

## Fat wars: In the trenches of a Southern California classroom

Susan Greenhalgh

*Fat-Talk Nation: The Human Costs of America's War on Fat*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2015, US\$26.95, ISBN: 978-0801453953

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In 2015, Tess Holliday became the largest plus-size model ever signed to a major modelling agency. At 5'5" and 280 pounds, her body-mass-index (BMI) of 46.6 exceeds the norm by almost 150 pounds. According to current scientific standards, she is morbidly obese. Holliday could be considered one of the casualties of the “war on fat” that anthropologist Greenhalgh (2015) documents with great urgency in her new book, *Fat-Talk Nation: The Human Costs of America's War on Fat*. The book aims to provide a human element to the deleterious consequences of combating obesity that, according to Greenhalgh, hurts everyone while simultaneously failing to help people lose weight. In the current health-obsessed American milieu, Greenhalgh argues that fat bodies represent a kind of moral failure that promotes and justifies the extreme measures taken to pursue bodily perfection. The bellicose language used throughout the book is intentional as the author emphasizes that fatness is experienced as a threat that must be prevented and eliminated at all costs. But Holliday's social media profiles depict a life full of photo shoots, jet-setting, adoring fans and cutting edge fashion. In addition to her professional success, Holliday's personal life appears equally fulfilled. Clearly, this is a curated and commercial enterprise that leaves out the more mundane and painful aspects of life. But Greenhalgh describes a bleak and diminished life for those unlucky enough to tip the scales. Is it possible to be fat and happy?

“As long as there is still one beggar, there still exists myth”, prophesied Benjamin (1982, p. 505). He referred to the nineteenth-century Parisian bourgeoisie's obfuscation of poverty but contemporary discussions of the so-called obesity epidemic are equally mystifying. As long as there is still one fat person, there still exists myth. For Greenhalgh, alarm over the increasing number of obese people in the country coupled with a lack of efficacy on how to successfully manage weight contributed to the creation of a series of *biomyths* (p. 30), false ideas about health and weight that help to sustain a larger, umbrella myth – that bodily perfection is attainable. The author argues that the pursuit for the perfect body under the guise of health detrimentally affects the self-worth, interpersonal relationships and overall happiness of young people, irrespective of their size. Precisely how Greenhalgh arrives at this conclusion might be what most interests readers, as she uses personal essays written by her students as preferred data over scientific research on obesity to locate where the bulk of the harm of extra pounds is actually occurring. The author's focus lies in documenting broken spirits, not in arguing about the accuracy of BMI; it lies in tracing strained familial ties, not in disputing the merits of calorie counting.

Greenhalgh's (2008) current focus on public health and weight has grown out of earlier award-winning work on China's emphasis on population governance and state formation in order to improve the “quality” of the country's citizens through the one-child policy. While teaching anthropology to undergraduates at the University of California, Irvine, from 1995 to 2011 Greenhalgh became increasingly aware of the harmful effects of the “war on fat”. One class in particular, “The Woman and the Body”, eventually led to the ethnographic material that makes up most of the book. She assigned her students an extra credit project to write a personal essay on how diet, weight and body issues had impacted their lives or the life of a friend or loved one (p. 43). Greenhalgh writes, “Assigning these essays as a pedagogical tool, I was not prepared for what I received. Full of tales of California childhoods dominated – and often devastated – by battles over weight, the essays were eye-opening, disturbing, and in cases, heartbreaking to read” (p. 43). Confronted with the pain and suffering exposed in these essays, the author felt obliged “to get their voices out, to ensure that their stories were more widely heard” (p. 44). This activist component is common within critical fat studies and while this is

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not a foreign gesture in anthropology, the exigent nature of the book is notable. For Greenhalgh, efforts to combat obesity have put the physical, mental and emotional lives of young people on the line and there is no time to waste in rectifying this reality (p. 38).

Following anthropologist Reed-Danahay's (1997) conceptualization, the students' essays are described as auto-ethnographies in which "the person being studied crafts his or her own description and analysis of his or her life and world" (p. 16). Greenhalgh explains this methodology as "persuad[ing] with personal stories, stories that, ideally, compel assent by their very humanity" (p. 17). Greenhalgh purposefully chose this approach in order to counteract the mainstream story being told by doctors, scientists and public policy makers that portrays the fight on waistlines as not only innocuous but virtuous (pp. 46–47). For her, scientists claim to "speak for people", but by prioritizing what they find to be relevant in their data, they ignore the sinuous complexity of individual lives (p. 16). The essays provide the bulk of her empirical research along with interviews, survey questionnaires, and "informal conversations and experiences" (p. 44). Clearly, research goals are different between the hard sciences and the social sciences, so how does Greenhalgh represent the results of the 245 personal essays she collected? She writes,

Students of narrative teach that it is not enough to challenge a powerful public story; one must replace it with a better story. In the pages that follow, I seek to disrupt an exceedingly powerful account of weight in America, one focused on personal blame, health, and economic costs, by telling a more compelling story that is centered on morality and political belonging, individual and societal costs, and social injustice on a very wide scale.

(p. 18)

This "better story" includes a new host of concepts that Greenhalgh develops from the material in the essays such as biocitizen, biopedagogy, bioabuse, biocop and fat personhood. These concepts seek to reveal the insidious and entrenched power of obesity research that has by no means reached scientific consensus, yet is so pervasive that it enlists mothers and fathers, siblings, teachers, coaches, paediatricians and the media in a national effort to prevent obesity and encourage weight loss (pp. 27–37). The book's first chapter provides a condensed but thorough overview of "the war on fat" that Greenhalgh dates as picking up steam in 2001, the year the US Surgeon General called on all sectors in society to combat fat

(p. 7). In 2004, after the attacks of 11 September, another Surgeon General "described the rise in childhood obesity as 'every bit as threatening to us as is the terrorist threat we face today. It is the threat from within'" (p. 8). In the pursuit of "thin, fit biocitizenship", in which "managing our own health and ensuring a medically 'normal' weight and fit body are fundamental duties", (p. 19) Greenhalgh argues that the message that is being delivered to young people that came of age during this time, and all born after, is that fatness must be prevented in order to belong. Kids in America learn that "fatness is evidence of a biological flaw, moral turpitude, and civic irresponsibility" (p. 76).

The middle of the book is divided into the categories delineated by BMI assessment (obese, overweight, underweight, normal). These chapters all include excerpts from essays by students who self-identified as belonging to those categories. Interestingly, only 7 per cent of respondents were actually fat. A footnote reveals a hypothetical explanation: fat people are less likely to get into college (p. 300). The excerpts are followed by an interpretation from Greenhalgh on how the "war on fat" has wreaked havoc throughout their lives, even if the student might not have perceived it that way (pp. 84–87). Some students were aware of the ways in which their lives had been negatively shaped by fat discourse (p. 104), while others accepted it without much critical analysis, unable to make connections between obsessive feelings about their bodies and the harmful comments they had received from family members or during paediatric visits (p. 90). Reading the essays often feels like one has stumbled across "deeply private and often painful secrets" (p. 44), but they vary in affective tone and effect. There are certain sections that sound like intimate diary entries (pp. 204–206) while others read like college application essays (p. 147). Nonetheless, the case Greenhalgh makes is compelling. The "war on fat" is not working, as students repeatedly failed to make sustainable weight changes and frequently made terrible dietary choices in the pursuit of weight loss or gain.

According to Greenhalgh, fat-talk is pervasive across the land. Yet, her empirical material focuses exclusively on Southern California. Greenhalgh suggests that "SoCal", as the area is colloquially called, serves as a microcosm of the whole country (p. 39). While aspects of the region are representative of the country at large (specifically racial and ethnic diversity), Greenhalgh also highlights particularities that help to explain why her students were so preoccupied with their bodies. This includes the celebrity and beach culture and general affluence of the area where "the

cult of the body is more extreme” (p. 40). Would an autoethnographic exercise like the “SoCal Body Politics Project” (p. 43) reveal similar results if done in Mississippi, one of the poorest states which coincidentally is also the fattest? What would essays written by non-college educated young people reveal?

The connections between race, class, gender and rates of obesity have been widely documented and show that blacks, Hispanics and lower income people tend to be fatter (Ogden *et al*, 2014). With this knowledge in hand, Greenhalgh’s interpretations repeatedly highlight the social differences between her student autoethnographers, even though the “authors did not emphasize (or perhaps even see) the role of ethnicity and other factors in their struggles” (p. 58). Over 40 per cent of her essayists are Asian while they only represent 5.1 per cent of the general US population (pp. 60–61). Asians also happen to be the thinnest ethnic group in America but they curiously made up the majority of her fat-identified students, which allowed Greenhalgh to focus on breaking down stereotypes of the “good Asian” and the “bad black and Hispanic” (p. 61). While her sample is not really representative of the more common assumptions of the obesity discussion, it is interesting to see Greenhalgh’s conclusions about the relationship between ethnicity and body politics. At one point she describes a student as “suffering from a double dose of pressure: from the wider culture and from her family” because in “Chinese American culture, ordinary is never good enough” (p. 158). Later, a white student is able to resist her family’s “biobullying” because “unlike the Asian girls we have met, who mostly endure parental bioabuse in silence, Kelsey confronts her mom, claiming ownership of her own body” (p. 224).

While fat studies generally seek to disrupt the monolithic claim of “fatness as pathology” (Cooper, 2010), academics and activists working within this field vary in their enthusiasm of size-acceptance. For some, the focus lies in exposing the disputed science on whether being overweight or obese is universally harmful and for others the emphasis is on changing the public policies that are a direct result of the varied evidence. Less common is a sense that fatness is a type of normal that deserves not only understanding and sensitivity but celebration (Cooper, 2010). This stance opposes attempts that encourage weight loss. It is a position found within *Health at Every Size*, a self-described “peace movement” that foregrounds body diversity. Greenhalgh’s book lies somewhere in the middle of these positions. The oppression and discrimination experienced by fat people is of top concern

in her work yet she stops short of valorising increased girth (pp. 286–287). For Greenhalgh, “poverty, genetics, and psychosocial distress” (p. 38), influence obesity rates more than individual choices. Understanding the cultural and political representations of fatness is admittedly not the author’s goal (p. 13), rather she seeks to expose how the “war on fat” is operating on the ground. Nonetheless the third factor Greenhalgh associates with weight troubles, psychosocial distress, represents an emotional pathology.

If one agrees with Greenhalgh that fat people do not deserve to be treated badly because of a complex interplay of biology, genes, environment and social factors that makes a person’s weight largely impossible to control, and that currently we do not have a solid scientific grasp of the effects and consequences of increased weight, how can one simultaneously assert, as Greenhalgh gently does, that obesity, not just the *treatment* of obese people, is a problem that deserves remediation? *Fat-Talk Nation* does mention some strands of unrest within fat activism and the promise of future possibilities for fatness to be normalized (pp. 10–14, pp. 284–285). But fat studies is a field strained by tensions between science and subjectivity. Size acceptance is one way to pursue happiness within a social reality that aims to destroy the self-worth of large bodies, as Greenhalgh documents, but how will it stand up to future scientific research that potentially confirms fatness as pathology? Will “sizeism” experience a comparable civil rights history as racism, sexual orientation, or sexism? Can one move from a position of shame to one of politicized pride of something as recalcitrant as one’s weight? What if eventually there was a way to permanently lose weight? If given a choice, would fatness be an identity that some would hold on to or could we, for the first time in human history, live in a world without any fat people?

Writing about the cultural politics of shame, especially as enacted by the social movements of the 1970s, feminist theorist Sally Munt pointed out that “collective emotions *do* instigate social change” (Munt, 2007). There are many emotions present in Greenhalgh’s students’ accounts: anger, sadness, shame, regret, envy, frustration and despair. The question that persists is what emotions will the counter-attack to the “war on fat” enlist? The heart wrenching accounts told throughout the book intuit that the damage on young people’s psyches is too great to overcome, or as Greenhalgh asks in the final pages, “if one comment can destroy a child’s life, what should we do now?” (p. 284) She offers some concrete and worthy initiatives that include dispelling bio-myths, discouraging fat-talk, and banning fat-bullying

(pp. 286–287). These are important suggestions that have the potential to change behaviours. Think of anti-discrimination and anti-sexual harassment trainings in the workplace. But as I read through account after account of Greenhalgh’s students hating their bodies, I remembered Tess Holliday and her Instagram posts where she unabashedly uploads images of herself eating “unhealthy” food, like corn dogs and enjoying being in love with a “normal” sized man. Perhaps disregard – in addition to joyful celebration of body diversity – is an emotion that could be effectively mobilized to combat discrimination of fat people. Is that not how bullies are intimidated?

In a recent contribution to the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, Greenhalgh (2015) asked some colleagues “why the culture and politics of fat have attracted so little anthropological interest”. The answers she received ranged from concern with the scarcity of analytic frameworks with which to approach the subject to disdain over enduring long periods of ethnographic research with people one did not like. Another informant offered up the possibility that because many anthropologists themselves are fat, feelings of shame would pursue them and prevent objective engagement with the topic. For a discipline that enthusiastically took up head-hunting and canni-

balism, it seems that fatness has been taboo. As long as there is still one fat person, there still exists myth. The author of *Fat-Talk Nation* has set out to break the taboo and dispel the biomyths surrounding our pounds.

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## The many meanings of obesity now and then

Megan B. McCullough and Jessica A. Hardin (eds.)  
*Reconstructing Obesity: The Meaning of Measures and the Measure of Meaning*, Berghahn Books: New York and Oxford, (Food, Nutrition, and Culture Vol. 2), 2013, US\$120, ISBN: 978-1782381419.

Georges Vigarello  
*The Metamorphoses of Fat: A History of Obesity* by (translated from the French by C. Jon Delogu), Columbia Press: New York, (European Perspectives), 2013, US\$35, ISBN: 978-0231159760.

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Since its designation as a global epidemic by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2000), obesity has become a major topic in both popular and academic writing. Social scientists from a wide range of disciplines have dissected biomedical understandings of the relationship between body weight and health (Jutel, 2006; Gard and Wright, 2005; Monaghan, 2005; Campos *et al*, 2006), as well as producing accounts of the media coverage of obesity (Boero, 2007; Saguy and Ameling, 2008), the effects of obesity stigma (Rich and Evans, 2005) and the politics of obesity discourses (Guthman, 2006; Kwan, 2009; LeBesco, 2011). Such scholarship partially overlaps with a new discipline known as fat studies or critical weight studies (Aphramor, 2005; Cooper, 2010). Detailed critiques of the framing of obesity as an epidemic have been produced (notably by Gard and Wright, 2005), but due to the greater availability of evidence, much of this work considers material from a small number of developed countries,

usually the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

*Reconstructing Obesity* addresses many of these issues using a series of cross-disciplinary and anthropologically informed case studies that draw on ideas of cultural difference, embodiment and local knowledge in order to better understand obesity in a range of social and geographical contexts. In their introduction, the editors criticise current obesity scholarship for its lack of attention to the lived experience of people, how and why they eat what they do, and how people in cross-cultural settings understand risk, health and bodies (p. 3). Chapters describe research using a range of ethnographic methods and conducted in a range of countries that include Guatemala, Cuba, Samoa and the United Arab Emirates. This is a welcome corrective to the restricted focus of much obesity research and policy-writing, and is particularly valuable for countries such as Samoa and Cuba, which are regularly discussed in public health nutrition policy.

The collection aims to create a constructive dialogue across anthropology, sociology and public health. This is a challenging target given the continuing dominance of biomedical framings of body size, diet and health, and the consequent lack of attention paid to social scientific analyses of the problem with such understandings. In their introduction, the editors challenge the idea that obesity equals sickness and begin to develop a hybrid model of ‘obesities’, rather than a unitary obesity, that incorporates and moves between both scientific and cultural understandings of the phenomenon (p. 7). As part of this reframing, they want to problematise both the measurement of obesity and underlying models of its causes, arguing that

Intervention and health promotion work could benefit from not assuming that the “individual” is universal, rights-baring and agentive, but rather see the individual as a culturally located concept best understood in context

(McCullough and Hardin, 2013, p. 8).

For them, a highly individualised and rationalised account of behaviour leads to an excessively instrumental use of culture in obesity research (p. 9) where the influence of an individual’s social and physical environment is reduced to the limited and unhelpful

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