

Lexia: Undergraduate Journal in Writing, Rhetoric & Technical Communication

Volume IV

2015–2016

The Rhetoric of Fat Female Bodies in Western Culture

Hannah Jones

James Madison University

Westernized countries, in particular the United States, place a tremendous amount of significance on the value of bodies based on an idealized norm that is damaging to those who do not meet the superficial standard. Fat women are among many other demographics excluded on the basis of their “abnormalities.” Part of this problematic and ungrounded exclusion comes from the negative messages Western society embeds in larger female bodies as visible manifestations of laziness, self-abandonment, weakness, and uncontrolled desires, among many other perceived qualities. In this way, “fat” does not only carry with it literal meaning when applied to women. Rather, in the context of Western societies, it is a multifaceted term used to other women who do not embody the slender ideal, placing value on physicality as an indicator of success or failure.

The multitude of stigmas that deny many women self-definition significantly contributes to fatness becoming an increasingly undesirable trait. Following neocolonialist ideals, or practices that operate through capitalistic desires and dominate Western frames of thought, certain bodies have come to be understood as markers of success, power, and modernity. Capitalistic systems decrease the value of certain demographics because of their relationship to Western domination, marginalizing those in direct opposition to the able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, white male. In particular, fat female bodies are devalued across the globe because of their “negative” implications. According to the results from a study that surveyed 7,000 people from 26 different countries, the majority of participants preferred thinner women (Smith 628). In the context of the United States, globalizing this ideal only strengthens the negative message in mainstream culture that fat women are lesser and unwelcome.

The pervasive, globalized belief that fat women are abnormal and undesirable socially configures their bodies to “invite” cruel mistreatment, judgment, and criticism that is unregulated or protected against. In this way, many people do not consider fatness a form of oppression (Kirkland 400). Instead, it is framed as a conscious, self-inflicted quality that deserves a great deal of individual blame. According to Anna Kirkland, “fat is considered quite unlike the traits usually protected in civil rights laws: race, religion, sex, national origin, age, and disability. Protected traits are classically those that bear a recognized history of oppression and are understood to be outside the realm of personal choice, irrelevant to one’s merit and capacities” (401). Therefore, the rhetoric of large female bodies carries notions of second-class citizenship that popular culture’s incessant criticism validates and encourages. In this way, fat women are subordinate to thin women, failing to reconstruct their bodies into objects of desire that would allow for true personhood.

This expectation that women should regulate and discipline their bodies implicates the omnipresent male gaze, in which conventional Western attractiveness subjectively labels fat women as *powerless* over their own bodies and *powerless* over how their bodies are received. In other words, fat women are depicted as out of control while at the same time expected to reclaim this control in the very society that minimizes their agency. Jasie Stokes elaborates on the troublesome authority that the male gaze has over unconventional female bodies, explaining that “the excess of fat on the female body disturbs not only ideal female beauty standards but also the identity of the masculine-oriented gaze. Her excess signifies both the inability for the body to be determined by the self as well as the impossibility of self-determinacy” (58). Stokes captures a double bind that afflicts the majority of fat women — they can neither be

understood as people who have authority over their own bodies nor can they escape how their bodies are read; consequently, they are ridiculed. So long as they are classified as fat, their identities are forcefully centered on the rhetoric of their bodies that communicates unfounded negative qualities that the general population internalizes.

These negative characterizations are primarily formed through popularized mainstream opinions about physical attractiveness and operate in close proximity to power and success. Fat women represent the end of a binary in which the other side is associated with confidence, individualism, and self-worth — qualities in *opposition* to the negative stigmas that the former group faces (Smith 628). Similarly, these fat bodies stand “in opposition to the patriarchal, rule-bound order of the symbolic” (qtd. in Stokes 59). Thus, the male gaze primarily consults women’s bodies and secondarily assigns characteristics based on Westernized conventions that value appearance over merit. To those privileging Western ideals, fat bodies communicate rebellion, an unsettling quality for those endorsing these beauty standards. In this way, the rules of attractiveness negotiate visibility by way of the female body, a fleshed-out site that contests individuals’ alignment with beauty ideals.

Bodies unavoidably communicate non-verbal messages in patriarchal societies that stratify femininity based on weight and other beauty ideals; they symbolize a hierarchy rooted in true womanhood in which the white male gaze dictates what kind of woman is valuable, or conversely, what kind of woman is disenfranchised because of her appearance. Ngaire Donaghue and Anne Clemitshaw elaborate on the rhetoric of fat female bodies when they state that, “. . . in many of these women’s experiences, their fat bodies seem to drown out even the most personal and intimate communications from ‘inside’” (423). Consequently, fat women are stripped of their complexity, understood

primarily through nonverbal, bodily messages projected that mainstream ideals project. However, these messages do not burden the patriarchal sources they come from; rather, they fall on the individuals' responsibility to assimilate their bodies into a society that perpetuates "thin privilege."

Without the privilege of being thin, mainstream media reinforces the notion that fat women are subordinate, socializing female consumers to covet a specific body type and to value a certain shape and size for reasons beyond aesthetic pleasure. Value is rooted in idealized beauty, and when women do not represent this archetype, they are received in complex ways that extend beyond their "unattractiveness" and into the realm of their character and abilities. Samantha Murray explains why stigmas surrounding fat women are so pervasive when she dissects the term "knowingness," which essentially asserts that people are socialized to regard certain beliefs as truths in a way that promotes social mobility or decline based on an individual's location within these "truths" (266). Specifically, the qualities surrounding fat women's bodies are not suggestions to the general public; they are widely understood as facts — external indicators of internal characteristics. Murray elaborates on the dissonance between the discernibility of fatness and the simultaneous implication that it is a taboo quality meant to conceal. She declares that "because of this negative 'knowledge' of fatness in our culture, most people don't want to have to see fatness out on display. . . And yet, it is irrevocably 'seen,' hypervisible, and the cultural meanings of its fat 'bodily markers' are always known" (273). Judgment is unavoidable for fat women, especially in a culture that obsesses over visual qualities — physical projections of self-expression. Furthermore, this learned, shallow behavior elevates initial bodily perceptions to be

understood as “facts,” implicating that *knowing* people is as simple as examining their physicality.

The closer women are to these beauty ideals, the more benefits they have. Accordingly, the term “thin privilege” captures the elevated status to which slender women have access and conversely fat women do not. Research demonstrates that conventionally attractive people are associated with more positive qualities; they are viewed as better at their jobs, more sexually attractive, and smarter (Smith 628). As a result, weight bias has many negative implications for women who do not reap its benefits. Lindsay King-Miller writes about specific identities and their correlation with privilege, remarking that, “for fat people. . . access to being viewed as ‘beautiful’ has long been restricted, and with it the visibility and social capital it can bring” (22). Restriction comes from widespread socialization that thin bodies deserve an elevated quality of life, in opposition to fat women whose weight “forfeits” this privilege. Evidently, Western society listens to *pounds* over *people*, considering weight to be the foundation with which all additional qualities must comply.

It is blatantly apparent that popular culture perceives fat physiques as burdens of individualistic self-affliction and slender frames as tokens of feminine self-care. Essentially, weight is seen a choice in which thin women are glamorized while fat women are ostracized. Those occupying the latter category are inaccurately defined as disengaged with their bodies, debilitated as a result of this neglect. Christine Smith reiterates the limitations of this stigma, giving visibility to the fact that “all women are pressured to be attractive, and fat women are deemed that they could be, but they lack control to do so” (629). When women do decide to invest in “self-improvement” behaviors that presumably mobilize them closer to the thin ideal, they are not taken

seriously, made fun of, or laughed at. They are caught in a double bind in which the negative rhetoric of their bodies centers around personal faults and the only way to escape these stigmas is to succumb to the very ideals that marginalize them in the first place.

Even when fat women elect to celebrate their bodies, regardless of the degree to which their figures are “othered” within mainstream society, they are still framed as out of control. Despite their efforts to reclaim and reshape beauty standards on their own terms, women endeavoring to accept their bodies continue to receive criticism. Instead of acknowledging the possibility that women can be empowered while at the same time fat, the validity of their confidence is inverted into a sign of last resort. Jessica M. Murakami and Janet D. Latner expose the impossibility of bodies being read as fat *and* happy in a culture that unabashedly associates contentment with skinny women, noting that, “in some contexts, body acceptance may be perceived as a forfeiture of control and embracing of a non-ideal weight and lifestyle” (164). Concurrently, fat women’s bodies are objects of hopelessness while at the same time they are in need of extreme refiguring should they ever have a shot at fulfillment. Agency, then, is removed from the individual’s realm of possibilities and relocated within oppressive and dominant ideologies. Without question, no matter how a fat woman feels about her body, she is read as having no authority over herself.

In the absence of their perceived lack of control, fat women’s figures communicate to the masculine forces that they need help and that criticizing bodies outside of the norm is constructive and welcome, when in reality it is a patriarchal practice that polices feminine identity as one specific archetype. If women in general are discouraged from loving their bodies, fat women are excluded entirely from this

possibility. Since they are excluded, they are expected to have an even stronger drive to conform because of their lengthy distance from the ideal — at women cannot simply exist; they must be in constant motion towards “better” versions of themselves. Sophie Smailes illustrates this assumption of self-improvement when she agrees with critic Joan Crisler: “. . . fat women’s bodies are always located as something to ‘make better’ rather than bodies with their natural rhythms, changes and ways of being” (51). These bodies carry with them negative perceptions of abnormality, discontentment, and fluidity. Western ideals reason that the only way fat women can achieve solidarity is through physical transformation; they are either framed as restless with their desire to lose weight or uneasy about their “abnormal” bodies. Satisfaction, according to mainstream beliefs, can only be channeled through attempts to alter their physical states, which furthers the idea that fat women are unacceptable being who they are.

This view that fat women are incompetent due to their excessive weight perpetuates malicious, unsolicited body shaming, which stems from the popular, yet uninformed, opinion that weight is easily regulated and *should be* controlled. Healthism, the belief that health is a direct outcome of individual choices, relates to knowingness; people read physical traits and assign healthy or unhealthy characteristics accordingly (Murakami and Latner 163-64). Murray speaks from her personal experiences as a fat woman, informing that “society ‘knows’ [her] body as a site of undisciplined flesh and unmanaged desires” (165). Healthism is yet another way that women like Murray are judged for being out of control and gluttonous. Due to the fact that fat women are demoralized and criticized for being hopeless, it is understandable that diets often do not work for them. Put simply, when individuals are viewed as helpless and weak because of their physical appearance, it makes sense that they would

not place trust in their figures to transform. Physically, their bodies are not good enough, but this physicality also translates into assigned emotional qualities that deeply complicate fat women's relationships with weight management.

As one of the tools for weight management, the dieting industry and its relationship with fat women builds on the problematic tendencies of consumer culture that associates thin bodies with productivity, a neocolonialist ideal. It projects self-care in a way that manipulates women into believing they can only wholeheartedly love themselves through losing weight. This projected message assumes that the fat female body is a site of self-loathing and unfulfillment. When 65% of Americans are overweight and 90% of diets fail to keep that weight off, perhaps fat bodies are living representations of major flaws within the dieting industry, rather than indications of powerless, insecure individuals (Kirkland 411). Nevertheless, the general public still reads them through the lens of healthism, which frames dieting as imperative. Fat women are depicted as unhealthy and in need of various interventions and lifestyle changes before they can ever possess confidence or independence. The visual rhetoric of their bodies in Westernized culture is gathered as an anomaly, a site of incongruence only made compatible through losing weight and pursuing the thin ideal.

When Western society exclusively links femininity with thinness, it is not surprising why fat women are masculinized. Perhaps this treatment is a result of cultural binaries in which certain words come into being through their stark opposition to one another; beautiful is antonymous to ugly, skinny respectively to fat, and femininity is structured around its distance from masculinity. These dichotomies all factor into Westernized womanhood in which the validation of female experiences derives from hierarchical, exclusionary standards of appearance. Ngaire and Clemitshaw

elaborate on female beauty ideals, stating that the “. . . effortful management of one’s appearance is a feminine practice” (415). Thus, if fat women are viewed as unfeminine, their bodies essentially communicate neglect and “failed selfhood,” only repairable through materialistic means (Ngaire and Clemitshaw 420). Since mainstream culture in the United States is deeply ingrained with capitalistic behaviors, ideal femininity is manufactured, maintained, and reproduced through marketing that socializes female consumers to invest in products for self-care purposes.

These marketing strategies are used to target fat female consumers and embody all that is wrong with the superficial Western culture; this society locates manipulative messages within advertisements into the periphery, while centralizing female identity as that which personal responsibilities shape. Thus, the rhetoric of self-care situates women into a deceiving position of empowerment, when in actuality, they are subordinated by industries that contrive feminine self-care into a performance where their products take center stage and women are the props. Self-care, according to commercialism, has everything to do with managing appearance — other benefits come as a result, but the primary marker of femininity rests in the female aesthetic. With this being said, fat women break feminine social codes, and because these “rules” are deeply ingrained in idealistic views of the body, their figures are read within a binary frame of thought: They are masculinized.

No matter how women perform their weight, they unavoidably break social codes; no matter how women feel about their bodies, they are unavoidably met with resistance. To deny a woman agency over her body is to rid her of personhood — it is the very act of shunning that shames women into regression while simultaneously making their imperfections hyper-visible. In this way, these socially constructed codes

regarding weight distance the fat woman's voice while firmly situating her body in the public eye. Fikkan and Rothblum elaborate on the impractical female body ideal, stating, "this movement from an ideal to a standard means that fat women will not simply be judged as unattractive, but also as unacceptable" (633). Fat women may not benefit from discrimination legislation, but they do experience the detrimental ramifications that are the result of them "breaking" ambiguous social laws that deem them undesirable. As this beauty ideal evolves into a standard, ideas about what femininity entails increasingly narrow.

One day, instead of prematurely judging females based on their weight,, perhaps Western society will be a place where fat women have agency over themselves, and instead of always being told to shrink (physically and mentally), they will have the privilege of growing in myriad ways. Fat bodies carry with them unscripted rhetorical messages, qualities that marginalize female personhood and acceptance into mainstream society; the general public subjectively dehumanizes them as objects to ridicule and criticize. Bodies are flesh and bones — they are at the center of how people move through the world; fat women do not deserve minimized navigation just because of their mode of travel.

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