

Where Are All the Other Fat Folks?

Fat Liberation in Food Justice Work

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This paper includes first-person narratives about my experiences as a fat (white, cis, queer) academic and teacher involved in community food justice research and advocacy. Theoretically grounded in fat studies and food studies, I explore the tensions amongst these disciplines and suggest that justice-minded food folks should also be focused on fat inclusion, addressing implicit bias in food advocacy spaces, celebrating food and community, and advocating for systemic change that supports fat liberation.

Introduction

Through first-person narrative, I explore my experiences as a feminist educator/academic, a fat cis woman, and a leader within local food security circles over my career as an educator and activist. I examine the tensions amongst my feminist educator identity, my role as an academic and community leader, and my (often contested) fat body (Austin 258; Lee 7). The culture within food security circles frequently overlaps with body shaming mantras of “clean-eating” – a social landscape that is frequently unsafe for a fat body like mine (Brady 9). While preaching a “good food for all” mantra, food security and local foodie groups are more often than not geared toward white, thin, upper-middle class, able-bodied, cis people. I conclude with some final reflections and recommendations for community food organizations who want to support and amplify their fat community members.

Situating Myself and This Work

I am a queer, cis, small fat, able-bodied white woman. I am in a tenure-track faculty position with a hybridized administrator role at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay,

ON. The narratives I present here are from life experiences over time, in different locations, and spaces. I acknowledge the privilege that my white, small fat body affords me and offer this narrative as an opportunity to discuss making space for all fats within food movements. For as long as I can remember, my body was the site of interrogation (from myself and others); I dieted, I restricted. I felt good when these habits resulted in weight loss and bad when they didn't. In short, my self-esteem was tied to weight. I exercised with the goal of weight loss. For a while, I tried to be the good fatty, someone who tried to stem the tide of weight-based oppression with exercise and a demonstration of what my fat body could do to earn more credibility in a thin world. One element of my world where thinness dominates is within food justice or local food circles where a lot of my research as an academic and my advocacy as a community member happens. In this narrative, I try to make sense of my own belonging and leadership within communities where my credibility is tacitly contested. And to try to make space for other fat folks to take up space in this sphere.

Because of the personal and affecting nature of food justice and fat liberation for me, I offer my thoughts as first-person narrative reflections. Narratives are a central component of storying lived experiences (Clandinin and Connelly 576). There is a growing body of literature at the nexus of food studies and fat studies (Brady et al. 2021, 2), but there is also much work to do. Just like the gym, school, clothing stores—food activist circles are fraught for fat people. As an education scholar, fat pedagogy occupies space within anti-oppressive and critical pedagogy frameworks. Scholars take up fat studies in relation to health sciences and nutritional sciences (Brady et al. 2019,

104). Hunt and Rhodes articulate that fat studies finds its home at the intersection of these theoretical frameworks because of their joint interest in examining “assumptions, stereotypes, stigma, and the creation of difference” (23). Food justice, a concept explored by many, often ignores fatness and embodiment as a piece of the puzzle (Brady 8; Cadieux and Slocum 3). I knit this research and theory with my experiences here because as I embrace my own liberation as a fat academic, leader, and community organizer, I realize that I cannot recall being in a room of community food advocates and meeting another fat person. Not one. In over 20 years of advocating, organizing, growing, and planning. So instead of pretending my fatness isn't there (McPhail et al. 18) I want to ask some questions: Where are all the fat people who are interested in food justice? Does my fat body erode my credibility in community food work? And where/when did my belief in food as a human right and joyful human experience start?

Narrative 1: Childhood memories of food

I grew up in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Situated on the shores of Lake Superior on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe people, Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850. As I started to come of age, my dad owned a sensible brick bungalow with a big backyard adjacent to a large public greenspace. We had a huge backyard and southern Italian neighbours who fed me crispy meatballs, hot out of the pan, over the fence. I loved that yard and I loved the giant garden my dad created. As a kid, I got the glamorous job, planting the seeds. I remember being amazed that seeds looked like the things we ate on our plates, except they were dry. Corn seeds looked like corn, pea seeds looked like peas. But, my favourite, carrots, were unbelievably small. Like little pieces of dust. How could a little tiny piece of dust make the long, tapered vegetable that I loved so much? And yet they did. I worked and played and worked and played for an eternity in the backyard with my dad. I remember digging up potatoes, unearthing these mounds of dirt, turning them over and finding dozens and dozens of potatoes. It was like magic to me. It still is. And, my favourite, pulling on the soft green tops of the carrots. Out of the ground they would emerge. Orange and perfect and lovely. I would typically eat them before they were clean. “A little dirt never hurt anyone,” my dad would say. They were usually rinsed down with a drink from the garden hose. This is the same house that we'd often come to (every second weekend and on Wednesdays) to discover a giant beast hanging, gutted, and flayed from the rafters of the garage. A large game hunter, my dad always (it seems to me) had a moose hanging in the garage. The smell of the animal “curing” as they call it, that smell to me, must be like what kids who have parents who are mechanics feel about the smell of motor oil. Or pipe tobacco or

something. At our summer cottage, I learned to hook worms and minnows to my line and pull up a fish. Which I would then watch being gutted (what's in its guts?!), fileted, washed, breaded, and fried.

On weekends, we would go to Uncle Nick's. He lived in the country, had a beautiful wooden house, with two ponds. It's where the bees were kept. And bees made the honey, so it was important that we go and feed them sugar water (bees have good taste), and make sure they were okay. This is also a time in my life before I considered my body, my fatness. I was older than 6 and younger than 10. By the time my dad moved out of that house, when I was 12 or 13, I had already learned that my body—and the food that went into it—was somehow not what it should be.

Growing food, preparing food, understanding where our food came from, and enjoying food were part of my life from an early age. It's no surprise to me that I've spent so much time in my adult life on food justice and for a time, running a small-scale organic farm. In the world of food advocacy and activism, there are a few frequent players: the engaged parent, the public health nurse, the government worker (usually department of agriculture), the farmer, the teacher, and the hippy activists. I guess I fall somewhere amongst the last three. You already know from my opening story that my connection to food and where it comes from started at an early age, so it shouldn't surprise anyone that, when I was laid off from my teaching job, I ended up working on an organic farm for a couple of years. Like, other areas of my life, education and more specifically my role as an educator helped me mobilize myself as an activist and eventually, a leader in food movements.

Narrative 2: The only fatty in the room: Community food advocate

Sitting around the table of our local food working group, we're brainstorming. It's situated in a decolonizing way: food justice, security, and reconciliation are all priorities. We've asserted in this draft of our food charter that food celebration is important to us, after all, food isn't all serious, right? The public health nurses see the word celebration and want to deconstruct what that means. Or more to the point, they set their crosshairs on celebratory food and what that includes. A melee of processed, deep fried, high sugar foods. They don't use the word obesity, but it's right there on the tips of their tongues, instead they say garbage food. “There's always garbage food at these celebrations.”

I start to reflect on the fact that thin people get to eat whatever they want without it eroding their worth as a person. Fine dining that includes some high-end poutine is not critiqued the way French fries at a community event can be. Because fat people, poor people, racialized folks are not afforded the opportunity to enjoy food for food's sake. I'm tired of not being

afforded this space nor to see it made for others. I find myself blurting out: “But, I love garbage food. I really do. And so do other people!”

Our facilitator refocuses the conversation, but, I’m acutely aware that I’ve already committed the cardinal sin as a fat person: I’ve admitted to enjoying food. And more than that, food that isn’t kale or green juice or something that implies that I’m punishing my body to try to make it different.

Many of the conversations I am privy to in my food advocacy work are like this: some overlapping Venn diagram of food security—making sure everyone has

is genuine and partially borne out of not asking questions, but there’s something else there. I can’t help but wonder, if I was a thin person, would my credibility be different in her eyes? Later, my student recounts to me in great detail the steps to making hummus from scratch. Because now that I’m in the world of people (in her mind) that want to talk about food security, I must want to know more about “clean eating” and vegan diets. I think this conversation is earnest enough and she is keen to share information, but one by-product of leaving our society’s dominant narratives about food and fat bodies unaddressed is the reality that thin people, like my student,

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access to the kinds of food they want to eat—and public health narratives of healthy food (Austin 249; Lee 4). As a fat person, when I hear (inevitably) a thin person sit around a board room table, talking about making sure that people eat healthy food, every hair on the back of my neck stands up. I’m steeling myself for the moment. The moment when they invoke the “O-word”: obesity. And all the well-intentioned white women in the room nod their heads in agreement. Not only is the enemy the industrialized food system and capitalism, it’s also all the fat people who just can’t help themselves (Cameron and Russell xii). This is the great dilemma of being a food activist and a fat person: fat people are not supposed to have a public relationship with food, unless we’re putting ourselves down or talking about earning our food through restriction and exercise (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 464). And fat people certainly don’t have public authority to talk about the food system in an educated way because our bodies clearly betray how little we know about health and nutrition (Austin 248). After all, how can people with such little “self-control” and knowledge of food participate in advocacy for something we clearly don’t have a handle on? I am often the only fat person in the room in these conversations. I don’t blame my fat colleagues and comrades from opting out of these food conversations; it doesn’t feel like a safe place.

Narrative 3: Vegansplaining and hummus

I have a student researching a project on food security. She’s an anxious student by nature, so I don’t want to tell her right away this is one of my research interests. Part way through her project, she stumbles upon this and also that I’m also involved in community work about food. She seems surprised. Her surprise

don’t realize how their food talk will impact people with fat bodies, or at the very least, mine. I now refer to conversations like this—where well-intentioned white women weaponize their healthy food knowledge—as vegansplaining. About the wonders of lentils and plant-based diets.

Even now as I write this narrative, I question myself: am I being hard on my student here? Is she earnest and interested in talking about hummus? Incidentally, homemade hummus really is easy and delicious! Or am I just being paranoid? I am reminded that this is how sustained oppression and microaggressions work; they trick you into thinking your reaction is illegitimate. And I know from these years of participating in food advocacy and now research that most of the researchers don’t look like me. That my body isn’t read as someone who is interested in food justice, while it is simultaneously read as someone (fat) who is exclusively preoccupied with food. Folks in food justice have a stereotypical “look,” one must look the part. And as a fat person, I do not.

Narrative 4: Fat promoter

I’ve been teaching this course over Zoom for the semester, we’re almost at the end. The whole course has been grounded in critical social justice theory. I’ve explicitly named my identity and social location, including that I’m fat-identified. While not the exclusive focus of the course, students have read articles and watched videos about fat hatred and its impact on people doing what they love. Today, they listened to an interview with a fat activist doing community building work. Thinking that we had moved past the meat of our weight stigma conversations, I frame the classroom discussion around creating community and belonging. Students are sharing ideas verbally and via the chat function in the online classroom. Then up pops an

offering that stops me (and the conversation) in my tracks. I see the start of the sentence “Promoting being fat is dangerous” and for a microsecond (is that a unit of measure?), the wind is knocked out of me. It’s the closing minutes of the class and I don’t want to, nor do I know how to take up an “anti-fat bias 101” lecture in 180 seconds. I also don’t want to leave it unaddressed. It sits like a bomb in chat section. So, I say to so-and-so: “I can see a comment in the chat that I don’t have time to take up now, but I can see there are some ideas we need to discuss more.” One of my students hangs around after class and asks me how I deal with responding to comments like that with tears in her eyes. I tell her that like any good researcher, I go to the literature. And in the case of fat activism the literature includes blogs, podcasts, social media profiles, and any other media that is research-informed or experience-based focusing on fat activism and empowerment. It is an ointment on the wound those comments inflict, reaffirming words, experiences, and people who have been there and experienced this sometimes at much greater cost to themselves. The irony that this comment comes in a broader conversation about creating spaces for people to belong is not lost on me. I’ve bought myself some time before I have to respond, but I’m left feeling sad for my students and for myself.

As the shockwaves of this “promoting fatness” comment ripple through my class, myself, and my mind, I’m reminded of the risk and vulnerability that come with opening discussions on fatness. I receive a few emails from students after class expressing their shock and dismay. I text one of my (fat) friends to share the experience. She is a badass with a masterful understanding of policy. She asks if there is any recourse. Can I have this student reprimanded through the code of conduct? Ultimately, I think it’s impossible, as she quickly identifies, fatness/body size isn’t a protected class under the human rights code. I’m left wondering how to pick up this topic next in a way that balances my authority as an instructor and also honours my values and experiences. How do I set an example for the fat students in my class who will (inevitably) have to self-advocate against these hateful ideas in their lives? And, importantly, how do I show the thin folks (and other “bystanders”) bearing witness to this exchange that it isn’t okay to talk about fatness and fat people this way?

Narrative 5: Glimmers of hope and belonging

I heard about an online webinar being hosted by Food Share about “Body Positivity” in food circles. I signed up immediately. I will admit that my expectations were very low for this webinar/online workshop. My low expectations stem from a professional lifetime of being disappointed by food folks’ treatment of fatness and also, in this case specifically, from their use of the problematic term “body positivity.” A term that is used on blog posts,

social media, and by beauty/fashion companies to describe some lukewarm version of “love yourself.” The real problem here is not loving oneself, but the fact this mantra fails to acknowledge that, despite loving oneself, many of us have poorer access to respectful health care experiences, fashion choices, more expensive life insurance premiums, and daily lived experiences fraught with microaggressions and tangible systemic oppression based on body size. All the loving myself in the world isn’t going to ensure that I earn as much as my thin counterparts. I carried this lifetime of weight-bias with me into this space, anticipating the worst. And I was pleasantly surprised. The community organizers running this workshop provided organizational and societal context for their focus on fat liberation—words they actually used to my great delight. Included in their facilitation team was a member who self-identified as a fat person to what I can only assume is a captive audience of community food advocates. Helpful tools and examples were provided for organizations looking to do fat liberation work alongside their food justice work. I was elated to have attended this meeting and to not be (for the first time ever) the only self-identified fatty in the room. After the workshop was over, I got to thinking of all the times I’ve attended community food meetings, how this is the first time anyone has ever said anything that felt validating about fatness. I’ve failed to do so in many instances myself. Almost two decades of food advocacy work and this meeting, in October of 2020, was the first time.

I named the community organization (*Food Share*) here because I think they deserve credit for using their prominence in community food advocacy circles to discuss fatness and fat liberation. The experience of this workshop put wind in my sails as I felt the weight (pun intended) of fat advocacy lifted from my shoulders for the briefest of moments. As I found myself amongst fellow fat-identified people and allies, I was not the only person responsible for raising weight bias amongst community food groups. I had the flexibility and comfort of being a participant, instead of a leader.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

Over the last decade of working in education, academia, and food advocacy I have learned a lot about myself as a leader, an academic, and as a fat person. When I considered this paper and this project, I tried to think of moments of overt fat-shaming that occurred for me in foodie circles. I came up kind of short. That made me doubt that this was a relevant topic to explore. I could tell a lot of stories of being in restaurants, grocery stores, clothing stores, family dinners, and a lot of other places where I’ve been overtly fat-shamed. One does not need to be called fat to perceive and feel one’s fatness, one can feel one’s difference in a room full of thin people talking about kale. The tacit

exclusion of fat people from these circles tells me that fat people do not feel safe there. As a scholar of food security, equity, and advocacy this troubles me. Increasingly, I'm troubled by who isn't represented around the tables I sit at. Some recommendations for community food organizations to consider:

1) Consider fat inclusion. How you talk about food (and the people who consume it) matters. Don't use words like obesity. Equally important is not to remain silent on the way our bodies influence our relationship to food and communities more broadly. If you find yourself in a room filled with thin people talking about community food issues (and you will!) consider how you can make this space more welcoming for people of diverse bodies sizes and abilities. Are you meeting in spaces accessible for all bodies? Are the chairs accessible and comfortable for all bodies? If you have catered events (the budget!), how do you talk about the food? Using words like "healthy" and "nutritious," while well-intended, can be triggering and create unease amongst fat people.

2) Work to address the implicit and unrecognized bias. Many organizations fall back on (flawed) health concepts and research (e.g., obesity rates, BMI) when trying to advocate for better food security and justice. In doing so, body size and fatness become undesirable, excluded identities. If you try to keep people away from your movement, you will succeed.

3) Make space to celebrate food and community. Often in community food circles, food is viewed as something to restrict, restrain, and control. Celebrate nourishing communities in holistic ways (mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically).

4) Advocate for systemic change on anti-fat bias. Include anti-fat bias in your strategic plans, food charters, food strategies. Anti-fatness is tied to colonization and white supremacy which community food organizations are increasingly incorporating into their work (Strings 91; Taylor 52). Food justice means fat justice. Elevate and amplify the voices of fat people by including this in your work.

As I peel back the layers of these stories, I can see the ways that fat people would feel policed, silenced, and fearful of these venues. The moments where my authority is underestimated because of my fat body, the war on fat waged by public health officials, and the cult-like nature

of the clean-eating movement that frequently overlaps with producers or purveyors of local food. So, why do I stick around? I return to my childhood stories, which are filled with idealism. Spending time on the land, preparing food, learning about what plants need to be nourished and grown so that they can nourish and grow you. Dipping rhubarb in sugar barefooted. Food for me has equalizing potential and that is rooted in my familial and childhood experiences. Despite the complications of identity and systems of powers (being fat!) I still believe food (growing it, preparing it, eating it, celebrating it) holds that power for others.

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L.A.R.K.

A Is for Appetite

And when Mona Lisa sat there,
 she just sat, there.
 Her appetite grew intense
 and she stood up,
 walked toward the fridge.
 She grabbed herself some chocolate,
 a loaf of bread, and a bag of chips.
 Eating this food made up for all the times
 she deprived herself,
 when she existed on water.
 Today she wanted to enjoy herself.
 She walked toward her chair
 and sat down munching away,
 looking out the window,
 out into the fields which lay before her.
 Her appetite soon satisfied,
 she began to whistle,
 and then a huge smile spread across her face.
 This may be what it meant to have an appetite,
 to satisfy it and feel at ease and comforted in her body.
 Imagine if you saw a painting of the Mona Lisa,
 and thought to yourself, “I wonder what she is thinking about?”

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