

# No Space For Women

On becoming a fat feminist femme in a fat-hating,  
heteronormative society

by

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on the lived experiences of fat feminist femmes in a fat-hating heteronormative society. It does so by exploring the connotations fatness carries in Western society, and the way anti-fatness is substantiated through arguments about health, morality, and aesthetics. An exploration of feminist interventions into fat discourse shows the way feminist theory can be employed to create non-normative knowledge on fatness and its relation to normative femininity. This then leads to the last chapter, in which a closer look is taken at the liminal experience of being a fat feminist, on the boundary between a fat-hating society and a body positive practice of feminist theory.

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## Introduction

“I am fat.”

I have been saying this more and more over the past two years, and I no longer want to feel bad about it. Why should I? More than anything, this thesis is about myself and my experience with becoming – and then coming to terms with – fat. It dawned on me that there was a connection between fatness and femininity and heterosexuality, as I started to look more critically at the negative messages I was receiving about my body. Why should it be so important that I look a specific way in order to be attractive to the men I would or should want to date? Why should I, a feminist, be so concerned with what others, especially men, think of my body? Why is it so hard to let go of negative feelings concerning my fatness? This is the starting point for my thesis, in which I explore fatness through a feminist perspective and examine the benefits of such a feminist perspective for living a fat life.

To this effect, I am researching the lived experience of fat feminist femmes,<sup>1</sup> those who do not adhere to specific bodily norms that are seemingly mandatory. These norms prescribe a thin body as part of normative femininity, which in turn is part of heteronormativity in that heteronormativity prescribes specific ‘complimentary’ gender expressions for men and women, in relation to the ideology that men and women are ‘natural’ partners. Starting from my own heterosexuality, as well as the general assumption of heterosexuality for women (Rich, 1980), I explore heteronormativity as a societal context or background for the experiences of fat femmes. To do this, I combine several ways of looking at the “institution of heterosexuality”(Jackson, 2006), including work from Adrienne Rich, Stevi Jackson, and Ofelia Schutte, in order to be able to understand how the phenomenon of fatness operates within it.

To explore how heteronormativity works to influence gender normativity and, via that, bodily norms for women or feminine folk, I first turn to Adrienne Rich. She discusses “compulsory heterosexuality” as a bias through which lesbian existence is seen as deviant, or simply rendered invisible (1980). Rich analyses four different feminist books and notes that they all automatically assume women to be heterosexual, or even go so far as to expect women

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<sup>1</sup> I use ‘women’, ‘femme’, ‘femininity’ interchangeably throughout my thesis. One of my interviewees is non-binary and their experience showed me that femininity is not something that only applies to women. My research is ultimately about the connection between fatness and femininity, not just about fatness in relation to women. To limit my thesis to only women would be reductive. I have tried to use the term ‘women’ sparingly in my writing and without intending it in an essentializing way. I see femme as a way of addressing all who adhere to or connect with femininity equally, regardless of gender.

to “*choose* heterosexual coupling and marriage” (Rich, 1980, p. 633). This automatic assumption of heterosexuality – for both women and men – is central to compulsory heterosexuality, or heteronormativity. Rich then posits that heteronormativity should be investigated as an institution affecting expectations about women’s sexual preference, as well as ideas about “mothering, sex roles, relationships and societal prescriptions for women” (Rich, 1980, p. 633). These expectations include the assumption of a thin body (Wolf, 2002).

Building on the work of Adrienne Rich, Stevi Jackson argues that heterosexuality is “by definition a gendered relationship,” ordering sexual life and division of labor according to ideas about two pre-existing, naturalized and above all *complementary* genders (Jackson, 2006, p. 107). She then adds that heteronormativity goes beyond this binary division by defining “a normative sexual practice [as well as] a normal way of life” (Jackson, 2006, p. 107). So, heterosexuality works to order people into two genders which are assumed to be ‘natural’ partners, a belief that is frequently substantiated by arguments about reproduction. Heteronormativity builds on this by ordering the broader scope of gender and sexuality, and ideas about normal life choices in general. Just as Rich suggests compulsory heterosexuality affects social behaviors and relations, heteronormativity also influences norms and social rules, as well as heterosexual sexuality itself.

Like Rich and Jackson, Ofelia Schutte works with the construct of heteronormativity. She touches upon the idea that heteronormativity suggests a “natural” or even “emotional complementarity of the sexes,” and further explores what this means for feminine gender expectations (Schutte, 1997, p. 43). Just as heteronormativity works as a social construct that affects the way we see and expect bodies to look and behave, so does normative femininity,<sup>2</sup> which can be seen as part of a norm-system that heteronormativity keeps in place. Normative femininity and normative masculinity are two complimentary sides of the binary gender system constructed by heteronormativity – created and sustained within the heteronormative context that is “self-sustaining and self-replicating” (Atkinson and DePalma, 2008, p. 28). This means that these normative constructs are recreated every time they are lived out (Atkinson and DePalma, 2009).

Ofelia Schutte then defines heteronormativity as a regulative model or construct that is taken as exemplary or ideal, so much so that it serves to define whether behavior, be it sexual or gendered, is correct – or even moral (Schutte, 1997, p. 41). It brings forth a strict “normative

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<sup>2</sup> I will come back to and explain the concept of normative femininity later in my thesis.

gender construct,” prescribing what Schutte calls “a regulative ideal that is taken to represent ‘man’ and ‘woman’ in their ideal characteristics” (Schutte, 1997, p. 41). These normative gender constructs are multilayered and, much like in Rich’s theory on compulsory heterosexuality, influence and uphold societal expectations of men and women. When it comes to bodies, this means that normative femininity and masculinity prescribe ideal body types for women and men that are, like normative femininity and masculinity, constructed as opposite. While men are expected to be big and take up a lot of space, women are expected to be small and take up little space (Wolf, 2002). So, what happens when a woman is not small, or when a woman takes up more space than is prescribed to her by normative femininity?

## Chapter 1: Methods

This thesis centers around the following research question(s): How are women taught not to take up large amounts of physical space in a heteronormative society? Furthermore, how can a feminist perspective be a valuable tool in not only theorizing, but also changing the experiences of those women that invariably do?

In my first chapter I explore what it means to be fat as a woman and how one comes to learn these meanings. I examine the connotations fatness carries and the way these connotations are reinforced. I look at the way connotations are both learned at a young age and re-learned throughout the rest of our lives. Finally, I consider the different arguments that are used whenever anti-fatness is made explicit.

In the second chapter I explore what a feminist perspective could offer towards a non-normative theorization of fatness. I discuss several feminist interventions into the normative anti-fatness discourse, using work from Naomi Wolf, Judith Butler, Samantha Murray, and, finally, Kimberlé Crenshaw. My goal here is not to combine the work from these different feminists, but to discuss different ways to disrupt normative messages about fat bodies.

In the last chapter, I consider the ways a feminist femme navigates living while fat in a heteronormative fatphobic environment, with a special focus on the liminality or ‘in-betweenness’ of such an experience. I concentrate on the lived experiences of fat feminists in a heteronormative society and examine different themes that stand out as points of struggle for young feminists, who are keenly aware of the connotations that fatness carries in popular society and try to maneuver their lives in-between feminism and anti-fatness.

In this thesis, not only I am approaching the subject of fat femininity through a feminist lens, this feminist perspective is central to the interventions I want to make into fat discourse. The basis of my thesis are three in-depth interviews I did with fat feminists, which speak to the lived experiences of fat femmes and showed different ways of negotiating fatness, both in everyday life and in academics. I then used these interviews to find the themes that would later form much of the structure of my thesis.



### Call for interviewees

I made a very conscious decision to look for interviewees in feminist spaces. To this end, I started my search for interviewees in two specifically feminist Facebook groups: 'AskAnnabel'<sup>3</sup> and 'Feminist Club Amsterdam.'<sup>4</sup> The first functions as an unofficial student association for the different gender studies programs at Utrecht University and the second is a space in which feminists from Amsterdam, and other places in the Netherlands, come together to discuss actualities and feminism. Both of these spaces attract people with an interest in and prior knowledge about feminism, which is the reason I posted my call for interviewees here.

I was looking for feminist interviewees, so that I could discuss concepts, such as heteronormativity, with people who were already familiar with them. I was not looking for a generalized story about being fat, I was looking for specifically feminist perspectives on fatness in order to theorize the lived experiences of those who are feminine, fat, and feminist. I knew that working with explicitly feminist interviewees would help me discuss not simply fatness and experiences with fatness, but fatness in connection to critical feminist thought. As Hesse-Biber describes in "Feminist Research: Exploring, Interrogating, and Transforming the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology, and Method," marginalized lived experiences are important sources when working to "unearth subjugated knowledge," which is essentially what I am working towards with regards to fat discourse, by bringing in feminist voices (2011, p. 3).

In my call for interviewees, I was very deliberate in the wording that I chose.<sup>5</sup> Besides giving a little information about myself and my project, I specifically asked for people who identified as fat. This was to attract people who would be interested in and comfortable talking about their fatness, while avoiding a situation in which it was up to me to label someone as fat, or not fat enough. Yet I ended up having to do exactly that, as my call for interviewees also drew in people who had formally been fat, or who were dealing with some form of body dysmorphic disorder and identified as fat while being thin or 'normal sized.'

My hesitation with putting myself in a position where I would be creating a fixed boundary between fat and non-fat was related to my own experience of being what Lilith referred to as "small fat" (Lilith, 2017): I was small enough to be told by friends that I was not

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1475607782709220/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/feministclub/>

<sup>5</sup> See appendix 1 for my call for interviewees.

fat, but big enough that my BMI<sup>6</sup> told me I was overweight, clothing sizes told me I was 'plus size,' and the mainstream media I consumed told me I was fat. I believe there is not one firm boundary out there to separate fat people from non-fat people, and that fatness is often open to interpretation. I was not trying to be the one to interpret other people's bodies, and asking for people who identified as fat was my attempt at avoiding this.

### **My Interviewees**

I ended up working with three interviewees, one of whom I found through 'Feminist Club Amsterdam,' the two others I found through 'AskAnnabel.' Two of my interviewees identified themselves as fat, while one had in the past been fat and did not identify that way anymore. I included this person because I was interested to see what their perspective could add to my thesis.

I asked all of my interviewees the same question: "Will you tell me something about yourself?" I purposefully left this question open to interpretation because I wanted to know what they considered relevant information when prompted to talk about themselves. The following introductions are based on how they introduced themselves to me.

My first interview was with Nisha,<sup>7</sup> she is a twenty-three-year-old student enrolled in the two-year Gender Studies Research Master's Program at Utrecht University. Living in Rotterdam, she travels to Utrecht to study. When asked the previous question, she said she would identify herself as Hindu, but added that her family has a complex diasporic history. Her parents moved to the Netherlands from Surinam, where her family was submitted to indentured labor after being brought there from India. Nisha has been fat her entire life. Later on in the interview, she talked about being bisexual.

My second interviewee was with Lilith, who is a twenty-two-year-old student of sociology at the University of Amsterdam. They identify as non-binary, using they/them pronouns, but note that they do not mind she/her or he/him either. Lilith is active in a lot of feminist groups, mostly on Facebook, and talks about having attended some demonstrations. They also worked as a research assistant for the diversity commission of the University of

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<sup>6</sup> BMI is a contested way of measuring someone's health that only takes into account height and weight. It is by no means reliable as a way of 'reading' health but is nonetheless widely known and still used often (Nordqvist, 2013; Olson, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> This is a pseudonym chosen by the interviewee herself. The other two interviewees were comfortable with me using their real names.

Amsterdam, and read a lot of feminist articles. Later on in the interview they mentioned that they are mixed race, with a Surinamese mother and a white father.

My third interviewee was with Aurora, who described herself as “many things and nothing at the same time” (Aurora, 2017). She is also a student at the two-year Gender Studies Master’s Program in Utrecht but grew up in Italy. She used to be an activist, but doubts if she still is one. She was fat growing up, but has since lost a sizable amount of weight and does not consider herself fat at this time. Later on in the interview, Aurora spoke about identifying as a lesbian from a young age but coming to question that identity in more recent years.

### **The Interviews**

For the interviews, I opted for a semi-structured format with a range of open-ended questions to guide the conversation to topics that I was interested in. The first question I asked was if my interviewee was comfortable with me making an audio recording of our conversation. My intention was to make sure that they were aware that I was (intending to be) recording, and to make an effort towards more balanced power relations between me, the interviewer, and my interviewees by asking for their permission (Leurs, 2017, p. 1). The interviews were conducted in English, in order to circumvent the need to translate their words, risking misrepresentation. All of my interviewees were comfortable speaking in English and reacted positively to my ambition to not alter their words, despite it being their second language. The interviews took place in different locations each, moving from a private room in the University library, to a place I was house-sitting in Amsterdam, to eventually my own bedroom in Utrecht. Each of these settings was private, in order to be able to talk freely without being overheard, and the location was chosen together with the respective interviewee.

The conversation gradually moved from their personal feelings and experiences with fatness to a more academic exploration of fatness. This conversation was made easier considering the fact that I am also a fat academic and could relate to a lot of what they were saying, both on a personal and a scholarly level. I believe these shared experiences of not only being fat, but being fat and being critical of dominant messages about the negativity of fatness, helped my interviewees talk about their fatness knowing that I would be able to follow their reasoning, whether it was personal or political. I think it is important to reflect on the role my own body size played in these interviews, because of the way my own fatness helped to open the conversation and create a space in which my interviewees were not ‘others’ to me (Lloyd and Hopkins, 2015, p. 308).

At the time of the interviews I had no clear understanding yet of what exactly would become my analysis, and my intention was to let the outcomes of the interviews guide me. My main goal was to find out what my interviewees thought about fatness in relation to femininity, about (re)claiming fatness, about the possible intersections between their size and other (marginalized) identities, such as class, race, and religion, and what they thought about the undefined boundaries between those considered fat and those considered 'normal.'

### **The Writing**

After having completed the interviews, I set out to find the different themes that were inspiring. The focus of my thesis changed a lot during this time, and I really came to understand Laurel Richardson's observation that, "writing is also a way of 'knowing'— a method of discovery and analysis" (2000, p. 923). The structure of my thesis became apparent whilst I was exploring and writing about fatness and feminism. The original plan was to write a thesis about the connections between heteronormativity and fatness, and though this is still an important part of this thesis, the main focus shifted to feminist theory as an intervention into the dominant discourse on fatness.

As I described in the introduction, this thesis is largely about my own experiences with negotiating fatness through a feminist perspective and I am happy to conclude that in this case, "not only is the personal the political, the personal is the grounding for theory" (Richardson, 2000, p. 927). This is to say that I have had a positive experience in exploring topics that carry a lot of weight in my personal life, creating a body of work that is close to both my heart and my politics.

## Chapter 2: (Re-)Learning Connotations of ‘Fat’

This chapter focuses on the way fat bodies are understood through negative connotations and on the way these connotations are produced and reproduced in Western society. A connotation is a secondary meaning that is ascribed to a specific word, in this case a meaning that is ascribed to fatness (Dictionary.com, 2017). These meanings are part of a shared cultural archive or cultural understanding of a specific term. Following the stories of my interviewees, I look at these meanings connected to fatness that are learned at a young age and subsequently reinforced in years that follow.

To many people, ‘fat’ is more than just a word to describe physical appearance. It has multiple connotations that often have very little to do with actual body size, connotations that are intensely negative (Orbach, 2016, p. xvi). Without even making them explicit, we all learn – and continuously re-learn – these connotations. My interviewees have picked up on this first hand, as all three of them have had childhood experiences with being called fat by family or by schoolmates. And though they might not initially have known what the meaning of the word was, they definitely understood that it was not meant to be a positive description.

My first interviewee, Nisha, told me about the way her family used to forgo her name in favor of calling her “moti,” meaning ‘fatty’ in Hindi. She explained that she was the only one of her siblings or cousins to receive this treatment, singling her out as different from the rest for being bigger. Aurora similarly recalled the first time she heard the word fat:

It was addressed to me. I was a kid, didn’t know what it meant but I knew it was an insult. It was to make fun of me, because the other kids where slimmer than me. So for a time of my life it [fat] was just bad. Fat was ugly, the contrary of beauty. And it made me different from other people (Aurora, 2017).

Lilith had an almost identical story of growing up with classmates who used the word fat as an insult, explaining what the word fat means to them:

It’s a tricky word for me, growing up it was really a bad word because it basically has this connotation of shame and insecurity and bullying, I was bullied mostly the beginning of high school. Back then I wasn’t fat, objectively speaking, but was developing faster than class mates, had broader hips, wider thighs (Lilith, 2017).

Even though Lilith remembers not being ‘objectively’ fat, the word was still a powerful taunt for their classmates to make them feel ashamed and insecure. This is because in contemporary western society, fat has come to stand for self-indulgence, lack of trustworthiness, and

sedentariness (Jutel, 2006). Fat people are, among other things, seen as unhealthy, ugly, weak-willed and friendless (Jutel, 2006).

Susan Orbach explains that, “more often than not [...] fat isn’t about the physical,” rather it has come to signify a range of negative emotional meanings that have been attributed to fatness (2016, p. xxi). As the word fat has come to signify a range of negative judgements about someone’s character, to be called fat is to be called a bad person. Annemarie Jutel suggests this stems from the idea that, “the appearance mirrors the ‘true’ inner self” (2006, p. 113).

According to Samantha Murray, “we in the West believe ourselves to be quite enlightened about ‘correct’ body maintenance,” leading us to critique those who do not seem to ‘measure up’ (2007, p. 111). Such bodies are highly regulated and policed for not adhering to ‘correct’ physical standards. Orbach proposes that this policing of fat bodies is done using three separate arguments:

The moral argument [being fat is being a bad person], the health argument [being fat is being unhealthy] and the aesthetic<sup>8</sup> argument [being fat is being ugly or unattractive] are all deployed to maintain a fat-thin binary in which thin is aspirational and fat is an affront (2016, p. xiii-xix).

These arguments are central to the narratives that are reproduced every time fatness is discussed. One example of this can be found in a recent article from Dutch online news outlet NU.nl with a headline saying, “Almost a third of world population is too heavy,” referring to the thirty percent of the world that is ‘too fat’ as “suffering from obesity” (NU.nl, 2017). By describing fatness as a health problem people *suffer from* in a seemingly objective news article, the idea that fat is inherently bad and unhealthy is reproduced and reinforced in people’s minds as objective truth.

In this, the discourse on fat functions similarly to heteronormativity; though there are moments that destabilize the normative messages about fatness, these dominant meanings reproduce themselves every day. This happens in news articles, it happens in conversation with friends, and it happens in interactions with strangers. Some of this reproducing happens through seemingly simple comments, such as when a friend tells you they stopped smoking and they are now *afraid* of getting fat as a result, without being aware of what exactly they are conveying about fatness with such a statement. This reproducing also happens in more violent ways, when

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<sup>8</sup> While aesthetic is an expansive term, I interpret this author as writing about visual aesthetics, meaning pleasing to the eye.

a stranger slings their opinion about fatness in your face, as was the case for me recently. I was standing on the side of the street when a car stopped long enough for the driver to look out the rolled-down window and make pig sounds at me, before quickly driving off again. Without making it explicit, I understood that his intention was to comment on my fat body. And though initially I was shocked, the part of me that immediately understood what he meant was not. As Susan Orbach writes, “attacking a woman’s body is seen as fair game” (2016, p. ix). It is seen as *acceptable* to point out the ways in which she is somehow in the wrong (Greenhalgh, 2012, p. 475).

### **Foucauldian perspective on fat**

Going back to the three arguments against fatness that Susan Orbach brought up, the moral argument, the health argument, and the aesthetic argument, I want to explore these lines of reasoning, as well as their consequences, more in-depth. These arguments are easily conflated and are sometimes used to justify each other, for instance when people say that being fat is morally bad, because a fat person does not take good care of their health.

A Foucauldian approach has something to offer when looking at the moral and health arguments against fatness. In a previous paper on the diet industry’s employment of disciplinary power and biopower,<sup>9</sup> I examined the way these types of power are used to reinforce the negative connotations attached to fatness (Eeltink, 2017, p. 4). I chose to focus on the diet industry, because it’s profits are directly dependent on maintaining the belief that fat is unhealthy and undesirable, thus motivating people to want to be thinner and to want to lose weight, creating demand for diet products. In *Weighty subjects: The biopolitics of the U.S. war on fat*, Susan Greenhalgh similarly examines dominant narratives on fat through a Foucauldian lens, focusing on:

the war on fat as a biopolitical field of science and governance that has emerged to name, study, measure, and manage the ‘obesity epidemic’ – a newly threatening flaw in the biological and social body of the nation – by remaking overweight and obese subjects into thin, fit, proper Americans (2012, p. 472-573).

Starting with an article by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, I looked at the way biopower works through three distinctive elements:

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault explained disciplinary power and biopower as two types of state power that are aimed at controlling the population and creating productive subjects, with disciplinary power working on the individual and biopower working on the population at large (Eeltink, 2017).

These elements are (1) *'one or more **truth discourses** about the 'vital' character of living human beings, and an array of authorities considered competent to speak that truth,'* (2) *'**strategies for intervention** upon collective existence in the name of life and health,'* and (3) *'**modes of subjectification**, through which individuals are brought to work on themselves'* (Rabinow and Rose via Eeltink, 2017, p. 2).

Considering the working of biopower as Rabinow and Rose demonstrated it, I argued that the truth discourses spread by the diet industry center around the idea that fat is unhealthy and thus bad, while thin is healthy and thus good (Eeltink, 2017, p. 3). This truth discourse is validated by "scientific experts (doctors, physical education teachers, etc.)" who, as authorities on health and disease (or the lack of health), produce scientific knowledge that substantiates the belief that fat is inherently unhealthy (Greenhalgh, 2012, p. 474). Following a truth discourse that tells us fat is bad, the diet industry then offers weight loss as a strategy of intervention, before offering modes of subjectification in the shape of products and services that are meant to help you achieve this weight loss.

Focusing on the truth discourses on fat, Greenhalgh proposes the term 'fat talk' for the daily conversations on fat, or what she calls, "the conversational component of fat discourse" (Greenhalgh, 2012, p. 473). She then argues that fat talk has a history of being a moralizing discourse:

In which thinness is deemed a worthy, desirable, and necessary state, and thinness and fatness are associated with traits representing opposite ends of the moral spectrum (from the highly valued self-discipline and self-control, at the one end, to the moral failings of self-indulgence and lack of self-discipline, at the other) (Greenhalgh, 2012, p. 473).

Greenhalgh's moralizing discourse and Orbach's moral argument against fatness are two ways of theorizing the same phenomenon: the use of a moral judgement, or moral condemnation, for bodies that are fat and are thus seen as not properly managing their impulses and desires (Heyes, 2006).

Further exploring the dimensions of fat talk, Greenhalgh focuses on what she calls the "medialization of weight" in recent years (2012, p. 473). She observes that fat talk is increasingly takes the shape of a health discourse, in Orbach's words, there is an increase in health arguments against fatness. Greenhalgh adds that, though thin bodies have been the cultural norm for some time, this move towards a health discourse means that fat people are, "no longer deemed simply unattractive (and morally flawed); they are also 'abnormal,' 'defective,' or 'flawed' in some essential, biological sense" (2012, p. 473). Fat has become a disease, and fat people are to be cured. Via biopower, health (understood as thinness) has



become a personal responsibility and moral obligation. Looking at it that way, to fail at health (by being fat) is to fail at being a moral person.

Jen Pylypa writes that the scientific knowledge produced to create these truth discourses also works to create a discourse of norms and normality, “to which individuals desire to conform” (1998, p. 21). Thinness thus becomes a bodily norm to which people are not only expected to conform to because of health and moral reasons, but also because of a personal and individual desire to embody this ideal. This, in turn, ties into the third argument against fatness: the aesthetic argument, which centers around the idea that thinness is desirable, and so fatness becomes undesirable and unattractive.

The media teaches us what ‘attractive’ looks like through constantly showing bodies that fit a very specific idea of what beauty looks like. Every time you see a person that is portrayed in a way that is meant to denote attractiveness, this person is thin. From models to movie stars to popular singers, the universal message is that thin is attractive. When one of these models, movie stars or popular singers gains weight, they are quickly called back by the media and the public.<sup>10</sup> Every year, magazines share tips on how to get a ‘summer body’ or ‘bikini body,’ on how to look good in a bikini – with ‘good’ being a synonym for ‘thin.’<sup>11</sup>

During my interview with Lilith, they spoke about the effect such a singular representation of what a (female or feminine) body should look like had on their self-esteem, saying that, “In the media, all the people I saw being portrayed as beautiful had thin legs and thin thighs and I will never have that. It’s not possible for me, that made me feel kind of inferior growing up.” As Lilith mentioned, these kinds of representations, that reinforce notions of thin as good and fat as bad, influence the way people view themselves and their own bodies. When we are consistently told that to be fat means to be doing something – whether that be health, morality or beauty – wrong, we end up believing this. As such, fatness has a strong connection to shame.

In a paper exploring the ethical dimensions of the discourse on obesity<sup>12</sup> or fatness, Emma Rich and John Evans note that, “the stereotyping of fat [and] the feelings of guilt and shame that are produced through this discourse, are regarded as secondary to the primary

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.eonline.com/news/864937/kelly-clarkson-shuts-down-person-who-tells-her-she-s-fat> for a recent example as well as a reference to earlier instances in which Kelly Clarkson was called fat as an insult.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.shape.com/lifestyle/mind-and-body/30-day-countdown-your-best-summer-body> for the first thing I found on google with the search term ‘summer body,’ the article is geared towards weight loss with the goal of fitting into ‘your teeniest bikini’.

<sup>12</sup> Obesity is a medical term that is used often in mainstream discourses around fatness. I made a conscious choice to try not to use this word in my thesis, as I think this is a term that could use some further critical exploration, which could be a thesis on its own.

concern of treating the ‘obesity epidemic’” (2005, p. 344). In other words, the mental weight from the guilt and shame that come with fatness is considered less of a problem to be solved in fat individuals than the fatness itself. The guilt and shame are actually used to force people to lose weight and are considered inevitable by-products of fatness.

Susan Greenhalgh also echoes the notion that fat has become “a mark of shame” and offers up the term “fat abuse” to talk about the verbal and non-verbal abuse fat people face (2012, p. 474). The early childhood experiences my interviewees described to me are examples of such fat abuse, as is my own experience of being ‘oinked’ at in the street. These types of abuses foster a growing sense of “self-consciousness and shame” about weight (Greenhalgh, 2012, p. 474), which then combines with a sense of personal failure for not ‘doing health’ the right way, and the internalization of the message that, “for girls and women, a beautiful body is the source of happiness and power [...] and that beauty comes from – and only from – being thin,” thus making a fat body an unpleasant place to be (Greenhalgh, 2012, p. 476).

In this chapter, I have discussed some of the connotations or meanings ascribed to fatness and how these meanings are learned at a young age via different types of fat abuse, such as bullying or otherwise hurtful comments. From here, I explored what is at the basis of these meanings, and how anti-fatness is grounded upon three types of arguments: moral, health, and aesthetic arguments. I found that these arguments take the shape of truth discourses, working to control people’s behavior through what Foucault termed Biopower.

My goal here was not only to explore the normative understanding of fatness, but also to paint an image of the kind of experiences and emotions fat people face. I found that the constant reinforcing and relearning of connotations of fatness, make a fat body an undesirable and unpleasant place to be.

### Chapter 3: Feminist interventions into fat discourse

In the previous chapter I explained how the connotations of fatness are constantly reinforced and relearned. I explored the ways moral, health and aesthetic arguments or discourses are employed in order to make living while fat an uncomfortable and shameful experience.

Having learned, and re-learned, the connotations of fatness all throughout my life, I found that feminism could offer me a way to think through societal norms, providing an alternative perspective to the many messages that told me I was somehow ‘wrong.’ Feminism taught me that when the norm does not fit, it is the norm that should be challenged and not me – not my personality, not my behavior, and not my body. I believe a feminist perspective to be a valuable tool in the work of separating yourself from negative connotations and reclaiming fatness. All of my interviewees also talked about the ways in which they are doing this work of re-thinking fatness and how they are untangling the connotations of fatness in relation to their own bodies.

This chapter builds on the previous chapter, focusing on the way fatness is critically explored within feminism and on how feminist theorizations of fatness can help re-think fat discourse. To this end, I want to research the ways in which feminist theory can aid the production of knowledge that goes against the norm and/or helps to deconstruct normative knowledge that is portrayed as objective truth.

With this in mind, I focus first on a feminist contextualization of bodily norms or ideals through work from Naomi Wolf, who locates beauty standards within (normative) femininity and patriarchy, and Judith Butler, who conceptualizes femininity as gender performance. Using work of Samantha Murray, I explore the validity of vision as a basis for judgements about fatness. Finally, I touch upon intersectionality in relation to fatness, as a possible tool for theorizing the marginalization of fat individuals. My intention here is to bring together different feminist interventions into the three main arguments against fatness as discussed in the previous chapter: the moral, health, and aesthetic arguments.

These feminist approaches to fatness depart from vastly different yet feminist perspectives, making them seemingly incongruent at times. I would argue, however, that in an effort to dismantle or at least disrupt fat discourse and heteronormativity, it makes sense to not let the fact that these theories are seemingly non-combinable deter from their usefulness as different entry points into the dominant discourse. As Judith Butler says in an interview with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, “there is no one site from which to struggle effectively. There

have to be many, and they don't need to be reconciled with one another" (Osborne, 1996, p. 123) It is valuable to not dismiss one approach in favor of another, but to let the different approaches exist side by side. The goal of this chapter is to describe possible feminist interventions into fat discourse. That does not mean finding a singular solution to 'fix' everything, it means finding ways to disrupt the dominant discourse around fat whenever and however possible.

### **Beauty and femininity**

As discussed in the previous chapter, there is a strong aesthetic aspect to anti-fatness arguments. This has to do with the fact that beauty, understood as a normative construct, centers around the thin body. Contemporary beauty standards, or what Naomi Wolf calls beauty myths, are grounded upon the idea that thin is beautiful and fat is not. Naomi Wolf describes the beauty myth as telling a story:

The quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless (Wolf, 2002, p. 12).

The beauty myth describes the way the concept of beauty is portrayed as necessary for women to live successful, fulfilled lives. This belief has bred the expectation for women to strive towards dominant ideas of beauty in order to be adequately attractive, in order to live up to normative notions of femininity. Femininity has become intertwined with ideas about beauty, and because beauty is equated to thinness, femininity has become intertwined with ideas about body size.

Both Aurora and Lilith reflected on how they experience this connection between femininity and body size, saying, "Of course body size and femininity are entangled. And the idea is that, I guess, you are more feminine if you have certain types of curves but not others. And most of all you are feminine when you are small" (Aurora, 2017). In this quote, Aurora talks about the entanglement of femininity and body size, commenting that there are specific expectations with regards to curves on a feminine body, as well as an expectation of smallness.

People just read me as feminine so there's still the expectations for women that people do have for me as well. And femininity, I don't know, on the one hand femininity has something to do with curves, but only in a specific way, it has something to do with

thin as well. There are sort of contradicting cultural messages. You're meant to be thin, and in recent years really fit as well, and be able to do really cool exercises. But you're also meant to have large breasts, and a large butt, but also not a large butt (Lilith, 2017).

Lilith first mentions how they feel the bodily expectations of femininity, despite not identifying as a woman. They then expand on what Aurora already hinted at, listing a number of bodily norms that center around curviness and slimness, which seemingly leave some room for interpretation but end up being conflicting at the same time.

Beauty, understood here as a complex whole of both slim and curvy body parts, is understood by both Aurora and Lilith as something that a woman has to do in a very specific way.<sup>13</sup> Beauty is an essential part of normative femininity, understood by Ofelia Schutte as 'a regulative ideal that is taken to represent [...] "woman" in [her] ideal characteristics' (Schutte, 1997, p. 41). What this means is that to not embody beauty, to not be thin, is to always be compared and found 'less than' the ideal.

Feminist theory offers multiple ways to think through normative femininity and its prescription of a slim body as beautiful and a measure for success. Naomi Wolf's critique of patriarchy's influence on femininity and Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender as performativity are two of these feminist approaches to normative femininity, both providing ways to unsettle some of the learned truths about normative femininity, beauty, and fatness.

### **Normative Femininity and Patriarchy**

One way of theorizing normative femininity is by placing it in the broader context of patriarchy,<sup>14</sup> as it influences, and is invested in, the construct of femininity. Lilith was quick to make a connection between femininity and patriarchy during their interview, stating that, "[Femininity] also ties into patriarchy as well, because keeping women occupied with what their body looks like, they don't have time to fight the patriarchy" (Lilith, 2017).

Naomi Wolf places the beauty myth, prescribing beauty as an essential part of normative femininity, within a context of patriarchal power and oppression of women. She argues that the beauty myth is the last remaining myths about femininity that still has power over women, in the same way that myths about chastity, motherhood, domesticity, and passivity used to have (2002). As these older myths lost their hold on women, the beauty myth

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<sup>13</sup> Note: Lilith does not actually identify as a woman, but their feminine appearance makes it so that people expect an adequately feminine performance regardless of gender identity. This shows how the pressure to have a slim (feminine) body is not just felt by cisgender folk, but also by trans or non-binary folk who might appear to be cisgender.

<sup>14</sup> Patriarchy is commonly understood as a, "hegemonic structure of masculine domination" (Butler, 2002, p. 6).

grew with the development of new technologies such as mass distribution of photographs via newspapers, magazines, and eventually the internet (Wolf, 2002). Sandra Bartky shares a similar theorization of the turn towards beauty within the framework of normative femininity saying, “Normative femininity is coming more and more to be centered on woman’s body – not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality, more precisely, its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance” (2002, p. 76).

In the excerpt above, Bartky makes a connection between a woman’s appearance and presumed heterosexuality, a connection that Wolf also makes when she writes about beauty being something for women to embody and for men to possess (Wolf, 2002). Female beauty, as a part of normative femininity, belongs within the bigger framework of heteronormativity, in which women’s beauty is ascribed value because it is seen to signify fertility, marking a woman as a desirable partner for a man. Heteronormativity, patriarchy and normative femininity are fundamental pillars of a gender system that reinforce themselves and each other, simultaneously upholding fat discourse to maintain the status quo.

Wolf reflects on the way the beauty myth is part of this bigger system, stating that, “ideals [don’t] simply descend from heaven, [...] they actually [come] from somewhere and [...] they serve a purpose” (2002, p. 3). Wolf points towards a financial and a political purpose behind the beauty myth; with on the one hand an industry comprised of advertisers and diet companies who are trying to increase their profit by convincing women that they need their products, and on the other hand a patriarchal society in which women need to be distracted from their growing political power (2002).<sup>15</sup>

Beauty serves the purpose of keeping women distracted with a bodily ideal, by prescribing a specific set of behaviors that women need to engage with in an attempt to embody this ideal (Wolf, 2002). This distraction, and the sense of failure and shame that stem from not being able to embody an unattainable ideal, benefit patriarchal gender systems in that it imbues women with a sense of worthlessness and keeps them from protesting inequalities (Wolf, 2002). This distraction and sense of worthlessness, according to Wolf, work to keep a range of gender inequalities in place, such as pay inequality and unequal treatment on the labor market, because women are made to believe they do not deserve better for not being more beautiful, or because they are simply too distracted by the work of becoming beautiful (Wolf, 2002).

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<sup>15</sup> Wolf also argues that the growing pressure on men to adhere to strict beauty standards “is driven less by cultural backlash and more by simple market opportunity,” which I believe is an astute observation (year, p. 7).

Wolf rejects the ‘blame-the-victim’ mentality created by the idea that women have to constantly work towards this beauty ideal, by the idea that beauty can be achieved, “if only the individual worked harder, tried harder” (Wolf, 2002, p. 29). Her book on the beauty myth is an attempt to take apart the fiction that beauty has any inherent value, because beauty is a financial and political tool, and, in Schutte’s words, “permeated with male dominance” (Schutte, 1997, p. 43). This means that, from a feminist perspective, the argument that fatness is not attractive or beautiful, holds no merit, because beauty is nothing more than a construct created to keep women distracted and with a low sense of self-esteem and thus holds no merit.

### **Normative Femininity and Performativity**

Another way of theorizing normative femininity is by closely analyzing its construction so as to be able to then de-construct it – and any innate value it is purported to hold. I want to explore how Butler deconstructs gender using her conceptualization of performativity, in order to show how this constructed nature of normative femininity can be theorized and then taken apart.

Judith Butler is famous for her theorization of gender as performative. In an attempt to open up the categories of masculinity and femininity to be more inclusive of minority expressions of gender and sexuality, she departs from the point of heteronormativity and the way it shapes gender roles as binary (Butler, 1999). She notes the way gender is understood through a framework of normative sexuality and poses the question of what happens to such a system when one is not engaging in heterosexuality at all (Butler, 1999). If sexuality is constitutive of gender roles, what intervention does queerness make into this our gender system? What happens if we let go of our stable notion of gender? Theorizing these non-normative sexual practices as a normal part of human existence destabilizes the naturalized belief that there are two complimentary genders (i.e. heteronormativity).

Butler explores the way gender comes into being, suggesting that though gender is conceptualized in feminism as distinct from sex, in order to “dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation,” a connection between the two becomes apparent when looking at the way gender often mirrors sex (Butler, 1999, p. 9-10). This again shows that, even when not focusing directly on the connection between gender and heterosexuality, gender is consistently seen as a binary system. Within this binary system, there is what Butler calls, “the anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning,” in which there is an expectation that through gendered expression of the self, some kind of truth about the inner self is exposed (Butler, 1999, p. xiv).

Butler argues that this expectation of disclosure of the inner self is, “producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates”(1999, p. xiv). This is where Butler brings in the idea of performativity, described as a repetition and ritualization of gendered acts in anticipation of a gendered inner self. Her intervention centers around the idea that this gendered inner self does not come before the expectation or expression thereof, meaning that the expectation and expression effectively establish the way the gendered inner self is understood. Or in Butler’s own words:

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures (1999, p. xiv).

In the interview with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, Butler talked more about what she calls the “discursive chaining of gender to sexuality,” through which gender identities become fixed and stable within a heteronormative system (Osborne, 1996, p. 109). She then describes performativity in relation to discourse, as “that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names” (Osborne, year, p. 112). This is really just another way to explain the concept of performativity, but at the same time it is a suggestion to think of performativity as creating and recreating a normative gender discourse.<sup>16</sup> Performativity is not simply the manufacturing of gender through the repetition and ritualization of an arbitrary set of gendered acts, it is the manufacturing of a very specific type of gender through the repetition of highly specific gendered acts. As Butler says in the interview, “It’s not any gender, or all gender, it’s that specific kind of coherent gender” (Osborne, 1996, p. 119). The expectation that comes before the performance of gender is an expectation of a normative expression of gender. Normative femininity then creates ‘women’ as a group who are expected to have shared interests and characteristics, who are expected to perform their gender in similar ways – limiting the capacity for non-normative performances of femininity. Butler then goes on to suggest to Osborne that, “it takes a pretty vigorous (and politically informed) community around you to alleviate the possible sense of failure, or loss, or impoverishment, or inadequacy – a collective struggle to rethink a dominant norm” (Osborne, 1996, p. 113).

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that this link was not possible before, but Butler’s deliberate attempt at writing performativity somewhat inaccessibly is specifically aimed at making it difficult to comprehend in order to further disrupt dominant discourse, making it a complicated concept to grasp in its totality (Butler, 2011, p. x).



Normative femininity prescribes a bodily performance that includes thinness, or at least a visible effort towards thinness through such bodily practices that are aimed at achieving thinness, like exercise or diets. Following Butler's comment on the need for a very vigorous and politically informed community to rethink a dominant norm, the pressure normative femininity puts on women to conform to bodily practices aimed at thinness becomes clear. The expectation of a feminine gender expression or performance always includes the expectation of those types of acts that promote thinness.

The essence of Butler's argument is that there is no fixed notion of gender that exists before people enact it, as gender is created at the same time that it is performed. This means that gender, and as such, femininity, is completely constructed. Via this perspective, normative femininity is nothing more than a normative construct. There is no inherent value in the specific way normative femininity has been constructed, as it is (wo)man made and has no bearing on a person's worth other than what we choose to believe it has.<sup>17</sup> In relation to fatness, this means that acknowledging the constructed nature of normative femininity is a way of taking power away from normative femininity and that by taking away this power, strict anti-fat beauty standards can be experienced as less mandatory and oppressive.

### **Vision as Judgement**

If we consider Wolf and Bartky's arguments to be questioning the validity of beauty as a valuable trait for women, Samantha Murray is questioning the validity of judgements about fatness as unhealthy. She does this by questioning the validity of judgement in general, and through that, the validity of judgements specifically about fatness and health.

The health argument against fatness, which holds that fat is unhealthy and thin is healthy, is deeply ingrained in our cultural understanding of what constitutes a normal body. The notion that fat is inherently unhealthy is reiterated often and forcefully. There is a vast industry that profits from the reinforcement of this belief, an industry that needs us to believe fat is unhealthy so that we keep buying their products. The truth discourses produced by these industries do not just influence fat and thin people alike, they also influence the medical professionals who then bring this 'truth' into their medical practice.

In "Corporeal Knowledges and Deviant Bodies: Perceiving the Fat Body," Murray explores the way knowledge is created through vision and uses this to problematize the

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<sup>17</sup> Butler is not suggesting that gender holds no value. Through its construction, gender becomes valuable to many people. The argument here is that the social construct of gender, specifically that of femininity, is meaningless (Butler, 1988).

assumed objectivity of medical practitioners. Though medicine and the “clinical gaze” are understood as objective science in Western society, Murray suggests that clinical observation does not happen outside of cultural understandings of the world (2007, p. 362). She introduces the term “tacit bodily knowledge” to refer to the type of bodily knowledge that is unspoken but known by everyone (Murray, 2007, p. 362). This tacit bodily knowledge is always already ‘there’ when we look at someone, influencing our perception of them. In turn, this means that our perception of someone is never just that, it is always already influenced by pre-existing knowledge. Comparable to Foucault’s understanding of discourse, perception works to produce rather than simply process that what is seen, which means that perception then, “emerges as a discursive effect, rather than a purely biological function” (Murray, 2007, p. 362). This means that *seeing* and *knowing* are two processes that are always knitted together in ways that are both culturally and historically specific (Murray, 2007).

In relation to fatness, this means that when a body is *seen* as fat, it is also immediately *known* as “lazy, greedy, of inferior intelligence” (Murray, 2007, p. 363). Through the way tacit bodily knowledges, those unspoken things we all know, influence the practice of seeing, these connotations of fatness always already accompany the perception of a fat body. Murray theorizes that we constantly internalize what is said about specific body types and that we (unconsciously) bring this information into our interactions with other people (Murray, 2007). Her analysis of these kind of knowledges as unconscious is thought-provoking, as she suggests that they are not so much the effect of conscious prejudice, but that they are the result of culturally and historically specific tacit bodily knowledges (Murray, 2007). Her analysis offers a way to look at these tacit bodily knowledges, which seem to overlap in meaning with what I previously explored as connotations of fatness, as knowledge we might hold without a clear foundation, knowledge that is always ‘just there.’ There is almost a kind of circularity to Murray’s conceptualization of tacit bodily knowledge, in which vision as a discursive effect simultaneously recalls and produces the same knowledge.

While these tacit bodily knowledges are unspoken and hard to analyze, they are important to discuss as these “knowledges inform and shape our interactions, and provide an insight into why we constitute some bodies as pathological, and regard others as normative” (Murray, 2007, p. 363). This is specifically relevant in the case of medical professionals who are, “complicated by the same multiplicity of cultural meanings we are all subject to,” leading them to bring the belief that fat is unhealthy into their practices (Murray, 2007, p. 367). This, in turn, influences the judgements medical professionals will make about fat bodies and the further production of medical knowledge about these bodies, which is something Murray

experienced first-hand when medical professionals, “diagnosed the various maladies from which [she] was suffering as a direct result of what they perceived as [her] ‘fatness’” (2007, p. 376).<sup>18</sup>

Murray then makes an astute connection between the medical and popular perceptions of the fat body, and “the way these seemingly discrete arenas are always inflected by each other [...] and constantly draw on each other for power, authority and veracity” (Murray, 2007, p. 367). While on the one hand the medical gaze is always already shaped by specific cultural and historical notions of fatness, the knowledge it produces is then taken as evidence to further (re)produce these same specific notions of fatness in popular culture.

Murray’s over-arching argument is against vision as a method of learning something about a fat individual, whether that be about their health or even about their morality, as such judgements are also frequently based in the belief that vision is able to reveal something about the inner self. Vision is never neutral and always already implicated by truth discourses about fatness, effectively recreating the knowledge that fat is unhealthy (or unmoral) through tacit bodily knowledges that remain just under the surface of social interaction.

### **Intersectionality**

Unlike Wolf’s beauty myth, Butler’s performativity or Murray’s theorization of vision as non-objective, intersectionality is not so much a direct feminist intervention into fat discourse, as it is a feminist intervention into the way we think through the multiple ways people can be marginalized (Crenshaw, 1989). Size is only one of a number of social axes that form our identities and influence the way we come to understand our position in society. People who are fat are never just that, they are also always gendered and raced and classed individuals, and these different identities have an effect on the way their fatness is read and experienced.

I have discussed the connections between fat discourse and heteronormativity throughout the previous chapters, exploring the way heteronormativity works to structure both gender and sexuality. In the previous chapter, as well as earlier in this chapter, I examined the way normative femininity requires thinness and assumes heterosexuality. It is no surprise then, that my interviewees spoke about the way their fatness intersects with their gender or their sexuality. Aurora talked about the way her fatness intersected with her

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<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.attn.com/stories/18555/female-patient-reveal-shaming-doctor-because-weight> or <http://time.com/3618659/fat-shaming-doctors/> for some examples of the consequences that this can have for women’s health.

sexuality when she was younger. She specifically remembers feeling uncomfortable in a heterosexual/heteronormative setting and talked about the influence this had on her sexuality:

The first person for whom I felt some kind of physical attraction was a woman, a girl. So as a girl I started identifying as a lesbian, and I wondered if that was because I knew that guys were rejecting me because I was fat or because I was attracted to women. I didn't know about fluidity so it was either hetero or homosexual (Aurora, 2017).

Aurora started to identify as a lesbian at a young age, after being attracted to a girl and feeling discomfort with men, and the expectation of thinness in a heteronormative setting. She later started to question her sexuality as she learned more about fluidity, wondering if she was "choosing to grab onto the lesbian label was partially because of [her] body." Her experience mirrors what Nisha said about the way her fatness and her sexuality intersect:

I feel more comfortable with women because with men you get into this heteronormative matrix of being beautiful and fuckable and with women there's a bit more space to be yourself and claim your specific identity than when you get into this mold of heterosexuality (Nisha, 2017).

Both Aurora and Nisha speak about feeling more comfortable in a relationship with a woman as opposed to a man, because of certain bodily expectations that are reinforced within a heteronormative setting, but not as much in a queer one.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to the intersection of fatness and gender, Lilith spoke about being non-binary in a country that is still relatively unfamiliar with what that means:

Partially it's sort of easier because especially in the Netherlands there aren't any cultural messages about non-binary people because people aren't really aware we exist. On the one hand that's annoying because I have to keep justifying my existence to people, but it is also freeing when it comes to self-determination (Lilith, 2017).

The lack of cultural understanding about non-binary folk makes it easier for Lilith to let go of strict binary gender performances, including those that prescribe thinness as a norm. Though being non-binary in a society that does not understand yet what that means definitely has its negatives, like Lilith mentions, it offers a freedom when it comes to navigating strict bodily norms that are connected to a binary understanding of gender.

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<sup>19</sup> Note: I am speaking to the experience of my interviewees, I am not trying to suggest that fatness is universally accepted within queer spaces. See for instance, "The body that does not diminish itself: Fat acceptance in Israel's lesbian queer communities," by Maya Maor, for an analysis of fatness in queer spaces in Israel.

Another example of the way fatness intersects with marginalizations other than gender or sexuality, is the connection between being lower class or poor and being fat, which has been well documented and researched (See Stobal & Stunkard 1989, Voigt 2014). This is a connection that two of my interviewees commented on from personal experience. Aurora recounted a view on the connection between fatness and class her wealthy classmates shared. She said, “Being perceived as fat, also entails the idea that you’re poor. Cause if you’re poor for sure you can’t take care of yourself. You are not able to, you don’t know how, or eat crap basically” (Aurora, 2017). There are a lot of assumptions in Aurora’s quote that are worth unpacking critically, such as the notion that poor people are not capable of or do not know how to take care of themselves, or the idea that poor people “eat crap.” Nisha’s reflection on the connection between fatness and class helps to counter this idea that poor people do not know how to take care of themselves, and offers insight into the notion that poor people eat badly:

I cannot eat a salad of ten euros when it’s cheaper to have bread with cheese for two euros. I cannot be vegetarian or vegan because that comes with a price tag and I do not have the money to buy those things. Even if I want to live on primarily vegetables, I can’t go to a Boon or an Albert Heijn even, no I have to go to the market to get low prices. I really have to plan, it takes more time to have a certain diet. It’s just not that easy (Nisha, 2017).

Her comments show that she is very aware of the types of foods that are considered healthy, and speaks towards accessibility of these types of food, and the money and time that are needed to adhere to a healthy diet. Money and time that a poor person does not have.

Another example of the way fat intersects with other marginalizations was brought up by Lilith when they talked about the intersection between their race and their fatness: “I’m also a person of color, which plays a role in genetics I guess. I developed large thighs and large hips, even when I was really thin. Beauty standards are really white” (Lilith, 2017). The implication in Lilith’s statement is not only that beauty standards are white in the sense that whiteness is promoted as beautiful in terms of skin color, but also that beauty standards promote thinness in ways that might not be compatible with the bodies of people of color.<sup>20</sup> This means that for Lilith, beauty standards are experienced in a very different way than I experience them, because they face a unique combination of racism and fatphobia.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2014/05/16/white-as-beautiful-black-as-white/> and <http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/01/when-beauty-equals-white/> for more information on the way beauty standards promote whiteness.

<sup>21</sup> Discrimination based on body size.

Though intersectionality is not so much of a direct intervention into fat discourse, as it does not directly help to disrupt normative messages about beauty standards, it offers a way of thinking through fatness in a larger framework of marginalizations. Kimberlé Crenshaw argued in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color” that intersecting identities should not be understood as separate parts but looked at as a whole in order to see the way they interreact and to effectively fight discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). If we want to adequately address the discrimination and marginalization fat people face, it is important to take into account the way their fatness intersects with other identities. In some cases this might reveal that the stigma someone faces for being fat is compounded by stigma related to class or race, while in other cases it might reveal that certain marginalized identities can offer new ways to think through fatness as it relates to specific normative gender performances and sexualities. As such, intersectionality can be considered a feminist intervention into overly simplistic perspectives on combating fat discourse.

One of my interviewees, however, added a critical note to our conversation about intersectionality. Nisha commented on the experience of using intersectionality to theorize the many different ways she is marginalized:

Intersectionality becomes really heavy when you hold a lot of marginalized positions. You're brown and a woman and bisexual. So sometimes I play something up or down. You're always the other of supposed binaries. For a long time I chose not to spit out that I was from a poor background (Nisha, 2017).

Though she did not question the usefulness of intersectionality in mapping her identities, but acknowledged the discomfort of consistently being the one that is most marginalized in social situations and university classrooms, of always ‘being the other.’ Intersectionality is a great tool to think through the different identities that someone holds, either privileged or marginalized, but that does mean that someone who is marginalized in multiple ways has this pointed out to them every time intersectional identities are discussed.

In this chapter I set out to explore different feminist interventions into fat discourse with a specific focus on countering the three anti-fatness arguments discussed in the previous chapter, the aesthetic argument, the health argument and the moral argument.

Wolf and Butler’s work on different aspects of normative femininity relates to the validity of beauty (understood as thinness) as a measurement of worth, arguing in different ways against the pressure to be beautiful. And Murray’s theorization of vision as influenced

by tacit bodily knowledges goes against the notion that observation is a valid method for judgements about someone's health or morality, destabilizing the assumption that fat is inherently unhealthy. Finally, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality offers a way of theorizing fatness in relation to other forms of oppression, showing that fatphobia exists in a bigger framework of and can coexist with different marginalizations.

In working to counter these three anti-fatness arguments, these feminist interventions into fat discourse contribute to a re-imagining of fatness, taking some of the power away from the dominant fat discourse. It shows how feminist theory can be employed to oppose the 'truth' put forward by fat discourse, and to push for the creation of new and non-normative knowledges.

## Chapter 4: 'In-Betweenness'

Becoming a feminist has a lot to do with unlearning certain truths as you open your eyes to new ways of seeing the world. One truth to unlearn is the one that is put forward through fat discourse, which holds that fat is always, irrevocably bad. This chapter focuses on the ways fat feminist femmes find themselves in a liminal space, a constant state of in-betweenness, as they navigate the boundary between the normative anti-fatness discourse within Western society and the non-normative bodily knowledges produced through feminist theory.

All my interviewees commented on the difficulties of navigating their fatness with one foot in the dominant fat discourse and one foot in feminist theory. They had been doing work towards unlearning dominant truths, but also experienced the way these truths were all around them and hard to escape. Aurora reflected on the way her relationship with her body changes over time:

This is my body, this is how it works and I'm okay with that. In the last years I've been trying to accept my curves, my fat, my fatness. And sometimes I really do. Sometimes I feel beautiful despite my fatness and sometimes I just feel ugly. I don't have fixed answers. It depends on when you ask me. At the moment I'm in one of those periods where actually fat is beautiful. It's just a different way to be (Aurora, 2017).

She experiences alternating periods of feeling that fat is ugly, and feeling that fat is beautiful and "just a different way to be" (Aurora, 2017). Her changing relationship with both her own body and with the word 'fat' highlight the difficulty of finding a stable way of relating to these issues while receiving contradictory messages about them. I saw this trouble mirrored in Lilith's story, when they spoke about their relationship to their own body.

Lilith shared this notion of fat as beautiful or simply different, but had trouble applying this sentiment to themselves:

In recent years I have been trying to reclaim the word [fat] for myself but that's difficult. Whenever someone asks me about the word fat I try to be positive, try to see it as neutral or positive, but that's really hard because of the bullying and the internalized fatphobia. Right now I'm at the point where I can see fat as positive or neutral in others but not in myself. I'm much harsher on myself than on others. Some days I'll feel good and then I look in the mirror and then all the things people say will play in my head and I won't feel as good. I remember wearing a new dress and feeling confident until my dad said it made me look fat (Lilith, 2017).



Years of fat abuse and internalizing negative messages about fatness have taken their hold on Lilith's perspective on their own body, and are proving very hard to unlearn. Especially when there are people around them who still continue to reinforce the dominant notion that fat is bad. There is a constant pressure from outside of Lilith that pushes for a normative understanding of fatness, while Lilith is actively trying to view fat in a different light.

Nisha told me that she had started to label herself as fat in front of others, but that she is still trying to figure out how to navigate her fatness:

I have started to refer to myself as fat in front of other people, I wanted to put it out there that it's something I know. I'm not unaware of my body, I carry it every day. I know it and don't think it's a bad thing. The fat itself is not bad. That dynamic is something I'm trying to figure out. I can easily talk about the race in my face, not the fat (Nisha, 2017).

She recognizes that the fat itself is not bad, and wanted to make it clear to others that she is aware of her body, but still struggles to talk about it comfortably. Because the dominant discourse on fat only discusses fatness in a negative light, any conversation about fatness is automatically haunted by the negative connotations that fat carries. For a fat person, this means feeling shame and being wary of fat abuse. Talking openly about your fatness puts you in a position of vulnerability, at risk of being on the receiving end of hurtful comments. For a fat feminist can create a tension between the need to keep yourself safe, and the desire to undo these negative connotations. This means that this vulnerability is accompanied by a sense of strength and resistance to dominant norms.

### **'Good Fatty'**

With the dominant fat discourse consistently reinforcing the notion that fat is bad, there is an assumption that fat people should be trying to hide their fatness instead of bringing attention to it by claiming or embracing their fatness. This expectation that fat people will make an effort to minimize the presence of their fatness influences what kind of behavior is deemed acceptable for a fat person. Nisha reflected on what this means for her, saying:

I'm afraid to break chairs. So in [my] surroundings, what can and can't I do because of my size? Do I take a full elevator and push myself in or do I take the stairs knowing that I will struggle half way through and be out of breath? It's a very condemning to be a fat body that is exhausted or a fat body that is eating. Or a fat body that is showing.. 'symptoms' let's call it, of fatness. It's kind of okay if you're fat but still normal, but fatness comes with consequences (Nisha, 2017).

Nisha speaks to her awareness of the erasure of fatness when she comments on the condemnation a fat person faces for being exhausted or for eating. She hints at the fact that fat discourse allows for a singular type of fatness, a type of fatness that bears no visible marks of fatness lest these draw attention and condemnation. This type of fatness is understood by Kitty Stryker as the ‘good fatty’ (Stryker, 2016).

Stryker describes the ‘good fatty’ as the fatty that performs their fatness in a way that shows their awareness of social norms and apologizes for their deviant subjectivity. The good fatty exercises and eats healthily, dresses the right way and is self-deprecatingly funny (Stryker, 2016). Above all, the good fatty might be fat, but is trying really hard to let everyone know that they still adhere to social rules, by trying to become thin or at least by hiding their fatness. Being a ‘good fatty’ requires a lot of work, hiding those instances that you might be out of breath or hungry because those might call negative attention to your fatness. It is as if the combination of being visibly fat (thus not beautiful) and being visibly unfit (thus unhealthy) emphasizes the negative connotations, being both is worse than just being one of the two.

Navigating fatness on the edge between a feminist and a normative understanding of fat, involves a growing awareness of all the ways fat discourse is prescribing restrictive rules on fat folk, in order to make a fat person into a ‘good fatty.’ The ‘good fatty’ is still constrained by the normative fat discourse, making adherence to these social rules an oppressive rather than an emancipatory experience. As a fat feminist, you are unlearning the ‘truth’ that fat is bad, that your body is unmoral, unhealthy and unattractive, while the discourse that this truth belongs to actively pursues you every day through, amongst other things, the promotion of subjectivities like the ‘good fatty.’ Fat discourse permeates our society with messages that tell you to alter your behavior and that push you to feel worth less (Wolf, 2002).

### **Disrupting fat discourse**

While writing the body of this thesis, it became increasingly clear to me that fat discourse works much like heteronormativity in that it is a normative discourse that constantly reinforces itself through a wide variety of channels, from the media to your close friends and family. There is this constant repetition, both explicit and implicit, of these normative messages that tell you that being thin is the norm. The underlying message is always that you should strive to live up to said norm, that being different is a negative thing or at the very least a thing that should always be (publicly) noted.

I believe some of the conceptualizations of ways to unsettle heteronormativity might be useful for the development or theorization of ways to unsettle fat discourse. During her interview with Peter Osborne, Butler suggested a course of action for destabilizing heteronormativity:

I think we need to pursue the moments of degrounding, when we're standing in two different places at once; or we don't know exactly where we're standing; or when we've produced an aesthetic practice that shakes the ground. That's where resistance to recuperation [of the norm] happens. It's like a breaking through to a new set of paradigms. (Osborne, 1996, p. 122)

If we apply this advice to our goal of disrupting fat discourse, this shows that it is necessary to constantly find ways to counteract or contradict the normative messages that are part of this discourse. You have to actively keep looking for 'moments of degrounding,' and do the work of untangling yourself from the connotations fatness carries, whilst still existing in a fat-hating society.

It is easy to fall back into this dominant discourse, but it is also painful and shameful and these emotions, together with the knowledge that this truth about fatness is based in reasoning that you do not subscribe to, are motivators to keep pushing back. This means that you need to find 'moments of disruption' to these norms in order to unlearn anti-fatness, and you need to keep finding these moments to counteract the continuous reinforcement of anti-fatness. It is not a case of simply saying, 'I now know fat is okay, I've done it,' it is a process in need of continual resistance and re-affirmation, because the contradictory messages are always there.

## **Representation**

Lilith and Nisha both spoke about the way they were finding moments of disruption through good representation. Lilith shared that they were part of "a whole bunch of body positivity groups on Facebook, and that helps a lot"(Lilith, 2017). Though the term body positivity is interpreted in multiple ways, Maria Southard Ospina explains that "at its core represents this wild idea that all bodies are good bodies. All bodies are worthy of self-love, self-care, and acceptance. All bodies are allowed to feel beautiful, regardless of their color or jean size or health status or how attractive *you* personally find them to be"(Ospina, 2015). Body positivity promotes a non-normative performance of fat femininity that includes a focus on "combatting this belief that thin is always good and fat is always bad. You've heard it before, right? Thin is beautiful and fat is ugly. Thin is always healthy and fat is always

unhealthy” (Ospina, 2015). Body positivity groups are spaces where feminist theory is practiced by people of all sizes, with a specific focus on fat positivity. As such, these spaces provide visibility and representation for body types that do not fit the dominant beauty standards or beauty myth, and are not often shown in mainstream media.

Nisha, who had previously commented on the difficulties she had with intersectionality as someone who holds multiple marginalized identities, commented on the importance of such diverse representation:

To have this very intersectional approach that lifts you up instead of weigh you down - because you feel like every ‘not being’ is an anchor that pulls you down - good representation is something that lifts you up. To see people like yourself represented as inhabiting all of these identities at once instead of playing up and down some things. It’s not often that you can inhabit all of your identities and still be comfortable in my experience. (Nisha, 2017)

Nisha shows that good representation is exceptionally important for those who are not only fat, but also marginalized in other ways. In her experience, good representation is something that lifts you up as you see people that look like you, people who are the same size and skin color, people who visibly share a similar cultural background.

In the previous chapter I referenced a quote from Butler in which she talks about the type of vigorous and politically engaged community that is needed to help “rethink a dominant norm” (Osborne, 1996, p. 113). This is exactly what body positivity groups provide for my interviewees as well as myself. Seeing ourselves represented and seeing others who do not look like the norm represented, helps to make sure that we stay firmly with one foot in feminist theory about fatness. When society constantly tells us that we see it wrong and that fatness is abhorrent, we need that community to help drown out the continuous repetition of the dominant ‘truth.’ The body-positive discourse is an invaluable tool in contesting the forceful, dominant fat discourse, and engaging with positive representations of fatness can be a significant and positive influence when navigating the liminal space of ‘living while fat and feminist.’ My interviewees and I practice our in-betweenness, our moment of degrounding, by reading feminist theory and by looking for community that shares our worldview. We do this by sharing the struggle against the dominant norm with others who know the importance of breaking through to a new understanding of fatness.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have researched the lived experience of fat feminists in a heteronormative and fat-hating society. Heteronormativity prescribes women and men as ‘natural’ and complimentary partners, in such a way that normative femininity and normative masculinity have been constructed as complete opposites to each other. When it comes to bodies, this means that heteronormativity requires a feminine body that is thin and takes up little space. It was within this context that I wanted to explore the lived experiences of fat feminists.

In order to do this, I first explored the normative understanding of fatness through the experiences of my three interviewees and myself. The negative connotations are communicated through fat abuse and fat talk, to the point where everyone who shares the same cultural archive, understands the word fat to be an insult. Whenever these connotations are made explicit, they are often substantiated through three anti-fatness arguments: the moral argument (fat is unmoral), the health argument (fat is unhealthy), and the aesthetic argument (fat is unattractive). These arguments can also be understood as separate truth discourses, propagating a negative understanding of fatness and instilling fat people with shame and low self-esteem.

I then examined several different ways in which feminist theory can offer a point of intervention into the dominant fat discourse. Naomi Wolf and Judith Butler both locate strict beauty standards, that equate beauty with thinness, within normative femininity and work towards a devaluation of this normative femininity. Wolf does this by showing how beauty standards, as part of normative femininity, can be implicated in a larger system of oppression that has the benefits of patriarchy as its primary objective. Butler focuses on the constructed nature of gender in general, questioning the value ascribed to a system that claims to be universal and natural. While focusing on different aspects of normative femininity, they both recognize the fallacy of beauty, understood as thinness, as a measurement for personal worth. Samantha Murray critically analyzes the validity of vision as the basis for judgements about fat bodies, by showing that vision is always already implicated in truth discourses about fatness, allowing for a destabilization of the arguments that fat is inherently unhealthy or unmoral. Finally, I explored the way intersectionality is an important tool to think through fatness as part of a bigger system of oppressions, as my interviewees were never merely fat. I found that fatness and fat oppression intersect with different marginalized identities to create unique lived experiences. These different ways of analyzing fatness from a feminist

perspective show how employing feminist theory can help create non-normative conceptualizations of fatness in order to counter the dominant fat discourse.

In the final chapter, I took a closer look at the way fat feminists find themselves in a liminal space between the dominant discourse and the non-normative feminist perspective on fatness, doing the work to untangle themselves from the negative connotations described in chapter two. I explored the way social rules enforce certain behaviors aimed at being a ‘good fatty,’ and how a growing awareness of the normative fat discourse helps to recognize the ways in which the ‘good fatty’ is part of this oppressive discourse. I argued that, because fat discourse is much like heteronormativity in the way that it consistently reinforces itself, it is valuable to look at the way Butler approaches heteronormativity. She suggests the pursuit of moments of degrounding, of standing at the boundary and leaning into the confusion of the liminal space. Finally, I looked at the importance of good representation in support of non-normative truths, as the dominant discourse continuously repeats and reinforces itself around us. I argued that body positivity groups can offer the type of community that is needed to successfully navigate the liminal experience of being a fat feminist.

### **Reflection and suggestions**

As explained in my method chapter, I let the interviews guide me in deciding which theme’s to include in my thesis. For the most part, this was a wonderful practice which allowed me to bring much of what my interviewees said into my writing, and allowed me to simply look back at my interviews whenever I was feeling stuck.

The downside of this approach, or my execution of this approach, was that it took very long for my thesis became what it now is. It took me very long, while working with the interviews and the theory, to find what would be the final focus of my work. This was both stressful and inspirational at times. There were times were I did not feel like I was in control of my own thesis, and though I think this was both a good and a bad thing, I cannot help but feel like my thesis might have benefitted from a stronger sense of direction as I was writing.

There have been many moments where I have come across topics related to fatness that are worthy of further exploration. I touched upon one of these when I discussed Lilith’s experience of being fat and non-binary. I believe further research into the way fatness intersects with gender, with a focus on trans and non-binary folk, could help create valuable knowledge towards further undoing of the dominant fat discourse.

**Personal note**

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have been paying careful attention to the fluctuations in my own relationship with my body. Writing my thesis about fat has forced me to talk about my fatness with friends who ask what my thesis is about. I have noticed a growing sense of unapologetic-ness when it comes to my fatness, and I am much less hesitant to talk about my body or bring attention to it. After having tried to hide my body for years, I have started to explore clothing that is not primarily aimed at hiding and I have bought and worn a two-piece bathing suit for the first time in six years. There are still days where I look at my body in the mirror and hear myself think negative thoughts, but I am now aware that these thoughts belong to a discourse that I want no part of, and try to let them float by without letting the negativity influence my self-worth. The dominant fat discourse is becoming easier to see for what it is: an oppressive norm system that has negatively influenced my well-being and has taken energy out of me that I could have used for much better things than obsessing about looking thin – like fighting the patriarchy.

Or, as Lilith put it: “I want to be able to go hiking without the goal being weight loss. Because it really isn’t, I’m fine with my size. I just want to be able to bench-press my boyfriend and to go skydiving” (Lilith, 2017).

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## Appendix

### Call for interviewees

Hi,

I'm a MA1 student at Utrecht University. I wanted to reach out to this group to ask if any of you would be interested in talking with/to me about your experiences in a (western) heteronormative society that prescribes a type of femininity that is restrictive to say the least.

For my thesis I am working from an intersectional feminist perspective on the pressures experienced by (cis and trans)women to look a certain way, have a certain body. I think everyone has to deal with these kinds of pressures, but I would like to focus my research on the specific experiences of women who are fat or identify as such.

In recent years, I have started to claim the word fat for myself and have found this both empowering on a personal level and very interesting/necessary to engage with on a political level. One fat body is not the same as another; differently sized people have different lived experiences, and these differences matter. It is those differences, but also the shared experiences, that I want to focus on in order to explore living while fat in an fatphobic (and intersectionally marginalizing) society.

Please email me at [rhea.eeltink@gmail.com](mailto:rhea.eeltink@gmail.com) or send me a personal message on facebook if you would like to sit down and talk with me.

### **Interview questions**

Do you mind if I record this?

—

Who are you? Will you tell me something about yourself?

—

What does the word fat mean to you?

—

How do ideas about body size connect to ideas about femininity for you?

—

How do ideas about ‘deviant’ body size, especially when it comes to your own body, connect to other ways in which you might experience marginalization (because of perceived ‘deviancy’)?

—

What do you think about the politics of labeling yourself as fat? About claiming that word as a political act?

---

What do you think about the strong negative connotations that are attached to the word fat?

—

It seems to me that people are so uncomfortable with the word fat and its negative connotations, that they will try their best to avoid using for as long as they can justify. They use euphemisms like curvy or chubby or fuller figured, especially to describe women’s bodies up until a certain non-specified level of fatness where they can’t get around the truth anymore.

What do you think about the idea of this kind of gray zone of bodies that are described using only euphemisms for fat?

—

I think having a body in this gray zone comes with both a decent amount of thin privilege, as well as with a number of marginalizing experiences that come from having a body that is bigger than what is considered ‘normal’.

What does it do when someone with a body in that zone, with a decent amount of thin privilege, claims the term fat?

—

I’ve started to notice that body size is often left out of intersectional analysis, and that the body positivity community is only now starting to become more intersectional.

Is this something you recognize?

—

Why do you think body size is not taking into account in a lot of specifically intersectional work?

—