil rights group.

¹⁶¹ Bill Fabrey, "Big As TEXAS 2001 Event--Keynote Address," 2001, <http://bigastexas.tripod.com/2001event/keynote2001.html>.

¹⁶² Rina Rossignol, "Fat Liberation (?)," *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 13, https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v14n01_02.

Although NAAFA did not engage in large-scale forms of mobilization at first, early strategies included: writing “letters to corporations, protesting advertisements and commercials that they consider repugnant,”¹⁶³ “lobbying health care professionals for tolerance and acceptance, [and] organizing against health care/insurance discrimination.”¹⁶⁴ One of the organization’s most widely-recognized accomplishments was its reappropriation of the word “fat.” NAAFA encouraged fat people to shy away from euphemisms such as “heavy” or “big-boned” in order to resignify the terms’ “derogatory meaning.”¹⁶⁵ Reclaiming “fat” also served to “replace the formal medical or clinical diagnosis” of “obesity” with a “more descriptive or catchier [term].”¹⁶⁶ These reclamation efforts clearly parallel the Gay Liberation movement’s reappropriation of derogatory terms such as “queer.” In another parallel to Gay Liberation activism, NAAFA was the first of many fat acceptance groups to utilize “closet” and “coming out” metaphors, urging fat people to “come out of the closet and live normal, happy lives.”¹⁶⁷ More than a statement of the obvious, “coming out” as fat was a symbolic declaration of self-acceptance and rejection of societal expectations.

Today NAAFA is known for its advocacy efforts, but in its initial years, the organization faced internal conflict over its intended purpose.¹⁶⁸ A shift from counterpublic engagement to enclaving struck Fabrey as a necessity for building group membership. He noted

¹⁶³ Judy Klemesurd, “There Are a Lot of People Willing to Believe Fat Is Beautiful...,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 1970, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/08/18/archives/there-are-a-lot-of-people-willing-to-believe-fat-is-beautiful.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 36.

¹⁶⁵ Esther D. Rothblum, “Why a Journal on Fat Studies?,” *Fat Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2012.633469>.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Hanna Rosin, “Solid Citizens,” *The New Republic*, 1994.

¹⁶⁸ Samantha Kwan, “Framing the Fat Body: Contested Meanings between Government, Activists, and Industry*,” *Sociological Inquiry* 79, no. 1 (February 2009): 25–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2008.00271.x>; Matelski, *Reducing Bodies*.

“that the need for social interaction with others who don't disapprove of your body was so powerful that we could not attract members without offering it.”¹⁶⁹ He decided to turn NAAFA’s focus to social organizing: the group began hosting dating events, banquets, dances, fashion shows, and swimming parties.¹⁷⁰



NAAFA’s social functions fostered an environment of acceptance where members could revitalize their self-esteem. And indeed, membership grew steadily over the following years: by 1972, nine cities in the United States had formed NAAFA chapters and membership had expanded from 200 members in its first year to over 1,000.¹⁷¹ Still, while NAAFA’s shift to socialization can be understood as a necessary form of enclaving, it can also be critiqued for its move away from political advocacy. Following Fabrey’s decision, several NAAFA members, including Lew Louderback, “respectfully withdrew from leadership...because their vision was primarily one of activism and education.”¹⁷² By emphasizing the need for “activism and education,” activists such as Louderback envisioned a more radical and confrontational approach to the de-pathologization of obesity.

¹⁶⁹ Fabrey, “Interview with Bill Fabrey, Amplestuff Owner | LoveToKnow.”

¹⁷⁰ Fabrey, “Big As TEXAS 2001 Event--Keynote Address.”

¹⁷¹ “Arizona Republic from Phoenix, Arizona on August 11, 1972 · Page 20,” Newspapers.com, accessed April 9, 2018, <http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/117533417/>.

¹⁷² Fabrey, “Big As TEXAS 2001 Event--Keynote Address.”

In Los Angeles, California, fat activists Sara Fishman¹⁷³ and Judy Freespirit learned about Louderback's advocacy after reading his book *Fat Power: Whatever You Weigh Is Right* (1970). Referencing biomedical literature on obesity, Louderback argued that excess weight cannot be attributed to overeating; rather, it is biological.¹⁷⁴ Additionally, he asserted that diets and weight loss are ineffective, unsustainable, and unhealthy. Fishman and Freespirit used Louderback's work as a starting point to achieve their goal of "critiqu[ing] medicalised obesity discourse in the language of its advocates."¹⁷⁵ Fishman, who held a graduate degree in chemistry, began fact-checking Louderback's sources using the Index Medicus (a database of biomedical research) at UCLA's Bio-Medical Library.¹⁷⁶ She explained that

the sources backed up [Louderback's] statements. Nor were his sources obscure research papers. No, they were from public health documents summarizing years of published research...Most important, their findings resonated with the experience of one fat woman (myself) who had dieted almost continuously since the age of twelve, and was still fat.¹⁷⁷

Fishman's observations here are significant. The validity of Louderback's sources helped her realize "what doctors tell the public about obesity, and what the public therefore believes, is somewhat different from what doctors tell each other in their research papers."¹⁷⁸ Put differently, these findings drew her attention to the disparity between the biomedical community's uncertainty and the unflinching pathologization of obesity in the dominant public. Moreover, her remark that these findings "resonated with the experience of one fat woman

¹⁷³ Fishman has also gone by the names Aldebaran and Vivian Mayer. I refer to her in-text as Sara Fishman, but reference the name she went by at the time of publication in citations.

¹⁷⁴ Clark A. Pomerleau, *Califia Women: Feminist Education against Sexism, Classism, and Racism* (University of Texas Press, 2013).

¹⁷⁵ Cooper, *Fat Activism*, 2469.

¹⁷⁶ Jane Wilson, "Fat Underground Throws Weight Into Obesity War," *Los Angeles Times*, 1976.

¹⁷⁷ Sara Fishman, "Life In The Fat Underground," 1998, http://www.radiancemagazine.com/issues/1998/winter_98/fat_underground.html.

¹⁷⁸ Aldebaran qtd. in Wilson, "Fat Underground Throws Weight Into Obesity War," 9.

(myself)” demonstrates the importance of considering fat people’s embodied experiences; these findings offered Fishman an unprecedented sense of validation and relief.

Several findings in Fishman’s research would shape the core of fat feminist advocacy and influence later iterations of the fat acceptance movement. First, fat people on average do not consume more calories than thin people. Second, diets – even when supervised by doctors – have a 90% failure rate and cause irreversible changes in the dieter’s metabolism. Third, yo-yo dieting can damage one’s heart, muscles, nerves, and kidneys, putting fat people who repeatedly diet at a higher risk for early death than those who do not attempt to lose weight. Finally, Fishman pointed out that health issues such as high blood pressure can be caused by stress and argued that internalized fatphobia – far more than fatness itself – contributed to fat people’s health issues.¹⁷⁹ Through these findings, Fishman and Freespirit forwarded “fatness as [an] inherited bodily difference rather than a self-induced disease” in order to subvert the widely-believed notion “that anyone can (and should) be thin if only they try hard enough.”¹⁸⁰

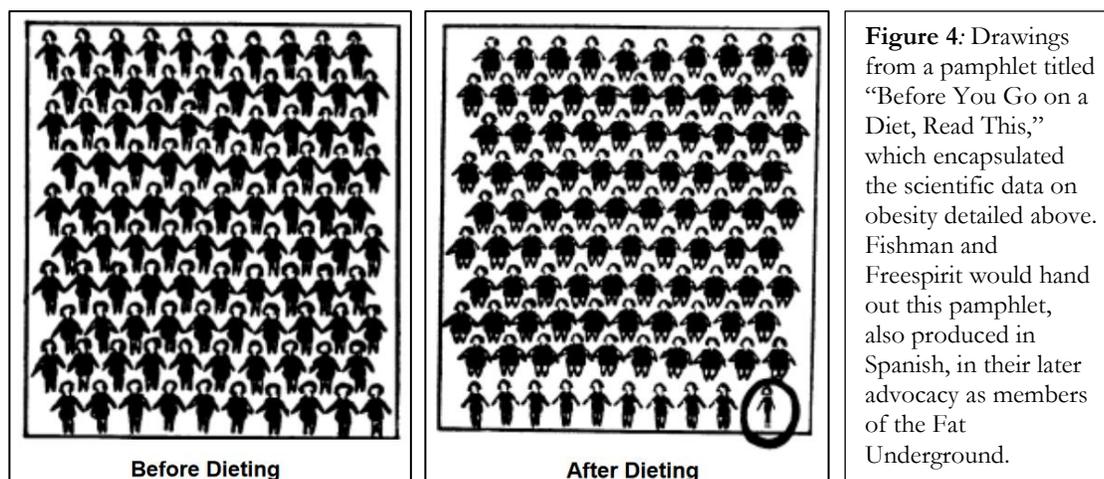


Figure 4: Drawings from a pamphlet titled “Before You Go on a Diet, Read This,” which encapsulated the scientific data on obesity detailed above. Fishman and Freespirit would hand out this pamphlet, also produced in Spanish, in their later advocacy as members of the Fat Underground.

¹⁷⁹ Fat Underground, “Before You Go on a Diet, Read This,” n.d., <https://archive.li/o/uh9Xd/www.largesse.net/Archives/FU/brochureE.html>.

¹⁸⁰ Anna Mollow, “Unvictimized: Toward a Fat Black Disability Studies,” *African American Review* 50, no. 2 (July 21, 2017): 105–21, <https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2017.0016>.

As they were interrogating anti-obesity research, Fishman and Freespirit learned of the Los Angeles Radical Feminist Therapy Collective (LARFTC), whose goal was to critique the presumed neutrality of the medical industry. Through a feminist approach, LARFTC “taught women to define themselves and to oppose the perception of a society that labeled them ‘sick’ based on being frustrated, uppity, lesbian, or fat.”¹⁸¹ Radical therapists contended that these labels function as a form of mystification: “oppression goes unchallenged”¹⁸² when it is naturalized by medical and psychiatric discourses. Although Fishman and Freespirit initially built from Louderback’s research, they did not feel it was sufficient for the radical activism they envisioned: “*Fat Power* lacked a political analysis: Radical Therapy provided one.”¹⁸³ In 1972, Fishman and Freespirit reached out to LARFTC to train to become radical therapists. In addition to learning how to demystify obesity, they would develop skills in feminist consciousness-raising, problem-solving, and community organizing.¹⁸⁴

In 1972, Fishman and Freespirit also contacted NAAFA and formed a Los Angeles chapter of the organization. After recruiting additional members, the chapter immediately “took a confrontational stance with regard to the health professions,” accusing “doctors, psychologists, and public health officials...of concealing and distorting the facts about fat that were contained in their own professional research journals.”¹⁸⁵ After roughly a year, NAAFA’s main headquarters reached out to them. Fishman recalled that while “some of the leadership privately applauded us, officially we were told to tone down our delivery, and also to be more circumspect about our feminist Ideology.”¹⁸⁶ The members of Los Angeles’s NAAFA chapter were

¹⁸¹ Pomerleau, *Califia Women*, 25.

¹⁸² Fishman, “Life In The Fat Underground.”

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Pomerleau, *Califia Women*, 25.

¹⁸⁵ Fishman, “Life In The Fat Underground.”

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

dissatisfied with this response. They were adamant that fatphobia inextricably intersected with sexism and could not be demystified without taking a radical feminist approach. The chapter decided to break from NAAFA and form a separate group called the Fat Underground (FU). Its initials, FU, represented “the group’s contempt for ‘thin’ society.”¹⁸⁷

FU built on Fishman’s and Freespirit’s anti-obesity research and Radical Therapy training to develop a focused political stance. In 1973, the group published a Fat Liberation Manifesto, which held doctors responsible for wrongly pathologizing fatness, critiqued the diet industry’s misogyny and capitalistic greed, and demanded “equal rights for fat people in all aspects of life.”¹⁸⁸ Their manifesto concluded: “We refuse to be subjugated to the interests of our enemies. We fully intend to reclaim power over our bodies and our lives...FAT PEOPLE OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE.”¹⁸⁹ As a reflection of their commitment to this political mission, members of FU would refuse to diet or attempt to lose weight. A core goal of theirs was to convince other fat women to do the same.

To recall, prior to joining NAAFA and FU, Fishman and Freespirit had engaged in forms of counterpublic activism by confronting doctors and weight loss institutions. It was in its efforts to expand group membership that FU began to shift to enclaving. Not unlike NAAFA in its early years, FU discovered that fat people were hesitant to engage in political advocacy. However, whereas NAAFA gained membership through a turn to social gatherings, FU worked to build membership through consciousness-raising and problem-solving. For the purpose of evaluating enclaving practices, it is necessary to distinguish between these two forms of activism.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, “Fat Liberation Manifesto” (Fat Underground, 1973), <http://www.largesse.net/Archives/FU/manifesto.html>.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, emphasis in original.

In published and archived materials, FU referred to problem-solving and consciousness-raising as distinct forms of feminist activism, but they did not explicitly describe the differences between the two. What I can derive from context is that whereas consciousness-raising helped fat women connect their lived experiences to broader social conditions of oppression, problem-solving attempted to transform those connections into social action. Put differently: consciousness-raising built awareness, while problem-solving effected change.

The distinction between consciousness-raising and problem-solving can be better understood through an analysis of FU's Fat Women's Problem-Solving Group, which formed in 1973. As a problem-solving group, FU's leaders hoped that "The political analysis of fat liberation would be applied to personal problems."¹⁹⁰ De-pathologizing and demystifying obesity, however, was not sufficient to counteract group members' internalized fatphobia. Diving immediately into radical feminist politics was a fraught experience for participants. Group members shared their fears, struggles, and concerns with one another, but many could not let go of their desire to lose weight. Though participants grappled with their size and, for some, their eating habits, the group's facilitators were relentless in offering validation: it is okay to eat; it is okay to be fat. FU noted that members came and went during this time, but that they reached a turning point after six months. At this time, a new member joined the group experiencing "a crisis of pain over being fat."¹⁹¹ The group offered unprecedented support and the "'underground' secret came out into the open and was made acceptable: it's okay to wish you were slim. It's a futile wish, but a valid one."¹⁹² Once group members expressed these

¹⁹⁰ Aldebaran, Fonfa Gudrun, and Reanne, "A Fat Women's Problem-Solving Group: Radical Change" (Fat Liberator Publications, 1978), <http://www.largesse.net/Archives/FU/psgroup.html>.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

feelings in the open, “The whole group sighed with relief”¹⁹³ and it was over the months that followed that the group moved toward political action.



Figure 5 (left): Photo taken at a 1978 FU meeting published in the *Los Angeles Times*. Pictured from the left are Gudrun Fonfa, Linda Torn, and Lynn Mabel-Lois.

Figure 6 (right): Judith Stein (left) and Judy Freespirit (right) in 1980. Freespirit was a founding member of FU and Stein would become a founding member of Boston Fat Liberation.

Reflecting on these experiences, the group’s facilitators expressed frustration with participants’ initial resistance, but admitted that this “validation is what was missing from the work that went on early in the group” and that “it might have been good to have had a consciousness-raising group along with the problem-solving group”¹⁹⁴ to allow for a more natural progression toward political engagement. Here, the importance of the distinction between consciousness-raising and problem-solving becomes evident. A challenge that surfaces with enclaving is reconciling differing levels of political awareness. Because the leaders of the problem-solving group had already undergone the consciousness-raising process, they were prepared for direct action in a way that new members were not. By observing that a consciousness-raising group may have been an appropriate precursor to the problem-solving group, FU’s leaders were reflexive about the need to refine their approach to enclaving. This type of adaptation would help fat people at the individual level by allowing them to process and

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

unpack their individual struggles, easing the transition into political awareness and, ultimately, counterpublic advocacy.

Although FU's problem-solving group encountered turbulence in the year it was active, the group did begin engaging in counterpublic activism—and the transition was abrupt. In August of 1974, singer Cass Elliot, a member of The Mamas & the Papas and later a solo artist, passed away. Because Elliot was fat, the media ridiculed her death by writing that “she died choking on a ham sandwich.”¹⁹⁵ This made FU livid: their research had revealed that dieting put fat people at a higher risk of death than fatness itself and at the time of Elliot's death, she “had been on a severe diet and had just lost 80 pounds.”¹⁹⁶ Following Elliot's death, FU member Sharon Bas Hannah published an article in *Sister*, a Los Angeles feminist newspaper.¹⁹⁷ In the article, referencing the “ham sandwich” news story, she wrote, “That's not how she died though: Naomi Cohen [Cass Elliott's real name] choked on the culture, on the stale empty air and worthless standards of our conditioning.”¹⁹⁸ At the 1974 Los Angeles Women's Equality Day parade, FU attended “sporting black armbands and candles for Elliot.”¹⁹⁹ At the parade, “In an unprecedented speech about institutional fat oppression, one of the members took to the main stage and publicly denounced the medical system for murdering the singer.”²⁰⁰

FU members explained that “from that point on, every woman in the [problem-solving] group considered herself an activist in fat liberation” and that the group “started confronting the

¹⁹⁵ Freespirit qtd. in Andrea Hernandez, “Judy Freespirit: Foremother of the Fat Liberation Movement,” *FaT GiRL*, 1994, <https://judyfreespirit.wordpress.com/2010/09/12/max-airborne/>.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Sharon Bas Hannah, “Naomi Cohen Choked on the Culture,” *Sister*, 1974, <http://www.largesse.net/Archives/FU/cohen.html>.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Hernandez, “Judy Freespirit: Foremother of the Fat Liberation Movement.”

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

world and the feminist community for having anti-fat attitudes and discriminatory practices.”²⁰¹ In 1975, for example, FU began “harassing weight-loss institutions” by attending lectures and “[attacking] the program’s medical theory and success rate” in order to “shake the lecturer’s confidence and turn away customers.”²⁰² Cooper notes that this is an example of “zaps, a strategy of turning up where they were not wanted,” which was “pioneered in the peace movement and developed by the early gay rights activism.”²⁰³ Shanewood details a number of additional strategies that the group employed in its activism: “In 1970s confrontational style, the FU pickets and marches...; disrupts and takes over university lectures and seminars; and speaks at political rallies. FU make their presence and their objectives quite clear.”²⁰⁴

Additionally, FU attempted to make strategic use of the mainstream media. This was a noteworthy pre-digital activist strategy: “In those days before the Internet, one important way to spread a message was to gain the support of existing groups that had access to the various media.”²⁰⁵ Taking advantage of their access to Los Angeles news stations, FU members were featured on several TV specials about weight loss. However, Fishman described these appearances as ineffective:

The networks used doctors to present medical facts about the dangers of being fat. We ‘unrepentant fatties’ were featured only for human interest. As soon as we attempted to present our own medical facts, filming would stop and the next guest would replace us on the recording stage.²⁰⁶

To recall, FU members studied obesity research to legitimate their stance; their hope was that doctors would have no choice but to recognize their competence and authority on the subject.

²⁰¹ Aldebaran, Gudrun, and Reanne, “A Fat Women’s Problem-Solving Group.”

²⁰² Fishman, “Life In The Fat Underground.”

²⁰³ Cooper, *Fat Activism*, 2474.

²⁰⁴ B. Shanewood, “An Interview with Medical Rights Champion Lynn McAfee,” *Radiance Magazine*, 1999, 4, https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/mcafeelynn/interview_shanewood.pdf.

²⁰⁵ Fishman, “Life In The Fat Underground.”

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

What this example demonstrates, however, is that hegemonic institutions – including both biomedicine and the mainstream media – were not interested in attending to their arguments. Instead, activists’ “bodies—imbued with symbolic significance set within a particular political context—become the argument, and speak loudly, like spoken words do.”²⁰⁷ Positioned next to biomedical authorities condemning obesity, fat activists’ bodies conveyed a symbolic threat. These activists were not only fat; they were unrepentant. By silencing FU members’ voices, TV networks worked to maintain control of the symbolic meaning of fat people’s bodies – and fat activists’ legitimacy – in the dominant public’s imagination. In part due to the ineffectiveness of these encounters, fat activists would shift away from direct confrontations with the biomedical industry.

By 1983, FU had officially disbanded – the group had only 20 members at its most active and by this point, many members had moved away from the Los Angeles area.²⁰⁸ The dissolution of the group, however, did not mark the end of its members’ activism. In 1976, FU members Fishman and Bas Hannah moved to New Haven, Connecticut. Partnering with New Haven fat activists Karen Scott-Jones and her husband, Darryl Scott-Jones, the group formed the New Haven Fat Liberation Front (NHFLF) in 1977. NHFLF carried the same radical anti-dieting stance as FU. Karen Scott-Jones explained: “Our orientation is radical, which means we are completely opposed to dieting and condemn those doctors who recommend it as healthy...It would be unnatural, and ultimately unhealthy, for us to try to be thin.”²⁰⁹ While Fishman and Bas Hannah moved to Connecticut and participated in NHFLF, Judith Stein and her partner,

²⁰⁷ Sara L. McKinnon, “Necropolitical Voices and Bodies in the Rhetorical Reception of Iranian Women’s Asylum Claims,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 218, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1136066>.

²⁰⁸ Fishman, “Life In The Fat Underground.”

²⁰⁹ Scott-Jones qtd. in Randall Swatek, “Fat Times in New Haven,” *New York Times*, 1978, sec. Connecticut Weekly.

Meredith Lawrence, moved to Massachusetts. In 1980, they formed Boston Fat Liberation²¹⁰ (BFL). BFL performed local activism, hosting groups for fat women and facilitating fat activist workshops at local universities. A noteworthy achievement of BFL was the release of “Throwing our weight around: a video about a fat women’s lives,” a documentary funded by BFL member Sandy Dwyer and released in 1989.



In 1980, members of NHFLF and BFL worked together to host the First Fat Feminist Activist Working Meeting (FFFAWM).²¹¹ Notably, FFFAWM coincided with the New Haven Women’s Health Conference. FFFAWM was “a completely separate event,” but its event dates served a symbolic purpose: the coinciding of the two events demonstrated fat activists’ “affirmation of our identity within the women’s health movement.”²¹² Additionally, there was a

²¹⁰ BFL has gone by several other names such as Boston Area Fat Liberation, Boston Area Fat Feminist Liberation, and Boston Area Fat Lesbians.

²¹¹ Karen Stimson, “Fat Feminist Herstory, 1969-1993: A Personal Memoir,” archive.li, June 23, 2003, <http://archive.li/tfuWw>.

²¹² Judith Stein, “Feminist Fat Activists Working Meeting Confirmation Letter,” 1980, Box 1, Folder: Health Weekend -- CORR, Judith Stein Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

practical purpose for this decision: fat activists delivered three workshops at the New Haven Women's Health Conference. Still, by holding FFFAWM as a separate event, it was designed to be an enclave opportunity for fat women. Organizers' goals included: "personal support and energizing for women who were working in isolation; information gathering, and most important, developing a network among feminists who were doing Fat Liberation work."²¹³

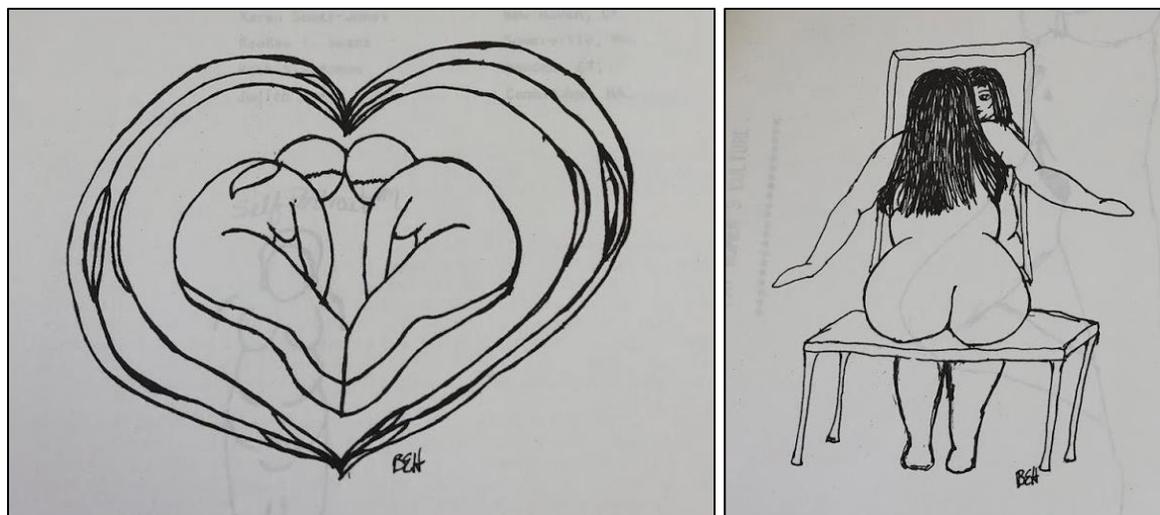


Figure 9: Artwork included in the "Procedures of the first feminist activists' working meeting," which were compiled by Judith Stein in 1980. Illustrations by h-Elise Hoffstein.

Detailed notes and audio recordings were taken at the meeting. Part of the *Our Bodies, Ourselves*²¹⁴ advisory board, BFL member Judith Stein brought these materials back to Boston with her and utilized them to "document the need for revision of the book's anti-fat, pro-dieting stance in favor of one more size-informed."²¹⁵ The following 1984 edition of *Our Bodies Ourselves* included these revisions and featured a resource section on fat liberation.²¹⁶

²¹³ Judith Stein, "Proceedings of the First Feminist Fat Activists' Working Meeting," 1980, Box 1, Folder: Proceedings of the 1st Feminist Fat Activist Mtg, Judith Stein Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

²¹⁴ *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was a groundbreaking women's health book first published by members of the Boston Women's Health Collective in 1971. In addition to offering detailed health advice specific to women's bodies, the book took a politicized feminist stance by challenging the discriminatory practices of the medical establishment and providing women with educational resources to help them advocate for themselves.

²¹⁵ Stimson, "Fat Feminist Herstory, 1969-1993."

²¹⁶ Ibid.

Beyond organizing support groups, workshops, and conferences, fat activists in the 1980s also helped cultivate fat-positive approaches to fitness, understanding that some fat people avoided working out due to the stigma they encountered and embarrassment they felt exercising in public. Several fat-positive groups and organizations developed in the U.S. and Canada, many of which were influenced by fat activists' work. Examples included Large as Life (1981), We Dance (1983), and Ample Opportunity (1984). As enclave spaces, many fat-positive fitness groups only allowed fat women to participate. Though Large as Life classes were not initially led by fat women, "enrollment multiplied" when members "obtained fitness leadership training and began to teach the classes"²¹⁷ and We Dance was designed "Exclusively for women over 200 lbs."²¹⁸ Within fat-positive fitness groups, this was understood as a necessary measure to ensure fat women could foster "self-esteem, positive experiences for personal growth, mutual support, social action, and satisfying physical activity."²¹⁹

Unlike other fitness organizations and dieting programs that emerged during this time,²²⁰ these fat-positive groups de-emphasized weight loss and focused on the social experience of physical activity. While groups such as Ample Opportunity (AO) foregrounded "interpersonal experiences," they also stressed the importance of "coalition building among fat women, health and mental professionals, and organizations like [AO]."²²¹ Much like LARFTC and FU, AO saw radical potential in the therapeutic activities it facilitated. And indeed, AO's founders described a

²¹⁷ Jenny Ellison, "*Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*," by Charlotte Cooper: HammerOn Press, 2016," *Women's Studies* 46, no. 3 (April 3, 2017): 313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2017.1288048>.

²¹⁸ Charlotte Cooper, "A Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline: Queering Fat Activist Nationality and Cultural Imperialism," *Fat Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2012): 61–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2012.627503>.

²¹⁹ Barron and Lear, "Ample Opportunity for Fat Women," 79.

²²⁰ e.g. Weight Watchers (1963), Slimming World (1969), Jenny Craig (1985).

²²¹ Nancy Barron and Barbara Hollingsworth Lear, "Ample Opportunity for Fat Women," *Women & Therapy* 8, no. 3 (October 31, 1989): 79, https://doi.org/10.1300/J015V08N03_09.

shift in the group's later programs: in addition to fitness activities, members began to host support groups and became involved in community education.²²²

Although enclaving – whether in problem-solving and consciousness-raising groups, conferences and workshops, or fitness groups – offered fat women a safe space to develop self-acceptance, fat separatism had its limitations. For example, an important question to ask when evaluating fat enclaving practices is quite simply: what “counts” as fat? Though body fat is biologically material and quantifiable, fat activists' goal was to expose that “fat,” in the cultural imagination, was a moralized social construct. Fat activists recognized that even culturally-perceived “thin” women could identify as fat and held workshops oriented toward audiences of women of all shapes and sizes. Nevertheless, by creating fat-only enclave spaces, activists were tasked with qualifying what counts as “actually” or “truly” fat and justifying the decision to exclude individuals who did not meet this threshold.

Judith Stein described the challenge of delimiting these boundaries in a series of correspondences with Sara Fishman. A woman had attended a fat-only BFL meeting, but there was consensus among members that she was not actually fat and should be asked to leave the group. Writing back to Stein, Fishman acknowledged that the presence of “non-fat women...was inhibiting”²²³ in these enclave support groups. She pressed for detail about how Stein dealt with the situation, to which she responded:

At the second meeting she was at, one woman in the group started by saying “I have been looking around the room at all of us...and looking at how each of us is fat, and when I look at you, you just don't seem fat to me.” The woman was very tuned in to that possibility – and she said she had been thinking about that herself...Various women in the group spoke about our perceptions of fat, and of this woman—and she agreed that

²²² Ibid., 82.

²²³ Vivian Mayer, “Untitled Letter to Judith Stein,” 1979, Box 1, Folder: Aldebaran/Correspondence, Judith Stein Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

she wasn't really fat, but that she carried a lot of body-hatred that came down as fat-hatred.²²⁴

Rather than dismiss the woman with hostility, group members attempted to utilize this experience as an educational opportunity. Though the woman recognized that she perhaps did not “technically” qualify as fat, she pointed out that her struggles nevertheless stemmed from internalized fatphobia. Reflecting on this, Stein continued:

This woman was definitely not skinny, and definitely not either your approved Barbie doll figure, or the skinny tough Amazon that is so beloved in the Lesbian community. She is a big woman, very stocky and strong looking—and very androgenous [sic] looking in many ways. She also took up her own space real well – really moved like a dyke, and I’m sure that her build and her presence are what brought on the kind of body-hatred she experienced. She talked about wanting to do some work on this issue for her.²²⁵

Curiously, though the group agreed this woman was not fat, Stein described her using euphemisms for “fat” – she was “a big woman” and “very stocky.” It is unclear from Stein’s letter if the woman identified as queer, but by describing her with visual signifiers presumed to denote queerness, Stein suggested that this woman’s body-hatred stemmed from internalized *homophobia* more than *fatphobia*. While it could have been the case that nonconformity with expectations of hegemonic femininity influenced this woman’s body-hatred, it is problematic to insist this was the singular source of her struggles, a point I will return to momentarily. Though the group was adamant in their decision to ask this woman to leave, Stein explained that they offered her resources to help her overcome her struggles:

[W]e suggested that she start a group for women wanting to work on body-hatred issues, and we offered to share our publicity hints with her etc. One woman in the group offered to help her start the group and was interested in being in it. The woman stayed for the meeting but left very very quickly without tqking [sic] anyone’s phone number –

²²⁴ Judith Stein, “Untitled Letter to Vivian Mayer,” 1979, Box 1, Folder: Aldebaran/Correspondence, Judith Stein Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

²²⁵ Ibid.

so none of us know what she may be doing to find a supportive place to do body work.²²⁶

Though it is impossible to know for sure, that the woman “left very very quickly” suggests she may have felt invalidated.

Evidenced by the example above, “fat-only” enclave spaces may have benefited participants, but they risked de-legitimizing the experiences of individuals who may have identified as fat, but were not necessarily read as fat by others. More broadly, this example can be critiqued as a single-axis approach to fat activism. It is possible that the woman in the above example was excluded because her internalized fatphobia was perceived as “secondary” to her experiences with homophobia, thus warranting her exclusion from the space. As Stein’s letter demonstrates, fat enclave spaces foregrounded fatness as the most pressing form of oppression that fat activists experienced. This was not unique to BFL – for example, Fishman explained in a *Los Angeles Times* interview that FU was created because “Fat was the crisis area, the area where our identification ran highest and where we felt most strongly persecuted.”²²⁷ Problematically, this type of single-axis approach set boundaries on group membership that flattened the complexity of fatness, fatphobia, and fat activism.

Single-axis approaches also served to organize fat activism around commonalities rather than differences. For example, in 1987 Judith Stein and Candy Feldt organized a Fat Lesbian Retreat in Rockport, MA. In a letter to the retreat’s participants, Stein and Feldt provided an instruction guide on “dealing with differences” where they wrote:

Like any other gathering of lesbians, there will certainly be differences among us—in background (for example, class, race or ethnicity); lifestyle; politics; sexuality and lesbian sex roles, etc. These differences are real, and they are significant. Our fear is not that these differences exist, but that they prevent us from using what we view as a rare and

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Wilson, “Fat Underground Throws Weight Into Obesity War,” 8.

precious opportunity: fat-dyke-only-space...By asking women to stay focused on what we do have in common and what we can get from each other, we hope to avoid the explosive confrontations that have sometimes kept lesbian gatherings from accomplishing all they can.²²⁸

Stein and Feldt suggested that differences among attendees would infringe upon the retreat's efficacy as an enclave for fat lesbians. However, it must be acknowledged fatness is form of embodiment that *always* intersects with race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. Asking participants to avoid discussing their differences, Stein and Feldt situated considerations of internal differences "as shortsighted and aggressive" and a threat to fat activism "because they abandon (and impede the possibility for) commonality and unity among women due to an excessive focus on multiplicity."²²⁹ Though a single-axis approach was taken in the name of unity, critics of fat activism observe that because the movement has "operated under the assumption that racial difference is just another factor of oppression," fat activists have "offered little fine-tuned analysis of fat black bodies."²³⁰ Though "explosive confrontations" may have been uncomfortable, what we would now refer to as an intersectional approach to fat activism is necessary to foster an inclusive movement.

A single-axis critique of fat activism in the 70s and 80s can be expanded to fat activists' gender exclusivity. Although "thin" individuals could participate in some fat activist workshops, conferences, and groups, men were rarely allowed to participate. This is not a problem in and of itself, but becomes concerning when this decision portrays fatphobia as an issue that disproportionately affects women. Bell and McNaughton explain that "in their commitment to exploring the feminization of fat, [activists] inadvertently create the perception that men's weight

²²⁸ Judith Stein and Candy Feldt, "Untitled Letter to Fat Lesbian Retreat Participants," 1987, Box 1, Folder: Fat Lesbian Retreat, Judith Stein Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

²²⁹ May, *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries*, 128.

²³⁰ Usiekiewicz, "Dangerous Bodies: Blackness, Fatness, and the Masculinity Divide," 42.

concerns pale in relation to women's," which ultimately "disguise[s] more complex dimensions of the ways that fatness has been constructed."²³¹ For example, in justifying AO as a space for fat women only, Barron and Lear argued, "Fatness is disproportionately a women's issue...The prejudice and social control are more blatantly directed at women. As members of the group experiencing this prejudice, we have the greatest vested interest in combating it."²³² Enclave spaces for fat women were vital in providing meeting spaces that were safeguarded against encounters with gendered oppression, but comments such as Barron's and Lear's helped secure the perception that fatphobia did not affect men to the same degree. This implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) pushed men away from fat acceptance.

To this end, it bears mentioning that in my research on fat activism, very few secondary scholars reference Girth & Mirth (G&M), an enclave social group for fat gay men that formed in the 1970s and remains active today. Much like fat-women-only groups, G&M's goal was the "creation of a space without the threat of ridicule or discomfort."²³³ In addition to socializing with one another, G&M members participated in gay pride parades, developed a mission statement, and distributed newsletters.²³⁴ G&M members, however, contended with unique experiences of oppression, such as the emasculation of fat men in the dominant public and the gay community. They sought to find ways to "produce an 'ordinary' masculinity to counter the exclusions they face[d] from everyday life."²³⁵ It is important to note that G&M never "formed

²³¹ Kirsten Bell and Darlene McNaughton, "Feminism and the Invisible Fat Man," *Body & Society* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X07074780>.

²³² Barron and Lear, "Ample Opportunity for Fat Women," 85–86.

²³³ Jason Whitesel and Amy Shuman, "Normalizing Desire: Stigma and the Carnavalesque in Gay Bigmen's Cultural Practices," *Men and Masculinities* 16, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 479, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X13502668>.

²³⁴ Ron Suresha, "'The Birth of Girth and Mirth' Interview," *Ron J. Suresha* (blog), February 7, 2016, <http://ronsuresha.com/?p=4093>.

²³⁵ Whitesel and Shuman, "Normalizing Desire," 479.

alliances with fat feminists; nor [did] the fat feminists recognize them as fat rebels.”²³⁶ It is true that G&M has been critiqued as assimilationist (for pursuing masculine normativity), but the group has worked to “realign what is visible, what is hypervisible, and what is invisible so they have control over it.”²³⁷ In other words, despite the group’s (in)voluntary distance from fat acceptance, G&M provided a pivotal space where gay men could contend with their experiences of fatphobia and resignify their fat embodiment.



Figure 10: Screenshots taken of footage from the 1994 Girth & Mirth Convergence (held in NY). The Convergence is described as “the annual gathering of ‘chubs and chasers’ from around the world.”

Before concluding this section, I wish to highlight a final point about fat activist enclaving in the 70s and 80s. So far, I have critiqued separatist enclaving as single-axis, but I have also considered its potential merits: enclaves provided fat activists safe spaces where they could distance themselves from the fatphobic dominant public. My research points toward a general absence of enclave intrusion in early iterations of the fat acceptance movement—I was only able to locate one example. In 1987, the London Fat Women’s Group formed and in 1989, it organized the first London Fat Women’s Conference. Following the conference, fat activist

²³⁶ Ibid., 484.

²³⁷ Ibid., 491–92.

Heather Smith published an article in feminist magazine *Trouble & Strife*. In the article, she drew attention to the media attention it generated:

We had decided to exclude the press as we wanted to create a safe and supportive atmosphere in which to explore issues around fat. Several reporters stayed outside the building and hassled women as they arrived at the conference. Some reporters attempted to take photographs of the dance workshop through the windows and some reporters tried to participate in the conference.²³⁸

The decision to exclude the press from the conference to “create a safe and supportive atmosphere” is understandable given that media representations of fat activism often challenge, undermine, and delegitimize activists’ efforts. Nevertheless, reporters denied this request by harassing attendees and taking images through the windows.

Not only a sign of disrespect and a disregard for the group’s wishes, reporters’ photography demonstrates the tendency to reduce the fat body to a spectacle: something to at which to gawk and perhaps snicker. Snider explains that the “allure” of gawking at fat bodies “is not simply based on a singular feeling of desire and repulsion, but rather seems to be situated on the tense divide between these two reactions.”²³⁹ Later iterations of fat activism would play with these “boundaries between the beautiful and the ugly”²⁴⁰ in reclamations of the spectacle. However, fat activists of the 70s and 80s criticized fatphobic voyeurism and attempted to distance themselves from the stereotypes that attracted it. Charlotte Cooper, a well-known fat studies scholar and organizer of the London Fat Women’s Group, points out that the “prurient press attention” from the conference “possibly heralded the end of the group.”²⁴¹ Though it is

²³⁸ Heather Smith, “Creating a Politics of Appearance: The National Fat Women’s Conference,” *Trouble and Strife*, no. 16 (1989): 36.

²³⁹ Stefanie Snider, “Revisioning Fat Lesbian Subjects in Contemporary Lesbian Periodicals,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 14, no. 2–3 (April 9, 2010): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160903196574>.

²⁴⁰ Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust in the Colonial Imagination,” 228.

²⁴¹ Cooper qtd. in E. Rich, L. F. Monaghan, and L. Aphramor, *Debating Obesity: Critical Perspectives* (Springer, 2010), 175.

unclear exactly why this is the case, Cooper's insight suggests that enclave intrusion risked destabilizing enclave activism.

This thesis postulates that enclave ambivalence is unique to digital iterations of fat activism and a lack of enclave intrusion during the 70s and 80s supports this claim. However, this section demonstrates that political ambivalence has been intrinsic to fat activism from its outset. Fat activist enclaves in the 70s and 80s emphasized sameness, reinforced group boundaries, and attempted to safeguarded against in-group antagonism. Although single-axis approaches to fat activism were considered a necessary measure to promote unity, such approaches pushed away individuals who did not "fit the mold," so to speak. As Usiekiewicz explains, many iterations of fat activism "take up the positioning of bodies that are white, cis gender, female, and middle class."²⁴² Fatphobia remains raced and classed, but the biomedical pathologization of obesity may obscure these moralized dynamics for individuals who do not have to confront them directly. While early fat activists' experiences of fatphobia are valid and warrant attention, the universalization of their politics has contributed to the erasure of "the various ways in which fatness and the war against it affect men, people of color, trans people, and the poor."²⁴³ In short, despite the potential benefits of enclaving, I have argued in this section that a separatist approach is problematic when it flattens and erases the intersectional complexity of fat embodiment.

Fat activism in the 1990s and early 2000s: fat positivity

Fat activists during the 90s and early 2000s took less concern with challenging biomedical institutions and instead sought to cultivate bonds within feminist and queer

²⁴² Usiekiewicz, "Dangerous Bodies: Blackness, Fatness, and the Masculinity Divide," 22.

²⁴³ Ibid.

communities. To be clear, many members of FU and other early iterations of the fat acceptance movement identified as queer, which informed their feminist philosophy and political approaches. However, the primary focus of these groups was de-pathologizing obesity. Fat activists of the 90s and 00s felt there was “nothing to prove to obesity stakeholders,” which led to the development of “fat activism that is playful, subversive, multilayered, creative and confident.”²⁴⁴ Central to these activists’ work was a foregrounding of sexuality and an embrace of the non-normative. Through zines and performance groups, activists relied on “mischief, fun and anarchic spectacle”²⁴⁵ to celebrate and queer fat embodiment.

Feminist zine culture of the early 90s set the stage for new iterations of fat activism where fat “girls and women construct identities, communities, and explanatory narratives from the materials that compromise their cultural moment: discourses, media representations, ideologies, [and] stereotypes.”²⁴⁶ Nomy Lamm’s *i’m so fucking beautiful* (1991-1996) is cited as the first fat feminist zine and in many ways, it captured the ambivalence of her fat identity and embodiment. Lamm used the pages of her zines to express her anger with diet culture, narrate her struggles with self-esteem, and recount experiences of discrimination. Simultaneously, she positioned herself as a proud and confident “fat grrrl” and forwarded a take-no-bullshit critique of fat oppression. In issue #2 of the zine, she included a list of rules where #10, in a bigger font than the rest, declared: “if you consider me a threat, if you fear me now, then just wait. the fat grrrl revolution has begun.”

²⁴⁴ Rich, Monaghan, and Aphramor, *Debating Obesity*, 184.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (NYU Press, 2009), 2.

Whereas earlier iterations of fat activism sought to reassure the dominant public that fatness did not present a threat to the social body, Lamm was part of an emergent group of activists that would strategically invoke this rhetoric. Characterizing herself as a “threat,” Lamm was not referring to the health risks of obesity. Rather, she was satirizing the belief that fatness is “spread” ideologically. Critics of the fat acceptance movement maintain that fat activists are condoning obesity and the indolence, lack of discipline, and moral weakness it purportedly represents. By identifying herself as a threat, Lamm’s goal was to subvert hegemonic belief systems. However, by writing “if you fear me now, then just wait” and joining the “fat grrrl revolution,” Lamm made it clear that she would spread a fat-positive message *regardless* of fatphobes’ attempts to stifle her efforts.



Figure 11: Images from Issue #2 of Lamm’s *i’m so fucking beautiful* (date unknown). On the right is a “quick list of rules for you to keep in mind,” which includes rule #10: “if you consider me a threat, if you fear me now, then just wait. the fat grrrl revolution has begun.”

In 1994, San Francisco's FaT GiRL Collective released the first issue of its *FaT GiRL* zine. Not unlike Lamm's *i'm so fucking beautiful*, *FaT GiRL* helped to craft a new approach to fat activism that centered queer fat embodiment as empowering at both an individual and collective level. What was particularly unique to *FaT GiRL*, however, was its creators' and contributors' "use of sexually explicit photographs to foreground the sexual desirability of fat dykes."²⁴⁷ More specifically, "*FaT GiRL* flirts with all kinds of propriety" through the "[domination of] bondage and sadomasochistic themes."²⁴⁸ To this end, these images "can be seen as bad and dangerous—dangerous to the people imaged and dangerous to society in general" because they "explode the boundaries of normative ideals of how fat women should behave sexually and politically."²⁴⁹ Optimizing the visual medium, the pages of *FaT GiRL* featured these images alongside articles, stories, and art, developing a space where non-normative embodiment and sexualities could be explored, discussed, and negotiated at the same time they were embraced.



Figure 12: Covers of Issues #1-7 of *FaT GiRL*, published between 1994 and 1996.

²⁴⁷ Helen Hester and Caroline Walters, *Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism* (Routledge, 2016), 23.

²⁴⁸ Snider, "Fat Girls and Size Queens: Alternative Publications and the Visualizing of Fat and Queer Eroto-Politics in Contemporary American Culture," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (NYU Press, 2009), 227.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Zines like *i'm so fucking beautiful* and *FaT GiRL*, among others, do not necessarily fall on either side of the enclave/counterpublic activism binary. Their primary audience was fat girls and women; within the pages of any given fat-positive zine, readers could find content that paralleled or reflected their own embodied experiences. Moreover, these zines were constitutive of a more hopeful and accepting space, away from the dominant public, where readers could see their bodies and lives represented in positive, imaginative ways. Still, these zines can also be understood as serving a counterpublic function. Lamm initially wrote her zine to distribute to audience members at events and performances. The zine “became a kind of preemptive strike, a way for [Lamm] to present an interpretive lens so that people she encountered...would not have to rely on their own stereotypes of large women.”²⁵⁰ The audiences she addressed in her zine extended beyond fat girls and women to skinny individuals and fatphobic members of the punk scene she was a part of at the time.²⁵¹ The zine, in other words, was not just a safe space where fat individuals could find refuge from the fatphobia they encountered in their everyday lives, but an educational counterpublic tool as well.

The creation and circulation of fat-positive zines would influence the development of performance groups such as Toronto-based *Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off* (1997, PPPO) and *Fat Femme Mafia* (2005, FFM).²⁵² PPPO co-founder Allyson Mitchells explains that *i'm so fucking beautiful* “changed everything for me. In my life I had never heard one whiff of a notion that it was okay to be fat, queer or atypical in any way. I devoured it.”²⁵³ Building on the “energy [and]

²⁵⁰ Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 95.

²⁵¹ Hester and Walters, *Fat Sex*, 24.

²⁵² *Many* other fat performance groups emerged during this time, but it is outside the scope of this chapter to offer an exhaustive overview. Additional examples include: *The Padded Lillies* (1997), *Phat Follies* (2002), *The Chubsters* (2003), *Chainsaw Chubbettes* (2003), *F.A.T.A.S.S. (Fat Action Troup Allstar Spirit Squad*, 2003), *Fat Girl Speaks* (2003), *Fat Femme Front* (2009), and *Aquaporko* (2009).

²⁵³ “Allyson Mitchell | Mike Hoolboom,” accessed April 11, 2018, <http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=19559>.

love/rage”²⁵⁴ the zine inspired, Mitchell joined activists Ruby Rowan and Mariko Tamaki to create PPPO. Together, the group took creative approaches to counterpublic activism. PPPO members began their advocacy with street protest – for example, they would occupy a “trendy shopping district”²⁵⁵ in Toronto wearing “tight-fitting crazy outfits, rock-star diva wear, loud prints, hot pink polyester dresses, and feather boas.”²⁵⁶ They would distribute candy and flyers to passers-by while asking them, “Do you think I’m fat?”²⁵⁷ Mischievous and tongue-in-cheek, PPPO would later develop a cabaret troupe, hold theater performances and fundraisers, and host educational fat-positive workshops for young girls.²⁵⁸ FFM built on PPPO’s approach to fat activism. The duo began by “scrawling FAT FEMME MAFIA in bathroom stalls all over Toronto,” but “their actions...soon evolved to live performances around town.”²⁵⁹



Figure 13 (left): PPPO handed out cookies that said “porky” during events such as No Diet Day.

Figure 14 (right): “Fat Femme Mafia” written on the bathroom wall of a Toronto theater.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Josée Johnston and Judith Taylor, “Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists: A Comparative Study of Grassroots Activism and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign,” *Signs* 33, no. 4 (2008): 942, <https://doi.org/10.1086/528849>.

²⁵⁶ Mitchell qtd. in Jenny Ellison, “From ‘FU’ to ‘Be Yourself’: Fat Activisms in Canada,” in *Obesity in Canada: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Wendy Mitchinson, Deborah McPhail, and Jenny Ellison (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2016), 310.

²⁵⁷ Johnston and Taylor, “Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists,” 949.

²⁵⁸ Johnston and Taylor, “Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists”; Allyson Mitchell, “Big Judy: Fatness, Shame, and the Hybrid Autobiography,” in *Embodied Politics in Visual Autobiography*, ed. Sarah Brophy and Janice Hladki (University of Toronto Press, 2014), 64–80.

²⁵⁹ Liz Worth, “A Big, Fat Revolution,” *Toronto Star*, 2006, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&t=pubname%3ATTRSB%21Toronto%2BStar%252C%2BThe%2B%2528Ontario%252C%2BCanada%2529/year%3A2006%212006/mody%3A1107%21November%2B07&action=browse&format=text&docref=news/115426DBB792FD60>.

Crucial to fat activist performance groups was the invasion of public space. By “invasion,” I mean quite literally the “unwelcome intrusion into another’s domain.”²⁶⁰ Fat activists recognized that their presence in public space was unwelcome. Brash displays of fatness – and nudity in particular – disrupted normative expectations of fat propriety (e.g. occupying as little space as possible, both physically and metaphorically). PPPO’s Mitchell explained, “Fat people generally try to make themselves as small as possible in public. We try to make ourselves as big as possible in public.”²⁶¹ The “disruption of public space”²⁶² was therefore deliberately agitational. Chelsea Lichtman, a member of FFM, observed:

Maybe if our bodies were skinny and partaking in some of the same activities, it wouldn’t be considered mayhem! But because our bodies are pathologised so much by mass culture, when we get naked or semi-naked in public to make a statement, for some fatphobes it feels like their world is crashing down on them, which for us equals SUCCESS.²⁶³

Building on Lichtman’s remarks, it may be productive to frame the “invasion” of the public sphere as a reclamation of the spectacle. In this chapter, I have suggested that hegemonic representations of fatness evoke a fascination with and revulsion toward fat bodies. Although the circulation of images of fat people is common in the mass media, representations are often negative; fat bodies are to be read as grotesque, appalling, humorous, clumsy, inept. These images reinforce the norms of propriety that fat people are supposed to abide by in public spaces. When fat women in groups such as PPPO or FFM put their bodies on display, they rejected these norms of propriety and, in so doing, took ownership of their image. Their goal

²⁶⁰ “Invasion | Definition of Invasion in English by Oxford Dictionaries,” Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/invasion>.

²⁶¹ Allyson Mitchell, “The Big Fat Revolutionary. Allyson Mitchell: Fat Activist, Guerrilla Performer, Sweet Bonbon,” *Saturday Night; Toronto*, February 10, 2001.

²⁶² Lichtman qtd. in Charlotte Cooper, “Obesity Timebomb: Interview: The Fat Femme Mafia,” *Obesity Timebomb* (blog), March 18, 2009, <http://obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com/2009/03/rad-fatties-fat-femme-mafia.html>.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

was not to change the attitudes or beliefs of onlookers. Quite the contrary, by reclaiming the spectacle, activists expressed not just indifference toward onlookers' disgruntled reactions, but *satisfaction*: their discomfort “equals SUCCESS.” In short, the disciplinary function of fat-as-spectacle lost traction as activists reclaimed it.

Asserting the right to appear was more than an agitational maneuver; it was also an embodied performance of agency: “it feels great for us to take control and dictate the meaning of a space for a few minutes.”²⁶⁴ The expression of agency and ownership of one's body, in other words, was deeply transformative at an individual level. Still, members of FFM and PPPO identified a sort of dissonance intrinsic to their activism. The “fat is fabulous” persona that they embodied in the public sphere “was a source of strength both for ourselves and for our audiences,”²⁶⁵ but this is not to suggest that these activists unconditionally accepted themselves. The resolute self-acceptance that activists embodied in public made it challenging to reconcile the feelings of shame they experienced in private. Tamaki asks, for example, “What does it mean to fight for fat freedom after a lifetime of buying into the same messed up body messages as everyone else?”²⁶⁶

Mitchell elaborates on the dissonance she and other PPPO members experienced through the divorce between their public and private personas:

We had experienced the joy of playful dances in public and recognized the powerful effects that these moments had on audiences and our immediate communities. However, we knew fat to be more than just this. We knew fat was also difficult, sad, and shameful at times – not simply about pleasure and power. Some of us had also experienced feelings of ambivalence around the disjuncture between our public personae as fat activists and the guilt or shame we felt for not being able to overcome internalized fatphobic judgments about our own bodies.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Mitchell, “Big Judy: Fatness, Shame, and the Hybrid Autobiography,” 69.

²⁶⁶ Tamaki qtd. in Abi Slone, “Funny Girl: An Interview with Mariko Tamaki,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 149, no. 149 (February 1, 2012): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctr.2012.0000>.

²⁶⁷ Mitchell, “Big Judy: Fatness, Shame, and the Hybrid Autobiography,” 70.

I would speculate that fat performance groups embraced a “fat is fabulous” attitude in public at least in part to counter the common trope of the “unhappy fatty.”²⁶⁸ This trope positions fat people as fundamentally unhappy and situates fatness as the singular source of their unhappiness (this is common, for example, in the before-and-after weight loss narrative). Mitchell demonstrates that, yes, fat people can be unhappy, but that this unhappiness often stems from the fatphobia they experience and not fatness in and of itself. Additionally, her description of ambivalence reveals that unhappiness can coexist alongside other feelings and emotions, both positive and negative.

Still, because the “unhappy fatty” trope is widespread in the dominant imagination, any fat person’s display of unhappiness, shame, or low-self-esteem risks reifying stereotypes of unhappiness while overlooking positive experiences of fat embodiment. Nevertheless, Mitchell’s and Tamaki’s remarks demonstrate that it can be damaging to ignore or downplay these feelings. In their later activism, they began networking with other fat activist groups and sharing these “feelings of ambivalence.” Mitchell describes these interactions as a form of consciousness-raising and notes that they inspired PPPO to adjust its approach to advocacy. By acknowledging “the importance of sharing the full spectrum of our stories publicly,”²⁶⁹ PPPO began to develop forms of theater and educational practices that encompassed “multivalent narrative[s]”²⁷⁰ and exposed the ambivalence of fat embodiment.

²⁶⁸ In fact, researching examples of this narrative returned a 1973 journal article published by *Canadian Family Physician* titled, quite literally, “The Unhappy Fat Woman.” The article forwards obesity as a “psychosomatic illness” and simultaneously contends that unhappiness both *causes* and *is caused by* obesity. In other words, this is not just a trope/stereotype in the dominant imagination, but one legitimated in (misguided and outdated) scientific research. James A. Collyer, “The Unhappy Fat Woman,” *Canadian Family Physician* 19, no. 5 (May 1973): 93–97.

²⁶⁹ Mitchell, “Big Judy: Fatness, Shame, and the Hybrid Autobiography,” 70.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

In addition to performance groups such as PPPO and FFM, several fat burlesque troupes developed in the early 2000s. In 2001, Heather McAllister formed the Fat-Bottom Revue (FBR) because she was dissatisfied with other burlesque groups featuring fat members, which she saw as “just like everyone else, except bigger.”²⁷¹ She explained that these groups “reminded me...of assimilationist lesbians and gay men” and emphasized that “I wanted something different.”²⁷² McAllister enlisted a diverse group of dancers, but made sure all of them were fat. The purpose of FBR – and subsequent radical fat burlesque groups – was twofold. On the one hand, they served as a path toward individual empowerment. McAllister noted that “The oppression of anti-fat hatred is sited on the body” and that “we will never have our freedom if we live only ‘from the neck up.’”²⁷³ On the other hand, fat burlesque troupes were a strategic form of counterpublic activism. Cookie Woolner, a member of FBR and Chainsaw Chubbettes (another fat burlesque group), explained that

By taking off a corset to reveal my tummy while dancing confidently and seductively as it shakes, my actions express more than words...and gives everyone in the audience permission to expand their definitions of beauty beyond what we’ve been taught.²⁷⁴

In other words, fat burlesque was pedagogy *performed*. Whereas fat activists of the 70s avoided engaging with the dominant public because their bodies spoke louder than their voices, fat burlesque dancers used this to their advantage. Their enthusiastic self-acceptance subverted hegemonic representations of fatness as repulsive. These performances thus offered audiences a positive, resignified display of fat embodiment as sensual.

²⁷¹ Heather McAllister, “Embodying Fat Liberation,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (NYU Press, 2009), 305.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 311.

²⁷⁴ Woolner qtd. in David W. Haslam, Arya M. Sharma, and Carel W. le Roux, *Controversies in Obesity* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013), 49–50.

Although burlesque performances could be considered a form of counterpublic advocacy, they simultaneously had characteristics of enclaving. Mitigating antagonism was necessary insofar as “these performances would not be sustainable if performed in empty theaters or to hateful crowds.”²⁷⁵ Asbill explains that the “social rules”²⁷⁶ of the burlesque scene fostered a positive and supportive atmosphere. Audience members were both expected and encouraged to “[respond] enthusiastically to the sensual nature of the performance while the performer reacts to the accolade with increased confidence.”²⁷⁷ Although the burlesque scene generally fostered positive interactions between the audience and performers, some fat troupes took additional precautionary measures to safeguard against antagonism. In forming FBR, McAllister was “initially very selective in accepting performance opportunities” and avoided performing in mainstream venues until “we gained experience and had ongoing positive reactions.”²⁷⁸ Still, McAllister reflected positively on her experiences in FBR, noting that she only encountered antagonism from a heckler on one occasion in the years the troupe was active.



Figure 15: Image of a Fat-Bottom Revue performance (date unknown).

²⁷⁵ Asbill, “‘I’m Allowed to Be a Sexual Being’: The Distinctive Social Conditions of the Fat Burlesque Stage,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (NYU Press, 2009), 300.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ McAllister, “Embodying Fat Liberation,” 307.

Thus far, I have reviewed the coexistence of counterpublic and enclave practices in iterations of fat activism through the 90s and early 00s. My research suggests that enclave spaces generally served their intended function: they allowed fat activists to distance themselves from the dominant public. Though I have noted a relative absence of enclave intrusion, what I *did* encounter in my research was an increase in inter-community discourse in the 90s and 00s. Specifically, concern about fat lesbians' size-acceptance advocacy developed within the lesbian community. To recall, many fat activists in the 70s and 80s identified as lesbian and networked within fat-dyke enclaves.²⁷⁹ However, whereas queer fat activism primarily operated in the spatial confines of support groups in the 70s and 80s, the zine culture of the 90s and 00s meant that queer fat activists' messages saw wider circulation. Many queer individuals – of all shapes and sizes – were supportive of fat activists' advocacy. Nevertheless, some lesbians began to vocalize concerns about the growing visibility of fat lesbian activism. These lesbians took issue with the health risks of fatness and they questioned the ethics of a movement that validated what they perceived as unhealthy lifestyle and diet practices. To elucidate their concerns, I turn to two noteworthy examples.

In 1997, Harvest Brown, a reader of *Lesbian Connection*,²⁸⁰ submitted a black-and-white image of herself to the magazine with the following caption:

Here is a black and white photo for your consideration. I had the photo taken as an anniversary present for my lover, and it was a very empowering experience. For years I hated my body and I believed the people who made fun of my size. Then I met my

²⁷⁹ What is more, though outside the scope of my analysis, it is important to note that the 90s and 00s saw a vast proliferation of new fat-lesbian support groups across the U.S. Examples include: Lesbians of Size (Portland, OR); Sisters of Size (Seattle, WA); Big Beautiful Lesbians (Washington, D.C.); Lesbian Fat Activists Network (Woodstock, NY); Sisters Are Fighting Fat Oppression (Minneapolis, MN); and Fat Lesbian Activist Brigade (Manhattan, NY). Additionally, the National Organization for Lesbians of Size (NOLOSE) formed in 1998. Still active today, NOLOSE is a well-known and influential organization that advocates for fat acceptance for queer individuals.

²⁸⁰ *Lesbian Connection* is a magazine that has been in publication since 1974. Branded as a “worldwide publication,” the magazine often features submissions from its readers. “Lesbian Connection - Home,” accessed April 12, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/LConline/>.

sweetie. She fell in love with me and adores my body size and shape. And when I saw this photo of my full nude breasts and hips and thighs, for the first time in my life I saw myself as beautiful. I encourage all wimmin to treat themselves to a photoshoot.²⁸¹



Figure 16: Harvest Brown on the cover of Volume 20, Issue 1 of *Lesbian Connection*.

The image Brown submitted was of herself standing naked outdoors in front of what appears to be a shed. She is facing the shed, so viewers only see her backside. She has both of her arms “symmetrically raised and one foot is in front of the other.”²⁸² Readers’ reactions to the image were momentous – both positively and negatively. The magazine received over 25 letters regarding the cover and chose to publish some of them in the following issue.²⁸³ Some readers lauded Brown’s courage and reflected on their own relationships with their body size. Others, though not fat themselves, applauded the magazine’s decision to include the image.

Still, not all readers were appreciative of Brown’s cover. One reader expressed a great deal of concern with the image’s uplifting message of self-acceptance:

I didn’t just see someone who is happy with her body because she had found someone to accept her. Instead, I saw a woman who is what we in the medical profession refer to as morbidly obese...I know it is very P.I. [politically incorrect] to criticize heavy woman, but this is a *health* issue. I advise Harvest to see a therapist, *not* to learn self-acceptance, but to get at the root causes of your overeating.²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Brown qtd. in Snider, “Revisioning Fat Lesbian Subjects in Contemporary Lesbian Periodicals,” 178.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Snider, “Revisioning Fat Lesbian Subjects in Contemporary Lesbian Periodicals.”

²⁸⁴ Dorothy qtd. in *ibid.*, 179.

Invoking authority as someone within the “medical profession,” this reader labeled Brown as “morbidly obese,” a biomedical term critiqued by fat activists as dehumanizing. Though she qualified her statement by acknowledging it may not be politically correct, she warranted the use of the label “morbidly obese” by suggesting that the concern for Brown’s health outweighed her happiness. In fact, by advising Brown to see a therapist, she not only negated her happiness—she pathologized it. Simultaneously, this reader reinscribed a correlation between size and physical health and understood herself to be demonstrating ethical concern for another.

Another respondent took issue with the image but attempted to address the health concerns of obesity without demoralizing fat people:

I do not dislike fat people nor feel offended by them. But I do feel that obesity should be treated more intelligently in your pages. Being fat is a serious health issue...It’s sad that [fat women] are treated shabbily, it’s true. But please, let’s have some sensible dialogue in your pages.²⁸⁵

Twice, this reader acknowledged that fatphobia can be problematic. Nevertheless, she insisted that displays of fat positivity are irresponsible without also indicating that fat is a “serious health issue.” By asking for “dialogue,” she positioned fatness as part of a debate, calling for a social constructionist stance to be considered *alongside* a biological stance. Though this reader attempted to remain neutral by encouraging “dialogue” and critiquing fatphobia, she emphasized that this dialogue should be “sensible” and argued that the magazine was not currently treating fatness “intelligently.” By situating fat positivity as lacking good sense and intelligence, the reader delegitimated the value and efficacy of fat acceptance.

Although Brown’s image was published in *Lesbian Connection*, neither of the above readers discussed the intersections of fatness and fatphobia with Brown’s lesbian identity. Presumably,

²⁸⁵ M.K. qtd. in *ibid.*, 181.

their concern with her weight superseded the need to comment on other markers of her identity. However, in a 2001 *Bay Area Reporter* article, Paula Martinac drew an explicit connection between the intersections of fat, gender, sexuality, and health. Titled “Fat is a lesbian issue” (a reference to Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue*), Martinac’s article took concern with obesity rates within the lesbian community. Citing research from the *American Journal of Public Health*, Martinac observed that “a larger percentage of lesbians are obese than are women in general,” suggesting that it is because lesbians “don’t have to care about visually pleasing men” and can thus seek empowerment through the “[refusal] to conform to a socially prescribed image of beauty.”²⁸⁶ She acknowledged that fat lesbians still experienced discrimination, but expressed concern about the effects fat acceptance may have on the lesbian community’s health:

Given what we know about the connections between obesity and disease, it worries me that assertions of ‘fat is beautiful’ by some lesbians may backfire on our community... Lesbians need to take weight issues much more seriously than we do, but, unfortunately, being critical of obesity remains taboo. The silence around lesbian obesity reminds me of the hesitancy in the gay male community to speak up against bareback sex; in both cases, there’s fear that raising concerns will inhibit people’s freedom of personal expression.²⁸⁷

By suggesting that fat acceptance may “backfire on our community,” Martinac invoked the fatphobic belief that fatness spreads ideologically. She was not only concerned that lesbians are fat, but that an ideological preference for “freedom of personal expression” over attention to personal and collective health would lead to the spread of disease (e.g. heart disease and diabetes) within the lesbian community. Suggesting that fatness is a form of “personal expression,” Martinac reinforced the belief that being fat is an individual, easily reversible choice. By comparing the risk of the spread of obesity-related disease to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Martinac made it clear that this was not an issue to be taken lightly. She concluded by

²⁸⁶ Paula Martinac, “Fat Is a Lesbian Issue,” *Bay Area Reporter*, 2001.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

calling on fat lesbians to consider the large-scale consequences of their belief system and urging them to implement lifestyle changes at the individual level.

In these examples of inter-community discourse, members of the lesbian community critiqued fat activism by highlighting the health risks of obesity. Their pathologization of obesity reveals that fat positivity alone may not have been sufficient to subvert fatphobic beliefs. To this end, fat activists' emphasis on self-acceptance and its expression through a communal celebration of non-normative bodies and sexualities has been critiqued for its "excessive emphasis on the self and sexual empowerment at the expense of collective mobilization, radical or queer sexual agendas and/or honest accounts of the limits of fat positivity."²⁸⁸ Put differently, the shift from de-pathologizing obesity to the celebration of fat identity can be personally empowering and generative within fat communities, but does little to overturn fatphobic beliefs among the general public and scientific community. As Chapter 2 will demonstrate, digital iterations of fat activism have had to contend with the resurgence of a vigorous fatphobia that is grounded in the biomedical rhetoric of the "obesity epidemic." The critique I raise here is not to outright discredit the value of positively embracing fat identity. Rather, it demonstrates the need for a both/and approach to fat activism: one that works to de-pathologize obesity while simultaneously queering and celebrating fat embodiment.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an historical overview of pre-digital iterations of fat activism, tracing its 1969 emergence through the early 2000s. Its purpose has been twofold: it has considered the efficacy of various political approaches to fat activism, and it has evaluated fat activists' counterpublic and enclave strategies over time. I have argued that through the 70s and

²⁸⁸ Hester and Walters, *Fat Sex*, 30.

80s, fat activists focused primarily on pathologizing anti-obesity rhetoric. By interrogating extant scientific research on obesity, fat activists could critique its validity. Though early activists of the fat acceptance movement were prepared to use this knowledge to engage in counterpublic advocacy, they developed enclave strategies to help build support among fat women. Through consciousness-raising and problem-solving groups, fat activists worked to de-internalize fatphobia and develop the self-acceptance needed to confront the dominant public. However, I have suggested that fat activists encountered challenges with their counterpublic advocacy: despite the research they had done, the mainstream media and medical institutions did not take their arguments seriously.

Through the 90s and 00s, perhaps due to the ineffectiveness of this counterpublic engagement, fat activists shifted away from de-pathologizing obesity to more performative forms of activism. Through the circulation of queer zines and formation of performance groups, activists took less concern with debating fatphobes and instead focused on disrupting public space and taking ownership over their bodies. Agitational counterpublic performances, though efficacious in many ways, revealed the limitations of the full-force display of fat positivity. Contending with dissonant feelings of pride and shame, activists returned to enclave practices to work through the ambivalence of their embodied identities. Though fat activism of the 90s and 00s had some success in resignifying fat bodies, an analysis of inter-community discourse reveals that the proud display of fat acceptance raised concern within the lesbian community—a community with significant shared membership.

By positioning the de-pathologization of obesity against fat positivity, I do not mean to suggest that there was no overlap between earlier and later iterations of fat activism. Activists of the 70s and 80s developed queer and performative approaches just as activists of the 90s and

00s attempted to de-pathologize obesity. In many ways, what ties each iteration of fat activism together is a negotiation of the ambivalence that fatphobic norms produce. In the examples throughout this chapter, activists have had to consider what “fat” means; determine the overarching goals of the movement; consider whether there is space for self-hatred, shame, and internalized fatphobia in public activism; and identify what strategies are most appropriate for their advocacy. To effectively grapple with these sources ambivalence, I have highlighted a need for a both/and approach to fat activism. Such an approach would combine critical, antagonistic engagement with the dominant public and a separatist positive valuation of fat bodies, experiences, and sexualities.

As I move to an analysis of fat activism on Tumblr, users continue to negotiate fat activism’s ambivalence, employing a both/and approach to do so. However, Tumblr users must confront, more so than other iterations of fat activism, a new source of ambivalence: enclave intrusion. The history described in this chapter demonstrates the importance of enclave spaces for fat activists as sites of withdrawal, regroupment, and agitational training. At the same time, this history reveals their limitations: in many ways, the separatism of enclave spaces resulted in a single-axis homogeneity that came to define what fat activism is(n’t). In the next chapter, I use these findings to evaluate antagonism on Tumblr and the enclave ambivalence it produces.

Chapter 2: Fat activism and enclave ambivalence on Tumblr

Introduction

This chapter examines the discursive interactions taking place within Tumblr's fat activist network. I argue that while ambivalence has always been intrinsic to fat activism, enclave ambivalence is a unique phenomenon catalyzed by digital networking practices. To reiterate, by "enclave ambivalence," I am referring to the ways in which boundaries of group membership are unsettled online. Pre-digital iterations of fat activism organized in enclave spaces where group members could set clear boundaries on membership and rarely encountered antagonism from the dominant public. This is not to suggest that pre-digital activists shared universal beliefs—indeed, Chapter 1 located examples of tensions between groups, dissent, and the political limitations of enclaving. However, this *is* to suggest that pre-digital activists attempted to minimize intra-community debate and did not have to deal with fatphobic antagonism to the extent that fat activists on Tumblr do.

On Tumblr, enclaving efforts are destabilized as fatphobic users deliberately and persistently disrupt the platform's fat activist network. To recall, the presence of fatphobia on the platform contradicts its inclusive and welcoming reputation. Tumblr's reputation, or its media ideology, is shaped by platform affordances and limitations that inform a user's decision to use it. Unlike SNSs that are public-by-default, Tumblr's platform prevents context collapse, which puts marginalized youth at risk through the (often involuntary) exposure of identifying information to extended offline networks. By not requiring identifying information and offering customizable privacy features, Tumblr's platform affordances help users evade default publicness. Consequently, marginalized individuals can explore their identities, socialize, and network on an SNS that *feels* secluded. Indeed, the very presence of fat activism on Tumblr

speaks toward the platform's capacity to fulfill enclave functions. Fat activists converse with each other, post fat positive content (e.g. selfies and art), and celebrate their identities.

Additionally, Tumblr's lack of spatial boundaries helps facilitate vibrant intra-network debates about the politics of fat acceptance.

Still, with every post, tag, like, and reblog, fat activist content becomes accessible to a broader audience. The reach of this content is promising insofar as activists can circulate counter-hegemonic representations of fatness, educate allies, and engage in counterpublic advocacy. However, the public circulation of fat activist content means that it can be accessed by fatphobic individuals, some of whom vocally challenge Tumblr's fat activists. To be clear, the goals of fatphobes likely vary: some present as outright vitriolic, while others seem to see their fatphobia as a benevolent form of advocacy. Regardless of intent, fatphobic content can have deleterious effects on fat activists who use the platform for enclaving. Of course, utilizing Tumblr's platform affordances can reduce encounters with antagonists. Strategies include: not tagging content; disabling anonymous "asks"; not looking at posts' notes; not posting fat activist content (i.e., only reblogging); blocking fatphobic users; avoiding search pages; not following users who interact with fatphobes; password-protecting one's account (a rare practice); and using extensions such as XKit to filter posts with fatphobic keywords. However, short of implementing *all* of these measures (which would severely restrict the amount of content one can access), it is virtually impossible to completely safeguard oneself from fatphobic content.

Because of the presence of fatphobia, fat activism on Tumblr cannot be neatly characterized as an enclave practice. Yet because many fat activists utilize the platform for its enclave functions, it would be a disservice to dismiss the concept entirely. Characterizing fat activism on Tumblr as a form of enclave ambivalence, this chapter explores the blurring of

counterpublic/enclave boundaries and its implications. Enclaves cannot be characterized as wholly positive or negative. In this chapter, I examine the negative effects of fatphobic antagonism, but I also explore the potential of enclave ambivalence. Whereas pre-digital fat activism employed a single-axis approach to its advocacy, fat activists on Tumblr demand a more critical, rigorous, intersectional approach. By offering personal narratives, historical context, contemporary examples of fatphobia, and vocal critiques, users educate one another and hold each other accountable. Building on my critique of pre-digital iterations of fat activism, I argue that a lack of consensus among Tumblr's fat activists is a strength of this contemporary iteration of the movement.

Of course, because fat activists' – and even fatphobes' – opinions and beliefs are diverse, it is impossible to capture every individual's voice in this chapter. I therefore include a content analysis of fat activist and fatphobic posts on Tumblr in addition to performing rhetorical criticism. My goal here is to operationalize and measure enclave ambivalence. More specifically, I explore the presence of antagonism on Tumblr and offer insight into the scope of topics and themes that surface within Tumblr's fat activist network. This content analysis answers a series of questions that inform my performance of rhetorical criticism such as: How frequently does fatphobic antagonism surface on Tumblr and what rhetorical form(s) does it take? To what extent do fat activists respond to antagonism? Do intra-network conversations and debates take place among fat activists? Do activists advocate for the need to enclave? Additionally, I explore a series of thematic questions surrounding the politics of fat acceptance, including: Does the health of fat people matter within the context of fat activism? Does body positivity negatively affect the fat acceptance movement? Is contemporary fat acceptance sufficiently intersectional? Whereas my content analysis provides a descriptive review of answers to these questions,

performing rhetorical criticism allows me to explore these questions in further detail and consider their implications. In both cases, I consider what enclave ambivalence looks like on Tumblr and how users negotiate its effects.

In the section that follows, I provide an historical overview of contemporary anti-obesity rhetoric. In addition to discussing the effects of the rhetoric of the “obesity epidemic,” I discuss how the “Health at Every Size” and body positive movements have influenced the production of fatphobic content on Tumblr. This history contextualizes why a site as seemingly self-consciously welcoming, inclusive, and secluded as Tumblr can become a hotbed for fatphobic hatred. Next, I review the findings of my content analysis, paying close attention to the discursive themes that emerge within counterpublic, enclave, and antagonistic content. In the following section, I shift to rhetorical criticism to evaluate fat activist and fatphobic content in more detail. This section is organized into discussions of intra-network discourse, antagonism, and enclave advocacy. In my analysis, I pay close attention to the rhetorical strategies users employ to legitimate *and* de-legitimate the fat acceptance movement. I conclude by summarizing my findings and discussing the implications of enclave ambivalence on Tumblr.

Historical context

While anti-obesity sentiments never entirely disappeared through the late-20th century, most scholars of fatness agree that the start of the 21st century marked an energized resurgence of anti-obesity discourses in the U.S.²⁸⁹ Contemporary anti-obesity rhetoric often expresses itself in terms of concern with the future of the country. In 2001, the U.S. Office of the Surgeon

²⁸⁹ Zoë Meleo-Erwin, “‘A Beautiful Show of Strength’: Weight Loss and the Fat Activist Self,” *Health* 15, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 188–205, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459310361601>; Andrea E. Bombak, “The ‘Obesity Epidemic’: Evolving Science, Unchanging Etiology,” *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 5 (May 1, 2014): 509–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12153>; Charlotte Biltekoff, “The Terror Within: Obesity in Post 9/11 U.S. Life,” *American Studies* 48, no. 3 (2007): 29–48.

General published a “Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight²⁹⁰ and Obesity,” which helped frame obesity not only as a problem, but an “epidemic.”²⁹¹ In 2006, Richard Carmona, the U.S. Surgeon General at the time, infamously declared a “war on obesity,” stating that “unless we do something about [overweight and obesity], the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9/11 or any other terrorist attempts.”²⁹² Contemporary anti-obesity rhetoric remains grounded in the authority of medical institutions, but these comparisons to war, terrorism, and epidemic “contribute to the production of a pervasive culture of fear in the United States.”²⁹³

To contextualize the presence of fatphobic antagonism on Tumblr, it is necessary to consider what strategies, policies, and ideologies have been mandated to resolve this “epidemic.” To be clear, my goal here is not to pathologize fatness, but to acknowledge that even if one were to take its pathologization as a given, responses to the “obesity epidemic” fail to address how the “interplay of local, regional, national and global factors”²⁹⁴ contribute to an increase in obesity rates.²⁹⁵ Despite the many structural causes of fatness,²⁹⁶ contemporary anti-obesity campaigns employ a paternalistic approach that assumes Americans simply lack the knowledge or willpower to lose weight. Put differently, it is widely believed that obesity is an individual choice, but that government agencies, medical institutions, and schools must step in “to act on

²⁹⁰ The term “overweight” is often used as a noun in research on obesity.

²⁹¹ Office of the Surgeon General (US) et al., *The Surgeon General's Call To Action To Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, Publications and Reports of the Surgeon General (Rockville (MD): Office of the Surgeon General (US), 2001), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44206/>.

²⁹² Qtd. in Biltekoff, “The Terror Within,” 29.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁹⁴ Geof Rayner et al., “Why Are We Fat? Discussions on the Socioeconomic Dimensions and Responses to Obesity,” *Global Health* 6, no. 7 (2016), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2873249/>.

²⁹⁵ This is an ongoing debate among fat activists and fat activist scholars. Though many fat activists work arduously to de-pathologize obesity, some have pointed out that this activism may further marginalize individuals whose health ailments *can* be attributed to their body size. Within this approach to fat activism, it is necessary to avoid blaming individuals and instead challenge the structural causes of obesity, which disproportionately affect marginalized populations.

²⁹⁶ It is outside the scope of this thesis to detail the many structural causes of fatness, so it must suffice here to briefly acknowledge some of them, such as: the availability and affordability of calorie-dense food; the deregulation of advertising; socioeconomic inequalities; long work schedules; and lack of access to health care.

behalf of others who presumably lack sufficient information or the resolve to inform and guide their actions.²⁹⁷ Some of these efforts may appear benevolent, such as improvements to school lunches or advocacy for increased recess time in schools. Still, other efforts are more perturbing,²⁹⁸ evidencing Biltekoff's argument that "the war against obesity [has] justified its own set of rituals of surveillance and control of the bodies of citizens."²⁹⁹

Notably, "Because obesity in the U.S. is widely believed to be primarily a problem among Blacks, Latinos, and the poor, these populations have been the main focus of the public health measures that constitute the war against obesity."³⁰⁰ To this end, although anti-obesity measures are justified through scientific data on the risks and dangers of obesity, there remains an underlying moralizing and nationalistic stance: obesity is not just a risk to oneself, but to the security of the nation-state. For example, in a 2010 speech, Michelle Obama³⁰¹ drew explicit ties between physical health, citizenship, and patriotic duty:

[Military leaders] tell us that...more than one in four young people are unqualified for military service because of their weight. They tell us that childhood obesity isn't just a public health issue, it's not just an economic threat, it's a national security threat as well.³⁰²

Obama's remarks here are not dissimilar to the parallel Richard Carmona drew between the "obesity epidemic" and 9/11. In these instances, fatness is not just "a general threat to

²⁹⁷ Michael S. Merry, "Paternalism, Obesity, and Tolerable Levels of Risk," *Democracy & Education* 20, no. 1 (2012): 2.

²⁹⁸ For example: some schools in the U.S. have mandated obesity "report cards," warning parents if their child's BMI is too high; fat mothers are increasingly subjected to invasive prenatal screening and dietary restrictions in service of their fetus's protection; and in child welfare cases, there is legal precedent of felony abuse charges for the "overnourishment" of one's child. Katherine Mason, "Women, Infants, and (Fat) Children: Hidden 'Obesity Epidemic' Discourse and the Practical Politics of Health Promotion at WIC," *Fat Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 116–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2016.1144422>.

²⁹⁹ Biltekoff, "The Terror Within," 39.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ Obama began the *Let's Move!* campaign in 2010 as one component of her Task Force on Childhood Obesity. Focusing specifically on the physical health of children, the purpose of the campaign was to encourage healthy dieting and fitness practices among children.

³⁰² Qtd. in Cassandra Dame-Griff, "He's Not Heavy, He's an Anchor Baby": Fat Children, Failed Futures, and the Threat of Latina/o Excess," *Fat Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 167, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2016.1144233>.

humanity, but...specifically threatening [to] the dominance of Western, imperial/militarized, white, middle-class, reproductive masculinity.”³⁰³ At its most virulent, anti-obesity rhetoric is employed strategically to promote white supremacy. This may seem like a hyperbolic remark, but a 2017 comment by a reddit user demonstrates this point: “As men we must accept that physical fitness is a part of being a functional man [...] Run and play or else we’ll be sending the fatsos and manginas to liberate Europe from the migrants in 2030.” Among such discourses, fatphobia is legitimated not only by scientific truth claims on obesity, but a moralized, racialized, gendered sense of patriotic duty.

“Feminist” variants of fatphobic rhetoric can be found alongside paternalistic expressions of concern for the health of fat people. Tumblr is understood to be a welcoming, inclusive SNS with a strong feminist presence. And indeed, some of the examples of fatphobia I reference in this chapter are produced by self-identified feminists. To understand why fatphobia is present even among feminists, it is necessary to explore how the rhetoric of the “obesity epidemic” developed in tandem with the body positive and Health at Every Size (HAES) movements. Today, these movements are understood to be relatively distinct. However, HAES is a direct offshoot of body positivity—and body positivity is itself an offshoot of the fat acceptance movement. In 1996, Deb Burgard created BodyPositive.com and in 1998, she created a “Health at Every Size” Web Ring³⁰⁴ as a subsection of the website. Though the Web Ring is no longer active, it is described as a series of educational, healthcare, and activist websites that featured “information about living a good life regardless of weight or body size” and

³⁰³ Francis Ray White, “‘We’Re Kind of Devolving’: Visual Tropes of Evolution in Obesity Discourse,” *Critical Public Health* 23, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 320–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2013.777693>.

³⁰⁴ Web Rings were series of websites related to a specific theme. Common during the 1990s, links to each website were displayed on a single page, typically in the shape of a circle, allowing users to navigate between web pages.

“alternatives to the traditional diet and weight loss approaches.”³⁰⁵ The Web Ring was moderated and prohibited websites that “Promote weight loss as an end in itself,” a key decision that upheld HAES’s ties with fat acceptance. Before becoming an official organization, HAES circulated as a philosophy and its advocates implored medical institutions and fat acceptance organizations to consider taking an explicit HAES stance.

The history of body positivity is more challenging to describe because it lacks the political and philosophical cohesion that characterizes HAES. Broadly, body positivity may be characterized as the radical and politicized practice of self-love and body-acceptance. This has long been a tenant of feminist activism, but it was in the early aughts that “body positivity” began to gain traction as a discrete concept, which was fueled by its commercialization. On SNSs such as Tumblr, body positivity is popular and it maintains clearer ties to feminist politics than HAES. In contrast to fat activism on Tumblr, which focuses almost exclusively on the issue of size, body positivity also addresses other sources of insecurity related to the body. Despite its embrace of self-acceptance, body positivity has a contentious relationship with fat activism on Tumblr. While some body positive users believe that fat acceptance falls under the umbrella of body positive advocacy, other users rely on rhetorics of body positivity to justify their fatphobia. Drawing on body positivity’s intersections with HAES, these users are adamant that practicing body positivity requires the maintenance of good physical health. Though they embrace the concept of self-acceptance, these users rely on the pathologization of obesity to assert that excess weight results in poor health and that obesity therefore cannot be body positive.

³⁰⁵ “Body Positive: Boosting Body Image at Any Weight,” accessed April 16, 2018, <http://www.bodypositive.com/>.

These claims are not value-neutral. To recall from Chapter 1, fatness has long been coded as a signifier of regression, metonymically evidencing “a person’s lack of restraint, weak moral fortitude, and...threat.”³⁰⁶ For example, during the suffrage era, anti-suffragists often invoked racialized connotations of fatness, suggesting that “suffrage created primitive monsters that had upended the normal racial and gender order of civilization.”³⁰⁷ As a strategy to counter these stigmatizing images, suffragists represented themselves visually as the thin, white, hegemonic embodiment of western beauty standards. Farrell explains that “For suffragists, portraying the activists as thin was a way to ‘prove’ that they had civilized bodies, ones that had all the capacities necessary for entry into the public sphere.”³⁰⁸ The observation that thinness was an indicator of worthiness for entrance into the public sphere is an important one. White suffragists’ thinness represented civility, rationality, and moderation, in contrast to the fat body, which was out-of-bounds, out of control, and indicative of primitiveness and regression.

Similar tensions between feminism and fatness exist today. Among anti-feminists, fatness has become a visual marker of the “social justice warrior” (SJW), defined by Urban Dictionary as “A person who causes problems for normal people through protest and constant nagging because they cant [sic] accept that life ins’t [sic] fair.”³⁰⁹ Among so-called “anti-SJWs,” fat acceptance is a hallmark of the left’s irrational protest, a “symptom” of its weakness, and an indicator of cultural regression. By stereotyping SJWs as fat, the left is literally and metaphorically represented as “soft.”³¹⁰ Fatphobia from anti-SJWs is more common on SNSs

³⁰⁶ Afful and Ricciardelli, “Shaping the Online Fat Acceptance Movement,” 457.

³⁰⁷ Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 108.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁰⁹ “Urban Dictionary: Social Justice Warrior,” Urban Dictionary, accessed April 19, 2018, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Social%20Justice%20Warrior>.

³¹⁰ My intention has been to avoid reproducing fatphobic visual content in this thesis. However, this content often circulates visually. An example would be an image of Heather Heyer, who a white nationalist murdered in a car attack at the Charlottesville, NC protest. The image showed Heyer being treated by EMTs. It circulated on the white nationalist

such as reddit, though there are examples of this rhetoric on Tumblr. More common on Tumblr, however, is fatphobia from users who worry fat acceptance discredits feminism's legitimacy (which is exemplified by anti-SJW rhetoric). These Tumblr users, not unlike anti-SJWs, invoke rhetoric that pathologizes obesity and frames fatness as an individual choice. However, unlike anti-SJWs, these users critique obesity to uphold, rather than subvert, feminism's legitimacy.

When coded in rhetorics of body positivity, fatphobia on Tumblr becomes a marker of feminist values such as self-care, love for oneself, concern for one's health, and respect for one's body. The justification of this fatphobia rests on the perceived temporality of fatness: you *can* lose weight, and if you do, the harassment will stop and you will be healthier and happier. Even when anti-obesity rhetoric stems from purported benevolence or is qualified by a critique of fatphobia, such approaches paternalistically assume fat people's (willful) ignorance of the health risks of obesity. Additionally, while some fatphobes take a benevolent stance on Tumblr, vitriol is present on the SNS as well. Many examples of fatphobia described in this chapter, even those from self-identified feminists, rely on stereotypes of fat people as lazy, delusional, irrational, disgusting, unhealthy, and selfish.

Ultimately, even when coded in rhetorics of body positivity, fatphobia on Tumblr is “more than an interest in health or an individual idiosyncrasy”³¹¹ because it builds on “inherent connections to fundamental beliefs about race, class, and the evolutionary ‘fitness’ for citizenship.”³¹² In short, it is a new iteration of the notion that bodies have to be thin enough

subreddit r/Physical_Removal, with the caption: “Breaking news: she was less a victim of the Dodge Challenger of peace, and more the victim of McDonalds.”

³¹¹ Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 116.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 115.

(and thus sufficiently “civilized”) to be fit for entrance into public spheres. Although “body positive” fatphobia may rely on a rhetoric of inclusivity or benevolence, it nevertheless “eradicat[es] subjects’ ability to have voice in the public in ways that challenge”³¹³ fatphobic ideologies. This appears justified within a framework of social contagion, where the “spread” of fat acceptance on Tumblr represents a threat to: fat people themselves; young people on Tumblr who may be “corrupted” by this activism; the ideological legitimacy of feminism; and in some cases, the nation writ large. Fatphobes troll and antagonize fat activists to uphold hegemonic beliefs about fatness, health, and moral virtue that are under contestation.

Anti-obesity rhetoric remains pervasive today, and while it maintains scientific legitimacy, it simultaneously rests on the paternalistic belief that fatness is not only a choice, but one that represents gluttony, selfishness, and ignorance. The policing of fat activism on Tumblr cannot be extricated from this contemporary moment, which builds on the longstanding moralization of fatness and the virtue of physical health. By providing this history, my goal has been to demonstrate that the purportedly rational character of health and fitness-based anti-obesity rhetoric obscures the extent to which it is moralized. In other words, my intention is not to condemn every fatphobic user on Tumblr, nor is it to dismiss the value of body positivity. I firmly believe that some fatphobic Tumblr users take genuine concern with the health risks of obesity and view their fatphobia as righteous. For these reasons, fatphobia on Tumblr can itself be understood as ambivalent—simultaneously well-meaning and vitriolic, helpful and harmful, justified and unwarranted, depending on the audience. However, the history in this section offers the context required to situate—and necessitate—the mission of contemporary fat

³¹³ McKinnon, “Necropolitical Voices and Bodies in the Rhetorical Reception of Iranian Women’s Asylum Claims,” 217.

activists, which is to reveal that no matter how scientifically valid the concern for fat people's health may seem, it is misguided and does more harm than good.

Content analysis

My goal in performing content analysis is to operationalize the concept of enclave ambivalence and provide preliminary empirical evidence of its presence within Tumblr's fat activist network. To recall, I have conceptualized enclave ambivalence as the unsettling of boundaries of group membership. Enclave ambivalence occurs in two ways: first, through enclave inclusion, where antagonistic individuals deliberately interfere with enclave groups; and second, through intra-network discourse, which gives visibility to heterogeneous perspectives. To operationalize enclave ambivalence, I am focused on three sets of measures: the category, address, and theme(s) of each post. By *category*, I am referring to whether the post seems to be a form of counterpublic advocacy, fatphobia, or enclave advocacy. *Address* refers to who the intended audience of the post appears to be. And *theme(s)* classifies the subject(s) that surface in the content of each post. I will describe each of these measures in more detail below, but for now I wish to emphasize that enclave ambivalence is evidenced by variances in category, address, and theme(s). In other words, it can be said that Tumblr's fat activist network is an ambivalent enclave if there is: a presence of fatphobia and enclave advocacy; multiple audiences of address; and a diverse range of themes.

Before beginning my analysis, it is worth briefly reviewing the methods employed in my data collection. I began by collecting a sample of 198 fat activist/fatphobic original text posts from Tumblr. I collected both fat activist and fatphobic content from Tumblr searches of: #fat activism, #fat acceptance, #fat positive, and #fat liberation. I collected additional fat activist posts by exploring fat activist users' archives. I then developed a codebook to analyze this

content. My codebook included mutually exclusive categorizations of posts as forms of counterpublic advocacy, fatphobia, or enclave advocacy. I also developed mutually exclusive codes to identify the addressed audience of each post as general, fat people, fatphobes, inter-network, or intra-network. I then developed sets of thematic codes. Each set of thematic codes was unique to the classification they were applied to – in other words, I used different codes for counterpublic advocacy, fatphobia, and enclave advocacy. Broadly, counterpublic advocacy codes focused on the (de-)pathologization of obesity, fat positivity, and topics of intra-network discussion such as body positivity. Codes for fatphobic content focused on the pathologization and moralization of obesity. Finally, my codes for enclave advocacy focused on enclave strategies, effects of fatphobia, and requests for antagonism to stop. I applied at least one thematic code to each post, but most were coded for multiple themes. A detailed codebook is available in Appendix A, while Appendix B provides charts with statistical data on my coding. My full data book, including text posts and meta data, is available upon request.

I collected 103 posts in December, 2017 and an additional 94 posts in April, 2018, giving me a sample n of 198. A majority of content (52 percent) was posted in 2017, while 27 percent was posted in 2018, and a collective 18 percent was posted between 2013-2016. 145 of 188³¹⁴ posts came from unique blogs (77 percent). The posts I collected had a range of 0 to 340,761 notes, with a mean of 11,799 and a median of 366. The charts below include the range, mean, and median of note counts based on classification (top) and a breakdown of when content was published (bottom).

³¹⁴ 6 posts were deleted, meaning I could not access the poster's URL.

Range, mean, and median note counts by categorization				
Classification	<i>n</i>	Range	Mean	Median
Counterpublic advocacy	135	1 - 340,761	17,096	715
Fatphobia	45	9 - 4,356	486	111
Enclave advocacy	18	0 - 16,404	1299	19

Years posts were published							
Year published	No data	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
% of sample (<i>n</i> = 198)	3%	2%	3%	8%	5%	52%	27%

With the above data in mind, it is necessary to reiterate the limitations of this analysis. First, I cannot make any claims on the perdurance of fat activism or antagonism over time, nor can I draw conclusions about whether changes in thematic content have shifted over time. For example, while it is evident that a majority of content I collected was produced between 2017-2018, this can be attributed to Tumblr's platform limitations. The SNS displays content in reverse-chronological order, meaning it is easier to access newer content and, conversely, more challenging to access older content. Second, the posts I collected did not include images, comments on posts, or content in reblogs, which vary thematically from the text posts I collected. By limiting my data collection to original text posts, I am only capturing a small portion of the fat activist and fatphobic content in circulation on Tumblr.

This brings me to my final point: the purpose of this content analysis is not to make generalizable claims about Tumblr's fat activist network. Rather, it is to offer a descriptive overview of the content I looked at while studying Tumblr. In other words, this content analysis reveals that the posts I analyze in my rhetorical criticism are not isolated examples, but demonstrative of broader patterns of enclave ambivalence I observed in my research. In the sections that follow, I review my findings across the measures of category, address, and theme(s).

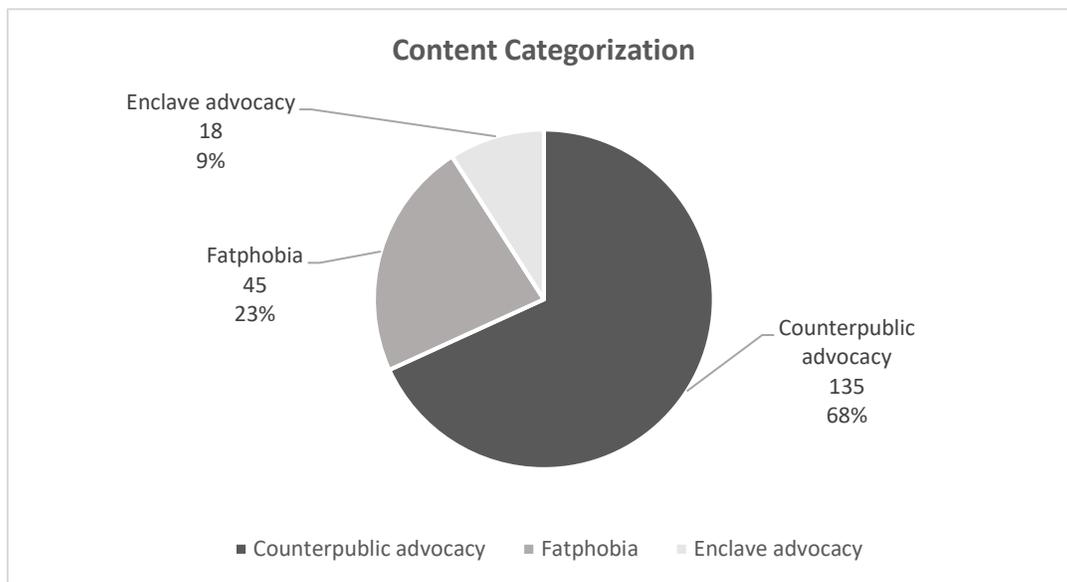
Categories

I coded each post I collected as a form of counterpublic advocacy, fatphobia, or enclave advocacy. Below is a breakdown of each code's conceptualization and an example:

Code	Conceptualization	Example
Counterpublic advocacy	Advocates for the support and acceptance of fat people; and/or advocates against fatphobia.	Fat Rolls are just as beautiful as curves and you should never be ashamed of them
Fatphobia	Attempts to undermine, delegitimize, discredit fat activism; and/or shames, stigmatizes, or derides fat people.	Your fat will kill you, it doesn't care about your feelings or public stance. You'll be dead by 60.
Enclave advocacy	Notes the presence of fatphobic antagonism/intrusion on Tumblr; the negative impact it has on fat activists; and/or asks antagonists to leave them [the poster or fat activists broadly] alone.	Just let us have our two or three tags and stop putting your fat phobic bullshit in it.

As I discussed in my methods section, counterpublic advocacy is not necessarily the same as enclaving. This content reaches multiple audiences and is produced by both fat people and people who are not fat. However, because counterpublic advocacy expresses support and acceptance of fat people, I would argue that this is the content users seek when they utilize the platform as an enclave space. By contrast, fatphobic content disrupts the fat activist experience; all the fatphobic content I collected was retrieved through fat activist and fat positive search terms. Although counterpublic advocacy and fatphobia both demonstrate the presence of enclave ambivalence on the SNS, the category of enclave advocacy addresses this topic the most explicitly. Here, users express dissatisfaction with the fatphobia on Tumblr and articulate its negative effects.

Of the 198 posts I collected, 45 posts were coded as fatphobic and 18 were coded as forms of enclave advocacy. The remaining 135 posts were coded as counterpublic advocacy.



This data reveals that there is an undeniable presence of fatphobic content within Tumblr’s fatphobic network. Other scholars’ research on fatphobia on Tumblr also validates this finding. For example, in a slightly larger analysis of fat activist content on Tumblr ($n = 500$), Levitt coded 20 percent of content as examples of trolling, which parallels my own findings (23 percent, where $n = 198$).³¹⁵ That 18 posts were coded as forms of enclave advocacy suggests that fatphobic content on Tumblr affects the SNS’s fat activist users. Most importantly, this breakdown of data exemplifies the ambivalence of Tumblr’s fat activist network – roughly a third of this content relates to the disruption of fat activism on the SNS. Enclave ambivalence can also be understood by studying the audience(s) addressed by this content, which I turn to in the following section.

Address

In discussing who each post addresses, it is important to keep in mind that Tumblr is a public platform. Any given post may circulate beyond the audience it addresses. For example,

³¹⁵ Amanda Levitt, “Crossing the Troll Bridge—the Framing of Fat Bodies on Social Media” (Wayne State University, 2016).

not all counterpublic advocacy is directed at fatphobes, yet many fatphobes respond to counterpublic content. This is another hallmark of enclave ambivalence, although it is not my focus here. Instead, my goal is to identify the intended audience of each post. This measure helps clarify the extent to which Tumblr’s fat activist network extends beyond fat activist users. If users are addressing multiple audiences, it can be postulated that fat activism on Tumblr evades the neat boundaries of group membership that characterize(d) offline enclave groups. To understand the address of each post, I coded *within*, rather than *across* categorizations. Put differently, I kept my coding of counterpublic advocacy, fatphobia, and enclave advocacy separate. It was necessary to do so because the significance of each post’s address depends on its purpose. For example, the meaning of a counterpublic post that addresses fat people is different than that of a fatphobic post that addresses fat people.

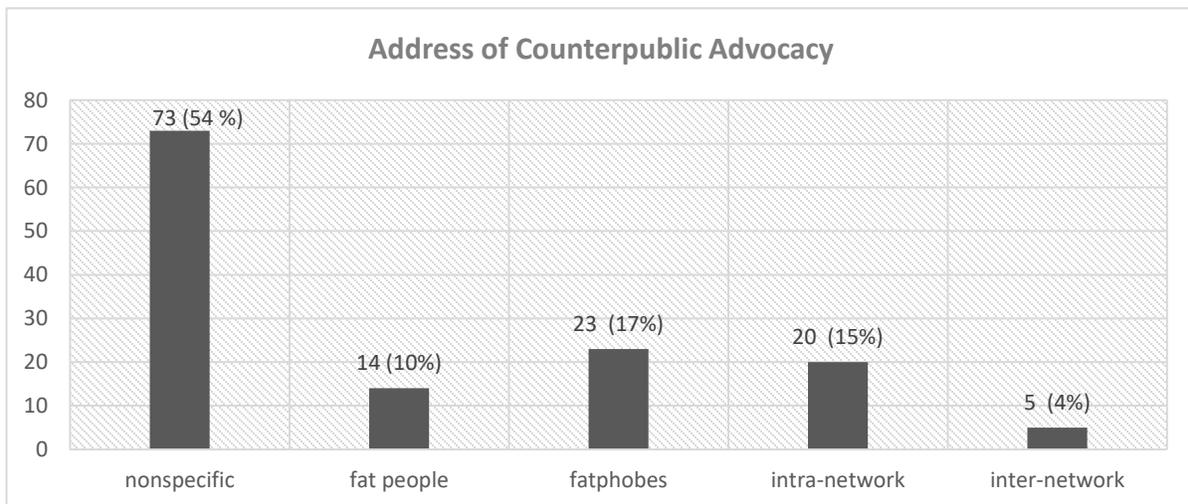
Below, I have included a chart with the conceptualization of each code and an example. Although conceptualizations are consistent across codes, I have included unique examples for each classification. If a code did not surface within a classification, I have indicated “n/a.”

Code	Conceptualization	Counterpublic advocacy example	Fatphobia example	Enclave advocacy example
Nonspecific	Does not address a specific subset of Tumblr users.	RADICAL IDEA: Fat people, ALL FAT PEOPLE, deserve to express self-love and express it LOUDLY!	Fat acceptance is helping America’s obesity epidemic spread. Yes, epidemic.	fatphobia is rampant in so many spaces, and it sucks that the one that’s supposed to be the most accepting is no better.
Fat people	Addresses fat people and/or fat activists.	All fat people: born fat, yo-yo’d fat, side-effect fat, syndrome fat, or however you became fat: You are not a disease, you deserve respect, and you should be honored in the body you’re in because it’s just as wonderful and storied and worthy as the bodies thin people live in.	I hate fat people. Stop eating you disgusting pigs	n/a
Fatphobes	Addresses individuals who hold fatphobic beliefs	Fat people have always existed, and we will continue to exist. no	n/a	I will refute you, ignore you, and re-post the content so people can view it without your toxic input.

		matter how mad that makes you.		
Intra-network	Addresses fat activists to resolve tensions among activists and/or demand change.	Fat acceptance means accepting unhealthy fat people. I don't care if it doesn't support your respectability politics. Unhealthy fat people (including those who's illness is related to their weight) deserve respect.	n/a	n/a
Inter-network	Addresses members of other networks on Tumblr (e.g. LGBT, black, body positive, or feminist networks) to resolve tensions and/or demand change.	thin LBPO women really need to take some responsibility for the fatphobia in WLW communities. Uplift fat women, spread our voices, make us visible.	n/a	n/a

This breakdown of codes demonstrates that fat activist engagement may take place across a range of audiences. Below, I will focus specifically on the address of counterpublic and fatphobic content.

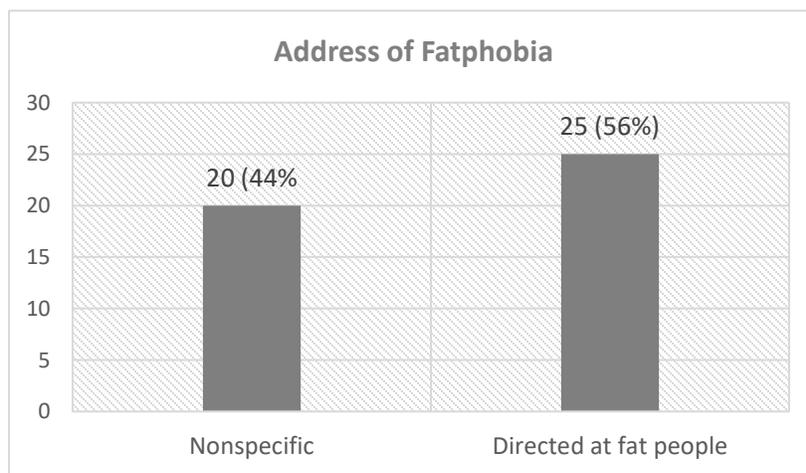
Of the 135 counterpublic posts I coded, 73 were directed toward a general/nonspecific audience. 23 were directed at fatphobes; 20 were forms of intra-network discourse; 14 were directed at fat people; and 5 were examples of inter-network discourse.



It is unambiguous that most of the content I analyzed did not address a specific audience. This is not to suggest that these posts were constructed to reach *all* Tumblr users—it is impossible to

know for sure. Regardless, the use of fat activist tags on these posts indicates that a fat activist audience is never far-removed from content without specific address. It is also noteworthy that a collective 56 percent of content addressed specific audiences. In particular, I wish to draw attention to the parallel between the volume of content that addressed fatphobic (23 posts) and intra-network (20 posts) audiences. At the same time that fat activists debate the politics of fat acceptance among each other, it is evident that there is a simultaneous awareness of the presence of fatphobia within Tumblr's fat activist network. Of course, this is not to suggest consistency – it may be different users producing and consuming this content, and the reception of this content inevitably varies. Nevertheless, this simultaneity is a hallmark of enclave ambivalence.

It should come as little surprise that fat activists address fatphobic users when considering the extent to which fatphobes address fat activists. Of the 45 fatphobic posts I collected, over half (25) were directed specifically at fat people.



I will explore the implications of this finding further in my rhetorical analysis, where I consider the motivations behind the address of fat people. I cannot forward any causal claims about the relationship between fatphobes' address of fat people and the counterpublic address of fatphobes, but it is clear that communication takes place between these groups of users.

Ultimately, I am forwarding that the circulation of this fatphobic content destabilizes the construction of this network as an enclave space. Of course, enclave ambivalence is determined not only by the presence of antagonism, but the diversity of themes and perspectives that surface among these groups of users. In the following section, I review these themes in more detail.

Theme(s)

To reiterate, it is important to consider variances in thematic content when studying enclave ambivalence. In offline iterations of fat activism, conversations frequently centered around the de-pathologization of obesity *or* the celebration of fatness. There was a general absence of discussions of intersectionality, and even fewer examples of responses to fatphobic antagonism. Within Tumblr’s fat activist network, a feature of enclave ambivalence is the heterogeneity of themes that surface. During the coding process, I developed 22 thematic codes for counterpublic content, X for fatphobic content, and X for enclave advocacy. I begin this section with a discussion of the thematic trends within counterpublic content. I include all X codes in the charts presented here, but below I only include conceptualizations and examples of those which surface in my discussion (the full codebook is available in Appendix A).

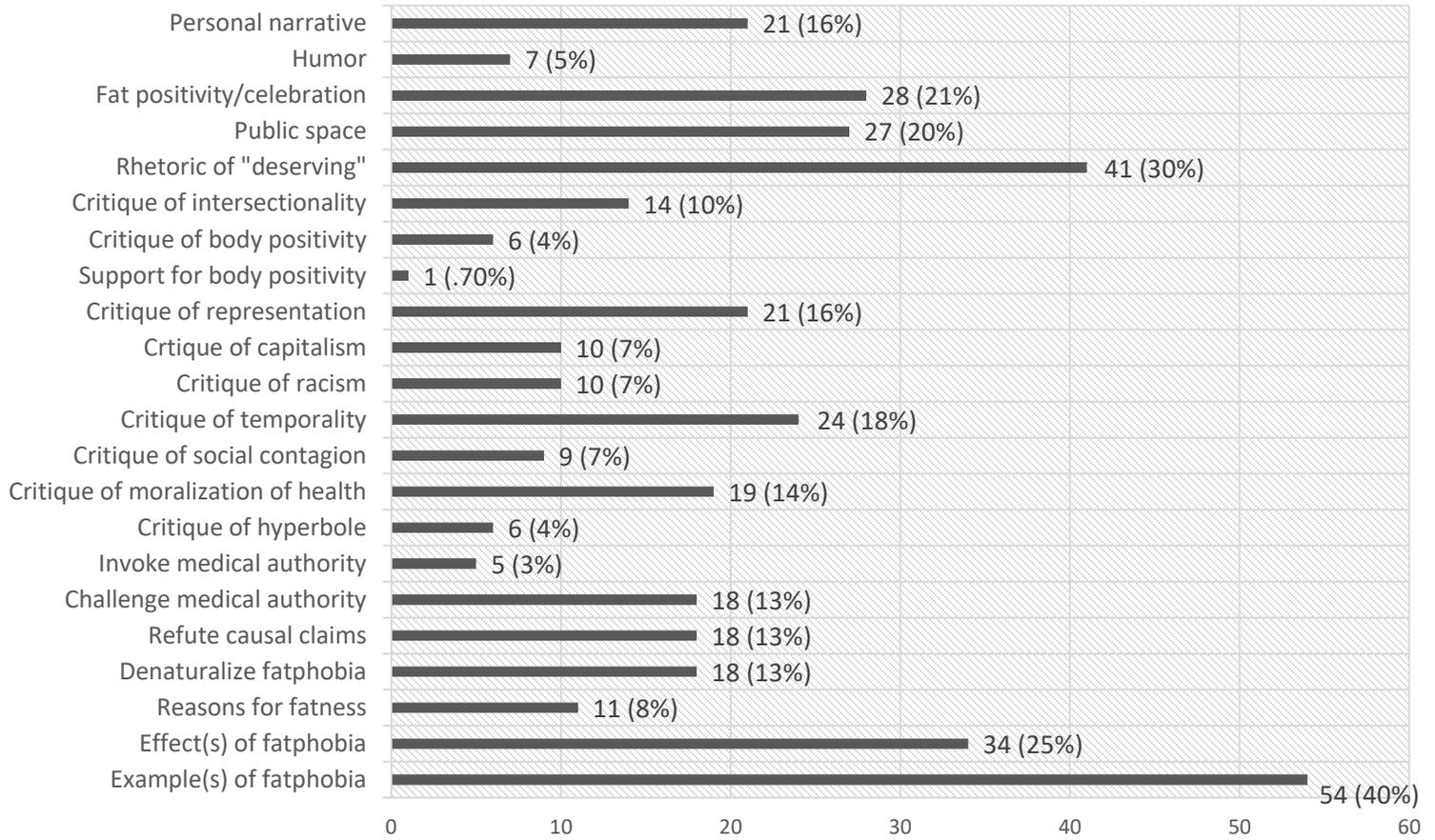
Code	Conceptualization	Example*
Example(s) of fatphobia	Lists example(s) of fatphobia of any kind. Can be general examples or personal experience.	Being forced to diet at a young age; being sent away to camps to starve and overexercise; being shamed and emotionally berated for eating; being taught to mistrust your own body’s hunger and satiety cues.
Effect(s) of fatphobia	Describes effects of fatphobia, e.g. influence on behaviors or effects on physical/mental health. Can be general examples or personal experience.	I’m still embarrassed to eat or dance in front of people or smile in pictures and its ridiculous and I hate it
Rhetoric of “deserving”	Argues that fat people deserve to be respect, to be valued, to be treated as human, to be happy, etc.	you deserve to be happy and treated with respect without qualifiers ♡

Invoke medical authority	Draws on the authority of medical institutions/doctors to validate they [the poster] are in good physical health; and/or to scientifically verify the negative physical/mental effects of fatphobia.	Everything was fine. I am not diabetic, my cholesterol is fine, my sodium is fine, even my thyroid levels were good.
Critique of racism	Critiques the racism intrinsic to fatphobia.	For black women who are fat, our fatness is judged with an overwhelming amount of cultural stereotypes and racist beliefs about black people.
Critique of capitalism	Critiques how fatphobia is caused/perpetuated by capitalism.	[Airlines] have the ability to accommodate the natural diversity of human body sizes on their airplanes, and they choose not to do it. It might interfere with their profit margin temporarily, so they shift the blame and the costs onto their passengers
Support for body positivity	Acknowledges the benefits of the body positive movement for fat people.	And for some of us, body positivity and fat acceptance are radical acts of defiance against kyriarchy and a demand to no longer be oppressed. So I mean. It matters.
Critique of body positivity	Identifies the limitations of body positivity and/or critiques its effects on fat activism.	FAT activism is NOT body posi. [...] Body posi is what happens when capitalism co-opts a radical movement, specifically radical fat activism.
Critique of intersectionality	Critiques a lack of intersectionality within fat activism; and/or demands more visibility for people whose experiences of fatphobia intersect with other identity markers.	For trans people who are fat, their fatness is judged with a negative belief towards trans bodies. And for non-black WOC theirs comes with the burden of racism too. We have to make the movement more inclusive.

Although this is a small sample of the codes I developed, it demonstrates the thematic scope of content found within Tumblr's fat activist network.

Of course, not all themes are addressed with the same frequency. The above codes represent some of the most and least frequent themes that surfaced in my analysis. The most frequent themes to surface were examples of fatphobia (54), effects of fatphobia (34), and advocacy that fat people are “deserving” of respect/happiness/worth (41). The least frequent themes to surface were critiques of body positivity (6), invocations of medical authority (5), and support for body positivity (1). Another significant observation here is that while the historical context provided in this thesis demonstrates that fatphobia is unequivocally raced and classed, only 7 percent of counterpublic content explicitly addressed the topics of racism and capitalism.

Thematic breakdown of Counterpublic Advocacy



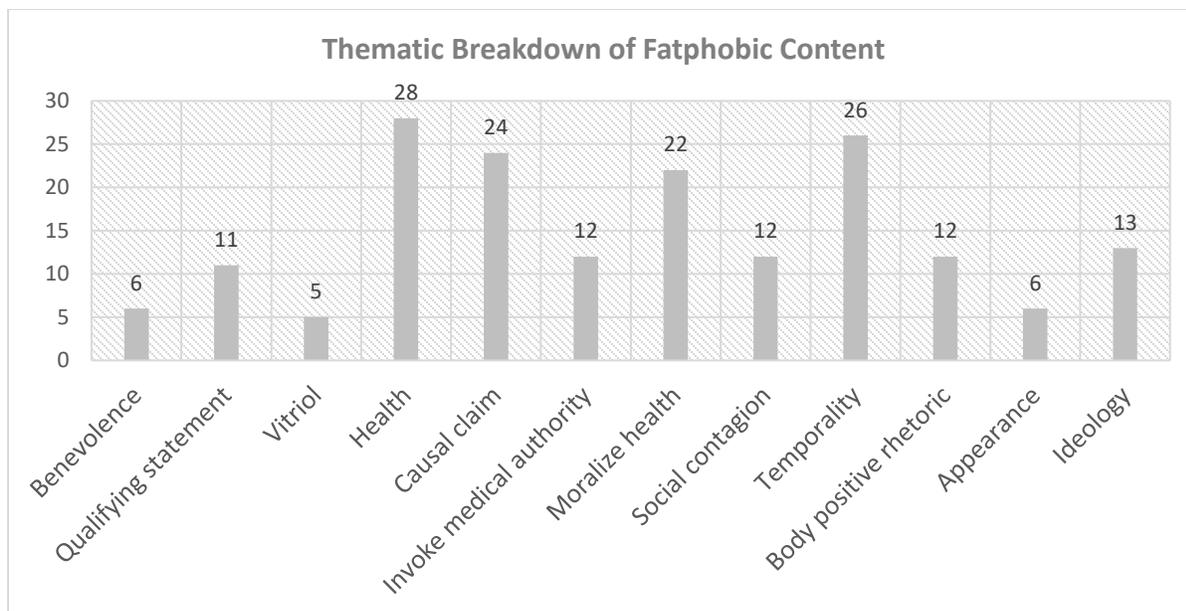
This chart demonstrates that while some themes are more common than others, one cannot identify a singular goal of fat activists on the SNS as neatly as past iterations of the movement. While users attempt to de-pathologize obesity, they simultaneously celebrate fat positivity. A more encompassing review of fat activist content on the SNS might produce different results given, for example, the frequency with which fat activists post selfies of themselves as a means of celebration. Nevertheless, this range of themes draws on the advocacy of *multiple* past iterations of fat acceptance.

Next, I coded fatphobic content. I coded for fewer themes, so I include each of them below with conceptualizations and examples.

Code	Conceptualization	Example*
Benevolence	Warrants fatphobia with concern for fat people's health.	I care about people regardless of size. That's why I want obese/morbidly obese people to get to a healthier size so they can live longer and feel better, emotionally and physically
Qualifying statement	Anti-obesity sentiment is qualified with a critique of fatphobia.	People shouldn't insult or tease people for being fat. With that said, nobody should be fat or be comfortable with being fat in the first place.
Vitriol	Outward hatred of fat people, including dehumanization and/or death threats.	Fat people should be shot down in the street like the disgusting animals they are. If you think being fat is acceptable you're disgusting.
Health	Explicitly mentions health or unhealthiness (can be in any context, e.g. causal claims, social contagion, medical authority, etc.).	you can't make the argument that someone can be obese and healthy
Causal claim	Implies an intrinsic correlation between body size and physical/health ailments; suggests fatness is a visual marker of pathology.	Your fat will kill you, it doesn't care about your feelings or public stance. You'll be dead by 60.
Invoke medical authority	References doctors, medical institutions, and/or scientific research to discredit fat acceptance.	anyone who claims to be happier while they're fat and not working to be healthy is in denial.... you can't be healthy and obese... it's scientifically impossible.
Moralize health	Associates physical health with moral worth.	Loving yourself means taking care of your body and not letting yourself turn into a jello blob of fat. If you truly love yourself, you will work to improve yourself, not become a fatass.
Social contagion	Suggests fatness/obesity is "contagious," i.e. "spread" ideologically; and/or positions fat acceptance as a threat to the general population.	Fat acceptance is helping America's obesity epidemic spread. Yes, epidemic.
Temporality	Argues fat people can and should lose weight; and/or argues that fatness is a voluntary choice.	Healthy weight loss is possible for literally every human being! You are not destined to always be fat! You can change things!
Body positive rhetoric	Expresses that healthy eating, dieting, and/or weight loss is a sign of love and respect for one's body; and/or positions fatness as oppositional to body positivity.	Daily Reminder: Being Positive to your body is eating healthy and exercising daily. Being positive to your body is not treating it poorly and voluntarily carrying (and embracing) excess weight that will only lead to health problems.
Appearance	Ridicules the physical appearance of fat people; suggests fat people are inherently ugly.	I'm fat phobic and proud, hate seeing obese bitches, turns me off. They make me wanna vomit
Ideological stereotype	Invokes stereotypes that fat people are: lazy, disgusting, sloppy, undisciplined, self-destructive, immoral, delusional, etc.	it's ALWAYS better to be in shape and eat healthy than be a lazy fat fuck who only makes excuses and preaches acceptance for their self destructive lifestyle...always.

Of the 45 fatphobic posts I collected, the most common themes to surface were mentions of health (28), causal claims (24), and the moralization of health (22). The least frequent themes

were mentions of appearance (6), expressions of benevolence or concern (6), and instances of vitriolic hatred (5).



Generally, the themes that surfaced in fatphobic content related to health, the pathologization of obesity, and the risks associated with fatness. Put differently, compared to counterpublic content, fatphobic content made no mention of topics such as intersectionality, capitalism, and representations of fatness. Within a framework of enclave ambivalence, it is important to consider the effects that fatphobic content can have on the production of fat activist content. Again, I cannot make causal claims, but it is important to consider the possibility that discussions of the de-pathologization of obesity surface within Tumblr's fat activist network in response to the presence of fatphobia (whether on the SNS itself or the mass media more broadly). Additionally, considering enclave ambivalence requires paying attention to markers of hostility. It is noteworthy that only 5 posts of the 45 I coded expressed outright vitriol – this is contrast to the 11 posts where users claimed to be against fatphobia, or the 12 posts where users justify their fatphobia through rhetorics of body positivity. In other words, not all users express

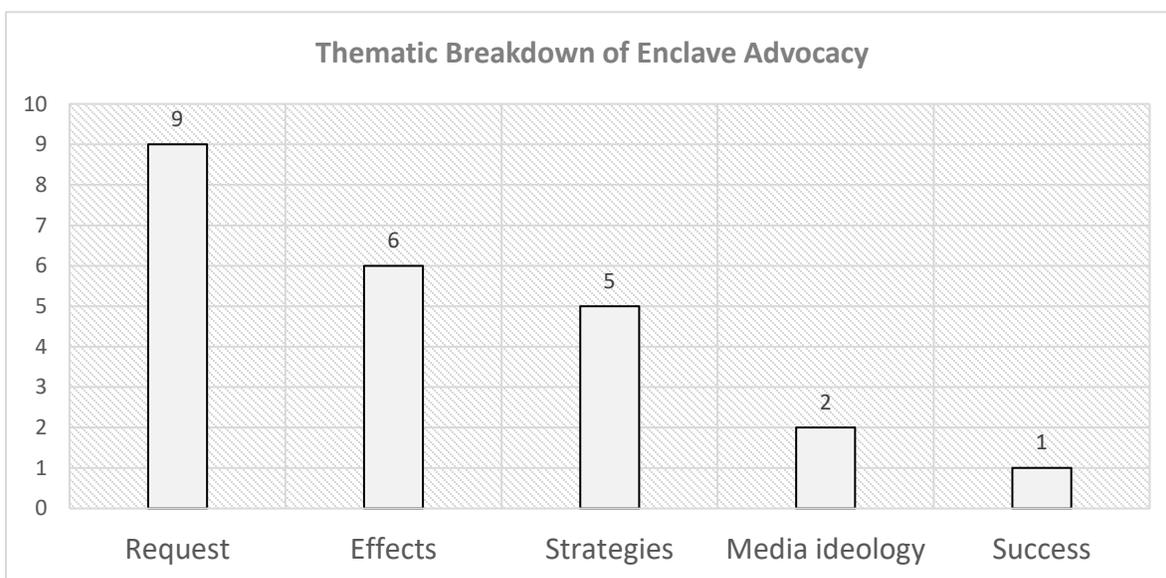
hatred toward fat people, and some perpetuate fatphobia out of concern or care. This lack of consistency is yet another marker of ambivalence within Tumblr's fat activist network.

Lastly, I coded examples of enclave advocacy. To reiterate, the thematic codes I developed here were different than the previous two categories. When analyzing examples of enclave advocacy, I was focused on the acknowledgment of fatphobia on the SNS, discussions of its effects, strategies users employ to avoid fatphobia, and the successes/limitations of these strategies. Below is the list of codes I developed.

Code	Conceptualization	Example
Request	Expresses a request that antagonism stop. May be a general request or directed at antagonists themselves.	Just let us have our two or three tags and stop putting your fat phobic bullshit in it.
Effects	Indicates the negative effects that antagonism has on the individual poster and/or fat people/activists in general.	i deleted the last post bc i really just couldnt handle that shit in my space and making me feel both unsafe and attacked
Strategies	Lists examples of how to achieve enclaving, i.e. distance from antagonists.	I will refute you, ignore you, and re-post the content so people can view it without your toxic input.
Success	Suggests enclaving, i.e. distance from antagonists, is generally achieved.	i'm in my self-made internet bubble of fucking rad fat people
Media ideology	Notes that the presence of antagonism refutes the ideological perception of Tumblr as a safe, inclusive, and/or feminist platform.	fatphobia is rampant in so many spaces, and it sucks that the one that's supposed to be the most accepting is no better.

I only coded 18 examples of enclave advocacy, or 9 percent of the total data I collected. This may seem relatively small when discussing enclave advocacy, but it should not be generalized as a representative sample. Most examples of enclave advocacy were not tagged, which means I found them through users' archives rather than search pages. In other words, I found many of these examples by chance and have no way of determining whether this sample is representative of the frequency with which enclave advocacy surfaces on Tumblr.

Still, my coding provides preliminary insight into the effects of fatphobia within Tumblr's fat activist network. Whereas 9 of the posts I collected included requests that antagonists cease harassing fat activists, only 1 post described success with enclaving. Moreover, 6 posts detailed the negative effects of antagonism on fat activists, and 5 posts outlined strategies taken in response to fatphobic antagonism. Finally, 2 posts referenced Tumblr's media ideology, drawing attention to how the presence of fatphobia on the SNS contradicts its welcoming, and even feminist, reputation.



Though my sample of posts advocating for enclaving was relatively small, it nevertheless reveals that not all fat activists on Tumblr are comfortable interacting with fatphobes. Additionally, it bears mentioning that enclave advocacy can go unspoken. While a user may never make a post advocating for enclaving, the descriptions of enclave strategies suggest that some users may not post about fatphobia, but take measures to mitigate encounters with it. Ultimately, these posts highlight the messiness of Tumblr's fat activist network. Although counterpublic advocacy was the most common category to surface, the presence of enclave advocacy demonstrates that fat activism on Tumblr is not a singularly positive or supportive experience.

Discussion

Throughout this content analysis, I have provided a descriptive overview of the terrain of Tumblr’s fat activist network. Focusing on the analysis of textual content, I have sought to operationalize and measure the presence of enclave ambivalence on the SNS. Specifically, I explored three measures of enclave ambivalence: category, address, and theme(s). My findings reveal that fat activism on Tumblr is indeed ambivalent. Multiple audiences are addressed, many themes are explored, and reactions to fatphobia on the platform vary. The data presented here cannot be used to make generalizable claims about the overall salience of specific themes within Tumblr’s fat activist network. Still, several findings inform my performance of rhetorical criticism in the section that follows. First, there is an undeniable presence of fatphobic antagonism on Tumblr. Of the content I analyzed, 45 percent (89 posts) was produced by, responded to, or addressed fatphobic Tumblr users. I would thus forward that the presence of antagonism on the SNS is substantive enough that it shapes the type of content produced by users. Second, while none of the fatphobic content I coded could be considered “positive,” very little was vitriolic. Especially in posts directed at fat people, fatphobes focused on a concern – sometimes benevolent – for fat people’s health. Third, and finally, a range of themes surface, particularly within counterpublic content. These themes relate not only to the (de)-pathologization of obesity, but the celebration of fatness and critiques of the fat acceptance movement.

Taken together, these findings speak toward the ambivalence of Tumblr’s fat activist network. Given the prevalence of counterpublic and enclave advocacy, the term “enclave” holds merit in its application to the SNS. Still, the presence of fatphobia on the SNS and diversity of thematic and intra-network conversations reveal that enclaving on Tumblr is messy—and not

always effective. In the section that follows, I use rhetorical criticism to elaborate on the findings detailed here. I analyze selected text posts to explore enclave ambivalence in more detail and I consider its implications.

Rhetorical criticism

Intra-network discourse

I begin my analysis with a focus on intra-network discourse to demonstrate how Tumblr helps fulfill certain enclave functions. As Squires argues, heterogeneity is intrinsic to social movements: “These emergent collectives are not necessarily homogeneous, but consist of all those who recognize and speak out concerning a specific set of social, legal, or political exclusions.”³¹⁶ On Tumblr, fat activist enclaving not only provides social support and validation to fat people, but it also opens a venue for fat activists to debate and discuss sources of intra-movement tension, “internally producing lively debate.”³¹⁷ Rather than position a diversity of perspectives as precluding collective unity, I demonstrate the pedagogical purpose this ambivalence serves: these conversations help raise critical awareness on topics that have been overlooked in previous iterations of fat activism. I focus specifically on three forms of intra-network discourse taking place within Tumblr’s fat activist network: conversations around the de-pathologization of obesity, body positivity, and intersectionality.

De-pathologizing obesity

An overarching question that frames debates about the de-pathologization of obesity on Tumblr is: *Does the health of fat people matter?* To an extent, yes: the unflinching association between size and health within the dominant public marks fatness as a visual signifier of illness.

³¹⁶ Catherine R. Squires, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres,” *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (November 1, 2002): 453, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00278.x>.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 448.

This association is problematic not only because of the fatphobia it arouses among the general public, but also because the pathologization of obesity means fatphobia is especially rampant within medical institutions. In several fat activist posts I collected, users draw attention to the fact that they are in good physical health, which demonstrates how fatphobia distorts doctors' perceptions of patients' health status. fatshion, for example, narrates a recent visit to the doctor:

[...] The doctor orders a mass of blood tests, for every single reason he stated it was due to my obesity. (I'm 5'6' and 280lbs)

He kept making comments about how my A1C is probably in the diabetic range, how my cholesterol is probably high, my sodium is probably too high, ect. When I came in the nurse has taken my blood pressure and when he took a look at it he made a side comment of "your blood pressure is surprisingly good, I'm impressed." Literally no one is trying to impress you, that's just how my blood pressure has always been: normal.

[...] Everything was fine. I am not diabetic, my cholesterol is fine, my sodium is fine, even my thyroid levels were good. Literally the only thing wrong was my vitamin D levels. Normal is 30-100 and I was hitting 18. So a vitamin D supplement is all I need.

Being fat isn't an indicator of unhealthiness.

This post exemplifies the fatphobia that fat people encounter when trying to access basic medical care. fatshion, however, simultaneously invokes and critiques medical authority. They make specific mention of their blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, sodium, and thyroid levels—measures where abnormalities are frequently attributed to body mass—to provide clear evidence of their physical health. Nevertheless, they also scoff at their doctor's comment that "I'm impressed" by pointing out that "Literally no one is trying to impress you." In doing so, fatshion suggests that being fat and in good health should not be considered exceptional.

In another example, sunbathe uses humor to elaborate on the effects of doctors' fatphobia:

it's also fucked up that fat people literally fear going to the doctor for anything because they know the first thing out of their dr's mouth no matter what their ailment is, is gonna be "lose weight lol" broken leg? lose weight. rash? lose weight. whooping cough? lose

weight bitch!!!! like we get it. but can you just write my prescription you bitch so i can go eat a salad and not call you again until im about to die of the plague???

Through hyperbole, this user points out that doctors' response to *any* fat person's health issues, even those obviously unrelated to their weight, will be "lose weight lol." The use of "lol" here highlights doctors' flippant disregard for fat patients' wellbeing. Additionally, by writing "like we get it," sunbathe demonstrates that fat people are well-aware of the belief that their fatness will inevitably cause them health problems. However, sunbathe points out that the risk of obesity is overinflated—they can "go eat a salad," but a healthy lifestyle or normal body weight does not safeguard against ailments unrelated to obesity. Ultimately, this post demonstrates that the pathologization of obesity engenders a mistrust of doctors, which can have consequences for fat people who avoid seeking medical treatment for fear of delegitimization.

While many fat activists on Tumblr critique the conflation of size and physical health, others point out why this can be problematic. kipplekipple explains:

When we talk about being fat-positive and we say, "weight is not an indication of health," I will reblog it. But I want us to also say, "health is not an indication of value." I could be at any weight and I will never be healthy, because I am chronically ill [...] When you make it about health, you're saying health is the pinnacle of human achievement, and you're shitting on those of us for whom health will always be a pipe dream.

Of course, it is precisely due to the pathologization of fatness, and the stigma fueled by the belief that size is a voluntary choice, that fat activists like fatshion and sunbathe may feel a need to emphasize their good health. kipplekipple means no ill will toward these activists, noting that they still reblog content that emphasizes that "weight is not an indication of health."

Nevertheless, as kipplekipple explains, de-pathologizing obesity requires recognizing that some fat people *are* unhealthy, sometimes not by choice, but that this does not make them lesser. A sustained emphasis on healthiness, kipplekipple argues, reinforces the moral conflation of health with worth and stigmatizes fat people who are unhealthy: "you're saying health is the pinnacle of

human achievement and you're shitting on those of us for whom health will always be a pipe dream." The author broadens her critique out from fatphobia to the moralization of health in our culture more generally.

Tumblr user 707sufo expands on kipplekipple's critique by commenting on their post with an addendum: "Not to mention, even if obesity is a choice, it doesn't fucking matter. A fat person is still valuable whether or not they're healthy, whether or not it was by choice. It just doesn't fucking matter." In a separate post, lumosfeminism makes a similar argument, writing:

Listen. You can be fat and unhealthy and you still deserve respect. You can be fat because of a disability or a mental illness or just because you really like food and you **DESERVE TO BE TREATED WITH RESPECT.**

I always see people saying "I'm fat because of my disability" and that's fine, obviously. And I think it's safe to say that my own mental illness has contributed to my weight. But you don't have to have a "good reason" for why you're fat to be treated like a human being who deserves love.

I'm sure this will earn some backlash because I'm "promoting unhealthy lifestyles" or whatever the fuck it is people say about fat acceptance.

But what I'm saying is that healthy or not, you **DESERVE LOVE AND RESPECT AND FUCK ANYONE WHO SAYS OTHERWISE.**

lumosfeminism and 707sufo both argue that there is never a valid reason to stigmatize or shame fat people. lumosfeminism points out that it is "fine, obviously," for fat people to discuss the reasons for their size, which parallels kipplekipple's remark that they will support users who emphasize their own physical health. However, like kipplekipple's critique of the moral valuation of health, lumosfeminism points out that an overemphasis on the causes of fatness risks invalidating fat people who do not have a "good reason" to account for their size. By putting "good reason" in quotation marks, lumosfeminism suggests that the intrinsic dehumanization of fatphobia is unwarranted because physical health is an arbitrary measure of one's worth. It is also important to note lumosfeminism's observation that "I'm sure this will earn some

backlash,” which indicates an awareness of the fatphobic antagonism that circulates on Tumblr. However, by describing fatphobes’ concerns as “whatever the fuck it is people say about fat acceptance,” lumsfeminism expresses a disregard for antagonists—they are aware of their presence, but cannot be bothered to engage with them. This post, in short, is directed specifically at fat activists who may struggle to find a place in the movement. It functions to support and validate these individuals while simultaneously advocating for more inclusionary activism.

These intra-network conversations surrounding the de-pathologization of obesity are a small sample, but they demonstrate the diversity of perspectives on the topic and the critical engagement that is taking place. Through personal narrative, examples of fatphobia, humor, and advocacy, these users critique the pathologization of obesity and its negative effects. Additionally, these users negotiate the moralization of obesity: while its de-pathologization is important, it must be denaturalized as well. Failing to do so leaves in place a hegemonic conflation between health and moral worth.

Body positivity

Conversations surrounding body positivity often seek to answer the question: *Is body positivity harming the fat acceptance movement?* Once again, a range of perspectives offer different answers to this question. In many ways, a fat activist’s stance on this subject is contingent on their perception of body positivity’s goals. Some users see the body positive movement as radicalized self-acceptance; others suggest that it has the potential to be useful, but lacks intersectional awareness; others see it as an outright co-optation and softening of fat acceptance; and still others maintain that body positivity does little more than perpetuate fatphobia. These various stances on body positivity emerge because the movement lacks a clear political stance.

Different users employ “body positive” in different ways, resulting in varied interpretations of its meaning and efficacy. Here, I review these perspectives in more detail.

Though a common critique of body positivity is that its focus on appearance obscures the larger political aims of feminism, fatphobiabusters argues that such critiques have no merit because they are “wildly missing the point of what [body positivity] is and who it’s for.” They continue:

[...] And for some of us, body positivity and fat acceptance are radical acts of defiance against kyriarchy and a demand to no longer be oppressed. So I mean. It matters.

[...Body positivity is] about normalizing transgender and intersex bodies and fighting for their body autonomy and against transphobia and intersexism. It’s about making the world for [sic] accessible for fat and disabled bodies and putting an end to ableism. It’s about holding doctors accountable and demanding that they treat and help people of color, women, and fat people the same way they treat cis het white skinny men. It’s fighting against fatphobia and diet culture, rallying against misogyny, etc. It’s activism, it’s feminism, it’s revolutionary. [...]

fatphobiabusters argues that body positivity is more than a focus on appearance; its purpose is to fight the systematic inequalities it has been accused of ignoring. Notably, this user characterizes practices of body positivity as “acts of defiance against kyriarchy,” rather than “patriarchy.” Referring to “kyriarchy” emphasizes the importance of intersectionality; the term “seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination.”³¹⁸

Though fatphobiabusters stresses the importance of structural change, they point out that body positivity’s focus on appearance should not be instantly discredited because “recognizing that you are beautiful in a world that tells you otherwise is a radical act.” To this end, self-acceptance in the form of body positivity serves a valuable purpose for fat activists on

³¹⁸ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza qtd. in “Kyriarchy 101: We’re Not Just Fighting the Patriarchy Anymore,” *Everyday Feminism*, April 23, 2014, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/04/kyriarchy-101/>.

Tumblr. Within the context of enclaving, Tumblr becomes a “site for identity formation, which counters the state’s designation and naming of identity.”³¹⁹ Fat positive selfies and artwork, for example, can be found under tags such as: #body positive, #fat positive, #fat black babe, #chubby bunny, #fat and fabulous, and #self love. Body positive networks on Tumblr can thus function to elevate fat activists’ visibility. These practices of self-acceptance mirror fat activist advocacy of the 90s and early 00s by offering fat people a space to embrace and celebrate their fatness. In other words, while simultaneously subverting the pathologization of obesity, activists resignify what their embodiment means to them without the gaze of the medical examiner on them.



Figure 17: Examples of artwork posted in fat activist tags on Tumblr.

³¹⁹ Palczewski, “Cyber-Movements, New Social Movements, and Counterpublics,” 165.

Though fatphobiabusters rightfully acknowledges the radical potential of body positivity, other fat activists on Tumblr are quick to point out its limitations. [secret-diary-of-an-fa](#), for example, discusses where personal empowerment falls short:

[...] This more mainstream 'Fat Acceptance Lite' is more about personal empowerment. Which is great- but not terribly helpful in a vacuum. Sure, people can say "I'm fat and that's okay!" and the celebs in magazines can swear off dieting and what-have-you... and that's all fantastic. No, really, it is. The problem is that reality, as it's lived by most fat people, is far too hostile for personal empowerment alone to fix the problems they face.

Being empowered is great: it's the first step to achieving social change, because it means you know you're in the right and can fight back against discrimination and bias.

However, it is only a first step, and the publicly acceptable face of Fat Acceptance rarely goes beyond that first step. And that's a problem, because it puts the weight of progress exclusively on the attitudes of fat people- it makes it about them adapting to a hostile world rather than about a concerted effort to make the world less hostile for everyone.

[...]

In the full version of this post, [secret-diary-of-an-fa](#) situates "Fat Acceptance Lite" in contrast to "hard' Fat Acceptance," which rigorously addresses the material experiences of discrimination that fat people encounter. In the excerpt above, [secret-diary-of-an-fa](#) emphasizes that no amount of individual empowerment can successfully subvert systemic and systematic forms of oppression. They do not mean to dismiss empowerment altogether, but to point out that it is only the "first step to achieving social change." Failing to move to the next step causes fat activism to stagnate, leaving in place structural discrimination that cannot be waved away with declarations of one's worth. [secret-diary-of-an-fa](#) does not explicitly critique body positivity, but the term "Fat Acceptance Lite" may be understood as a reference to body positivity, which has been critiqued as a co-optation of the fat acceptance movement.

[ok2befat](#) elaborates on this argument in their own Tumblr post, an excerpt of which reads:

Fat activism started as a legitimately radical offshoot of queer and feminist activism and not as a modeling campaign.

FAT activism is NOT body posi. It is not a way to make individual people feel slightly better about their oppression while not challenging it at all.

Body posi is what happens when capitalism co-opts a radical movement, specifically radical fat activism.

I do not and never will care about body posi because body posi only cares about making the world safe for medium sized women, while pushing out the FAT people who did the work in the first place. [...]

This user offers yet another interpretation of body positivity. While fatphobiabusters considers the radical potential of body positivity and secret-diary-of-an-fa suggests it can serve as a “first step” to social change, ok2befat calls attention to the invisibility of fat women within the movement. Though this user acknowledges that body positivity “may make individual people feel slightly better about their oppression,” they are adamant that this is not sufficient. Body positivity not only downplays the radical goals of fat activism, but erases the contributions of the fat activists who started the size-acceptance movement. Near the end of their post, ok2befat laments the effects of body positivity on Tumblr, suggesting that fat activists are “just getting some weak sauce co-opted body posi instead of real liberation politics.” ok2befat’s description here of “weak sauce co-opted body posi” parallels secret-diary-of-an-fa’s description of “Fat Acceptance Lite,” but takes a more critical stance in their demand for change.

In addition to the critiques explored above, fat activists must grapple with their visibility within the body positive movement and boundaries of group membership. In Chapter 1, I discussed how qualifying what “counts” as fat pushed individuals who may have experienced fatphobia, but were not generally considered fat, outside of the movement. On Tumblr, there is no way to regulate who participates in the fat activist network, which has aroused tensions among activists. Some users maintain a similar stance to early fat activists: though some people may believe themselves to be fat, if they are not “actually” fat, then they do not in fact

experience fatphobia—at least not to the same extent that “truly” fat people do.

feelingswithbrandy, for example, writes:

Superfats take on more drastic risks in their body positive activism, in return for very little benefit for themselves. Most of the benefits of the fat activism movement go to smaller fats, who really have it made compared to even 10 years ago. As a super fat when I've pointed this out, by like, saying a size 16 model in an ad is no cause for my personal celebration, or that a new clothing line up to a 3X does nothing for me, etc, I've been shouted down for not being excited for the things small fats are now getting. I'm tired.

feelingswithbrandy critiques the extent to which body positivity is lauded, even though its (commercial) size inclusion is limited. Here, a hierarchy is distinguished between “smaller fats” and “super fats.” There is not a universally-accepted definition of what makes someone a “super fat,” but these boundaries are often established through references to fashion: a “super fat” may be someone who wears ~3X/24+ clothing. What is important to note here is that a debate surrounding what “counts” as fat continues to surface on Tumblr, but that it is highly influenced by the presence of body positivity on the SNS.

To this end, the platform's SNS features also influence the production of these discourses. Whereas pre-digital iterations of fat activism could readily ask women who were not “actually” fat to leave fat-only groups, participation in Tumblr's fat activist network cannot be regulated in a similar way. redgranola explains that there is a

markedly different experience between fat folks on the smaller end of the spectrum and folk at the larger end, where the latter group gets significantly more shit upon.

Which leads to the phenomenon of “I'm size X, do I count as fat???” asks seen elsewhere and the mental health stuff associated with fatphobia. But a bigger person will never need to ask that question - they've been TOLD. Over and over again, in so many ways.

Like feelingswithbrandy, redgranola suggests that “folk at the larger end” of the fat spectrum receive a disproportionate amount of hate. redgranola describes that an outcome of these debates is the “phenomenon” where individuals send “asks” (direct messages to Tumblr users

who can choose to respond privately or post their response publicly) to other fat activists on Tumblr to try to determine if they “count” as fat (again, it is noteworthy here that redgranola provides an example that references [X] clothing size as an indicator of fatness, rather than a specific weight). This user seems to suggest that these forms of gatekeeping can have negative effects on users, referencing “the mental health stuff associated with fatphobia.” Nevertheless, they remain adamant that larger fat people are “significantly more shit upon” and never have to consider whether or not they are “actually” fat given that “they’ve been TOLD. Over and over again.” These observations parallel Stein’s remarks in Chapter 1—that the “not-fat” woman who attempted to enter a fat-only enclave space may indeed grapple with fatphobia, but that her presence was nevertheless disruptive to fat activist enclaving. On Tumblr, this issue goes unresolved, but users must take into consideration how the visibility of these debates affects individuals who may be grappling with their size.

A final critique of body positivity I wish to highlight focuses less on its uptake among fat activists and instead challenges how it is used to justify fatphobia. darlingiknow writes:

I am moments away from abandoning the label of body positive. i am tired of people telling me that body positivity is about focusing on being in perfect health and having an ideal body. thin people are using body positivity to fat shame others.

i have to remind people i am fat and fighting for fat people in the body positivity movement.

fat positive. fat activism. fat acceptance.

It can be somewhat challenging to categorize a post like this because it exemplifies the ambivalence of fat activism on Tumblr. To an extent, this post can be characterized as a form of enclave advocacy. darlingiknow expresses fatigue with their encounters with fatphobic individuals in Tumblr’s body positive network. However, I coded this post as a form of counterpublic advocacy, and intra-network discourse specifically, because it appears to be

directed at other fat activists. Rather than address fatphobic body positive users directly, *darlingiknow* acknowledges more generally that “thin people are using body positivity to fat shame others.” She highlights the failings of body positivity and pivots to an emphasis on “fat positive. fat activism. fat acceptance.” By tagging her post with these keywords, its seeming purpose is to circulate to a fat activist audience. As a form of intra-network discourse (and perhaps inter-network to the extent that it may reach body positive users), this post critiques how the focus on “perfect health” and “having an ideal body” shames, rather than supports, fat activists. I will elaborate on this point in my discussion of fatphobic antagonism on Tumblr, but it will suffice here to say that fat activists must reconcile with a movement that claims to share the same goals as fat acceptance, and grounds itself in radical feminist rhetoric, but can nevertheless be mobilized to silence, stigmatize, and degrade fat activists.

Intersectionality

Before transitioning to fatphobic antagonism on Tumblr, I wish to explore a final topic of intra-network fat activist conversation on Tumblr: intersectionality. To be clear, critiques of intersectionality and representation also surface in discussions of body positivity. However, I focus on intersectionality in its own section to highlight the voices of activists who extend their critiques beyond the body positive movement. Specifically, I foreground fat activists’ criticisms of *fat activism* as insufficiently intersectional. Some of these concerns also surface in critiques of body positivity, such as the visual privileging of normativity (white, curvy, cisnet, able-bodied women). However, this section expands this critique by acknowledging that experiences of fatphobia are not universal. *heavyweightheart*, for example, explains:

I saw someone say that fatphobia is not “a coherent system of oppression” and I don’t know if they meant that it’s not actually oppressive or that the oppression looks different across groups of fat people. The first interpretation is not really defensible. Fat people

have a harder time getting jobs, are paid less, suffer life-threatening medical discrimination, are traumatized in schools, camps, and other social environments from a young age, are much more likely to be poor, and on and on.

The second interpretation is an essential point, though. Fatphobic oppression does vary across groups. Fat women tend to have it worse than fat men because of the interaction between sexism and fatphobia, and fat Black women are in a more vulnerable position than fat white women because of the interactions among racism, sexism, and fatphobia, and so on – you’re likely to suffer worse if you’re trans and fat than cis and fat, etc.

Fatphobia is rooted in capitalism, class warfare, racism and white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism, and other violent interconnected systems. It’s an intersectional issue and we need to treat it that way for our anti-fatphobic work to have any teeth.

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I argued that a single-axis approach to fat activism inhibited discussions of difference. Fat activists of the 1970s wanted to create solidarity among activists by focusing on how fatphobia was the universal form of oppression that brought them together. More specifically, fat activist leaders worried that conversations about difference would become “explosive confrontations” and risk destabilizing the fat acceptance movement. However, the above example demonstrates the necessity of attending to difference. Fat activism *must* acknowledge these multifaceted systems of oppression to effect meaningful change. Anything less pushes marginalized voices out of the movement. fat-posi-for-black-women builds on this critique by writing:

It would be nice to see WOC and trans people represented in the topic of fat shaming and fat discrimination.

It’s still very cis, hetero and white. When I google the topic of fat shaming or fat discrimination still pictures of cis able bodies white women pop up. And there’s nothing wrong with that, we’re all worthy of liberation, I love us all.

But for other groups, in a society who already ignores us to begin with, we feel muffled. Fatphobia for us intersects, so the burden is even worse. Ours comes with a layer of racism, transphobia, and for black women anti-blackness, sexism + overall racism.

For black women who are fat, our fatness is judged with an overwhelming amount of cultural stereotypes and racist beliefs about black people. Fat black women are often referred to the fictional “Mammy” character and “Precious” who was played by a then plus size Gabourey Sidbibe [sic] as insults or mockery. Then the belief that all fat black women are loud, hyper-masculine, brute, impoverished and ghetto. But, also there are fat

black women who do fit those characteristics and they are human, which is why the intersection of racism + sexism+ anti-blackness + fatphobia is really toxic for us.

[...] We have to make the movement more inclusive.

fat-posi-for-black-women's post acknowledges how experiences of fatphobia vary based on its intersections with race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. When these intersections are not addressed, as fat-posi-for-black-women observes, "we begin to feel muffled." The creation of Tumblr accounts such as fat-posi-for-black-women function to elevate the voices and experiences of fat women of color, advocate for more inclusionary activism, and offer support and resources to individuals who may not see themselves represented in fat activist discourses.

Fatphobia and enclave intrusion

On Tumblr, anyone with an account can participate in fat activism, thus making the movement more expansive and allowing critical discussions on the de-pathologization of obesity, body positivity, and intersectionality to take place. The above examples demonstrate that fat activism's ambivalence is a strength and necessity, inviting intra-network discourse that works to (re)define what, precisely, fat activism is(n't). However, the openness of Tumblr means that fatphobic users can access and disrupt the conversations taking place within the SNS's fat activist network. It is worth reiterating that fatphobic antagonism takes many forms on Tumblr. Fatphobic users may post content in fat activist tags, comment on fat activists' posts, add fatphobic content to reblogs, message activists directly, or create curated anti-fat-acceptance blogs.

Discussions of the intersections between body size and health surfaced most frequently in the fatphobic content I collected. Antagonists remain firm that obesity cannot be healthy, no matter how fat activists try to "spin" their message. For example, hiphopfightsback writes:

The "fat acceptance movement" is the dumbest thing I've ever heard of...

They're straight up saying it's ok for someone to carry the burdens of unnecessary health issues their whole life and succumb to an early death from preventable obesity related causes.

In reality though...it's ALWAYS better to be in shape and eat healthy than be a lazy fat fuck who only makes excuses and preaches acceptance for their self destructive lifestyle...always.

This user begins with an immediate dismissal of fat acceptance, following this remark by explaining that the movement condones “unnecessary health issues” and “early death from preventable obesity related causes.” By stating that being healthy is better “In reality,” this user positions fat acceptance as irrational. This claim is supported by characterizing fat activists as “lazy fat fuck[s]” who are seeking to normalize a “self destructive lifestyle.” In short, this post describes a causal relationship between body size and physical health, reaffirms the belief that fatness is an individual choice, and moralizes fatness by associating it with self-destructive behaviors and laziness. At least nine fat activists responded to this post, elaborating on why hiphopfightsback’s arguments are invalid. One user, for example, responded:

I am so sick of you dumb ass idiots who have no clue what the fuck you are talking about. Just because a person is bigger does not mean they are unhealthy. I have wonderful bp, cholesterol, etc and there are things I can do people half my size can't, I have more stamina than some people half my size. There are “skinny” people who are unhealthy as fuck but I guess that's ok because they're smaller. People that talk shit w/o facts make me so damn sick!!!!

Because fatphobic content focuses on the pathologization of obesity and the moralization of health, many users respond to antagonists with personal examples of their own health status or descriptions of their workout routines. In this response, the poster refutes the belief that fatness is intrinsically correlated with poor health, citing their own health and stamina to counter hiphopfightsback’s claims. Just as hiphopfightsback positioned fat activists as irrational and ignorant, the poster above flips this claim by calling fatphobes such as hiphopfightsback “dumb ass idiots” who “talk shit w/o facts.” They also express exasperation with these fatphobes,

indicating that they are “so sick of” their arguments, which calls attention to the sustained presence of fatphobia within Tumblr’s fat activist network.

The presence of fatphobia on Tumblr can also be seen in fatphobes’ responses to fat activist content. *bodylovecakesandfeminsim*, for example, made the following post: “Fat Rolls are just as beautiful as curves and you should never be ashamed of them.” This post offers validation to individuals with fat rolls and builds into a larger critique of body positive culture on Tumblr, which often privileges the display of hegemonic, conventionally attractive, curvy fat bodies. In other words, this post serves to support fat individuals who may be “ashamed” of their appearance. However, several users commented on this post countering *bodylovecakesandfeminsim*’s claim:

takoyaangel: Nope

brianaishungry: If you have to tell yourself that, then you obviously know deep down it’s not true. No one has to say “Well curves are just as beautiful as fat rolls”, do they? Stop justifying your eight [sic] and get your ass to a gym.

frozen-toad83: Fat rolls are gross

nonnonsensethanks: Huge fat rolls are a sign that your body stores too much fat because you’ve consumed too much energy. It looks unhealthy because it is. Humans find health attractive.

gypsyrose90: Have to say it but it’s not good to have fat rolls. There you go.

bisexualqt: But you can get rid of them and be healthy. No one is born with huge fat rolls

Comments such as these reaffirm a metonymical reading of fat bodies: one only needs to look at a fat person to know what their dieting and exercise practices are and be reassured about their own practices, health, and attractiveness. In the case of *brianaishungry*’s comment, “Stop justifying your [w]eight and get your ass to a gym,” fatphobia is warranted by the belief that fatness requires an intervention because it is an unhealthy choice that can be reversed through diet and exercise.

The unflinching reliance on the pathologization of obesity and moralization of health can also be seen in more “benevolent” posts by antagonists. Some fatphobic posts make qualifying claims: fat people should not be shamed, but fatness should not be accepted. fropp-y, for example, writes:

Being fat is nothing that should be made fun of. People shouldn't insult or tease people for being fat. With that said, nobody should be fat or be comfortable with being fat in the first place.

In this post, fropp-y reifies the idea that fatness is unnecessary and, therefore, something that can and should be changed, rather than celebrated: though we should not fat shame people, fatness should not exist. This belief is often contested by fat activists. In response to fropp-y's Tumblr post, edenobell writes:

[...] Saying to not fatshame and then IMMEDIATELY telling people not to be fat is so incredibly redundant and contradictory that you might as well have made a post that says “Hey guys, don't shame fat people. I'll just do that for you.” [...] To all of my beautifully big babies: You are allowed to love your own body. Know your body's weaknesses and strengths and decide for yourself if you want that (and if you don't want to be fat, then remember that loving yourself and coming to terms with every part of you is KEY to making positive changes). You are allowed to be comfortable with your weight. Don't let other people tell you how you should feel about yourself.

edenobell's response calls attention to the contradiction intrinsic in fropp-y's post and the clear fatphobia in the argument that “nobody should be fat.” Again, fatness is cast as unnecessary and, therefore, a personal choice or individual moral failing. She follows her critique by offering validation to fat people: “You are allowed to be comfortable with your weight.” Of course, in telling her fat audience, “Know your body's weaknesses and strengths and decide for yourself if you want [to lose weight],” she risks reifying the conflation between health and value by implying that certain “weaknesses” may make weight loss the correct decision. Nevertheless, her intention here is positive, attempting to both challenge fropp-y and reaffirm the worth of fat individuals who may feel threatened by their fatphobic post.

In addition to directly engaging with antagonists, some fat activists create their own posts that mock fatphobes on Tumblr. For example, breadbank writes:

every fatphobic response to fat acceptance: FAT Acceptance is BAD because its NOT healthy to b faTtY!!! !! EVEYONe who is fat dies IMMEDIATELY and have DIabeats!!. it is literley So dangerous to love urself!!!! Everyone loose weight if they just Eet les\$s and exorcisze !,!!!!!! this is soo simple. Srlsly!!

The formatting of breadbank's post — deliberate misspellings, excessive exclamation points, sporadic capitalization — uses exaggeration to mime the polemic and hyperbolic stance that many fatphobes take. Their post encapsulates many common fatphobic assertions that appear on Tumblr: fatness is intrinsically unhealthy and deadly; fat activism glorifies obesity; weight loss is easy. Indeed, breadbank's post critiques the tendency for fatphobes to universally pathologize obesity and assume knowledge of fat people's health based on their physical appearance.

Through hyperbole, they position these tropes as trite and misinformed. In doing so, breadbank moves toward a denaturalization of anti-obesity rhetoric, suggesting that although fatphobes ground their arguments in discussions of health, their concern is overinflated and ultimately unwarranted.

In response to breadbank's post, noticing the antagonism it generated, collaberal-damage writes, "@ all these fatphobes in the notes: it's possible to have fat on your body without being obese?? like yes obesity is really bad but it's? okay to have some weight on you? it doesn't hurt anyone??" breadbank responds: "I don't wanna be rude because I think you're trying to help but saying 'obesity is really bad' is fatphobic." I draw attention to this interaction to point out that fatphobia often stems from ignorance. While some fatphobes troll for the sheer purpose of victimizing fat people, others, such as collaberal-damage, may not understand the complexity of biomedical truth claims about obesity. Given that collaberal-damage calls out fatphobes in their comment, breadbank recognizes that they might be "trying to help." Perceiving them as a

potential ally, and possibly amenable to criticism, breadbank uses a different tone in their response than they do in their original post. After prefacing their response with “I don’t wanna be rude,” they offer a gentle correction rather than mocking. This interaction reveals that members of counterpublics employ a variety of rhetorical tactics when engaging dominant publics based on perceived hostility or ignorance.

Indeed, the hostility of fatphobic content on Tumblr varies. Vitriolic fatphobia on Tumblr is characterized by unambiguous forms of dehumanization. This includes death threats, such as dasgemkorp’s remark that “Fat people should be shot down in the street like the disgusting animals they are.” However, vitriolic content is more frequently coded in the rhetoric of the “obesity epidemic.” In these instances, there is no need for outright death threats: fat people do not need to be killed because they are already killing themselves, and if they do not want to acknowledge this, then they can accept the consequences of their “choices.”

fitveganartsygurl explains:

I seriously don’t understand fat acceptance. you want me to change the way I think and the way I feel attracted to people because you are a fat piece of shit blob too lazy to put down that hamburger?...like no. Your lack of self respect is huge, just like you. You made your bed, now you lay on it.

This trolling models the familiar moves made by fatphobic people: assumptions, judgments, abandonment. At fatphobia’s most extreme, such as when fitveganartsygurl writes, “You made your bed, now you lay on it,” it becomes clear that if fat activists cannot “be ordered into desirable subjects through biopolitical processes,”³²⁰ then “conferring upon them the status of the living dead”³²¹ appears not only appropriate, but wholly justified. If a fat person, especially a fat activist, resists losing weight, their current form renders them voiceless. It is through an

³²⁰ McKinnon, “Necropolitical Voices and Bodies in the Rhetorical Reception of Iranian Women’s Asylum Claims,” 217.

³²¹ Mbembe qtd. in Ibid.

active, sustained “refusal of social recognition,”³²² in other words, that fat people are symbolically left for dead.

Few posts are as outwardly hateful as the above. I include it, not because it is representative in terms of the whole sample, but because it is characteristic of the sequence of moves made via fatphobic rhetoric. The final type of antagonism I wish to highlight is that which relies on discourses of feminism and body positivity to justify itself, such as when bichihopethefuckyou do writes:

Feminism and fat acceptance are separate.
 I consider myself a body positive feminist.
 Stretch marks? Almost everyone has them calm down.
 Dark undereye circles? Grunge chic.
 Acne? No biggie. Loads of people deal with it.
 Prosthetics? Rock on you're like a superhero.
 Anything else you can't really change? Yes you should absolutely overcome your self hatred and move on because everyone has flaws and everyone has strengths.
 You're 400 pounds and can't fit in a standard sized desk, airplane seat, or diner booth?
 No, you did that to yourself and you can absolutely undo it.
 You're ruining feminism, making it a joke.

By referencing individuals who are “400 pounds,” this post passes judgment on individuals who are not necessarily “just” fat, but “excessively” overweight. Unlike bodily insecurities that “you can't really change,” bichihopethefuckyou do positions being 400 pounds as unnatural. More specifically, they frame “excess” fatness as a voluntary choice. The argument that “you did that to yourself and you can absolutely undo it” mirrors fitveganartsygurl's remark that “you made your bed, now you lay on it.” This parallel demonstrates that vitriolic and “feminist” forms of fatphobia are not mutually exclusive. Both examples perpetuate fatphobia by suggesting that fat people lack the self-restraint and discipline required for weight loss. In other words, fat individuals' experiences cannot be taken seriously as forms of discrimination because they are

³²² Ibid.

presumed to be self-inflicted. Fat activists' demands for acceptance are thus framed as irrational, unwarranted, and perhaps even backwards. For these reasons, bichihopethefuckyou do claims that fat activists are "ruining feminism" by "making it a joke." Separating fat acceptance from feminism serves to legitimate feminism as a movement worth taking seriously and to distance it from the ideological stereotypes associated with fatness.

A final example demonstrates the extent to which fatphobia develops out of the fear that fat acceptance will "spread" and delude otherwise rational individuals into believing that fat acceptance is not dangerous. dolosolo writes:

On some real shit tho has the fat acceptance actually done anything positive besides lying to impressionable girls about health? And glorifying obesity which is a huge problem in our country right now? Has it done anything besides breed a hateful group of overweight women who demand people to find them attractive? Who demand special privileges? [...] Shame on you. Shame on the fat acceptance movement for encouraging obesity and lying about facts and telling people their doctors are lying, "fatphobic", misogynistic pigs. Its disgusting and it is unhealthy.

dolosolo expresses concern not necessarily with fat people themselves, but fat activists' belief system, which is "encouraging obesity" and "lying about facts." They reference the "obesity epidemic" in the U.S. and worry about the uptake of fat acceptance rhetoric among "impressionable girls" on Tumblr. However, to reiterate, concern with the "spread" of obesity is not value-neutral. dolosolo's fears that fat acceptance encourages obesity has as much to do with the perception of obesity as "disgusting" as it does the potential health risks obesity may pose. Ultimately, they shame fat activists in order to silence them, which is justified as a necessary measure to prevent the spread of fat acceptance and fatness itself.

Enclave advocacy

So far, I have demonstrated that Tumblr serves enclave functions that allow for intra-network conversations and practices of self-acceptance to take place. However, I have also

drawn attention the presence of fatphobic antagonism on the platform, which disrupts enclave practices by derailing conversations and deriding activists' bodies and beliefs. In some instances, fat activists do not mind engaging with antagonism—I noted several examples where users respond to fatphobic content or produce their own content that addresses antagonistic Tumblr users. Still, not every fat activist on Tumblr wishes to encounter fatphobic content, let alone engage with antagonists. Because Tumblr is publicly accessible, it is nearly impossible for fat activists to completely safeguard themselves from fatphobia. This section elaborates on the concept of enclave ambivalence by detailing examples of enclave *advocacy*. Users who advocate for enclaving ask fatphobes to stop harassing them, discuss the negative effects of fatphobic content on Tumblr, and describe the measures they take to avoid this type of antagonistic content. These examples not only demonstrate the need for fat activist enclave spaces, but reveal that enclaving is challenging—if not impossible—to achieve within Tumblr's fat activist network.

Many fat activists on Tumblr take active measures to reduce the presence of antagonism on their blogs and dashboards. Users floraljewitch and whatbigotspost, for example, write:

i unfollow people just for reblogging posts with subtle, unintended fatphobia. idc anymore. either understand that your opinions are shitty and oppressive or get away from me

Aggressive reminder that this blog is unapologetically fat positive. Saying stuff like “being overweight is bad” gets you blocked [...] If you follow this blog and view its content **you are consuming the labor of a fat woman**. You don't get to do that while shitting on people like me.

floraljewitch indicates that they are no longer inclined to engage with fatphobes, even when their antagonism is “subtle” or “unintended,” by writing “idc anymore.” Whereas floraljewitch unfollows users for reblogging with fatphobic content, whatbigotspost blocks them. In both

posts, the users argue that fatphobic antagonism is unwarranted and unappreciated. floraljewitch makes it clear that fatphobia is “shitty and oppressive,” while this sentiment is more implicit in whatbigotspost’s assertion that fatphobes are “shitting on” users who advocate for fat positivity.

For some users, these types of strategies may be generally effective in reducing the presence of fatphobic content within their networks. For example, darlingiknow explains:

it is WILD how many people who claim to be feminists or even take on the ‘sjw’ label with pride, and people who fall under several other oppressed groups STILL fucking hate fat people and cannot, for the life of them, understand where we are coming from on posts made for fat people. i’m in my self-made internet bubble of fucking rad fat people and sometimes i forget how nearly everyone, even people who claim to fight for equality for everyone, fucking hates us.

This user notes how incredulous it is that even purportedly radical, feminist, and/or “SJW” users “cannot...understand where we are coming from on posts made for fat people,” which suggests that she is not unfamiliar with the resistance Tumblr’s fat activists face in their advocacy. By emphasizing twice that “everyone...fucking hates us,” it is clear this fatphobia fatigues her and never ceases to stun her. Nevertheless, by referencing her “self-made internet bubble of fucking rad people,” which she has presumably cultivated by utilizing Tumblr’s platform affordances, darlingiknow implies that she is generally able to circumvent fatphobia and utilize Tumblr as an enclave space where she has the support of “fucking rad fat people.”

However, creating an “internet bubble” on Tumblr cannot guarantee protection from fatphobic antagonism. While some users commit to fighting antagonists, others discuss the deleterious effects of enclave intrusion. eggshells explains:

i deleted the last post bc i really just couldnt handle that shit in my space and making me feel both unsafe and attacked but its just really fucking awful that any fat person feels like they cant voice their opinion without people attacking them immediately because they dont believe in “pro fat logic.” [...] im upset that a personal post i made about this, expressing these feelings was attacked because the reader didnt really care about my message and was going through the fatphobia tag to hurt fat people, in addition to the fact that i felt the need to make this post in the first place! fatphobia is rampant in so

many spaces, and it sucks that the one that's supposed to be the most accepting is no better.

This user expresses the importance of having “my space,” referring to a space online where fatphobia is not “rampant.” Like darlingiknow, she acknowledges Tumblr’s reputation as “accepting” and points out how her experiences with fatphobia contradict the platform’s reputation. She refers to antagonists’ belief in “pro fat logic” in quotation marks, which may suggest that fatphobes do not understand what the purpose of fat acceptance is. Still, she emphasizes that this fatphobia is harmful. Not only did she delete the original post she had made, which was trolled by antagonists, but she explains that this intrusion made her “feel both unsafe and attacked.” While deleting posts can reduce the presence of fatphobic content and help shape an online enclave space, it risks silencing marginalized voices such as eggshells’s. To this end, she takes concern with the ripple effects of this antagonism on Tumblr’s fat activist network by discussing how fat people feel “like they cant voice their opinion without people attacking them immediately.” For fear of encountering antagonism, fat activists may self-censor or avoid producing content in the first place.

Enclaving online is challenging due to the SNS’s blurring of public and private. In response to eggshells, an anonymous user submitted the following “ask:” “Ok but this is a public internet though. If you post something, someone has every right to interact with it in any way they want to. It’s just a fact of life.” This comment echoes Michael Warner’s point that while counterpublic texts may address a specific audience, they are nevertheless a form of “indefinite address”³²³ that “commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger.”³²⁴ eggshells posted the anonymous user’s “ask” publicly with the following response:

³²³ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 59.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

“and i have the right to respond by asking people to leave me alone so please me leave me alone.” Asking for privacy is one strategy to maintain an enclave space, and it is one that is characterized by ambivalence: egshells wants an audience, but wants to restrict its membership to those who are like-bodied and/or like-minded. Despite her request for privacy, this anonymous user’s “ask” demonstrates that antagonists may not respect her wishes.

The presence of antagonism online may cause some users to stop posting fat activist content or leave Tumblr altogether. I turn to one final example to demonstrate this. An anonymous fat activist user on Tumblr sent fatwlw the following “ask”:

I feel like fat acceptance is waning. Whenever I want to go and look for body positive stuff I always get anti acceptance blogs up the butt which really shows how virulent people want to be in policing others.

fatwlw posted the “ask” publicly with the following response: “tbh I’m starting to feel more like this too. I’m just,, completely fucking undesirable to people and it hurts.” Pointing toward fatphobes’ “policing” of fat activists, the anonymous user suggests that this antagonism is turning fat activists away from Tumblr. Of course, it is challenging to know whether the presence of “anti acceptance blogs up the butt” in fat activist and body positive tags indicates an increase in fatphobia, a decrease in fat activism, or both.

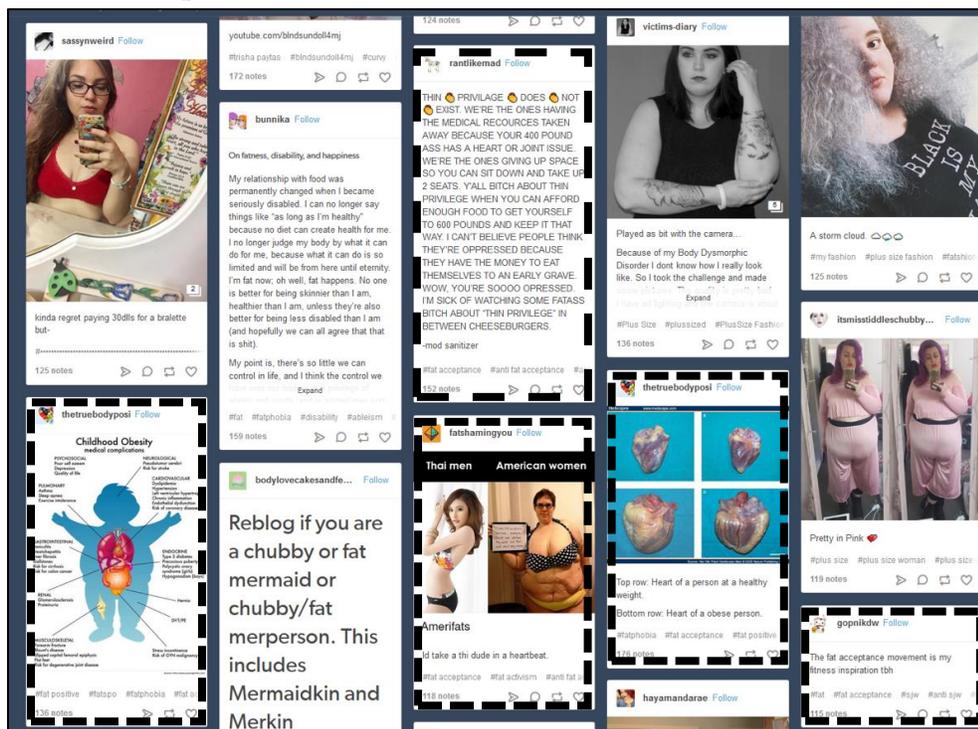


Figure 18: Screenshot of Tumblr’s #fat activist tag page. Fatphobic content is outlined with dashes.

It may be the case that activists tag their posts less frequently than previously to avoid antagonism. It may also be the case that users are shifting their activism to different SNSs. Regardless of why fatphobia is rampant in fat activist tags, fatwlv's response, reflecting on how this makes her feel "completely fucking undesirable to people," shows that enclave antagonism can problematically lead to the internalization of fatphobia.

Williams writes that "Fat accepting spaces...are intended to be safe arenas of support in which members of various communities can feel free to be themselves without worrying about being policed."³²⁵ However, the posts included here demonstrate that due to high volumes of enclave intrusion and antagonism from fatphobic users, the stability of Tumblr as a safe enclave for fat activists is tenuous. Squires argues that "nurturing the cultural strengths and memory of a public in enclave sites is key to maintaining a storehouse of knowledge, potential tactics, and strategies, to be used in counterpublic moments."³²⁶ The deletion of fat activist posts, deletion of accounts, and migration away from Tumblr demonstrates that antagonism can shut down conversation, stall the progression of fat activism, and harm fat activists who utilize the space as a "safe haven."³²⁷ For some fat activists, the digital sphere is the only space where they can enclave; the subversion of enclaving, therefore, has serious implications that must be taken into consideration when studying networked counterpublics.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined interactions that take place within Tumblr's fat activist network. The content I analyzed suggests that contemporary fat activism reflects its historical context. Whereas activism of the 90s and early 00s shifted away from the de-pathologization of

³²⁵ Williams, "Fat People of Color," 1.

³²⁶ Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere," 464.

³²⁷ Williams, "Fat People of Color," 14.

obesity and focused on a celebration of fatness, discussions surrounding the de-pathologization of obesity have resurfaced on Tumblr. In part, this can be attributed to the resurgence of anti-obesity rhetoric in the dominant public, which situates fatness not only as a health risk, but an “epidemic,” engendering fear that obesity—and the ideologies associated with it—may spread. However, the presence of antagonism on Tumblr can also be attributed to its platform features, which make it challenging for fat activists to distance themselves from users who express fatphobic beliefs.

This chapter has also demonstrated the challenges with de-pathologizing obesity. While some fat activists invoke medical authority to refute the correlation between size and health, others critique this practice and stress that physical health should never be conflated with moral worth. Of course, an emphasis on the fact that fat people can be healthy seems warranted when fatphobes embrace an unflinching pathologization of obesity. This rhetorical strategy subverts causal claims and some of the stereotypes associated with fat people. However, these practices become problematic when they reaffirm a connection between health and moral worth, which marginalizes fat people who may not be healthy, or whose size can be directly attributed to lifestyle choices. I would suggest that it is the denaturalization of anti-obesity rhetoric, more so than its de-pathologization alone, that works to subvert fatphobic ideologies. By denaturalizing fatphobia, users attempt to demonstrate that fatphobia emerges out of moralized disciplinary norms rather than a genuine concern for health.

To this end, intra-network discourse on Tumblr serves a valuable purpose. This chapter has considered the deleterious effects that fatphobic enclave intrusion can have on activists, but it also highlights the importance of a platform like Tumblr for enclave engagement. It is through intra-network discourse that fat activists interact with one another and attempt to shape the

trajectory of the fat acceptance movement. In addition to intra-network conversations around the de-pathologization of obesity, this chapter examined discussions of body positivity and intersectionality. Some fat activists emphasize the merits of body positivity: like fat activism, it allows for personal empowerment, self-acceptance, and the celebration of non-normativity. However, critics of body positivity argue that it has co-opted and softened fat acceptance to the point where activists no longer see their missions or bodies represented. Just as body positivity has been critiqued as lacking an intersectional approach, so too has fat activism. Fat activists on Tumblr advocate against a single-axis approach to fat acceptance, pointing out that fatphobia intrinsically intersects with racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and ableism. An intersectional approach is crucial to develop a model of fat acceptance that addresses the multivariate experiences of fatphobia that individuals encounter in their daily lives.

It is precisely because fat people encounter fatphobia in their daily lives that Tumblr is an important SNS to study. As fat activists themselves have noted, Tumblr's media ideology is one of acceptance, support, and inclusion. In other words, it is widely believed that Tumblr's platform affordances allow marginalized users to "escape" to a safe place where they can achieve distance from the oppression they experience in their daily lives. The presence of fatphobic antagonism on the platform, however, contradicts its reputation. I have attempted to account for this antagonism by tracking its circulation and situating it historically. While some fatphobic users rely exclusively on anti-obesity rhetoric to justify their hatred, others invoke contemporary discourses of body positivity to distance fat acceptance from Tumblr's feminist ideology. Regardless of the motivations behind fatphobic antagonism, I have considered the deleterious effects it can have on individual users and fat activist networking.

To conclude this section, I wish to draw attention back to the concept of enclave ambivalence. This chapter has provided a brief glimpse into the vibrant debates and discussions taking place within Tumblr's fat activist network. Fat activists on Tumblr encompass a range of beliefs. While some users directly confront antagonists, others focus primarily on intra-network engagement. Additionally, while some users take a great deal of concern with de-pathologizing obesity, others prefer to utilize the SNS to focus on self-acceptance and fat positivity. Some fat activist scholars argue that because of "the presence of multiple, interlocking, yet separate, discourses"³²⁸ among fat activists, "it is unclear that fat activism can currently be seen as a social movement."³²⁹ However, I have argued in this chapter that the diversity of fat activist perspectives is a strength of the movement. This is not to suggest that fat activism is perfect or that it has achieved its goals. The critiques raised throughout this chapter demonstrate that fat activists must continue to make the movement more inclusive and strive to address fatphobia at the systematic level. By referring to enclave ambivalence as a strength, I mean to highlight how a diversity of fat activist perspectives opens up conversations about these critiques. Whereas pre-digital fat activist enclaves employed a separatist approach that downplayed difference, fat activists on Tumblr acknowledge it. It is through the recognition and negotiation of the movement's ambivalence, in other words, that Tumblr's fat activists work to strengthen it.

³²⁸ Ibid., 1.

³²⁹ Meleo-Erwin, "A Beautiful Show of Strength," 193.

Conclusion

This thesis developed out of a question I could not shake as I shifted roles from a user of Tumblr to a researcher of the platform: Why is Tumblr framed in utopian terms in academic literature when fatphobia is pervasive within its fat activist network? I have argued in this thesis that the concept of “enclave ambivalence” answers this question. Scholars who have written on Tumblr are not wrong: the platform *is* generally an inclusive and welcoming space. It is a powerful site for the production of counter-hegemonic representations, and its fat activist network is no exception. Building from earlier iterations of the fat acceptance movement, fat activists on Tumblr continue to critique anti-obesity rhetoric, advocate for self-acceptance, and reject the belief that their existence in the public sphere comes with terms and conditions. To stop here, however, is to overlook the challenges that Tumblr’s fat activists encounter while trying to achieve these goals. The presence of fatphobia on the SNS disrupts Tumblr’s fat activist network and while it produces opportunities for counterpublic advocacy, it also silences and oppresses those who utilize the SNS as an enclave space.

The presence of fatphobia on Tumblr, I have argued, is unsurprising when considering two factors: the SNS’s platform features, which de-incentivize trolling from “outsiders,” but do not prevent active Tumblr users from interacting with fat activists; and the historical conditions that mark fatness as an ideological “threat” that needs to be contained. Tumblr is understood to feel secluded because its privacy settings allow for flexible anonymity: users can divulge as little or as much identifying information as they want. Additionally, the design of its interface makes trolling challenging for individuals who are not invested in learning how to navigate it. By-and-large, Tumblr users are young individuals, many of whom have marginalized identities and incorporate social justice advocacy into their blogs. However, the history of fatphobia that I have provided in this thesis reveals that even well-meaning, progressive individuals may hold fatphobic beliefs. Fatphobic Tumblr users take a great deal of concern with the health risks of obesity, but their fears are never

far-removed from the moralization of fatness. Fat acceptance is not just a health risk, but a perceived threat to Tumblr's ideological integrity. Warnings of the dangers of fat acceptance are about more than the spread of obesity—they are about the spread of irrationality, indolence, over-indulgence, and impropriety. If Tumblr is a hermetically sealed progressive platform, then fat acceptance is a contaminant.

Yet the reverse can be said about fatphobia on the SNS—and this is precisely why enclave ambivalence is important. Either/or approaches fall short in an analysis of Tumblr's fat activist network. This is not to excuse fatphobia on the SNS, but to acknowledge its complexity. The “benevolence” of many fatphobic Tumblr users warrants fat activists' efforts to denaturalize fatphobia. Counterpublic advocacy on the SNS unmask the moralization of biomedical anti-obesity rhetoric and thus serves a vital educational purpose. Paradoxically, this is also the risk that enclave ambivalence poses: as important as it is to combat fatphobia, fat activists need safe spaces where they can withdraw, regroup, and heal. The examples of enclave advocacy in Chapter 2 demonstrate that pervasive fatphobia on Tumblr risks further marginalizing and silencing fat activists. This raises an important question: If users on a site as seemingly utopian as Tumblr impede fat activist engagement, is there *anywhere* online where fat people can successfully enclave?

Offline enclaving

You might read the above question and ask yourself, “Can't fat activists enclave offline?” The simple answer here is: yes. And indeed, some fat activists do. Throughout this thesis, I have referred to “pre-digital” and “digital” iterations of fat activism, but these terms are not meant to establish a rigid binary between the two. Fat activism certainly takes place offline today. However, structural barriers preclude offline organization that mirrors the degree of engagement that takes

place online—it remains the case that contemporary fat activism is primarily a networked practice.³³⁰ Additionally, it is important to consider the limitations of offline enclaving alongside its merits.

To this end, Chapter 1 of this thesis sought to evaluate offline, pre-digital enclaving practices to better understand enclave ambivalence on Tumblr. Between the 70s and early 00s, fat activist enclave groups offered fat people the type of safe, protected space that could be said is absent on Tumblr. These enclaves served multiple purposes. For groups such as FU and BFL, fat-only spaces helped facilitate fat activist consciousness-raising and problem-solving. It was understood that fat women needed enclave spaces to de-internalize fatphobia, foster confidence and self-acceptance, and develop the tools, knowledge, and resources needed for counterpublic advocacy. For groups such as PPPO, enclaves were not used to *prepare* for counterpublic advocacy, but to periodically *retreat* from it. Agitational disruptions of public spaces allowed activists to portray themselves as confident and unwavering. These public reclamations of the spectacle helped create new representations of fatness, but they required a performance of confidence that did not always match activists' lived experiences. Rather than bracket feelings of dissonance, enclaving provided activists a space where they could work through them before returning to counterpublic advocacy. Ultimately, for groups like PPPO, enclaving transformed the type of activism in which they would engage. Later iterations of their activism would disentangle the complexity of fat embodiment in public. Ambivalence, in other words, was incorporated into their counterpublic advocacy.

Enclaving was vital to pre-digital iterations of fat activism, but it was not flawless. In particular, fat activist enclaves in the 70s and 80s were intentionally – and problematically – separatist. Building on second-wave feminist activism, fat activist enclaves during this time only allowed women to participate. This was considered a necessary measure because it was believed that

³³⁰ Mondin, “Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images”; Afful and Ricciardelli, “Shaping the Online Fat Acceptance Movement”; Meleo-Erwin, “A Beautiful Show of Strength”; Williams, “Fat People of Color.”

fatphobia disproportionately affected women. Additionally, within these enclaves, activists forwarded an emphasis on sameness over difference. Groups such as BFL asked fat activists to bracket markers of difference in the name of collective unity. The leaders of these groups feared that in-group conflict would destabilize the fat acceptance movement. Recognizing fatphobia as gendered was not unwarranted because it *is*. However, critics point out that patriarchy is “a network of hierarchies that interweaves identity categories of sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, and ablebodiedness.”³³¹ In other words, the “feminization” of fat impacts *everyone* and single-axis approaches to fat acceptance downplayed the expansive and intersectional reach of fatphobia.

Networked enclaving is important because heterogenous voices are given space to be heard. Pre-digital iterations of fat activism may have masked the ambivalence of fatness, but fat activists on Tumblr reckon with it without necessarily reconciling it. Active debates take place surrounding the de-pathologization of obesity, the effects of body positivity on the movement, and the need for intersectional approaches to fat acceptance. At the same time that activists inform a broader audience, they educate one another as well. Critics of online activism suggest that it privileges an individualized focus and precludes large-scale structural change. However, the examples I have included in my analysis reveal that users are reflexive about these critiques and forward the need for systematic responses to fatphobia.

If the sustained presence of fatphobia on Tumblr is any indication, systematic change does not happen overnight, which brings me to my final point about enclave ambivalence in Tumblr’s fat activist network. There is *always* room for improvement: fat activism can – and should – strive to be more intersectional and increase their advocacy for structural change. However, such critiques should not be used to discredit the ways in which fat activism on Tumblr is efficacious. While

³³¹ Usiekiewicz, “Dangerous Bodies: Blackness, Fatness, and the Masculinity Divide,” 27.

enclave ambivalence allows important debates surrounding fat activism to unfold, one thing is unambiguous: fat activism on Tumblr informs activists' lived, embodied experiences. Tumblr's fat activists "share their stories, listen to others' stories, consume popular culture in ways that they find empowering, and create new vocabularies to enhance their own lives."³³² Through these online experiences, users are able to understand their bodies as "open to contestation, reappropriation, and processes of alternative meaning-making."³³³ A single like or reblog may not resolve the ambivalence of fat activism, but these networked practices make fat activists' everyday lives more habitable.

Implications and future research

This thesis has clear implications for media studies. It is my hope that the research presented here offers a starting point for future research on enclave ambivalence. As Renninger notes, "With changes in platforms and networks of users, media ideologies shift."³³⁴ For example, while it is possible that fat activism is beginning to shift away from Tumblr, scholars have pointed out its growing presence on SNSs such as Instagram.³³⁵ Whereas Tumblr is an almost exclusively public platform, Instagram allows users to follow one another but keep their accounts private if they prefer. Although Tumblr is often characterized as a space for enclave formation, it is possible that it does not afford marginalized groups the same privacy that SNSs like Instagram do. Further research, of course, is needed to verify such a hypothesis, but my point here is that a possible decrease in fat activism on Tumblr does not inherently signify a dwindling of the movement.

Future research can also explore enclave ambivalence within other marginalized networks. For example, while Renninger argues that there is a relative absence of antagonism from "outsiders"

³³² Wendy K.Z. Anderson and Kittie E. Grace, "Taking Mama Steps' Toward Authority, Alternatives, and Advocacy: Feminist Consciousness-Raising within a Digital Motherhood Community," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 6 (November 2, 2015): 945, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1061033>.

³³³ Houdek, "The Rhetorical Force of 'Global Archival Memory,'" 210.

³³⁴ Renninger, "Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind," 1518.

³³⁵ Jessica Cwynar-Horta, "The Commodification of the Body Positive Movement on Instagram," *Stream: Inspiring Critical Thought* 8, no. 2 (December 31, 2016): 36–56.

within Tumblr's asexual network, parallels can be drawn between the platform's asexual and fat activist networks. Just as fatphobic antagonism on the SNS is produced by feminist users, acephobic antagonism is produced by members of the LGBT+ community. Divisive discussions and debates, including antagonism, take place on Tumblr, especially as users attempt to negotiate whether or not heteroromantic asexuals can identify as "queer." "Ace Discourse," as these debates and antagonism are referred to, is pervasive and may be understood as an example of enclave ambivalence.

Additionally, explorations of enclave ambivalence are not exclusive to research on activism—they can be expanded to consider other instances where deliberate separatism is destabilized by "outside" individuals. On reddit, for example, hate groups such as r/The_Donald and r/TheRedPill utilize the platform's affordances to mitigate the presence and influence of oppositional voices. These practices have come under intense scrutiny and contestation, yet the question of whether or not to shut down these hate groups goes unresolved.

This research also has implications for the discipline of fat studies. This thesis has attempted to build on critiques of fat studies scholarship's lack of intersectional engagement. Although fat activist researchers acknowledge that fat acceptance is not a singular movement, its successes are often celebrated without considering where it can improve. I have attempted to use scholars' critiques of fat studies and fat activism to nuance my analysis of the movement's history. This is not to dismiss or downplay the achievements of the fat acceptance movement, but to warrant a careful evaluation of its strengths and limitations. Though I have attempted to be as comprehensive as possible, the limitations of this project means that the history that I have presented here is necessarily partial. Further research on the fat acceptance movement can – and should – explore topics such as classism and ableism in more rigorous detail. In particular, I encourage fat activist researchers to consider how multivariate markers of difference have historically influenced fatphobic anti-obesity rhetoric. To this end, future research could include deeper archival research of both fat

acceptance and *anti*-obesity documents. Although fat studies scholars have expressed hesitance about discussing fatphobia at length, I have attempted to demonstrate its necessity. Attending to hegemonic constructions of fatness across time helps to evaluate fat activism's efficacy.

Denaturalizing anti-obesity rhetoric requires unpacking how it has been historically moralized, which necessitates an intersectional approach.

Appendix A: Codebook

* Tables where the example column is starred with an asterisk (*) indicates that examples are excerpts from longer posts. This is only done for non-mutually exclusive codes to draw attention to the specific content within a post that would warrant the use of the code. Examples in columns without an asterisk include the entire Tumblr post.

1. *Categorizing sampled content*

1.1 *Categories*

These mutually exclusive codes were used to classify the primary intent of each sampled post. Examples can be found in sub-categorizations.

Code	Conceptualization	Example
Counterpublic advocacy	Advocates for the support and acceptance of fat people; and/or advocates against fatphobia.	Fat Rolls are just as beautiful as curves and you should never be ashamed of them
Fatphobia	Attempts to undermine, delegitimize, discredit fat activism; and/or shames, stigmatizes, or derides fat people.	Your fat will kill you, it doesn't care about your feelings or public stance. You'll be dead by 60.
Enclave advocacy	Notes the presence of fatphobic antagonism/intrusion on Tumblr; the negative impact it has on fat activists; and/or asks antagonists to leave them [the poster or fat activists broadly] alone.	Just let us have our two or three tags and stop putting your fat phobic bullshit in it.

2. *Address*

2.1 *Address codes*

These mutually exclusive codes were used to classify the intended audience of each post. These codes refer to who the poster appears to be addressing and *not* who is able to access the post.

Code	Conceptualization	Counterpublic advocacy example	Fatphobia example	Enclave advocacy example
Nonspecific	Does not address a specific subset of Tumblr users.	RADICAL IDEA: Fat people, ALL FAT PEOPLE, deserve to express self-love and express it LOUDLY!	Fat acceptance is helping America's obesity epidemic spread. Yes, epidemic.	fatphobia is rampant in so many spaces, and it sucks that the one that's supposed to be the most accepting is no better.
Fat people	Addresses fat people and/or fat activists.	All fat people: born fat, yo-yo'd fat, side-effect fat, syndrome fat, or however you became fat: You are not a disease, you deserve respect, and you should be honored in the body you're in because it's just as wonderful and storied and worthy as the bodies thin people live in.	I hate fat people. Stop eating you disgusting pigs	n/a
Fatphobes	Addresses individuals who hold fatphobic beliefs	Fat people have always existed, and we will continue to exist. no matter how mad that makes you.	n/a	I will refute you, ignore you, and re-post the content so people can view it without your toxic input.
Intra-network	Addresses fat activists to resolve tensions among activists and/or demand change.	Fat acceptance means accepting unhealthy fat people. I don't care if it doesn't support your respectability politics. Unhealthy fat people	n/a	n/a

		(including those who's illness is related to their weight) deserve respect.		
Inter-network	Addresses members of other networks on Tumblr (e.g. LGBT, black, body positive, or feminist networks) to resolve tensions and/or demand change.	thin LBPO women really need to take some responsibility for the fatphobia in WLW communities. Uplift fat women, spread our voices, make us visible.	n/a	n/a

3. Thematic codes

These non-mutually exclusive codes were used to classify the thematic content of each post.

3.1. Counterpublic thematic codes

Code	Conceptualization	Example*
Example(s) of fatphobia	Lists example(s) of fatphobia of any kind. Can be general examples or personal experience.	Being forced to diet at a young age; being sent away to camps to starve and overexercise; being shamed and emotionally berated for eating; being taught to mistrust your own body's hunger and satiety cues.
Effect(s) of fatphobia	Describes effects of fatphobia, e.g. influence on behaviors or effects on physical/mental health. Can be general examples or personal experience.	I'm still embarrassed to eat or dance in front of people or smile in pictures and its ridiculous and I hate it
Reasons for fatness	Lists any reasons for fatness, e.g. illness, mental health issues, biology, and/or personal choice. Can be general examples or personal experience.	They could have hypothyroidism. They could be recovering from a restrictive eating disorder or replacing a more harmful drug addiction with food. They could have developed pregnancy-induced diabetes. They could be recovering from abuse or trauma and using food as a coping mechanism
Denaturalize fatphobia	Attempts to demonstrate that fatphobia is not rooted in concern for health.	People don't care about health, they just don't want to see fat people exist.
Refute causal claims	Challenges the belief that fatness/obesity causes health issues/disease; that fatness is a visual signifier of health; and/or asserts that fat people can be healthy.	Why are you pushing the idea that being fat is inherently unhealthy and that it's more important for fat people to be concerned with being skinny healthy than to love themselves?
Challenge medical authority	Disproves/discredits the authority/legitimacy/fatphobia of doctors, medical institutions, or scientific research.	Radical idea: Doctors should give fat patients the same amount of care and thought they would give to thin patients.
Invoke medical authority	Draws on the authority of medical institutions/doctors to validate they [the poster] are in good physical health; and/or to scientifically verify the negative physical/mental effects of fatphobia.	Everything was fine. I am not diabetic, my cholesterol is fine, my sodium is fine, even my thyroid levels were good.
Critique of hyperbole	Suggests that concern with fat people's health/well-being is excessive and out-of-proportion.	any time a fat person dares to be visible and happy at least one miserable soul will jump out of a bush and scream OKAY WELL HAVE FUN DYING YOUNG. like do you not have any

		friends or hobbies or anything? can you refrain from being such a drag or what
Critique of moralization of health	Refutes the belief that physical health is an indication of moral value; and/or offers support/validation to fat people who are unhealthy.	I know this is like a really controversial opinion but fat people deserve to be treated like a human beings whether they're healthy or not
Critique of social contagion	Subverts the idea that fatness is spread ideologically by identifying biological/structural causes of obesity.	i'm not saying there is no connection between consumption and 'obesity' but the relationship is a very complex one and it's not all about food. fat people and thin people alike suffer from food insecurity. there are millions of fat people who are going hungry in the first world.
Critique of temporality	Challenges the before-and-after weight loss narrative; suggests fatness is not a choice; and/or refuses to attempt to lose weight.	you heard it here first folks, being fat is not normal! every fat person please turn in your fatness at the door! the only right way to be is to be thin! sorry!
Critique of racism	Critiques the racism intrinsic to fatphobia.	For black women who are fat, our fatness is judged with an overwhelming amount of cultural stereotypes and racist beliefs about black people.
Critique of capitalism	Critiques how fatphobia is caused/perpetuated by capitalism.	The real problem when it comes to fat people flying in airplanes is definitely not fat people's bodies, and it's not even really the jerks who complain about sitting next to them (although they're terrible people)... it's the airline companies. These corporations have the ability to accommodate the natural diversity of human body sizes on their airplanes, and they choose not to do it. It might interfere with their profit margin temporarily, so they shift the blame and the costs onto their passengers
Critique of representation	Critiques negative representations/exclusion of fat people in the mass media and consumer culture.	I wonder when Michael Schur - creator of renowned progressive series such as Parks and Recreation, The Good Place, and Brooklyn 99 - will start treating fat people with common decency/civility/respect...?
Support for body positivity	Acknowledges the benefits of the body positive movement for fat people.	And for some of us, body positivity and fat acceptance are radical acts of defiance against kyriarchy and a demand to no longer be oppressed. So I mean. It matters.
Critique of body positivity	Identifies the limitations of body positivity and/or critiques its effects on fat activism.	FAT activism is NOT body posi. It is not a way to make individual people feel slightly better about their oppression while not challenging it at all. Body posi is what happens when capitalism co-opts a radical movement, specifically radical fat activism.
Critique of intersectionality	Critiques a lack of intersectionality within fat activism; and/or demands more visibility for people whose experiences of fatphobia intersect with other identity markers.	The intersection of racism + sexism+ anti-blackness + fatphobia is really toxic for us. For trans people who are fat, their fatness is judged with a negative belief towards trans bodies. And for non-black WOC theirs comes with the burden of racism too. We have to make the movement more inclusive.
Rhetoric of "deserving"	Argues that fat people deserve to be respect, to be valued, to be treated as human, to be happy, etc.	you deserve to be happy and treated with respect without qualifiers ♡
Public space	Argues that fat people are allowed to exist – especially in public – unconditionally and/or without judgment.	um. fat people are allowed to be outside btw. fat people are allowed to wear clothes that do not completely flatter them. fat people are allowed to have their belly showing or wear clothes too small for them. fat people are allowed to exist in whatever they want and we dont have to constantly make ourselves look appealing + attractive.
Fat positivity/celebration	Expresses positive sentiments toward fat bodies, fat	Fat Rolls are just as beautiful as curves and you should never be ashamed of them

	embodiment, and/or the appearance of fat people.	
Humor	Uses humor to mock fatphobes and/or subvert fatphobic arguments.	every fatphobic response to fat acceptance: FAT Acceptance is BAD because it's NOT healthy to be fat!!! !! EVERYONE who is fat dies IMMEDIATELY and has Diabetes!! it is literally so dangerous to love yourself!!! Everyone loses weight if they just eat less and exercise !!!!!!! this is so simple. Seriously! my uncle fat got him diabetic and he is BAD now!!!,
Personal narrative	References personal experience to build an argument (e.g. about examples/effects of fatphobia, the benefits of fat activism, critiques of the movement, etc.).	Growing up as a fat girl, much of this has become internalized and plays a part in my life - from the way I dress to what/how I eat to where I go grocery shopping to how I have sex. Everything.

3.2. Fatphobic thematic codes

Code	Conceptualization	Example*
Benevolence	Warrants fatphobia with concern for fat people's health.	I care about people regardless of size. That's why I want obese/morbidly obese people to get to a healthier size so they can live longer and feel better, emotionally and physically
Qualifying statement	Anti-obesity sentiment is qualified with a critique of fatphobia.	People shouldn't insult or tease people for being fat. With that said, nobody should be fat or be comfortable with being fat in the first place.
Vitriol	Outward hatred of fat people, including dehumanization and/or death threats.	Fat people should be shot down in the street like the disgusting animals they are. If you think being fat is acceptable you're disgusting.
Health	Explicitly mentions health or unhealthiness (can be in any context, e.g. causal claims, social contagion, medical authority, etc.).	you can't make the argument that someone can be obese and healthy
Directed at fat people	Content is directed specially at fat individuals (rather than a broader audience that may/may not include fat people).	I hate fat people. Stop eating you disgusting pigs
Causal claim	Implies an intrinsic correlation between body size and physical/health ailments; suggests fatness is a visual marker of pathology.	Your fat will kill you, it doesn't care about your feelings or public stance. You'll be dead by 60.
Invoke medical authority	References doctors, medical institutions, and/or scientific research to discredit fat acceptance.	anyone who claims to be happier while they're fat and not working to be healthy is in denial.... you can't be healthy and obese... it's scientifically impossible.
Moralize health	Associates physical health with moral worth.	Loving yourself means taking care of your body and not letting yourself turn into a jello blob of fat. If you truly love yourself, you will work to improve yourself, not become a fatass.
Social contagion	Suggests fatness/obesity is "contagious," i.e. "spread" ideologically; and/or positions fat acceptance as a threat to the general population.	Fat acceptance is helping America's obesity epidemic spread. Yes, epidemic.
Temporality	Argues fat people can and should lose weight; and/or argues that fatness is a voluntary choice.	Healthy weight loss is possible for literally every human being! You are not destined to always be fat! You can change things!

Body positive rhetoric	Expresses that healthy eating, dieting, and/or weight loss is a sign of love and respect for one's body; and/or positions fatness as oppositional to body positivity.	Daily Reminder: Being Positive to your body is eating healthy and exercising daily. Being positive to your body is not treating it poorly and voluntarily carrying (and embracing) excess weight that will only lead to health problems.
Appearance	Ridicules the physical appearance of fat people; suggests fat people are inherently ugly.	I'm fat phobic and proud, hate seeing obese bitches, turns me off. They make me wanna vomit
Ideological stereotype	Invokes stereotypes that fat people are: lazy, disgusting, sloppy, undisciplined, self-destructive, immoral, delusional, etc.	it's ALWAYS better to be in shape and eat healthy than be a lazy fat fuck who only makes excuses and preaches acceptance for their self destructive lifestyle...always.

3.3. Enclave advocacy thematic codes

Code	Conceptualization	Example*
Request	Expresses a request that antagonism stop. May be a general request or directed at antagonists themselves.	Just let us have our two or three tags and stop putting your fat phobic bullshit in it.
Effects	Indicates the negative effects that antagonism has on the individual poster and/or fat people/activists in general.	i deleted the last post bc i really just couldnt handle that shit in my space and making me feel both unsafe and attacked
Strategies	Lists examples of how to achieve enclaving, i.e. distance from antagonists.	I will refute you, ignore you, and re-post the content so people can view it without your toxic input.
Success	Suggests enclaving, i.e. distance from antagonists, is generally achieved.	i'm in my self-made internet bubble of fucking rad fat people
Media ideology	Notes that the presence of antagonism refutes the ideological perception of Tumblr as a safe, inclusive, and/or feminist platform.	fatphobia is rampant in so many spaces, and it sucks that the one that's supposed to be the most accepting is no better.

Appendix B: Statistical data

1. Categorizing sampled content

n = 198	Counterpublic advocacy	Fatphobia	Enclave advocacy
%	68%	23%	9%
#	135	45	18

2. Counterpublic advocacy

2.1 Audience codes (mutually exclusive):

n=135	general	fatphobes	intra-network	fat people	inter-network
%	54%	17%	15%	10%	4%
#	73	23	20	14	5

2.2 Thematic codes (not mutually exclusive):

n=135	Example(s) of fatphobia	Effect(s) of fatphobia	Reasons for fatness	Denaturalize fatphobia	Refute causal claims	Challenge medical authority	Invoke medical authority	Critique of hyperbole
%	40%	25%	8%	13%	13%	13%	3%	4%
#	54	34	11	18	18	18	5	6

n=135	Critique of moralization of health	Critique of social contagion	Critique of temporality	Critique of racism	Critique of capitalism	Critique of representation	Support for body positivity	Critique of body positivity
%	14%	7%	18%	7%	7%	16%	0.70%	4%
#	19	9	24	10	10	21	1	6

n=135	Critique of intersectionality	Rhetoric of "deserving"	Public space	Fat positivity/celebration	Humor	Personal narrative
%	10%	30%	20%	21%	5%	16%
#	14	41	27	28	7	21

3. Fatphobia

3.1 Thematic codes (not mutually exclusive):

n = 45	Benevolence	Qualifying statement	Vitriol	Directed at fat people	Health	Causal claim	Invoke medical authority	Moralize health
%	13%	24%	11%	56%	62%	53%	27%	49%
#	6	11	5	25	28	24	12	22

n = 45	Social contagion	Temporality	Body positive rhetoric	Appearance	Ideology
%	27%	58%	27%	13%	29%
#	12	26	12	6	13

4. Enclave advocacy

4.1 Thematic codes (not mutually exclusive):

n=18	Request	Effects	Strategies	Media ideology	Success
%	50%	33%	28%	11%	5%
#	9	6	5	2	1

Appendix C: Email response from Tumblr's support team (11/29/17)

Hello,

Thanks for reaching out!

The factors that contribute to appearing in search on Tumblr are complex and change almost daily, as we make improvements to provide the best results. So while the exact criteria may be different at any given moment, here are some factors that always affect what appears in search results:

- Whether you're looking at top or recent search results ("top" meaning our most popular posts, and recent meaning the posts appear with the most recent ones first). In the app you can switch between them by tapping those options underneath the search bar, and on the web they're at the top left of the search results.
- Whether Safe Search or Safe Mode are turned on (both will filter out sensitive content in search results). Learn more about those here: <https://tumblr.zendesk.com/hc/articles/231885248>
- Whether "Hide <blog name> from search results" is disabled on that blog's settings page.
- Original post vs. reblog (only original posts will show up in search results).
- Number of tags on the post (the first 20 tags on a post will be indexed in recent and top searches, and that blog's own tag pages, but only the first five will be indexed in tag search results, like searching for "#stuff" rather than "stuff").
- Whether the post employs any tactics often used by spam blogs (like using an excessive amount of trending tags at one time, for example).
- How often that blog's been posting on a particular tag or search page (if you've made multiple posts in a given public tag, only a few might show up together between other blogs for that search).
- Any links in the post (some links may cause posts to be hidden from recent search results).
- Number of post notes (for top search results only, not recent).

So while we can't be 100% sure of why a post is or isn't showing up in search results, keeping these factors in mind should offer some context while you browse. Thanks for venturing into the mystical world of search with me today.

Thanks,

Ben

Tumblr Support

Appendix D: List of Figures

Fig.	Pg.	Description	Source
1	50	1967 NYC Fat-In.	Cooper, Dr Charlotte. "Obesity Timebomb: Roots of Fat Activism #2: Steve Post's Fat-In Placard." <i>Obesity Timebomb</i> (blog), February 24, 2016. http://obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com/2016/02/100-fat-activists-2-steve-posts-fat-in.html .
2	51	Joyce and Bill Fabrey in NAAFA newsletter (1970).	"NAAFA Newsletter, Volume I, Issue No. 1." Westbury, NY, October 1970. https://www.naafaonline.com/newsletterstuff/oldnewsletterstuff/Chronicles/October%201970%20Newsletter.pdf
3	53	NAAFA fashion show and banquet (1973).	"NAAFA Newsletter, Volume III, Issue No. 2." Westbury, NY, November 1973. https://www.naafaonline.com/newsletterstuff/oldnewsletterstuff/Chronicles/November_1973.pdf .
4	55	Drawing from "Before you Go on a Diet, Read This" (date unknown).	Fat Underground. "Before You Go on a Diet, Read This," n.d. https://archive.li/o/uh9Xd/www.largesse.net/Archives/FU/brocureE.html .
5	59	Photo from 1978 FU meeting.	Wilson, Jane. "Fat Underground Throws Weight Into Obesity War." <i>Los Angeles Times</i> , 1976. https://search-proquest-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/docview/157967571?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=14214
6	59	Judith Stein and Judy Freespirit in MA (1980).	"Judith Stein." <i>Remembering Judy Freespirit</i> (blog), September 13, 2010. https://judyfreespirit.wordpress.com/2010/09/13/judith-stein/ .
7	63	NHFLF members in the <i>New York Times</i> (1978).	Swatek, Randall. "Fat Times in New Haven." <i>New York Times</i> . 1978, sec. Connecticut Weekly. https://search-proquest-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/docview/123784921?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=14214
8	63	BFL's "Throwing Our Weight Around" promo flyer (1989).	Dwyer, Sandy. "Throwing Our Weight around: A Video about Fat Women's Lives." Northeastern University Digital Repository Service, 1989. https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:cj82q0405 .
9	64	Hoffstein's art in the 1980 FFFWAM procedures.	Stein, Judith. "Proceedings of the First Feminist Fat Activists' Working Meeting," 1980. Box 1, Folder: Proceedings of the 1st Feminist Fat Activist Mtg. Judith Stein Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
10	71	Screenshots from 1994 G&M Convergence.	James Ferrante. <i>Convergence NY 1994</i> . Accessed April 24, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6Ve-Za0Xao .
11	75	Issue #2 of <i>i'm so fucking beautiful</i> (date unknown).	Raquel Fonesca. "I'm So Fucking Beautiful #2." April 24, 2018. https://www.pinterest.com/pin/561401909792617987/?lp=true .

12	76	Covers of issues #1-7 of <i>FaT GiRL</i> , 1994-1996.	“All 7 Issues, Published from 1994-1996.” <i>FaT GiRL</i> (the zine), February 23, 2010. https://www.facebook.com/322608789575/photos/a.322633054575.151163.322608789575/322633064575/?type=3&theater .
13	78	“Porky” cookie from a PPPPO event (date unknown).	“Allyson Mitchell Mike Hoolboom.” Accessed April 11, 2018. http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=19559 .
14	78	“Fat Femme Mafia” written on bathroom wall in Toronto (date unknown).	Alison. “PhotoTO:Pooping Plotting Behind Closed Doors.” <i>Torontoist</i> , December 9, 2005. https://torontoist.com/2005/12/phototopooping/ .
15	83	Fat-Bottom Revue performance (date/location unknown).	Williams, Audra. “How Leonard Nimoy’s Death Revealed Facebook’s Draconian Community Standards (Again).” <i>Ravishly Media Company</i> . Accessed April 24, 2018. https://www.ravishly.com/2015/03/02/how-leonard-nimoys-death-revealed-facebooks-draconian-community-standards-again .
16	85	Harvest Brown’s <i>Lesbian Connection</i> (Vol. 20, Issue 1, 1997) cover.	“Lesbian Connection: For, by & about Lesbians; Vol. 20, Issues 1-6, July/August 1997 - May/June 1998 Complete Run of Six Issues on Bolerium Books.” Bolerium Books. Accessed April 24, 2018. https://www.bolerium.com/pages/books/219413/lesbian-connection-for-by-about-lesbians-vol-20-issues-1-6-july-august-1997-may-june-1998-complete .
17	119	Artwork posted in fat activist tags on Tumblr.	Source URLs (right to left, top to bottom): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - http://thinfatfit.tumblr.com/post/167717460770/instagramcomgorditaslove - http://highfemmeexcess.tumblr.com/post/135897987201/i-did-some-art - http://marieboiseau.tumblr.com/post/159457239885 - http://histerismobg.tumblr.com/post/171111821220/body-positive-lookscreens-love-yourself - http://marieboiseau.tumblr.com/post/155685526960 - https://pastelpiggyprincess.tumblr.com/post/168537913224/double-chins-means-double-the-beauty - http://candy--heart.tumblr.com/post/165193389129/fat-people-dont-owe-you-shit-rachele-cateyes
18	138	Tumblr’s #fat activist tag page.	(Content changes over time and may not match screenshot): https://www.tumblr.com/search/fat+activism

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