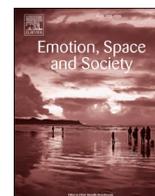




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# Emotion, Space and Society

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## Book review

**Fat, Hanne Blank. Bloomsbury Academic, New York (2020). xxii and 122 pp., notes and index. \$14.95 cloth, ISBN: 978-1-5013-3328-6**

Hanne Blank's *Fat* is an engaging invitation to think critically about the history, materiality, and cultural salience of a substance (and embodiment) that has vexed the United States for more than a century. Written by a seasoned fat activist for a general U.S. audience, *Fat* is short enough to read in a few hours but still contains nuances that can only come from years of unpacking the assumptions and imaginaries built into the social construction of fat as a nutrient, size, and threat. From her decades of work on the topic, Blank knows the kinds of narratives many people expect from a book with this title and uses her expertise to sidestep them; for instance, one might expect the chapter "foe" to cover the "war on obesity" but instead of explaining or dismissing this premise, Blank traces the emergence of fatphobia in the transatlantic slave trade. This sidestepping makes *Fat* an excellent introductory text for people who might otherwise not be willing to engage with different perspectives on fatness, such as those who firmly adhere to the biomedical and pathologizing model of "obesity." However, the text's casual, non-confrontational style and lack of citations (per the standards of the Object Lessons series) make it less suitable as a place to begin deeper research on this topic. Thus, it is recommended that anyone looking for a more thorough overview of the critical scholarship on weight and size supplement *Fat* with other sources from the field of Fat Studies.

A major theme throughout this text is fat's unruliness, or at least its unruliness according to the standards set by Adolphe Quetelet, a nineteenth-century statistician who measured European men to determine the "ideal" height-to-weight ratio for all people (this ratio was later renamed the BMI). Chapter one covers the consistent failure of attempts to make everyone thin by treating our bodies as standardizable machines. The scientist who invented calories expected human bodies to follow the laws of thermodynamics (the calories in, calories out model of metabolism), but bodies are not controlled environments. The first large-scale weight loss study found that starved bodies, instead of letting go of their fat stores, will instead slow all metabolic functions to stave off weight loss. Fat's behavior does not follow "natural" laws, but many people have a hard time thinking of it beyond a metabolic frame.

Fat's unruliness does, however, encourage some of us to think critically about why American society is so eager to make it go away. In chapter two, Blank considers what happens to the people who, literally and metaphorically, don't fit into the cultural obsession with thinness. For Blank, existing as a fat woman is both a hardship and a blessing. As the targets of fat hatred, fat people experience chronic stress, which can ironically lead to many of the negative health outcomes typically attributed to higher weights. But surviving, or even thriving, in "an unaccommodated, dispossessed, denigrated body" can give fat people a unique perspective on how power works, what it takes to resist its

workings, and what the world could be if all bodies were liberated (38). In other words, fat can be a teacher.

But, Blank argues, fat is more often foe than teacher. In chapter three, she explores the historical roots of the current aversion to fatness. Drawing on Sabrina Strings' *Fearing the Black Body*, Blank shows how fatphobia as we know it derives from rise of global white, Christian supremacy. Beginning in the 1700s, white Americans pointed to the visible bodily difference between themselves and Black people to justify slavery and colonization; thinness became evidence of white self-discipline and refinement, while fatness became evidence of Black laziness, greed, and sub-humanity (58). Even after slavery was formally ended, figures of fat Blackness, such as the Mammy, remained in circulation to ensure the link between race, body size, and humanness remained influential. For a contemporary example of this, see Quaker Oats using "the image of a fat Black woman's grinning servitude" to sell their "Aunt Jemima" products (59).

The history of fatphobia shows us that it is both sexist and racist, yet few people seem willing to disinvest from thinness. Blank contends that fat has "acquired the power to deny us our rationality" because "we" have made it "intensely synonymous with shame and pain and the loss of humanity" (61). In chapter four, she explores how fat has become a powerful negative fetish to which U.S. Americans devote an enormous amount of time and energy. Good fat (e.g. coconut oil) is separated from bad (e.g. pepperoni pizza), yet we are continuously tempted with the latter in food commercials and billboards. Many media sources promote the narrative that fat bodies are repulsive, but there are more fat than thin people in the U.S. – are Americans supposed to believe that most of the population is not loved or desired?

Chapter five doesn't give readers an answer, but it does get us part of the way there by examining the queer life of fatness. Fatness and gender are intimately connected; fat may exaggerate sexual organs (as in the stereotype of the hypersexual Black woman with an "enormous pussy") or cloak them (as in the stereotype of the "fat man with the little dick") (112–113). While fat is generally interpreted as feminine, its rebelliousness can blur the gender binary: fat deposits on men's breasts and hips can be feminizing, while "potbellies" can masculinize women. As such, Blank shows us, the fight against fat is also a fight to maintain cis-heterosexuality, another system that denies the diversity of human bodies and experiences.

Blank's final argument is this: in the moments when fat renders people deviant or escapes the efforts to rearrange or eliminate it, it reveals the boundaries of what we might take for granted and the possibilities of how we might live differently. In fat, we can find wisdom about what it means to accept – or even find joy in – an unruly world.

*Fat* would be an excellent addition to an introductory class on embodiment or critical perspectives on health. It would also be relevant for feminist studies courses due to its discussion of the interactions between size, race, gender, and sexuality. And as mentioned previously, it could be a very effective way to introduce more complicated narratives

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2020.100761>

Received 10 November 2020; Received in revised form 1 December 2020; Accepted 2 December 2020

Available online 14 December 2020

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about fatness to those who might otherwise not encounter them, such as pre-medical or pre-health students.

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