



Fat Talk Nation: The Human Costs of America's War on Fat, by Susan Greenhalgh

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Central to Baptist Weight Loss's television advertising campaign is video footage of "successful" dieters becoming symbolically "reborn" by bursting through life-size "before" photographs of their earlier, fatter selves. Eventually, Plum too bursts into a new life, though not the one she initially intended to live. However, the pace with which this transformation occurs may be a point of minor frustration for some body-positive readers who wish that Plum would more quickly heed the guidance of the feminist allies she encounters as the story progresses. Additionally, some readers with a scholarly or activist interest in sexualities and sex work may quibble with the novel's representation of pornography.

Nonetheless, *Dietland* succeeds on multiple counts. Walker has created a fat protagonist whose growth and awakening consciousness illustrate that which is so sorely needed by our contemporary fat-averse society. Plum's evolution, cautiously incremental as it is, permits ample opportunities for Walker to deftly skewer the diet and beauty industries, as well as diet culture itself. The novel also provides the reader with a host of interesting secondary characters. Were *Dietland* to be adapted as a film, it would pass the Bechdel test with flying colors: strong, nuanced female characters abound, and their conversations with each other are about everything *but* men and romance. Many secondary characters voice the feminist social critique that is the backbone of *Dietland*, drawing important connections between fat hatred and other related forms of sexism and misogyny.

According to Walker's website, the author is presently at work researching her second novel. Whether fat acceptance features prominently in her sophomore effort will remain to be seen. But while we wait, we have juicy Plum and the compelling world of *Dietland* to keep us company.

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Fat Talk Nation: The Human Costs of America's War on Fat, by Susan Greenhalgh, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2015.

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that Susan Greenhalgh's book *Fat Talk Nation: The Human Cost of America's War on Fat* is relevant for everyone in North America. She does not let anyone off the hook. No one—herself included—escapes culpability. The issues raised and the problems described are not that other person's problem, they are yours and mine. It's not the way "they" talk about their "chubby" cousin, it's not your colleague's *sotto voce* comments about your new coworker, it's not the bullies in school or the haters on the internet; it's you. This book raises ugly truths about the ways in which the war on fat in the United States "has recruited all of us to fight fat by lecturing, badgering, and shaming fat people into shedding pounds" (p. viii). The author sets her explanation of what the war on fat is, how it morphed into its omnipresent form, and what fat-talk is (and how to recognize it), against an evocative backdrop of her student-participants' narratives of daily weight-related struggle, trauma, and emotional pain.

They are drawn from ethnographic essays, targeted interviews, survey questionnaires, and informal conversations and experiences. In the first pages of the first chapter, she offers poignant examples of fat-talk using excerpts from 20-year-old Elise and 19-year-old Lauren—they provide details about their personal experiences of being shamed, embarrassed, ridiculed, and lectured by family members and classmates, and the devastating effects this had on their sense of confidence and self-worth. It is through listening to these voices that the reader can begin to grasp the enormity of the human costs of this war: “the emotional, social, bodily, and relational harm inflicted on individual Americans in the name of fighting fat” (p. 275). Unlike health-related economic costs that are carefully tallied and artfully communicated to the nation’s conscience, these human costs, she argues, remain unmeasured and thus invisible. This book makes it impossible to not see the casualties of the U.S. “War on Obesity.” It makes readers think more deeply about how they interact with people, and challenges them to think about how they might be impacting the life of someone in particular.

Greenhalgh includes in her intended readership both academics and the general public; content and prose meet the needs and expectations of both audiences. The essays of her students are the key to this flexible utility, included verbatim in all their individual eloquence and raw emotion—they draw the reader in and provide powerful evidence to support her claims. It is difficult to look away.

Fat Talk Nation is divided into four parts comprising 10 chapters. In Part 1—“The Politics and Culture of Fat in America”—Greenhalgh presents most of the key points, including the concept of *biocitizen*, and its necessary conditions. While she employs many biocentric terms (e.g., *biomyth*, *biocop*, *bioabuse*, *biopedagogy*) to emphasize various interrelated aspects of the war on fat in the United States, and to remind readers that the biological body is always part of the political mix, the actor on center stage throughout is the biocitizen. “Virtuous biocitizens” (p. 23), she explains, are “double duty-bound” (p. 24): they are zealous foot soldiers who not only discipline themselves to maintain their medically approved weight, but also preach the gospel of normal-weight-through-dieting-and-exercise to others. This interaction is the essential tactic used in the war on fat. Importantly, she distinguishes her use of *biocitizen* from that of others such as Christine Halse (2009) and Julie Guthman (2011) by emphasizing “the demand that the biocitizen be *fit* as well as *thin*” (p. 297); her development of this aspect of biocitizenry seems to be built primarily from the essays that centered on experiences relating to sports (more on that later). In Part 1 she also describes the “body-obsessed” (p. 42) culture of Southern California—the setting in which her participants were located, and from which their essays emerged—arguing that it is a “microcosm” (p. 37) of the United States, but is characterized by even “tougher standards and pressures” (p. 37) for body perfection. She introduces verbatim excerpts from her students’ essays throughout the remainder of the book—they are her primary data and bear out her developing arguments and claims about the human cost of the war on fat.

In Part 2—“My BMI, My Self”—Greenhalgh wades into the topic of BMI labels that are so often tossed around in discussions of weight, dieting, and exercise: “obese,” “overweight,” “underweight,” and “normal.” In doing this she shows how her participants have internalized these labels and “increasingly define themselves by their weight” (p. 37), no matter what size or shape they are. To uphold the author’s desire and efforts to put a human face on the war on fat, I include pseudonyms in this summary: Kim, Jessica, Mai Ly, Sajeda, Caroline, and Jonathan describe themselves as “obese,” based on “bad BMIs”; April, Tiffany, Binh, Alexis, Annemarie, and Ryan self-identify as “overweight”; Jason, Huy, Linh, Sabrina, Ariel,

and Seth are “underweight,” and thus “weaklings and weirdos” (p. 137); and Marissa, Lindsey, Brandon, Jade, Sarah, and Megan who, while medically “normal,” feel and live like “virtual fat persons” (p. 154). They have internalized all the same messaging, and are unhappy with themselves and their weight. The obsession with weight, the despair over failing to feel normal (even those who fall into the “normal” BMI category), and the sense of constant judgment inhered in these labels, characterizes all who shared their story. The author adds her insightful analyses in short sections following each participant example, and by the end of the book her arguments, concepts, and personal stance have been well-rehearsed reflexively and persuasively.

Throughout Part 3—“Uncharted Costs and Unreachable Goals”—Greenhalgh describes in poignant detail individual “unmeasured costs” of the war on fat: strained/broken/abusive relationships, feelings of self-loathing, sadness, depression, and a sense of constant failure. All facilitated and encouraged by the rules of this war that make it acceptable—and morally preferable—to shame and shun fatness. In a reflexive tangent, she allows for the idea that perhaps “the truly obese, who face seriously elevated health risks” (p. 38; see also p. 237-43) might want or need help, despite the foregoing threats to human dignity she has just explicated. She claims that her argument still holds up—the current strategies of interpersonal interrogation and persuasion do not work. In fact, they do more damage than good because they do not recognize or deal with “the most powerful forces underlying obesity today: poverty, genetics, and psychosocial distress” (p. 38). This statement, in juxtaposition with her students’ narratives, rings true. However, if the aim of research and the mantra of medicine remains “decrease fatness, increase thinness,” it presumably won’t matter which of those important factors is tackled. Even if “means to effectively treat the disease and make them well” (p. 38; and I would add scare quotes to the word “disease”) were available and offered to “overweight and unhealthy” adults and children, a war on fat would still involve ethically insensitive condemnation of the nonadherers. In fact, fat-shaming could arguably intensify, because the offender would be knowingly rejecting obvious “solutions,” and would therefore warrant even firmer exhortation. She then sets out a plan for dismantling the war on fat, and stepping into an alternate paradigm.

Part 4—titled, “What Now?”—introduces ideas for stimulating new discussions and debates about health and “obesity” in the United States; Greenhalgh imagines ways of seeing and knowing that are not possible in a state of war. Of primary concern is the continued fallacy that an individual exists in an isolated, autonomous bubble of self-determination. In debunking this, Greenhalgh points to 1-800-GET-THIN billboards, Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign, the ubiquity and indiscriminate use of the BMI calculation, school fitness tests, and an “obesogenic environment” (p. 28) as just some of the structural forces and societal voices that, ironically, work against individual efforts to reduce weight and improve health. Unfortunately, rather than recognizing these forces as legitimate inhibitors of personal “success” (as defined by anti-obesity campaigners and their disciples) her students blame “their fatness and failure to follow the practices of a good biocitizen on their own slothfulness and other shortcomings” (p. 243), thus reflecting the embedded cultural discourse of “personal deficiency.” As she illustrates, biology, emotional eating, and poverty are some of the most powerful forces acting to stymie weight-loss efforts (I hasten to add, she is not promoting the desire or the need for weight/size reduction). She also folds in the dynamics of gender and race/ethnicity, which are “deeply intertwined” (p. 67), and along with social class add to the nuanced

interpretations she makes throughout the book, leading to one of her most significant findings: “the close connection between poverty and . . . class or socioeconomic security, and weight” (p. 280). Through this analysis, she shows how it is almost impossible (especially for young women) to “lean in” while sticking out—a reality that even well-meaning feminists have been known to misunderstand or ignore.

There are a few areas in the discussion that could use slightly more critical attention. One of these is the conflict between the author’s assertions of the implicit benefits of participating in sports and her descriptions of “hard-ass coaches” (p. 198) who directly and indirectly promote damaging body practices (often in the form of weight criticism). For example, in one place she states that “medicine (rightly) encourages young people to participate in sports” (p. 283), and in another that “playing sports should and often does foster healthy bodies” (p. 198). However, the coaches and parents casting a shadow over many of the students’ autoethnographies cannot be separated from the context in which sports are experienced. In one of the surveys she conducted, 70% of women and 74% of men said they had participated in organized school sports in middle and/or high school, and yet almost none of the essays she analyzed suggested that those early sporting experiences had improved body image, created healthy ideas about weight, or even generally improved morale (in many cases, quite the opposite on all fronts). Plenty of research on youth sport bears out this dissonance (e.g., see Abrams, 2001; Cardinal, Yan, & Cardinal, 2013; Hyman, 2009).

Another disjuncture that appears occasionally is the faint implication that if the war on fat was at least working to reduce waistlines in the United States, then the other physical harms—as well as less tangible damage done to emotional and psychosocial health—could be more comfortably tolerated. This syllogism appears in the form of frustration directed at biocops and other moralists, for whom the message seems to be that, because it’s obvious that you’re not meeting your size-reducing goals through fat-shaming and bioabuse, you should (logically) stop those approaches and use different, more ethical, tactics. But if the current tactics are unethical, if damage is already being caused, then clearly an appeal to the ethical sensibilities of the sermonizers has been, and thus is, an ineffective strategy in efforts to end the war on fat. Perhaps more examination of the underlying prejudices and motivations of biocops et al. could help us understand how to disarm social forces whose “concern about adipose bodies” (p. 6) has been legitimized by the medicalization of weight and its accompanying moralization of health.

Greenhalgh wants to make her participants’ stories “part of the national conversation about the war on fat” (p. ix), and in doing so hopes to underscore the “problem of social (in)justice” that constitutes that war. The book holds up its end of the conversation. Importantly, it stands side by side with similar texts and concurring research (much of which she cites) that all point to the cruelty, the consistent harassment, and the continued dismissal of fat voices and their advocates. I hope these human voices and faces Greenhalgh has introduced will be allowed their full potential and thus make a profound difference at both individual and societal levels.

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Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism, edited by Helen Hester and Caroline Walters, Farnham, England, Ashgate, 2015.

Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism takes on the oft-ignored or tentatively explored discussion surrounding sex and sexuality in fat studies. This multiauthor collection covers considerable ground, addressing fat sex/sexualities in relation to intersecting themes such as gender and class.

Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism is a departure from previous works addressing fat sex/sexualities. As the book itself points out, the discussion on sex/sexuality thus far has largely been curated through zines and other DIY projects (such as Nomy Lamm's zine *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* [Lamm, 1991]) or handled in the realm of commercial publishing (such as Hanne Blank's self-help book *Big Big Love, Revised: A Sex and Relationships Guide for People of Size* [Blank, 2011]).

Chapters cover topics such as the history of fat activism (Chapters 1–3), the relationship between body acceptance and sexual practices and attitudes (Chapter 4), fat femininities among the working class in the United Kingdom (Chapter 5), the gendering of fatness (Chapter 7), attitudes toward and embodiment within queer porn (Chapters 8 and 9), and the treatment of fatness in literature (Chapters 12 and 13). The variation in tone, methodology, and form (alongside scholarly essays there are personal essays and even a poem) mirror the hybrid nature of fat studies itself.

The book's introduction conveys an investment to hybridity, stating a commitment to using academic works alongside commercial or DIY works: "*Fat Sex* owes a debt to this activism infused scholarship, and seeks to draw on the strengths of the tradition in order to make a contribution to the field . . . This book seeks to demonstrate some of the ways in which academics are also activists and activists are also academics" (p. 4). This commitment is realized in a number of the chapters, but becomes murky at times as a small handful of contributing writers/scholars enact the methods of traditional canon building rather than truly positioning their work *among* the materials available in the DIY, activist, and commercial publishing spheres.

Chapters 2 and 3 (Zora Simic's "Fat as a Feminist Issue: A History" and Cat Pausé's "Human Nature: On Fat Sexual Identity and Agency," respectively) offer relevant grounding to the book's subject matter, but ultimately seem primarily to function in the generation of citable work. This choice to privilege scholarship obscures the very history of activism and provocation that the book seeks to honor and highlight.