Body Positive Babes:
An Exploration of the Contemporary Body Positivity Movement and the Acceptable Fat Woman's Body

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Abstract

This thesis examines the roots of the representation of fat women in the popularised body positivity movement in recent UK and US culture. Popular critiques of body positivity tend to suggest it is a dilution of the more 'radical' fat activist movement of the late twentieth century which has erased fat women from its focus (Dionne 2017; Kessel 2018; Rutter 2017; Severson 2019). However, Cooper (2016) theorised that there are many proxies of fat activism, with body positivity being just one. I examine this bond, and ask: What is the relationship between body positivity and fat activism? What kind of fat body positivity has developed because of fat activist practices? And, what bodies (and people) does fat body positivity celebrate? These questions are relevant to me as a scholar of fat studies, as well as a fat woman affected by the perspectives of body positivity. I therefore navigate the ever-changing body positivity movement and address my questions via a methodology which consciously threads my own fat stories through these knotty questions. I follow the 'pricking of my thumbs' (Hennegan 1988) to locate a variety of texts that 'represent' fat body positivity. By engaging with my autobiography alongside texts from online magazines, published autobiographies and blogs, I trace a history of fat body positivity from its origins within fat activism. I argue that this narrative centralises around five themes: whiteness, femininity, heterosexuality, health and self-love. In examining these themes (or proxies) of body positivity I uncover significant cultural moments that connect understandings of fat activism and body positivity and identify important absences that 'haunt' the movement. I argue that both movements have led to a narrowly-focused acceptable fat body positivity and conclude by offering tentative ways forward for a more liberatory representation of fat bodies.

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Acknowledgments

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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1. Scavenging in Body Positivity: How to Organise the Disorderly

Over the last five years body positivity has become something of a social phenomenon. When I started my PhD in 2014, I did not want to research body positivity specifically, but I was aware of an influx of something my supervisor and I referred to as 'fat beauty' making its way into mainstream consciousness. Having had both a personal and academic interest in fat fashion (often termed fatshion) and writing my MA dissertation on the potential of fatshion for 'empowerment', I knew that, in some way, my PhD would focus on 'fat beauty'. Then, in January 2015, Tess Holliday, a visibly fat woman, was signed to MILK Model Management and was celebrated by mainstream media as the 'first plus-size supermodel'[1] (Ferrier 2015; Leal 2015; Lynch 2015; Olya 2015; Saul 2015; Weisman 2015). Holliday's elevation to 'plus-size supermodel' stood alongside a number of other markers of body positivity: Ashley Nell Tipton as the first plus-size winner of *Project Runway* (Feldman 2015), Gabourey Sidibe's sex scene in popular US television show *Empire* (Verdier 2015), the premier of Whitney Way Thore's own reality television show and, oddly, rapper Drake's use of the term 'BBW[2]' in his single *Hotline Bling* (Tonic 2015) meant that 2015 earned the title of 'the year of body positivity' in several online magazines (Kabas 2015; L. Murray 2015; Ospina 2015; Surface 2015). While most of those magazines included women – as well as men – who are not fat in their articles, the examples I engage with still focus on fat women. The popularisation of body positivity thus happened during my PhD and the more I tried to focus on 'fat beauty', the shift to body positivity seemed harder to ignore. At the

[1] A statement that has been contested considering the success of Emme, Amy Lemons, Angellika Morton, Mia Tyler, Allegra Doherty, Ashley Graham and Velvet D'Amour prior to Holliday's signing (Gilbert 2018; Hargrove 2018; Ospina 2013; Waller 2016). However, apart from Graham who has her own clothing line and most recently has been a judge on reality television show *America's Next Top Model* (2016-2018) , none of the other plus-size models prior to Holliday have reached quite the same level of fame. Additionally, I would argue that apart from Velvet D'Amour, the other plus-size models are not 'fat' in the same way that Holliday is fat.

[2] BBW: Big beautiful woman

end of 2015 I made a decision to shift my research focus slightly and focus on fat women in the body positivity movement.

This introductory chapter serves as a rationale for my thesis, outlining my decision to focus on the cultural history of fat body positivity and my inspiration for examining body positivity through fat activism. I also provide clarification of my theoretical framework which is focused within the field of fat studies and specifically centred on feminist fat studies. Finally, I will present my methodological strategies which highlight the importance of lived experiences and situated knowledge.

First, however, it is important to explain the necessity for researching the emergence of body positivity into mainstream media. The body positivity I focus on in this thesis refers to acts that may be deemed affirmative of women's physicality and draws on Charlotte Cooper's (2016) theory of body positivity as a fat activist proxy. Popularised body positivity is most closely associated with a 'self-love' agenda and a demand for representation of bodies that differ from normalised (thin) standards of beauty. Body positivity experienced an influx of popularity during the mid-late 2010s but not without multiple critiques. Many of these criticisms were to be expected within the context of the 'obesity' epidemic, but others focused on the perceived 'dilution' of fat activism. These latter critiques, which I am most interested in for my research, accuse body positivity of stealing and elevating more palatable aspects of fat activism while further marginalising people who do not fit into young, able-bodied and feminised beauty standards. These criticisms are becoming more plentiful and widespread, but they are not necessarily new perspectives. In 2013 Kelly Faircloth (2013) reported in the British newspaper the *Observer* that 'plus-size blogging' had left its radical roots behind and quotes Amanda Piasecki (quoted in Faircloth 2013), the creator of online fat fashion forum Fatshionista*,* who suggests that the 'deeply queer, alterative type of culture' associated with fat fashion was 'co-opted by the mainstream, in the same way that all kinds of subcultures are co-opted by the mainstream'. Even in 2013 there were accusations that body positivity, which, in my opinion had not yet

reached its peak popularity, had already forgone its more radical roots in favour of presenting fat people as acceptable (Faircloth 2013).

Articles that came post-2015 and Holliday's 'explosion' into mainstream press follow a similar mode of critique: Evette Dionne (2017) writing for *Bitch* suggests that body positivity is 'fragile' and has 'overtaken' the radical roots of fat activism; Bethany Rutter (2017) argues 'the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was snatching body positivity out of the hands of fat women and then convincing them it was never theirs in the first place' and Maria Sherman (2019) writes for *Jezebel* that the 'end game' for body positivity is more 'mindless consumerism'. These critiques, and others in a similar vein, suggest fat activism is the reason for body positivity's existence, growth and popularisation and yet the popularised version of the movement has forgotten its fat-focused roots and is refocusing on bodies which are more 'normalised'. My research focuses on the relationship between fat activism and contemporary, popularised fat body positivity. My own introduction to fat activism was through, what Faircloth (2013) calls, 'plus-size blogging'; I found my first fat activist home within fatshion and from there I was led to fat activism and eventually fat studies. My understanding is that fat activism has not always been a 'unified' movement, so when body positivity or, more specifically, body positive advocates, are accused of encouraging the depoliticisation of fat activism, I am curious to know what that means – especially if those accused of encouraging the dilution are fat themselves.

The articles I cite above are all written under the assumption that body positivity, as it is now, has become a separate phenomenon to fat activism with different goals. A few years ago, I may have also adopted this perspective; however, the more I research fat activism, the more I understand that while it is not necessarily divisive, it is a movement made up of many differing and often contradictory viewpoints. In conversation with fellow fat studies scholar Samantha Murray, Cooper (Cooper and Murray 2012, 132) suggests that while fat activism in many ways is 'undertaken by groups of people as community', that is only a small snapshot of what fat activism is. Fat activism can also exist in 'much smaller' ways too, 'through conversations,

friendships, in the passing moments between strangers' (134). Cooper argues that fat activism operates without a 'sense of group regulation' and people may call on fat activism without understanding what it really means; in this way fat activism can be treated as a concept relative to a specific moment or person. Cooper (2016), quite literally, wrote 'the book' on fat activism and it is one I draw on frequently throughout my thesis but there are, of course, other definitions and understandings of fat activism. Virgie Tovar (2018) argues that the 'differences' between fat activism and body positivity are very noticeable and seems to define them with ease; she argues that 'body positivity has eclipsed fat activism' and that, in contradiction to fat activism, body positivity is not a political movement since it does not have a clear focus, aim or purpose. While this thesis will explore the specifics of fat activism in more detail, I use these two examples to show that there are disagreements about what comprises fat activism. While there may be suggestions that body positivity is celebrating the less radical aspects of fat activism without engaging in its more political aims, clearly defining fat activism and the 'aims' of that movement is not a simple task.

Since I began researching for this thesis, body positivity as a cultural concept has gained even more traction and a plethora of concurrent critiques which suggest that body positivity is not only being diluted and becoming less radical but it is being 'taken away' from fat people (Brown 2019; Dastagir 2017; Ferguson 2019; Greene 2019; Greenall 2019; Motz 2018; Prins 2017; Rutter 2017; Severson 2019; Shackleford 2015; Tinsley 2019; VanKoot 2017). I am interested in pursuing and researching the idea that body positivity 'takes' from fat activism and in teasing out how the 'taking' happens. Therefore, I focus on women in the recent past, and now, who engage in body positive acts through their writing and who are deployed in body positive representation on social media, blogs and more traditional online media such as online magazines and newspapers. While a further exploration of body positivity could include thin women who identify with the movement, this thesis focuses on bloggers, journalists, authors, social media personas and television stars who have received significant traction representing themselves as fat body positive advocates or, in some cases, fat activists. I also want to note that

when I discuss women throughout this thesis, unless stated otherwise, I am referring to everyone who identifies as 'woman'. While there is a scope and need for a study in trans and nonbinary specific understandings of body positivity, the research I undertake here takes from mainstream or popularised representations of fat body positive advocates which, as I will go on to explore, relate to a very 'specific' version of woman.

Having decided that my research would focus specifically on fat women, and considering part of my investigation would be to connect themes of body positivity with established fat activism, I knew that any material I collected would need to be understood through the lens of fat studies. This is a relatively new field, but is growing with important contributions such as the *Fat Studies* journal and the publication of *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009). According to Esther D. Rothblum (2011, 173), Marilyn Wann was one of the first activists to use the term 'fat studies'. In 2009, Wann asserted, '[u] nlike traditional approaches to weight, a fat studies approach offers no opposition to the simple fact of human weight diversity, but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality' (Wann 2009, X). While fat studies 'critically examines societal attitudes about body weight and appearance' (Rothblum 2011, 173), there is an acknowledgment among fat studies scholars that women suffer more from weight stigma than men, as they tend to be more concerned with their weight, and report that weight has interfered with employment options and perceived sexual attractiveness (Rothblum 2011; Tiggemann and Rothblum 1988). Because fat studies is not an inherently feminist scholarly field, I also want to acknowledge a framework of feminist fat studies scholarship as the focus for my explorations in this thesis. Cooper (2010a), for example, refers to the 'Holy Trinity of academic discourse on fat in social sciences' – Susie Orbach, Kim Chernin and Susan Bordo all provided what Cooper terms, feminist psychoanalytic accounts of fat women in the early 1980s, which mainly focus on body image and eating disorders. Cooper asserts that the work of the 'Holy Trinity' is constantly cited as evidence that feminism has a good understanding of 'fat', but suggests that the feminism of Orbach, Chernin and Bordo is not the feminism that helped create the fat activist movement. In chapter

five, I explore significant feminist motivations behind fat activism, but it is also important to acknowledge where my 'feminist fat studies' is located. I have read Orbach, Chernin and Bordo and while they are recognised as fat feminist canon, I rarely engage with their work throughout this thesis; their feminist analysis of fat women does not merge easily with my understanding of myself as a fat woman, nor with my scholarly exploration of and challenges to body positivity. As Cooper (2010a) argues, the work that is produced from the 'Holy Trinity' is often a 'proxy' for fat activism, the 'real' focus being on 'slenderness, dieting, body image and eating disorders'.

'The Holy Trinity' are not solely responsible for understandings of fat within feminism, but while I refer to 'fat studies', I do not necessarily mean knowledges based within the academy. On fat epistemology, fat studies scholar and activist Cat Pausé (2012b, n.p.) asks who gets to be the 'knower'; she argues that 'authority figures' such as physicians and politicians are often happy to talk about the dangers and implications of fat without having any empirical evidence behind their ideas. Pausé (2012b n.p.) asserts that 'the bottom line' is that fat people know best about their own lives, behaviours and experiences and should therefore be the producers of knowledge around fat – even if, or especially if what fat people report contradicts mainstream understanding or 'common sense' surrounding issues related to fatness. Here, I introduce Pausé as both a scholar and an activist as within the specific fat activism I engage with in my research that distinction is important. Throughout this thesis I draw heavily on my own 'Holy Trinity' – the work of Charlotte Cooper, Kathleen LeBesco and Samantha Murray informs a theoretical framework that has basis in both academia and activism. Each of these scholars have experiences of being fat women and are either currently involved or have previously been involved in fat activism. It will be clear that I agree with feminists such as Teresa de Lauretis (1990) who argue that feminism is built on the foundation of women talking to each other about their experiences, and in this way Cooper, Murray and LeBesco's approaches to research are inherently feminist. While each scholar has a different perspective on what it means to be engaged with fat activism, ideas which are explored throughout this thesis, their publications

within the field of fat studies regularly demonstrate an understanding of gender alongside the complexities of existing as a fat woman whilst writing about fat.

I want to pause the explanation of my theoretical framework here to discuss why I did not go down one particular pathway of critical thought – although it may seem timely and topical. Despite there being multiple feminist scholars who have discussed neoliberalism and postfeminism in great detail and with a focus on the body (McRobbie 2004; Gill 2007; Gill 2009; Gill 2014; Rottenberg 2018), I made the decision to exclude direct discussions of both from this thesis. Perhaps because of the popularity of the analysis by the scholars cited above, there has been an increase in active discussions of neoliberalism and postfeminism in more mainstream dialogue, and body positivity is no exception. The majority of these more mainstream critiques criticise the neoliberal turn of body positivity and its collusion with capitalism. These critiques have become increasingly common over the last five years and, I aruge, 'neoliberalism' is now reaching buzzword status. At the beginning of my PhD, I did consider researching around, what my supervisor and I referred to as, the 'commercialisation of fat beauty' but on further consideration I became sure this was, although perhaps the most 'obvious', not the only story to tell. I was concerned, that at this point in my academic career and the current iteration of body positivity that I would not be able to provide a unique analysis. Additionally, because of the abundance of critiques of body positivity that include a reference to neoliberalism, capitalism and postfeminism, I do think that my tracing of body positivity through fat activism could have been distracted by investigating what is really meant by 'neoliberal' or 'postfeminist' in popular discourse. Nevertheless, I do see scope, using the core material I have already collected, for a discussion around neoliberalism in fat activism and body positivity in the future – specifically around ideas on how the 'self' is perceived through body positivity in mainstream society and, of course, how capitalism has invaded a movement built on grassroots activism. However, so not to distract from the body positive history I have managed to produce in this thesis, there is an absence of discussion around neoliberalism and postfeminism.

When I began my research, in comparison to the published academic perspectives on the concept of fat activism, there were very few articles or books published specifically on body positivity. As I began to understand more about body positivity and started to make connections with its origins, these academic and historic perspectives on fat activism, largely written by Cooper, LeBesco and Murray became increasingly relevant. LeBesco's (2004, 42) work on fat assimilationist activists has been particularly insightful, wherein she argues that a fat 'assimilationist's' aim is to 'secure tolerance' for fat people while still regarding fat as a 'problem' and compares the work of such activists to the work of some disability activists who work to gain equal rights for an 'unfortunate' group of people. She (2004, 42) compares fat assimilationists' work to the work of fat liberationists who, in LeBesco's opinion, celebrate fatness and see it only as a problem for those who are 'unenlightened'. If compared to disability activists again, LeBesco argues that fat liberationists are like those who 'champion the beauty, potential, and unusual experiences of disabled people'. For example, LeBesco (2004, 45) has argued that The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA, who I discuss in detail in chapter four) are more assimilationist than liberationist in their approach, as their newsletters tend to focus on the narratives of 'tolerance' and 'survival'. LeBesco's clear outlining of what it means to be an assimilationist helped me to determine some of the meanings behind the activist language often perpetuated in body positive texts. While body positivity and fat activism are different, especially in their portrayal in mainstream media, being able to hypothesize the 'goals' of a specific activism which has a history of being ambiguous helped me pull out some of the key ideas and themes behind body positivity.

While a large majority of the critiques of fat activism came from a mindset of 'obesity' as a moral panic, Murray's perspective comes from the angle of being a fat woman, passionate about fat politics but uncomfortable with her own body. Her ([2008] 2016) analysis of fat activism in *The Fat Female Body* focuses on and is inspired by the work of Marilyn Wann (1998). Murray ([2008] 2016, 8) is concerned with the 'politics' of, what she calls, the 'Fat' or 'Size Acceptance Movement', and

aims to interrogate the 'problematic model of subjectivity on which fat politics is founded'. She particularly takes issue with the 'pride' narratives in fat activism which she argues are based on Civil Rights and Gay movements from the past. Her work is written from the perspective of a fat woman who struggles to participate in the 'feel-good' discourses celebrated by Wann in her book *Fat!So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologise for Your Size* (1998). Murray ([2008] 2016, 107) argues that Wann suggests we make changes to ourselves as individuals and 'decide' that 'negative readings of "fatness" can be discarded in our project of self-empowerment' while failing to acknowledge that 'Size Acceptance' is not a unified, political movement which presents difficulties when 'simply' identifying as fat. Murray further contends that problems arise when processes of political activism first start with the task of 'changing one's own mind about one's own body' (89). These critiques are particularly useful for examining body positivity as with the particular fat activism that Murray discusses, there is a great emphasis on self-empowerment, pride and 'the changing of one's mind' (89). Both Murray and Wann draw attention to the themes of fat activism that remain present in body positivity, if body positivity is indeed a dilution of fat activism then it is possible that the threads of body positivity can be traced through their work.

In a conversation between Murray and Cooper (2012, 137) around four years after the publication of *The Fat Female Body,* Cooper asks Murray whether she may have understood Wann's specific fat activism as fat activism as a whole. Murray suggests that may be the case, but she was critiquing 'uncritical body celebration' through 'feel-good' discourses which balances on an individual's 'cultural capital, privilege, and social status'. So, if fat activism is not unified or a single political movement, as Murray ([2008] 2016) has suggested, then what is it? Cooper provides a suggestion, or rather an abundance of suggestions, with the publication of *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (2016) which she reports was written because she was dissatisfied with the 'majority of popular and scholarly writing about fat activism' (Cooper 2016, 11). She (11) asserts that much of the knowledge cited about fat activism is simultaneously treated as definitive whilst being distorted or disengaged with 'what fat activists actually do'. In this book, Cooper theorises that there are

many ‘assumptions’ made about fat activism that although cited and often respected do not reflect her experiences as a fat activist. Cooper (11) names these ‘assumptions’ proxies, which are stand-ins or ‘something authorised to represent something else’ which often only give a limited view or idea of the idea they are supposedly representing. Cooper suggests that body positivity, even before it became popular in mainstream media, was a proxy for fat activism. Citing Wann’s (1998) work as the ‘basis’ for this proxy, Cooper (2016 12-3) asserts that this is the most cited understanding of fat activism. She describes *Fat!So* (1998) as a ‘brightly coloured activity book [which] is written with an upbeat can-do tone and invites its readers to disinvest in self-hatred and weight loss and develop critical approaches to those concepts’ (Cooper 2016, 12-13). Whilst acknowledging that Wann makes fat activism both compelling and amusing, Cooper (12-13) asserts that ‘body positivity, self-acceptance and self-love are presented as fundaments of fat activism’ which are achieved through the work of personal growth and development. Cooper (13) also acknowledges that this specific proxy has gained traction in recent years with the influence of fatshion and fat celebrity memoirs that draw on the fat activist proxy of self-love. So, when Murray is criticising fat activism, Cooper argues that she is actually criticising a proxy of fat activism, specifically the self-love/body positive proxy.

Cooper’s assertion that proxies exist as fat activism helped me question where body positivity now stands in relation to fat activism. If the self-love, body positive proxy of fat activism has always existed, then is body positivity really a dilution or a depoliticisation of fat activism? Building on Cooper’s theory of proxies, I question whether body positivity has now become its own separate entity. While this thesis does focus on fat specific body positivity, many of body positive advocates I focus on speak about body positivity without mentioning fat activism. What if body positivity has its own proxies? This thesis aims to trace the roots of body positivity using the proxies of ‘self-love’ and ‘body positive’ fat activism: often these proxies and fat activism are easily separated, but others are entwined in complex debates and misunderstandings. In writing a unique cultural history through the lens of fat activism, I assess the similarities between body positivity

and fat activism and ask: what is the relationship between body positivity and fat activism? What kind of fat body positivity has developed because of fat activist practices? And, what bodies (and people) does fat body positivity celebrate?

Having determined my research questions, I next approached how I would explore them and entered the complex area of methodology. Coming from a background of English literature, I knew that finding a way to answer my research questions might be difficult; methods and methodology were not mentioned once to me throughout my undergraduate degree, so I knew I had a lot to learn. However, Beverley Skeggs (1995a, 1) suggests that although literary and film critics often believe they do not use methodologies, the fact is they do but may not recognise them as such. Perhaps because of my science-minded parents or perhaps because of one too many A Level psychology lessons on 'bias', I was originally very focused on keeping my own 'biased' ideas on body positivity out of my research. After very briefly considering the idea of quantitative analysis, I understood that my research questions and what I wanted to find from my research were geared more towards 'discovery rather than verification' (Ambert et al. 1995, 880) and my core material would need room for complexity that cannot always be determined with numbers. With firm ideas about qualitative analysis and bias in mind, my original research plan was to collect every article on body positivity from a mix of five British broadsheets and tabloids in 2015 and conduct a content analysis. Content analysis seemed to be a sophisticated way to approach analysis that would help me remove myself from the research and make my findings more 'reliable'. Content analysis in particular interested at me as I came to understand it was used by both quantitative and qualitative researchers (Elo and Kyngäs 2007) and is a 'systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding' (Stemler 2001, 1). This method, I believed, would allow me to wade through the mass of articles I collected with systematic ease. Rather than counting the use of specific words or phrases, I chose to look for patterns and trends, finding some relating to both fashion and health. However, the more I looked at the core material and tried to work with it, the more I understood this did not answer my research question, or indeed, say anything that

had not been said before. Further, because of my knowledge of both body positivity and fat activism, I knew that there was more to the discussion than could be garnered from mainstream news media. In the time that it took for the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* to realise Tess Holliday's existence, I knew there had been an entire 'fatshion' community existing online for a decade. I also knew that the body positivity that was being represented in British newspapers was not necessarily the same body positivity being 'celebrated' on social media or finding its way into advertising campaigns. For a while I tried to persevere with my analysis but, finally, I came to understand that ignoring the knowledge I have as a fat person who is part of the community I am researching was just as dishonest as pretending my research could be completely unbiased.

At that point, I knew I had to change the way I approached my research – and quickly – as I had spent almost two years focusing on the newspaper articles and had made little progress. If my questions were 'is the mainstream media still harbouring resentment towards women that do not conform with standardised beauty ideals?' or 'is health sometimes used as a proxy for fatphobia?' then I may have been able to use my analysed core material to write up a piece of research. However, it would not have been a new understanding or approach to body positivity and it would have betrayed my own understanding of something that is much more complex than can be summarised with five broadsheets or tabloids. Having made the mistake of trying to remove myself from my research, I began to realise that, for this project, I am my own best resource and I found support for this in an unlikely source. In a discussion with my supervisor around my alternative approach to this research, she mentioned to me a book chapter on becoming a 'lesbian reader' where Alison Hennegan (1988) discusses the phenomenon of, what she calls, the 'pricking of my thumbs'. Hennegan (1988, 166) explains that like many other young lesbians and gay men, she has always had the ability to find what she calls 'my books'. Although she admits that those around her who 'praise rationality above all else' dislike when she talks about the pricking of her thumbs, she continues 'unrepentantly' (167). Hennegan would look for any sign that a book may be 'hers' in the 'publisher's colophon, in chapter headings, in an author's paragraph

or coded biographical note, in the identity of a series editor, in the cumulative effect of a writer's previous publications listed in the front' (167) and identifies a warmth and pleasure when she finds what she is looking for. Although I previously did not have a name for this experience, it is something I had been aware of for a while, in many ways, without realising I had become a 'fat reader'. Having spent many of my formative years on the Internet, I have always been able to navigate through the web with ease and find communities of people 'like me'. I get those feelings of warmth or pleasure from books, of course, but I also find them in online feminist magazines, on social media and in television programmes too. Even when portrayed as 'grotesque' or in need of change, I have always been able to locate and connect to the fat people in the texts I come across. To believe that the 'best' way to conduct this research without using the 'pricking of my thumbs' was misguided and perhaps located in my own internalised misogyny that ignored feminist methodologies that had already proven successful.

As a researcher, I now understand that I would have been located in my research even if I had not chosen to study a community I have been a part of. I am positioned in my research through my 'history, nation, gender, sexuality, class, "race", and age' (Skeggs 1995a, 6) and those positionings, Skeggs argues, will have influenced my access to education, employment and media. To conduct my research without acknowledging that positionality in order to protect my 'scientific' objectivity and authority (Johnson et al. 2004, 48) would render me what Donna Haraway ([1997] 2018, 23-39) refers to as a 'modest witness'. A modest witness remains so 'modest' in their research that they supposedly become 'crystal-clear mirrors of nature' (Johnson et al. 2004, 48) removing any emotion or connection to their work. Haraway argues that this idea of objectivity was celebrated by men involved in the scientific revolution whose knowledge was constructed within their own form of white masculinity creating a 'culture of no culture' which opposed femininity (Haraway [1997] 2018, 23-39). Although this objectivity is still celebrated in some fields, I knew that if I tried to maintain that distance from my work, I would not produce research that would answer or even ask new questions. My knowledge is situated (Haraway 1988) within my own embodiment as a fat woman and

experiences of being part of both body positive and fat activist communities. For feminists, Haraway (1988, 581) argues that objectivity is a situated knowledge and champions an embodied objectivity that allows space for both paradoxical and critical feminist projects. Not splitting subject and object, Haraway (583) explains, means that (feminist) researchers can begin to understand their own positioning in the world which not only allows for great objectivity but leaves space to become 'answerable for what we learn to see'. Factoring myself into my research and drawing on my situated knowledge meant that I started relearning how body positivity actually operates. I recognised, for example, that my early participation in the rise of plus-size fatshion was only so appealing and accessible for me as a size 24, white woman in her early twenties because of the privileges allowed to women like me in mainstream media. The original 'findings' of my research would have suggested that increased body positive media meant progression for all women, even if there were negative representations in the media too. When I factored myself into my research and allowed myself to see what I had learnt in the years since starting my PhD as a young, fat woman involved in body positivity, I was able to see the problematics and erasure that I contributed to. Situated knowledge meant that I could learn from my research and engage more critically with what I thought I already knew.

This turn towards situated knowledge and acknowledging myself within my research did mean, as I have mentioned, recognising my own misogyny and making an active decision to embrace feminist methodologies and methods. As D. Millen (1997) and Sandra Harding (1987) have discussed, there is no such thing as a feminist method, rather, feminist methods prioritise the role of gender in research and critically approach generally accepted tools of research methods. Additionally, for me, it was important that my research be inherently feminist by recognising the importance of reflexivity, positionality and situated knowledge (or feminist subjectivity).

In terms of reflexivity, I, like Pamela Cotterhill and Gayle Letherby (1993), work from Liz Stanley's (1990) assertion that 'all feminist work should be fundamentally

concerned with how people come to understand what they do (Cotterhill and Letherby 1993, 68). That is, feminist theory should be 'directly derived' from experience 'whether this is experience of a survey or interview or an ethnographic research project, or whether it is experience of reading and analysing historical or contemporary documents' thus giving the reader an 'intellectual autobiography' of the feminist researcher which can produce 'accountable knowledge' relevant to the context of the researcher (Stanley 1990, 209). Reflexivity, then, is the necessity of the researcher to reflect on their own research and recognise how they might influence outcomes and analysis simply by existing in any given context. Pamela Moss (1995) also describes a version of reflexivity which is focused on visibility and particular spatiality. She describes this a double reflexive gaze that looks both 'inward' to the identity of the researcher and 'outward' towards their relation to their research and 'what is described as the "'wider world"' (445). Therefore, as a feminist researcher for this project I have to be 'self-critical' and 'self-consciously analytical' (445) of myself as a fat woman who has been both on the 'inside' and 'outside' of contemporary fat body positivity. However, I also have to reflect carefully on 'how [my] research is accepted into the scientific community and then becomes part of the known' (445), which means, in this instance, I try hard not to generalise and must accept that although I have prior knowledge and experience of how body positivity became popularised, I must carefully examine how I present that in my research as, as I will later discuss, I can only present one specific fragment of what is likely a larger story. As Diane Reay (1996, 443) asserts, '[o]n a fundamental level reflexivity is about giving as full and honest account of the research process as possible, in particular explicating the position of the researcher in relation to the researched'. In parts of my thesis, I do this more literally, for example, in chapter five, I reflect on my participation in the white centredness of contemporary body positivity and link it back to early fat activism and in other parts this is more implicit. It is important to me as a feminist researcher that I am honest and transparent about both my research and my position as researcher throughout the entirety of the research process, even when my stories are not directly involved.

Positionality, although always important to me, has been a point of contention throughout the writing of my thesis. As I will discuss later, I have some reservations about describing this thesis as 'insider' research as I feel my position has fluctuated throughout this research process. Like B. Temple (1997) and Gayle Letherby (2002) I have been wary of presenting and positioning my experiences of contemporary body positivity as the 'norm'. However, the difficulty with that is that at one point I did encompass everything it meant to be an 'acceptably' fat body positive advocate – in other words, although my experiences may have not been the norm, my body, style and overall 'look' was. There is obviously some friction in wanting to acknowledge my position as favourable within the body positivity movement but simultaneously not generalise my experience, this became further complicated as my health declined along with my financial resources. Over a period of a few years I went from 'acceptable' fat to 'unacceptable' which, in turn, changed my relationship with body positivity. However, my situation does not make it impossible to acknowledge positionality, it just makes it more complex. Linda McDowell (1992, 409) argues `we must recognize and take account of our own position, as well as that of our research participants, and write this into our research practice' and I have tried to do this with my work. I try to recognise when things are complex and at odds with what I know of contemporary body positivity, again, chapter five was particularly difficult for me to write as I had to recognise that my 'fat girl eutopia' was actually a fat white girl eutopia. Constant reflection on my positionality as researcher in writing this thesis ultimately allowed me to produce research which complicates well-known and accepted ideas about both body positivity and fat activism, and, I hope, show that exactly the same events can be interpreted differently depending on the positionality of both the researcher and 'the researched'.

It is perhaps clear already that I agree with Haraway's (1988, 1997) discussions of situated knowledge and the modest witness however, I also want to acknowledge that I also agree with her (1991, 193) assertion that positioning is the key to grounded knowledge and because power indicates a certain access to knowledge, knowledge that is positioned or situated cannot claim universality. Like Gillian Rose

(1997) argues, I hope that throughout this thesis I have made it clear that I do not want to, nor have tried to, produce research here that has 'universal applicability' for all fat women. I recognise the 'holes' in both body positivity and fat activism that have resulted in an activist movement that privileges people like me above others. However, what may be less obvious is that I also recognise that the fat studies scholars I draw on throughout this thesis are similarly 'like me', specifically my Holy Trinity, Cooper, Murray and LeBesco.

Although this may seem like a slight 'diversion' from the methods portion of my thesis, it is important to revisit my theoretical framework within the discussion of feminist methodologies. Rather than starting with a specific theoretical framework and working 'out' from there, I spent early periods of my writing up process writing smaller, yet in-depth, essays around some of the codes I was finding. What I found during that process was I kept revisiting the three scholars that eventually made up my theoretical framework and reflecting on my position and my situated knowledge allowed me to understand why. Although these three researchers come from quite different theoretical frameworks and backgrounds, they are linked by the aspects of research that I value most. Unlike the Holy Trinity that Cooper (2010a) refers to, my Holy Trinity do not focus explicitly on eating disorders and body dysmorphia and, in a relatively large jump, move directly away and are critical of discussions around the individual. Moreover, what makes them the right scholars for this research can be broken down into three different categories. Firstly, they all have knowledge and lived experience of being fat women. Although this may seem to some like an unimportant factor, for my research, where my situated knowledge is so deeply woven throughout my thesis, it is of deep theoretical importance. My work privileges grounded and situated knowledge above all else without generalising and I argue this is what Cooper, Murray and, often, LeBesco do too. Secondly, the majority of their work focuses on and prioritises gender and women, although this is not always deliberate and perhaps could just be reflective of fat activism more generally, it is especially important to me that a theme of gender is apparent in both my work and the work of scholars I heavily draw on. Thirdly, although done so in different ways, each of these scholars do interact with fatness

from an activist standpoint. At one time or another, they either had a personal interest in fat activism due to their own fatness or focused their research specifically on fat activism. So, while fat studies is becoming expansive, there is a specific niche of fat studies scholars that I am interested in for this project, those who are or have formally been fat themselves, are inherently feminist in their approach to research and focus on activism specifically. Therefore, Cooper, Murray and LeBesco approach research in a way that is in-line with the perspective on research I have for myself. My theoretical framework arose directly from my methods and approach to feminist methodology in order to present not a universal analysis of contemporary body positivity but one that is focused on reflexivity, positionality and situated knowledge.

Having accepted a feminist methodology that prioritised my own knowledge and experiences, and those of other fat women, would make this thesis stronger, I also knew that I had to begin to move away from newspaper websites as my only source of core material. Knowing that body positivity is quite 'messy' and scattered, I gradually began to understand that to get the 'picture' of body positivity I knew existed, my methods would have to be slightly messy and scattered too. Despite my chosen disciplines now, when I was at school my most accomplished subjects were not cultural studies, English or history. Instead, I excelled at maths, at least as much a child like me at a school like mine could excel at maths, but I hated everything about it and begged my parents for a tutor because I was sure I did not understand what was being taught. When I came to take my GCSEs, I received close to 100% on both exam papers and it was not until earlier this year that I understood why. The way humanities and social science subjects were taught when I was at school demanded that I reached certain conclusions in certain ways, and I think that I have always felt restricted by that. My reading of *Lord of the Flies* (1954), for example, was marred by the lack of discussion the teacher or other students gave the fatphobic treatment of Piggy, instead I was supposed to focus on 'violence' in the novel more literally and generally. My answers to questions based around the 'dark side' of human nature then, seemed peculiar (some may even say queer) to my teachers, so focused was I on something not quite relevant to what I was being

taught. However, while marks were giving for 'working out' in maths, I was also rewarded for finding the right answer, meaning my strategies to find answers were not punished in the same way. While it always seemed so bizarre to me that I found solace in a discipline I have always loathed, the time I have spent on this thesis encouraged me to learn and think in different ways and has helped me understand myself in new ways too. While it would have been more comfortable (and perhaps even easier) to pretend that articles from mainstream newspapers were representative of a complex and evolving movement, I knew I had to change track. The material I had previously collected was not irrelevant though, I was able to tease out some of the central themes of popularised body positivity which helped me to locate further core material in different spaces. While my collection previously had been systematic and ordered, I was now able to 'instinctively scavenge' for depictions of body positivity which led to, in Haraway's (1988) words, more 'objective' research.

As will become clear, my approach to theory and research has been greatly inspired by the work of Cooper and fittingly, I first discovered the idea of 'scavenging' in research in *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement.* Although the mention is small, she refers to the scavenging of a 'mixture of research tactics' (Cooper 2016, 39), it was enough for me to go on to discover Jack Halberstam's concept of scavenger methodology. Halberstam (1998, 13) describes scavenger methodology in *Female Masculinities:*

> A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence.

While Halberstam (1998, 9-10) refers more specifically to the scavenging of methods and 'crafting' a methodology out of already available disciplinary

methods, my scavenging came mostly from the collection of my core material and theories of body positivity and fat activism. As Halberstam acknowledges, there are risks for critique in using a scavenger methodology, for example historians may criticise scavenger work for not providing a 'proper' history, literary critics may wish for a focus on literary texts and social scientists may want more of an engagement with 'traditional' tools of social science research (10). However, I have tried to answer my research questions in a way that is more in-line with traditional ways of doing social research but failed and have come to the realisation, much like Stacey Waite (2015, 59) who also adopts a scavenger approach in her work on 'unconventional composing processes' for teaching of writing, that I do not know any other way of researching body positivity that would give new answers to new questions.

As I continued scavenging for core material, I realised that I would have to scavenge in another aspect of my research too. While I followed the 'pricking of my thumbs' and used my situated knowledge, I also came to understand that that to answer my research questions thoroughly, theories and ideas based within the academy would not be sufficient. While fat studies is a growing avenue of research, attendance at any fat or weight specific conference will confirm that although many researchers are studying fat in new and innovating ways, some of them do not have access to or are not using the work of activists or writers outside of a university or academic setting. While much of my analysis does build on the work of Cooper, LeBesco and Murray, if I wanted to respond to my research questions well, I knew that I had to engage with the work of activists in the same way I do with academics. A scavenger methodology allows me to draw on the importance of these texts and treat their knowledges with equal respect. Skeggs (1995a, 10) suggests that feminists locate ourselves by 'drawing from a wide variety of sources which we weave together into a feminist framework' and Halberstam (1998) describes a scavenger methodology as weaving together methods that may be cast at odds with each other and encourages us to write in ways that create tension and friction. Never have I experienced so much tension and friction in my writing than when having to navigate through the seemingly epistemological incompatibilities in this thesis. At

times, work of fat studies scholars is part of my core material, at others it is theory to be built upon, used to make sense of my own research. Then, there are writers like Lesley Kinzel – who is most well-known for her journalism for the now defunct online feminist website *XO Jane* – whose memoir I draw on as part of my core material throughout this thesis but also makes insightful and exciting connections between femininity, femme and fat that cannot be treated as anything but 'theory'. Navigating through these difficulties has been a challenge but one I know was necessary to garner honest and, to my best ability, accurate connections between body positivity and fat activism.

Using a scavenger methodology and the 'pricking of my thumbs' also allowed me a freedom to locate my core material that I would not have been afforded otherwise. Although this thesis may have benefitted from a methodology that was more specifically autoethnographic, I was concerned that my mind, both personally and intellectually, fluctuated so frequently throughout the writing of my PhD that I may not have been able to provide a thorough or informative autoethnographic analysis. However, I did employ some autoethnographic techniques while 'scavenging' for my core material. Tess Muncey (2010, 2) describes autoethnography as 'research approach that privileges the individual', and although she talks more specifically about the analysis of prose, poetry or other documentation by the individual researcher, I used my personal experience of body positivity to locate and scavenge for my core material. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that autoethnographic research can be based around the recollection of important events from a person's life, so, although I do not necessarily analyse my own recollections in a way that is perhaps traditional of autoethnographic research, I do use my own experiences to determine what is 'worthy' of research and what fits within the realm of fat body positivity and what does not. More traditionally in the social sciences, this approach to research has labelled as an insider status as I do draw on texts directly pulled from my own 'world'. The insider/outsider status of, usually, ethnographic research is most closely linked with Robert Merton (1972) who has surveyed and discussed many historical uses of insider and outsider knowledge in the social sciences. Historically,

in the social sciences it had been assumed that it was only the 'outsider' that could provide truly objective research and analysis on specific cultures (Lewis 1972) but as I have discussed, I agree with Haraway (1988) who argues that the 'true' objectivity lies within the acknowledgment and ability to reflect on the subjective. Therefore, from this perspective, it could be argued that I am an 'insider' but I do want to add a caveat to this. As will become apparent throughout my thesis, there are times when I am very much an 'insider', I did once fit within the narrow stereotype of a 'successful' body positive advocate, I was a young, smaller fat, who could afford the latest fashions, I was healthy, and, of course, white. But, throughout my PhD, I my insider status became more blurred, I became very unwell, gained weight that took me over the threshold of 'acceptable' fatness and consequently lost my interest in fashion and clothing. Therefore, despite being an insider based on my fatness and knowledge of this particular group of people, I have to agree with researchers such as Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013) and Sharan et al. (2001) that argue insider and outsider statuses can fluctuate and cannot always be taken for granted. So, while my insider knowledge did help me scavenge for and find my core material and help me negotiate what was important for this research, I am careful to remember to remain reflexive throughout the research process and remember that I can only tell what is a small portion of a larger story.

Despite drawing on material from multiple sources and using my insider status and autoethnographic techniques, I did also have to come to an understanding of what body positivity is or what can be considered a body positive practice. Using Cooper's assertion that the body positivity proxy of fat activism has its basis in Wann's *Fat!So?* (1998), I looked for texts that were written 'using a 'peppy' tone which present self-love and self-acceptance as vital alongside narratives geared towards 'personal growth and development' (Cooper 2016, 12-13). With that definition in mind, I decided to find as many autobiographies, memoirs and self-help books written by fat women who seemed to be promoting body positive messaging. Considering the importance of situated knowledge in my thesis, it was important to me that the autobiographies, memoirs and self-help books I categorised as body positive were written by fat women or, in some cases,

'formally' fat women. There is another category of body positivity that is inclusive of smaller, non-fat bodies, but that is not what this thesis focuses on. Finding these texts was easier than I expected considering the lack of body positive books when I began my research. The books I draw on for this research are: *The Unapologetic Fat Girl's Guide to Exercise and Other Incendiary Acts* (Blank 2012), *Being Fat is Not a Sin* (Bovey 1989), *Sizeable Reflections: Big Women Living Full Lives* (Bovey 2000), *Fat Chicks Rule: How to Survive in a Thin-Centric World* (Frater 2005), *Fat Girl Walking: Sex, Food, Love and Being Comfortable in Your Skin. . .Every Inch of It* (Gibbons 2015), *Lessons from the Fat-O-Sphere: Quit Dieting and Declare a Truce with your Body* (Harding and Kirby 2009), *Things No One Will Tell Fat Girls* (Baker 2015), *Two Whole Cakes: How to Stop Dieting and Learn to Love Your Body* (Kinzel 2012), *Wake Up, I'm Fat* (Manheim 1999), *Big Girl: How I Gave Up Dieting and Got a Life* (Miller 2016), *Hungry* (Renn 2009), *The Fat Girl's Guide to Life* (Shanker [2004] 2006), *I Do It with the Lights On* (Thore 2016), *Fat?So!: Because You Don't Have to Apologise for Your Size* (Wann 1998) and while I believe there may be some contestation on whether *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (Schoenfielder and Wieser 1983) should be included in this list of 'body positive' texts, it seems honest to include it here as it helped map the history of body positive fat activism. I also draw on books that came out after my period of collection or from people who do not necessarily identify as fat specifically but do engage in body positivity to contextualise what was happening in the contemporary movement: *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (Gay 2017), *The Clothes make the Girl (Look Fat)?* (Gibbons 2017), *The Not So Subtle Art of Being a Fat Girl: Loving the Skin You're In* (Holliday 2017) and *Body Positive Power* (Crabbe 2017).

There are some autobiographies and memoirs that I originally thought I would include in my core material but upon further examination did not quite fit with the criteria I outlined above. For example, actress Chrissy Metz's autobiography *This is Me: Loving The Person You Are Today* (2018) had a promising title that fits the 'peppy', self-help tone that Cooper (2016 12-13) refers to but ultimately focuses largely on her career as an actress rather than the 'everyday' body love and self-

acceptance of the other books. Similarly, Gabourey Sidibe's[3] *This Is Just My Face Try Not To Stare* (2017) focuses on her career as an actress and indirectly opposes more obviously body positive ideas as she details her struggles with weight loss and surgery. Ultimately, however, it seemed important to focus on the written work of fat women who can, at least in part, attribute some of their success to writing and talking about body positivity. I wanted to focus on the 'stars', 'celebrities' and 'experts' in body positivity rather than famous people who just so happen to have a non-normative body. Of course, there are always exceptions to rules and my 'exception' is Camryn Manheim's (1999) autobiography for two reasons. The first being slightly more personal in that it is one of the first fat positive books I ever read as a young teenager and therefore has shaped so much of my thinking and approaches to both body positivity and fat activism that it would seem dishonest to cut it from my core material. The second reason is that Manheim directly discusses the fat activism she became aware of in the 1990s making this not only an important text to reflect back on in the 2010s and beyond but also an important document in the building of a history of body positivity.

Despite having a clear idea of which books and physically published texts I deemed 'body positive' and knowing it may have been easy to just 'stop there', I also knew that if I limited my scope to the work of published authors I would be limiting my understanding of body positivity again. The women who are chosen to publish their thoughts, ideas and autobiographies are often selected on their marketability to a wider public and in some cases have already achieved minor celebrity. However, I also knew limiting my core material to a collection of blogs or feminist websites as I had tried before with newspapers would yield similar results to my attempt at content analysis. Therefore, I decided to listen to the 'pricking of my thumbs' and the knowledge of my community. Through those tactics, I managed to find a vast array of articles written by journalists, body positive advocates, fat activists and critics of both movements. Although the analysis and collection may not have been

[3] Although Sidibe's autobiography was ultimately excluded from my core material, the reaction to her weight loss and surgery from the body positive and fat activist community is discussed in detail in chapter six.

systematic, the combination of these stories that have been scavenged from a wide array of spaces allows for new understandings and connections. Steph Lawler ([2008] 2013) suggests that we are engaged in autobiographic work constantly. This has never been more literal than with the introduction of Twitter and blogging sites and although blogging has experienced a steady decline with the rise of social media, for navigating a history of body positivity those stories are still important. Ken Plummer ([1994] 1995, 5) reminds us that humans are narrators and that society can be understood through a web of stories that emerge everywhere through interaction and can simultaneously hold people together while pulling them apart and making society work. Much like solely focusing on newspapers, focusing only on the women who have been able to convince a publisher of their viability ignores the large amount of work that has been written about body positivity online where the movement began and started to become popular.

I had to approach my selection of core materials from online sources in a slightly different way to my selection from published books as the articles and blogs being written about body positivity are numerous and I am just one person working on a PhD thesis. However, I tried to follow the specifications I created for myself as much as possible. I looked for 'peppy' tones (Cooper 2016, 12-13) but, because the Internet moves faster than the publishing world I was also more obviously able to notice a body positive article from its language – most writers were not just using 'positive' language related to the body, they were actually using the term 'body positivity'. I was also predominantly interested in women who were fat or (preferably and) have writing focuses on women's bodies and body positivity. These writers became easier to find the more time I spent 'scavenging' online. I began to recognise the women who spoke about body positivity regularly (for example: Evette Dionne, Lesley Kinzel, Stephanie Yeboah) and collected articles and blogposts where they specifically mention body positivity. The main difference, however, between the collection for the published books and online articles is that I continued collecting publications online past 2015. Originally this was because I intended (and still do intend) to continue this project as body positivity and discussion of body-related activism continues in the public sphere, however, by the

time I came to my writing-up year I knew I could not complete this thesis without writing about the new developments and criticisms in mainstream press. Therefore, you will notice, specifically in chapters four and seven that I discuss more recent body positive case studies, such as the pool party episode in HBO's *Shrill* (2019) and mainstream ideas of body neutrality.

One last exception to my self-imposed rules of research and data collections is perhaps, unorthodox but necessary within the contexts of fat activism and body positivity. When I knew that I wanted to document a history of body positivity, I also knew I needed to acknowledge that connection between activism and scholarship. It will become clear in this thesis that I sometimes begin to analyse more traditionally academic or, at least, informative texts. Chapter six, for example, which largely focuses on Health at Every Size (HAES) in mainstream body positivity includes a very close reading of Linda Bacon's ([2008] 2010) book of the same name and chapter four draws out some of the story and discussion in Erich Goode's (2002) divisive article on his time spent and NAAFA (The National Association to Aid Fat Acceptance). I have also taken important evidence 'incidents' and 'events' where I could, whether this be from a reuploaded print article, a magazine front cover or a YouTube video. Writing a history, of even a very small part of one larger movement, can be messy and disordered work because the documentation is both messy and disordered. As a person who values structure and clear systems the benefits of scavenging in this way made themselves clear when I was able to produce an semi-structured timeline of the body positivity movement via fat activism[4].

With the introduction of blogs, online articles and some academic texts to my collection of memoirs, autobiographies and self-help books, the core material collected was vast and in order to write the cultural history and understand some of the concepts of body positivity, I needed a way for it to be understood. Although my knowledge is situated in my work and I have used autoethnographic techniques

[4] A full list of material analysed can be found in Appendix 1 of this thesis.

in my data collection, I made perhaps another risky decision to include myself more literally in my research too. As I will discuss throughout my thesis, my experiences of body positivity and fat fashion were originally exciting and allowed me to explore my 'liberated' fat identity for the first time in my life but as I got older, sicker, fatter I began to see the cracks. My 'self-acceptance' journey follows the chronology of the rise (and perhaps now fall) of the body positivity movement. My autobiographic stories are offered in this thesis to ground the texts of other body positivity advocates in a particular moment in time, these body positive stories and events are difficult to distinguish in any linear sense but I hope my own stories give context to a phenomenon that has proved extremely difficult to organise and narrate.

There are, of course, limitations to both the 'pricking of my thumbs' and using my own autobiographic stories to ground my research. I am a white woman in my late twenties who has been privileged enough to receive an expensive higher education. The decision I made to study only women 'like me' when I began my thesis is not one I would make now. Although it is important to document the history of body positivity, I understand the research I have produced is only part of the story. The body positivity I focus on in this thesis is the body positivity that was popularised by fat, white women and I have included a chapter that critiques that whiteness. However, over the last six months, I have come across multiple social media posts that suggest body positivity was created by fat, Black women and I must admit that this is not the body positivity I have been able to trace. This thesis does not confirm or deny those assertions because my research is limited to popularised notions of body positivity and my own autobiographic stories. An understanding of how racialised women interact with body positivity is desperately needed but regrettably this thesis largely focuses on white women.

After beginning to broaden my core material, I also started to realise that working with content analysis was further restricting what I understood about body positivity. For instance, in coding newspaper articles, I found words or phrases based around health and I noted how many times Tess Holliday's dress size was mentioned but I found the codes I had already established did not tell the stories I

knew existed. My academic training in English literature meant I am used to dealing with text and deciphering meaning and understanding through text, therefore I wondered if body positivity could also be read as text too. The treatment of cultural research as 'text' is common within Cultural Studies, as Richard Johnson et al. (2004, 76) reason 'cultural forms *appear* relatively fixed and stabled so that their complexities can be analysed, and represented'. The individual 'texts' I chose were, for the most part, quite traditionally 'text' in that they were written language, but 'text' can of course include a myriad of different formats. Text then, as Skeggs (1995b, 196) argues does not have the 'built in' insecurity of ethnography, when you leave a text it will not be altered, even though you, as the researcher, may have. This changing as a reader and researcher has influenced my PhD, as I will detail throughout my thesis, my 'mind' was not just changed intellectually but also personally, I very slowly went from a person who celebrated body positivity to someone who struggled to even place the 'joy' many fat women were experiencing from its popularisation.

Skeggs (1995a, 5) claims that 'texts are social products just as people and systems are social products' while reminding us that once text is produced it may have autonomy from its production, she argues understanding of text is produced through a reader and through a reader's response which is socially positioned. Whilst simultaneously being both producer and reader of texts (Johnson et al. 2004, 76) on body positivity, both literally in the sense of my thesis, but also being an active member of body positive communities, I had to be self-conscious of myself as a reader. As my viewpoint on body positivity, and indeed my own body, began to change, I had to remind myself to expand and build on the multiple layers of fat body positivity, connecting 'related textualities' (Johnson et al. 2004, 76) wherever I could. Alison Young (1995, 124), for example, when writing on women protestors at Greenham common researched representation in newspaper articles but she was conscious when writing that she did not want to write *on* Greenham women, rather she wanted to write *on* the press reports as a way to draw attention to the denial of voice or autonomy afforded to the women involved. Some of the women's writing I use as material for my research are producing autobiographical texts on

themselves, many in retrospect but plenty in 'present' tense too and my intention is to examine these texts as a 'reader' of body positivity whilst acknowledging my own subjectivity and situated knowledge of the specific cultural moment I am researching. Rather than focus on how the women I am writing about represent themselves – although that may be an important research project for the future – I intend to look at how body positivity is represented through the texts they are producing, whether that is in retrospect or in the present.

Practically, I approached the texts I had collected, including my own autobiographic understandings, the same way I would any Victorian literature novel I might have read as an undergraduate. I followed Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step process for thematic analysis and drew on Maguire and Delahunt's (2017) step-by-step guide. The first step is to familiarise yourself with your core material, I was in a privileged position where because I had already started (and abandoned) a project and I was researching my own community, I already felt like I had a good idea of what my core material might say. However, I was conscious not to become complacent throughout my research, I did not want to assume the material was alluding to ideas that I had preconceived ideas of. I took this period of familiarisation very seriously and submitted some preliminary thoughts and ideas from the data in the form essays to my supervisor. This encouraged me to really draw on the data rather than what I thought I might already 'know'. These early essays focused on feminine fashion, sexuality and, reluctantly at this point 'good' health.

The second part of this process is perhaps (apart from the writing-up stage) the most time-consuming. After my period of familiarisation, I began to generate codes using my core material. For this process I used open-coding, as although I had a fairly good idea of which themes would likely emerge, I was conscious not to make assumptions based on pre-formulated ideas about my own community. Using open-coding allowed me to develop and modify my codes as I progressed through my analysis. I used an approach which Johnson et al. (2004) term textual layering. I took notes as I read but also edited my texts and drew question marks in the margins, underlined parts that 'pricked' my thumbs (in pencil!) and used neon page

markers if I already knew a part of the text was going to be especially relevant. Textual layering was easier to do with the published memoirs and autobiographies, but I attempted to simulate something similar from articles and other media too. Where it was possible, I printed off the text I would be analysing and was able to layer there, however, sometimes, especially towards the middle and end of my PhD where I spent more time working from home (with no access to printing) the textual layering was not always possible but I still scribbled down concepts and ideas on paper (even if the article was on a screen). Doodling on, and annotating, texts combined with the knowledge I had both from the beginning of my earlier study and my own autobiographical knowledge of body positivity allowed me to formulate my themes fairly easily. Although I did not have the resources to code my core material line-by-line, I was able to code individual sections and paragraphs into concepts or ideas that would later be renamed and organised into themes. Originally I tried to use Zotero to document my analysis but moved to pen and paper when I found myself working out themes in notebooks and on the back of old scraps of paper I found wherever I was working.

I noticed a few themes begin to emerge almost immediately, if not on my first then my second reading. When I was not looking for specific words or phrases (Guest, MacQueen and Namey [2011] 2014), I was able to categorise 'concepts' of body positivity in a way that was both more complex but also more systematic. For example, people often referred to their own gender when discussing body positivity, whether that be through calling themselves 'woman', 'feminine' or complicating the gender binary by using the word 'femme'. I also noticed a general distrust of medical professionals but an insistence on individual 'good' health often within the context of self- and body-love. I noticed people discussing their own relationships – usually referring to their boyfriends or husbands. I also recognised a huge theme of fashion, clothing and 'getting dressed'. I expected to find all of these loose themes but was surprised to see just how much Tess Holliday was mentioned and the concept of celebrity which I expected to see more of was fairly absent. I also began to notice another concept which, although perhaps unorthodox, was more categorised by its absence. The majority of the texts I managed to find where

either written by or about white women, this eventually also became a theme. Hélène Joffe and Lucy Yardley ([2003] 2004, 57) argue that this is where thematic analysis 'comes into its own' as it allows the systematic element of content analysis whilst allowing the researcher to combine the frequency of the codes with their meaning within context while allows for both subtlety and complexity.

As I have mentioned, clear themes were beginning to emerge even at the very beginning of my analysis, so the third step of the thematic analysis process, searching for themes, was not particularly difficult. I did grapple with whether to separate the mixed material I had collected considering the vast differences between a blogpost on body positivity and a heavily edited autobiography. However, I eventually decided that since I wanted to look at how body positivity was represented through text, the rules I had invoked during my collection meant that concepts, regardless of who wrote them and where, could be coded into the same theme. The freedom that thematic analysis afforded me meant that I could group these discussions together to provide a history of body positivity that considered both an activist and more mainstream context.

Although I was confident about my decision to code and theme my core material together, it was daunting to be left with such a vast amount of text to wade through. However, thematic analysis allowed me to 'make sense' of my research through using themes as a way of seeing, finding relationships and analysing (Boyatzis 1998) and when it came to the fourth stage of thematic analysis, reviewing themes, I was confident I was familiar enough with the text to draw out five main themes. My inductive approach to thematic analysis allowed me to process what I already knew with the new information I had found, allowing me to categorise patterns into themes whilst acknowledging their discrepancies (Braun and Clarke 2006; Coffey and Atkinson 1996) and eventually approach the fifth step of thematic analysis, defining and naming my themes. While there is no singular definition of a 'theme' within thematic analysis exists, my themes surrounded the understanding of body positivity within the context of fat activism (Daly, Kellehear and Gliksman 1997) and eventually I was able to pull out five : whiteness,

femininity, heterosexuality, health and self-love in addition to the continued mentions of Tess Holliday, who, in many ways embodies all of these themes as the 'perfect' body positive advocate.

The last part of the six-step process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006; Maguire and Delahunt 2017) is, of course, writing up, which is what I am writing now. Although I knew the themes well when I began writing it was only as I engrossed myself in the writing-up portion of my PhD that I really began to see how they worked as a whole. My process of analysis was lengthy (and ever continuing) but I know that scavenging and thematic analysis were the right choices for this project as they both allowed me to present what I already knew and generate new ideas around body positivity's journey from fat activism.

As the themes emerged and I tried to make sense of them, the methods I used for each chapter were slightly different and while there is a critical context to my work, I have chosen to embed this context throughout my thesis. In this chapter I have introduced the context of the body positivity movement and explored and outlined my research story, my failings and my decision to adopt a more experimental methodology with the intention of creating new narratives around body positivity.

Chapter two focuses on the representation of plus-size supermodel Tess Holliday in order to determine how popularised body positivity is portrayed in mainstream media. The claims that body positivity is a less radical version of fat activism which ignores women who need political change most is explored through the assimilationist aesthetic Holliday has adopted which has elevated her career as both model and body positive advocate. Taking inspiration from Annie Sprinkle's image, 'The Anatomy of a 1980s Pin Up' ([1984] 2006), I offer a close reading of Holliday's feminised, largely normative approach to beauty and fashion. Focusing on markers of both style and femininity such as: pin-up clothing, tattoos, lipstick, long hair and body shape I ask, what made Holliday the iconic body positivity

advocate for mainstream media? And, what makes Holliday's specific fatness so 'palatable'?

Building on some of the ideas raised around femininity, fashion and 'palatability' in chapter two, chapter three tackles the complexities of the representation of femme styles that appear to have canonised themselves in the body positivity movement. Having felt the pressure of conforming to a hyperfeminized version of my own personal style, I interrogate where terms like 'fat femme' have come from and what they have come to mean within fat body positivity. Using my experiences of the early fatshion blogging forum Fatshionista on LiveJournal I ask, what is the significance of the idea of 'femme' within the fat body positive movement?

Chapter four explores heteronormativity within body positivity and the concept that fat women are 'acceptable' if they appeal to men in a very specific way. I focus largely on the history of NAAFA as the first fat activist organisation which was created by the husbands of two fat women. I examine stories of NAAFA events, specifically the pool party socials, and ask about the effects of fat activism's early heterosexual leanings on body positivity to ask, how did NAAFA embed heterosexuality into its early fat activism; what kind of heterosexuality was cultivated; and what are the reverberations of these NAAFA-inspired sexual cultural norms within contemporary body positivity?

Chapter five address the complications that arose in my own autobiography to ask questions around intersectionality and race within body positivity. I draw on my experiences of early body positivity where I was mainly surrounded by white women 'like me' and never thought to question why. If body positivity is a less radical fat activism which excludes specific groups of women, then this chapter tries to locate where those exclusions may have come from and where they appeared. I read stories of fat women of colour who have been involved in both body positivity and fat activism alongside case studies of mainstream media campaigns to ask in what ways are the celebrations of 'inclusivity' and 'intersectionality' of body

positivity undermined by the centrality of white women within the movement? And, how did white women become the focus of body positivity?

In chapter six I focus on health and body positivity. When I first started this PhD I was adamant I did not want to talk about health because I am not a health scholar and I found health narratives in mainstream press tired and repetitive, but then my own health began to deteriorate and I realised how necessary an honest conversation about weight loss, health and Health at Every Size (HAES) would be to my thesis. I focus on the celebration of HAES in both fat activist and body positive circles, using my own experiences of being a fat diabetic, the representation of HAES in autobiographies, and Linda Bacon's *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* ([2008] 2010). As I am now a fat person who is not healthy, I was inspired to ask some difficult questions about the fat people who are both 'medically obese' and 'unhealthy'. I therefore ask; how is HAES constructed in popular discourses of body positivity? How might a close reading of the meanings of HAES for advocates of body positivity tease out some of the problematics and challenges of health within the body positive movement? And finally, what does a HAES approach to fat specific body positivity mean for those of us who have intentionally lost weight or changed our diets?

Linking to ideas of moral responsibility from the previous chapter, chapter seven focuses on methods of body-love and acceptance. I look closely at Cooper's (2016) suggestion that body positivity is similar to positive psychology and what that means for individuals who cannot attain that 'positivity'. I observe alternatives to body positivity that are now moving into mainstream media and understandings of the body. Using both historical and contemporary representations of 'wellness' and 'self-love' from body positive autobiographies in addition to blogposts and newspaper articles about 'new' alternatives'. I ask how fat activists and body-positive advocates achieve empowerment and what are the limits of this individualised stance?

Chapter eight is my conclusion chapter, I tie together the themes of body positivity that I have picked out throughout my research. I conclude that through methods of assimilation (Lebesco 2004), individualised self-love (Murray [2008] 2016) and fat activist proxies (Cooper 2016) that body positivity is a continuation of 'acceptable' methods of body-related activism that have existed since NAAFA's creation in 1969. I also outline the limits and strengths of my methodology and provide potential avenues for future research.

This thesis was written at a time when body positivity was constantly evolving and changing. My intention is that it will trace body positivity as a movement and connect the journeys and thinking that led us to the enormously popularised phenomenon it is today in August 2019. If body positivity is a dilution of fat activism, then my objective is to deduce how that has happened and provide new meanings for understanding body positivity within the context of fat activism.

2. ‘Born to Stand Out’: Defining Popularised Fat Body Positivity

When I began my research for this thesis, my original plan had been to collect every article written about body positivity from five British tabloids and broadsheets in 2015 and while I ultimately chose to change and widen my scope, Tess Holliday’s consistent appearance in body positive articles from 2015 was impossible to ignore. In January 2015 Holliday was signed to MILK Model Management and became their first UK size 24 model (Ferrier 2015) and while this was only the beginning of her career, her celebrity and fame as a body positive advocate and model grew from that point. Although Holliday does not claim to embody the entire body positivity movement, for many people, including myself, she has become a vivid representation of popularised fat body positivity. Holliday has featured on the cover of multiple high-profile magazines (for example *Cosmopolitan* 2018; *Self* 2018), been the focus of a Piers Morgan tirade (Petter 2018), made a cameo on popular US drama *The Bold Type,* and released her autobiography, *The Not So Subtle Art of Being a Fat Girl* (2017). In this autobiography, Holliday (2017, 2) admits that she sometimes feels as though people are looking at her and asking, ‘why her’? Although my motivations for asking ‘why her’ are somewhat different, this chapter asks: what made Holliday the iconic body positivity advocate for mainstream media? And, what makes Holliday’s specific fatness so ‘palatable’?

Holliday’s (2017, 2) explanation for her own success as a celebrity body positivity advocate is that she was ‘born to stand out’, but I want to know more. Holliday is not the first plus-size model however, as Amanda Czerniawski (2015, 7) notes, ‘the average reader’ could determine that the definition of ‘plus-size’ for a model does not compare with the cultural understanding of a fat woman and considering the criticism Holliday receives for her fat body, I would surmise that the ‘average reader’ Czerniawski refers to would understand Holliday as a fat woman. While there have been other models as fat as Holliday, most notably Velvet D’Amour, none equal her celebrity status. Holliday’s rise to fame is entwined with the rise of popular fat body positivity and, just as multiple magazines, newspapers and websites chose Holliday to represent inclusivity and body positivity; I choose her carefully

cultivated look to do the same in my thesis. By means of a close reading of Holliday's fat aesthetic I provide a reading of the representation of fat body positivity in the mainstream media of the mid-late 2010s.

Holliday's success came at a time when 'love your body discourse' (Murphy and Jackson, 2019) was becoming increasingly popular. While this discourse appears to encourage people to love their body 'as it is', as Joseé Taylor and Judith Johnston (2008, 962) argue, it is a mode of thinking that has been picked up and manipulated by corporations such as Unilever in order to encourage consumerism. For example, Dove's[5] 'Campaign for Real Beauty' is a corporate project that claims to oppose restrictive beauty ideals, but even in its creation encourages women to conform to a 'feminine beauty ideology' by encouraging them to buy products that will enhance their 'natural' beauty. In the late 2000s Dove's campaign did disrupt some normative standards of beauty by using slightly more diverse models than the industry norm, however, much like Holliday's aesthetic, it also conformed to many others. Holliday has received criticism that her celebrity success as a plus-size supermodel does not do enough to diversify the images of fat women in the mainstream media; in response, Holliday (2017, 287) argued that she is the 'ONLY visible FAT plus, mainstream model' and promises to 'fight with everything [she] has' to open the door for more women of colour and trans models of all ages and sizes. However, in her cover story for *Self,* (quoted in Ford 2018) Holliday admits that she has received many opportunities over other women who are not as acceptably fat as she is. Holliday's specific aesthetic and physical attributes allow her to engage with traditional beauty industries while using a body positive agenda to stand apart from other models. Much like Dove's campaign, Holliday represents an 'activism' that is palatable for mainstream media, her fat body and feminised aesthetic is just different enough to interest magazines and cosmetic companies while maintaining otherwise traditional beauty norms.

Although Holliday is portrayed as a body positive 'activist' by some, the definition of activism can vary depending on context. LeBesco (2004) has written extensively on assimilationist activism in the fat acceptance movement. While the language of body

[5] Dove is a 'personal care' brand owned by Unilever.

positivity is new to mainstream media, assimilationist activism is not new to fat activists. For example, Judy Freespirit, a co-founder of the fat feminist activist group The Fat Underground, compared The Fat Underground working with NAAFA to the Black Panthers working with the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Freespirit (quoted in Cooper 2016, 118) suggests that NAAFA's agenda was to convince people that fat people could actually be 'nice', whereas the fat underground were liberation activists, engaged in more radical events such as breaking into a university lecture hall at UCLA to take over a lecture on behaviour modification and weight loss. Holliday's move into mainstream media as a plus-size model who, in many other ways apart from her weight, conforms to traditional beauty standards, suggests that rather than disrupt beauty norms, Holliday is assimilating herself in mainstream media and using a platform of body positivity do so. LeBesco (2004, 50-51) argues that activism that focuses on beauty gives too much power to beauty discourses in general. It can be dangerous (and ridiculous), she argues, to centre fat activism around the idea that fat is 'just as beautiful' as thin. However, in many instances, this is exactly what body positivity does, and Holliday has become the obvious choice to represent a body positive or 'inclusive' agenda as her aesthetic suggests that, apart from her weight, she is otherwise 'beautiful'.

At the beginning of her career, Holliday was the focus of many body positive photoshoots that centred around a retro pin-up theme[6] and in her autobiographical social media representations of her day-to-day life this pin-up and retro style of dress persists. Some of Holliday's earlier work reminded me of Annie Sprinkle's famous image, 'The Anatomy of a 1980s Pin Up' ([1984] 2006). Sprinkle's project was autobiographical and explored ideas around the performance of feminine sexuality and I have drawn from her method to offer a biographical reading of Holliday's palatable fat body positive aesthetic. Sprinkle highlights the absurdity of the excessive femininity of the pin-up while also undermining any simple critique in her final comment: 'Inspite of it all, I'm sexually excited + feeling great!' (Sprinkle [1984] 2006). Sprinkle's method inspired me to identify characteristics that contribute to Holliday's specific aesthetic and her 'just radical enough' approach to body positive activism.

[6] Holliday also consistently modelled for the now defunct plus-size clothing store Domino Dollhouse which specialised in pin-up and retro fashion styles (Jones 2015).

Like Sprinkle, I am also interested in the time-consuming, sometimes dangerous beauty practices that women are expected to participate in just to be deemed 'acceptable' and explore Holliday's 'acceptable' fat beauty through the use of Sprinkle's method.

Based on the Annie Sprinkle image (fig. 1) and the image of Holliday I annotated myself (fig. 2), I dismantle Holliday's polished aesthetic by analysing parts of her style and body features. I aim to show how Holliday's aesthetic is carefully constructed in a way that allows mainstream media to deem her as both an 'acceptable' (nice) fat woman and body positive advocate. In a similar way to Sprinkle, it is not possible to have one response to Holliday's beauty practices. I address each element of Holliday's aesthetic in order to represent the conformed, assimilationist style of Holliday such as her use of lipstick, her hairstyle and hourglass body shape. However, there are aspects of Holliday's aesthetic that cannot be singularly read as an approach to fat assimilation; such as her pin-up style of dress and heavily tattooed arms and legs. Holliday's body positive, 'fat can be beautiful too' aesthetic is the result of the embodiment of historical and contemporary approaches to beauty, therefore, this body-biography of Holliday seeks to tease out some of the intricacies of her cultivated representation as an assimilationist body positive advocate and plus-size model.

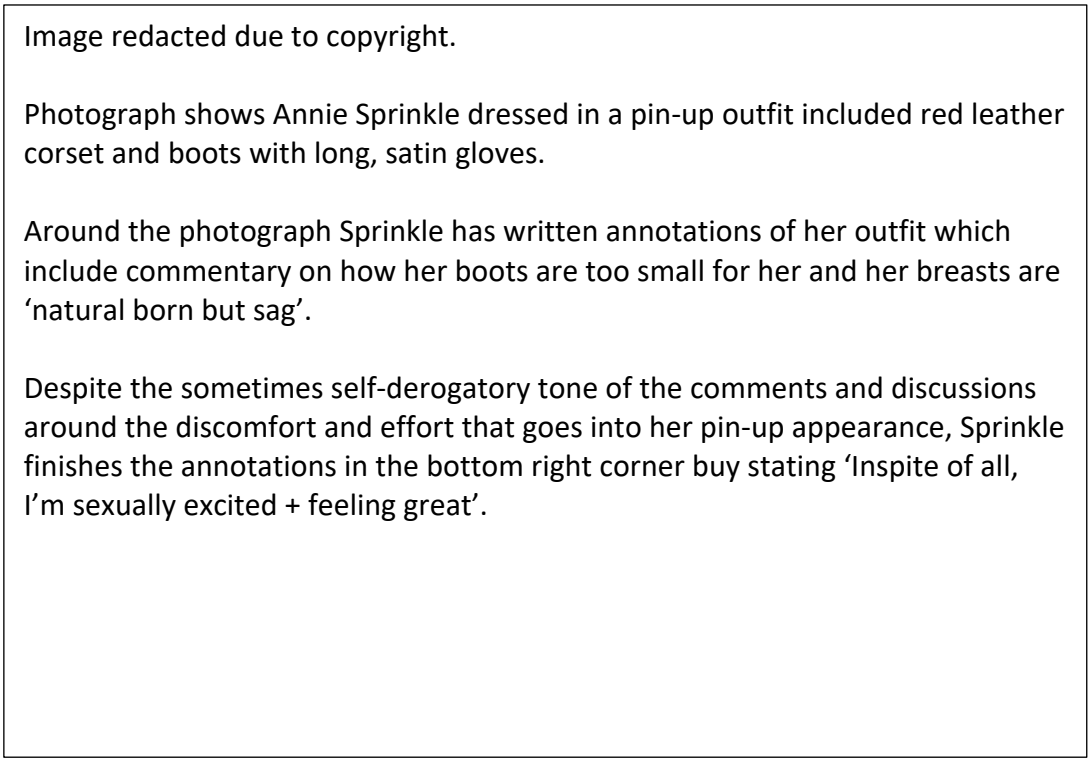

Fig. 1, Sprinkle, Annie, *Anatomy of A 1980'S Pin Up*, Photographic Print, 1984/2006. http://anniesprinkle.org/projects/archived-projects/anatomy-of-a-pin-up/.

Image redacted due to copyright.

Photograph shows a heavily tattooed Tess Holliday in a pink, black and yellow floral pencil skirt paired with sleeveless, high-neck top and black high heels. Holliday is facing the camera side-on. She is wearing noticeable dark make-up and her long, red hair has been carefully curled and almost falls to her waist.

Around the photographs are my own annotations in a similar tone to Sprinkles.

Hair dyed a deep auburn shade, loaded with products, heated and brushed into long 'retro' waves.

Contouring and blush precisely placed to accentuate cheek bones and help face appear more defined.

Tight shapewear worn from
shoulders to mid-thigh to emphasise hourglass figure but also to 'smooth' any bumps.

Form fitting clothing which fat women are often advised to avoid. Used here to emphasis 'smooth' hourglass figure.

1950s style clothing – Holliday was formerly a pinup/rockabilly model. Exaggerated, almost paradoxical femininity.

Body angled away from camera and to the side – perhaps to appear 'slimmer' as photo was taken for JC Penney social media campaign.

Bare legs and decorated calves – perhaps to enhance areas that at women are often encouraged to hide.

Heavily plucked and shaped eyebrows frames face.

Heavy eye makeup with 'retro' cat eye flicks and false eyelashes draw attention to eyes (and away from chubby cheeks?)

Pink/red lipstick worn here in a subtle shade but mouth open just enough to form a suggestive 'pout'.

Bare arms (and tattoos) – displaying part of body that fat women are often encouraged to 'cover up'.

Tattoos of famous, feminine women including: Dolly Parton, Miss Piggy, Mae West and Hello Kitty. Part of contemporary 'pinup' style.

Heeled shoes to give the illusion of height (Holliday is only 5ft3). But also help calves appear slimmer and more defined. Heeled shoes have become the feminine ideal for women.

Fig. 2, Holliday, Tess, *That's A Wrap Shooting for JcPenney in NYC*, Facebook Post, 2015, Facebook [text my own], https://www.facebook.com/TessHollidayOfficial/photos/a.185567701468943/1231857606839942/.

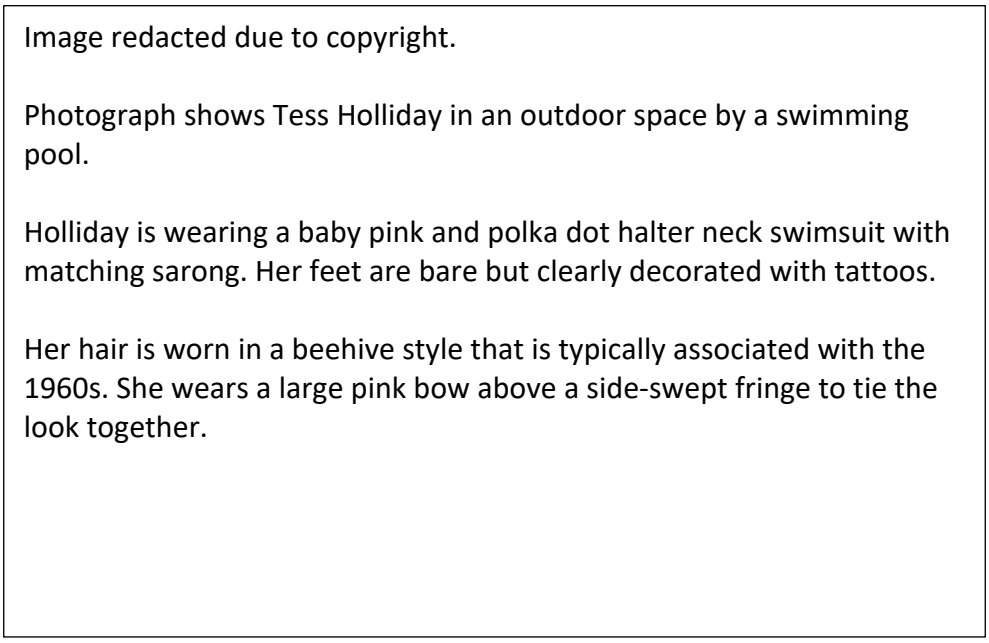

Fig. 3, Vestige Photography, *I Couldn't Love it More if I Tried*, Tumblr Post and Professional Photoshoot, 2013, https://tessholidayofficial.tumblr.com/post/36705392146/eeeeee-i-couldnt-love-this-more-if-i-tried.

1950s style clothing – Holliday is well-known for early career shoots in pin-up style.

Heavy eye makeup with 'retro' cat eye flicks and false eyelashes draw attention to eyes (and away from chubby cheeks?)

Heeled shoes to give the illusion of height (Holliday is only 5ft 3). But also help calves appear slimmer.

Pin-up styles are not as popular at the time of completing this thesis (2019) as they had been during the mid 2010s, and Holliday's pin-up aesthetic was striking when she first made her way into mainstream publications in 2015. Although I argue that Holliday is assimilating in many ways, her retro 1950s mode of dress is something, that in addition to her weight, sets her apart from other supermodels[7] who largely conform by wearing modern versions of fashionable trends. Holliday (2017, 23) describes her attitude to clothing in her thirties as being exactly the same as it was at age ten – 'if I like it, I am going to wear it', suggesting that Holliday's style which is reminiscent of 1950s cabaret and burlesque is simply a style

[7] Dita Von Teese, Zoey Deschanel and Katy Perry were all photographed often during this time period in vintage or retro clothing but are all thin. Adele Adkins has also been photographed regularly sporting a 1960s style beehive hairstyle and modern takes on the Dior designed 'New Look' dress.

she ‘likes’, rather than a carefully cultivated construction of normative femininity (which is reminiscent of ‘love your body’ discourse that I explore in chapter seven). Holliday was well-known for this specific style before signing to MILK Model Management and she details in her autobiography that she travelled through the United States offering ‘a pin up tour’. The tour offered ‘pin up for a day packages’ that paying ‘fans’ could attend to have their hair, make up and clothing styled in a pin-up aesthetic followed by a photoshoot (Holliday 2017, 246).

The pin-up style of dress has had many revivals since the 1950s but there is a precursor to this style as popularised by celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe. The Gibson Girl was a collection of drawings by Charles Dana Gibson that were popular during the 1880s until World War I (Fraser 1998, 27). Unlike the more voluptuous figure celebrated in the 1950s, the Gibson Girl was slender with wide hips, large bust and a corseted, cinched-in waist. The Gibson Girl, Fraser (28) argues, reflected the success of the early feminist movement as the style of clothes she wore gave way to more physical movement thus representing the freeing of women from the strict confines of clothing and the home. The representation of The Gibson Girl who was often drawn playing sports and engaging in other leisure activities – although never attending a university or campaigning for women’s votes (28) – eventually gave way to the popularised hourglass figure and style of dress we have come to associate with pin-up fashion. Although, The Gibson Girl was not ‘quite so plump’ (41) as the body ideal in the 1950s, both representations of an idealised body ‘figure’ emphasise the importance of maternal shapes with a small waist and larger hips and busts. Amber Jamilla Musser (2016, 58) argues, ‘the pin-up…represent[ed] a femininity that is explicitly linked with the nation. She is coded as beautiful, sexual, and innocent (despite some nudity), characteristics that are folded into an ideology of healthy sexuality that is racialized as white and legible as middle class’. While The Gibson Girl was often shown enjoying her leisure time, the emergence of pin-up styles represented a reminder to women that their priority should be their physical attractiveness and other traditional ‘feminine’ roles after the disruption caused by women having to go to work in America during World War II. The refocus on corseted, petticoated and often elaborate styles is in strong contrast to the cultural iconography of ‘Rosie the Riveter’ who was used as a symbol of women’s economic advantage in World War II.

It seems strange then, that Holliday – who has branded herself as a body positive activist – would be so invested in popularising styles which have represented the restriction on women's freedom for almost seventy years. While I acknowledge that not all body positive advocates identify as femme or are specifically interested in 1950s style (Dahl 2014), there is a clear connection between 'vintage femininity' and representations of body positivity. The pin-up style of dress does not exist solely as a fashion trend; pin-ups, as suggested by Musser (2016, 58), represent a 'healthy' sexuality, while the clothing associated with a pin-up style is also part of the sexuality of burlesque shows. It is perhaps this reading of pin-up style that contributes to Holliday's assimilationist activist aesthetic; Jana Evans Braziel (2001) argues that fat women's bodies are often understood in mainstream media as either asexual or desexualised and therefore a revival in fat women's burlesque could provide the space for fat bodies to be redefined as objects of sexual desire (Asbill 2009; Ratliff 2013, 2). Lacy Asbill (2009, 299) suggests fat women use burlesque performance spaces to 'defend' their sexuality. This defence of sexuality is important for Holliday to breakthrough into a mainstream media that still largely caters for the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), therefore the use of pin-up style which connotes both a 'healthy sexuality' and femininity encourage new readings of fat women that disrupt common understandings of fat.

Historically, burlesque was performed by women for the enjoyment of men. However, contemporary readings of burlesque suggest that many performers use burlesque as a way to 'reclaim' their sexuality (Asbill 2009; Ferreday 2008; McAllister 2009; Ratliff 2013). While traditional burlesque has 'been a site of anxiety about traditional feminine roles' (Ferreday 2008, 50), 'new burlesque', which Debra Ferreday argues originated in the mid 1990s in nightclubs in New York and London, challenges the notion that burlesque shows are exclusively for men. Although aspects such as vintage style clothing and the performance of striptease are in line with traditional burlesque shows, Ferreday reports that the traditional audience for 'new burlesque' largely consists of other women and gay men and Musser's (2016) study on queer and femme burlesque performers suggests burlesque is used to reclaim feminine sexuality and make femmes more visible in the queer community. However, despite many burlesque performers feeling burlesque gives them access to an otherwise restricted or invisible sexuality there is a danger that burlesque may be misread

‘as a reproduction of normative heterosexuality’ (Ferreday 2008, 53), thus removing the radical or activist implication of burlesque culturally. Moreover, regardless of Holliday’s intentions, whether she simply ‘likes’ 1950s retro fashion, her pin-up style of dress, while different from the trend-focused modes of dress of other supermodels conforms to a 1950s beauty standard that represents restriction both politically and aesthetically.

Of course, many individuals who support body positivity or even dress in pin-up styles are unaware of the broader cultural meanings and there are other explanations for the embrace of 1950s retro styles in body positivity. The hourglass silhouette popularised by pin-ups can easily be achieved by some fat women with heavy corseting and the ‘flaunting’ of fat bodies in sexualised clothing, meaning that the style is more easily mimicable than contemporary fashion trends that value thinner, more athletic body shapes. However, the disconnect between the way that pin-up clothing and burlesque make women feel empowered in comparison to broader, more generally understood cultural meanings is what allows Holliday to trace the liminality between ‘traditional’ understandings of beauty ideals and an activist aesthetic. The introduction of ‘new burlesque’ in the 1990s meant that pin-up styles, for those with political awareness, connote a radical style of dress that is associated with queer culture and feminist identity, while a more popularised interpretation of 1950s retro style denotes culturally understood meanings of ‘acceptable’ femininity. When dressing in or embracing a pin-up aesthetic, Holliday can thus simultaneously embrace and challenge traditional notions of women’s beauty while never having to commit to either reading.

Image redacted due to copyright.

Photograph shows Tess Holliday naked except for a sheet placed to the front of her body and what appears to be underwear in the corner of the photograph.

She is wearing minimal make-up although light blush, carefully drawn eyebrows and mascara are still apparent.

Her hair is worn loose and is brushed to her left side.

This photograph focuses on Holliday's tattooed arm which features famous characters or women such as Miss Piggy, Mae West and Hello Kitty.

Fig. 4, Cayley, Alex, *Telegraph Photoshoot*, Photograph, 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/fashion/people/eff-your-beauty-standards-meet-the-size-26-tattooed-supermodel-w/.

Decorated calves which draw attention to bare legs.

Decorated arms which draw attention to bare arms.

Tattoos of famous, feminine women including: Dolly Parton, Miss Piggy, Mae West and Hello Kitty. Part of contemporary 'pin-up' style.

Holliday's tattoos have been the focus of fascination for many journalists (Biddlecombe 2016; Fischer 2018; Gordon 2016; Shapiro 2015; Weisman 2015) and her 'fans'. Her tattoos are large, bright, colourful and often depict either 'heroes' of Holliday's or typical images of femininity such as a tube lipstick or Hello Kitty. Holliday offers an explanation of her heavily tattooed arms in her autobiography; she writes that when she was working at a plus-size clothing store she became fascinated with a customer with tattoos all over her body. Holliday admitted to the customer that she always covers her arms to disguise how big they are, in return, the customer confesses her arms are tattooed for the same reason, telling Holliday the tattoos encourage her to 'show off' her arms (Holliday 2017, 186).

The placement of Holliday's tattoos is significant; the majority are on her arms and legs which are often left uncovered by clothing. Holliday's colourful tattoos actively draw

attention to her large arms and legs in a way that goes against advice that fat women receive about covering up their larger body parts; this in itself is an act of minor social rebellion. Victoria Pitts (2003, 50) suggests that women who modify their body do so to promote 'symbolic rebellion' as an act of resistance and self-transformation that allows them to symbolically 'reclaim the body from its victimization and objectification in patriarchal society'. Pitts argues that by the 1990s, tattoos on the bodies of young feminists were being embraced by postmodern feminists as subversions of traditional notions of femininity and beauty (56). If Holliday's pin-up style is read as a conformity or an attempt to embrace both femininity and fatness, her tattoos represent a more direct challenge to traditional notions of beauty. While she may be embracing other normalised beauty standards, it is not typical for a supermodel to be this heavily tattooed, Holliday (2017, 27), who herself has suggested she was born to 'stand out' can use her tattoos to separate herself from other fat body positive advocates who may be more directly or obviously attempting to assimilate into mainstream culture.

While I would argue that women with tattoos are not as radical as they may once have been, there is still an important cultural history embedded in the embodiment of heavily tattooed women. Arnold Rubin (1988) suggests that the 1950s onwards was the beginning of what he termed the 'Tattoo Renaissance' in westernised culture. However, during the late 19th and early 20th Century, tattooed women were frequently featured in 'freak shows' and circuses (Irish 2013). Betty Broadbent – pictured in fig. 5 – spent much of her life touring fairs and circuses as a heavily tattooed woman. Broadbent's limbs and chest were covered in tattoos and she gained notoriety in 1939 when she entered a beauty pageant at the World Fair. Although she participated just as the other contestants did, despite her otherwise conventionally attractive features, Broadbent did not win the contest; her skin being deemed too 'monstrous' to gain a winning place (Braunberger 2000, 13). Holliday's fat body and Broadbent's tattooed body render them too 'grotesque' for the normalised standards of beauty for their individual time periods. Drawing on Mikhall Bahktin's theory of the carnivalesque ([1964] 1984), Jeffrey A. Brown (2005) theorises the modern female grotesque, which is in contrast to the 'classical body' (Russo 1995), represents 'all things socially unacceptable and hence lower class' (J. Brown 2005, 81). Women who 'fail or refuse to conform to the dominant physical ideal', Brown argues, subvert expectations of beauty,

creating a powerful cultural tool for feminists (81). So, while Holliday's tattoos are perhaps not as 'radical' or 'grotesque' as they once may have been, her fat embodiment renders her the 'modern grotesque'. However, in refusing to hide her body with clothing and instead choosing to decorate her limbs with artwork, Holliday stands outside the borders of accepted cultural behaviour creating friction between herself and other 'socially acceptable' models of feminised beauty practices (82). Holliday's tattoos alone are no longer regarded as grotesque in the way Broadbent's were but the practice of tattooing her larger than 'acceptable' limbs and therefore drawing attention to body parts that fat women are often advised to leave covered subtly hints at a liberation approach to body positivity. However, as tattooing has become more popular, especially within 'alternative' and pin-up fashion, Holliday's tattoos combined with her style of dress mean that, in many ways, she is conforming to an already established model of beauty – albeit a slightly more transgressive approach.

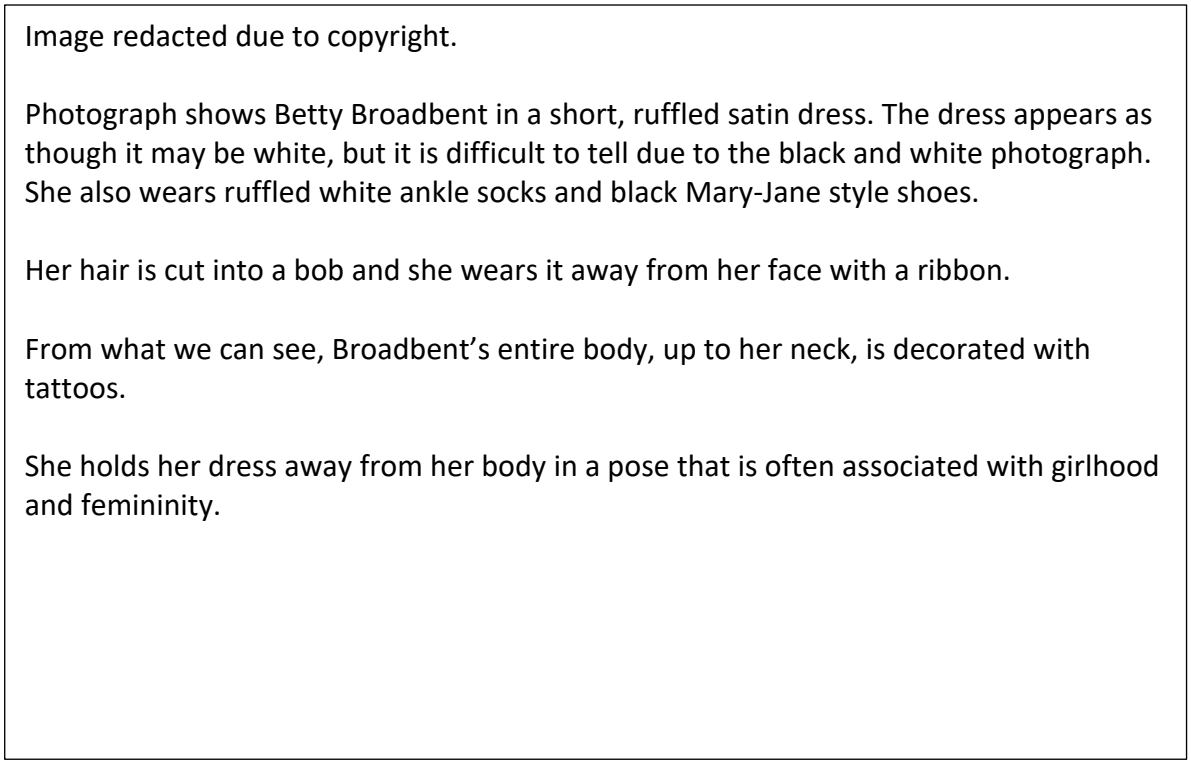

Fig. 5, Broadbent, Betty, *Betty Broadbent – Tattooed Beauty*, Photographic Print, Date Unknown, https://www.thehumanmarvels.com/betty-broadbent-tattooed-beauty/.

While historically pin-ups were much more likely to *be* tattoos rather than *have* tattoos (Kastan 2008, 19), in the 2000s tattooed pin-up girls were incredibly popular. The Suicide Girls are a large, contemporary group of women who are well-known for their pin-up

fashion styles and tattooed bodies. Suicide Girls is a website founded by Selena Mooney and Seal Suhl which sells images and videos of models; the website 'about' page features a counter at the bottom which counts the years, months and days the site has been 'celebrating alternative pin up girls' – seventeen years, nine months and six days at the time of writing (Suicide Girls n.d.). Suicide Girl models go through an audition process where, if successful, they will be accepted onto the site to sell images of themselves by their own design. Steen Ledet Christiansen (2009) argues that the tattoos worn by Suicide Girls differ from the more 'feminine' tattoos we may see on women who do not fall under the umbrella of 'alternative pin-up'. Like modern burlesque dancers, Christiansen (2009) argues, the Suicide Girls are aware of the 'tradition' in which they exist which was born from institutions like *Playboy* magazine. However, Suicide Girls differ from the models featured in *Playboy* as they have control over their own photographs: how they are shot, when they are uploaded and who they work with, a practice that suggests they are 'free' to 'playfully' engage critically with the conventions of more historically traditional pin-up photography (Christiansen 2009, 50). Similarly, Shoshana Magnet (2007, 580) reports that in her investigation of models from the Suicide Girls website, women indicated they joined to be part of a 'sex-positive community'. Magnet (2007) also establishes that although the owners of the site do not use the word 'feminist' to express ideological affiliation, the site has been described as 'feminist' by online media coming from different perspectives, for instance the feminist magazine *Bitch* and the cyber journal *Wired.* Further, Christiansen (2009, 50) argues that Suicide Girls use the same 'visual conventions' associated with mainstream erotic pin-ups but are displaying bodies that exist as an alternative to mainstream definitions and understandings of beauty which 'confronts the masculine definition of female sexuality'. While the Suicide Girls may carry markers which disrupt traditional femininity – such as piercings, tattoos and brightly coloured dyed hair – the majority of the models on the site are still mostly white, young, able-bodied, thin, tattooed women. Therefore, while some feminine beauty ideals may be disrupted, they are quite not as subversive as Christiansen suggests. Both Holliday and the Suicide Girls fit many of the other categories which determine feminised beauty in Eurocentric westernised societies, especially the UK and US. Tattoos in addition to a fat body allow Holliday to be just transgressive enough to be celebrated by mainstream media while positioning herself as a body positive advocate who fights back against gendered beauty norms. As with the pin-up fashion, there is a historical

relevancy to her cultivated look which allows her to simultaneously conform to and resist normative standards of beauty.

Tattoos, in many cases, are 'symbols demanding to be read' (Braunberger 2000, 1) and Holliday's artwork within the context of femininity and perceived social rebellion is of particular interest. In her autobiography, Holliday (2017, 202) gives some 'life advice' on the topic of tattoos; 'surround yourself with symbols of people that empower you. Or, if you're like me, use your big fat body as a big fat canvas'. Holliday's right arm features, as symbols of 'empowerment': Mae West, Dolly Parton and Miss Piggy. Considering the individual histories of each of these women, it is possible that Holliday's shifts between assimilationist fat person and body positive 'activist' are more carefully constructed than is immediately apparent.

Mae West had a complicated relationship with the media and was imprisoned after the performance of *Sex* (1926), a play written by West in which she performed the role of a sex worker, was deemed 'vulgar' (Ivanov 2004, 276). Holliday (2017, 202) describes West as the 'original badass' who 'paved the way for Marilyn Monroe' despite lacking 'conventional' good looks. Dolly Parton, on the other hand, is the epitome of what Brown (2005) suggests is culturally recognised as 'white trash sexuality'. Holliday (2017, 202) asserts that her love of Parton has much to do with her feeling as though she 'popped out of the womb holding a can of hairspray' and always loving 'excessive amounts of cleavage' suggesting that Parton's (excessive) femininity is what is most attractive to her. Miss Piggy[8], on the other hand, is a totally fictional character but one who is known for her glamourous and feminine aesthetic, but just like West was vulgar and like Parton is 'white trash'; Miss Piggy has a flaw too in that, she is, of course, a pig.

All the women that Holliday has tattooed on her arm are known for their 'tainted' femininity. Holliday, West, Parton and Miss Piggy all adhere to traditional practices of feminine beauty in similar ways – stylised hair, make-up, glamourous, often extravagant

[8] Miss Piggy is a fictional character who first debuted on *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981) in 1976. She is a felt puppet pig who was played by Frank Oz until 2000 and is now performed by Eric Jacobson.

modes of dressing – but disrupt beauty norms. However, each woman, in some minor way, disrupts and subverts what it means to be both 'feminine' and 'beautiful'. I do not assume that every woman who wears pin-up style clothing and tattoos 'empowering' women on their body is aware of the cultural meanings of doing so. However, Holliday's self-branding as a body positive activist who has gained mainstream success in otherwise thin-centric industries suggests her way of assimilating is carefully constructed and informed by past disruptors of femininity. Women (and constructed women) like West, Parton and Miss Piggy each chipped away at idealised beauty norms and paved the way for Holliday to become the world's first plus-size supermodel.

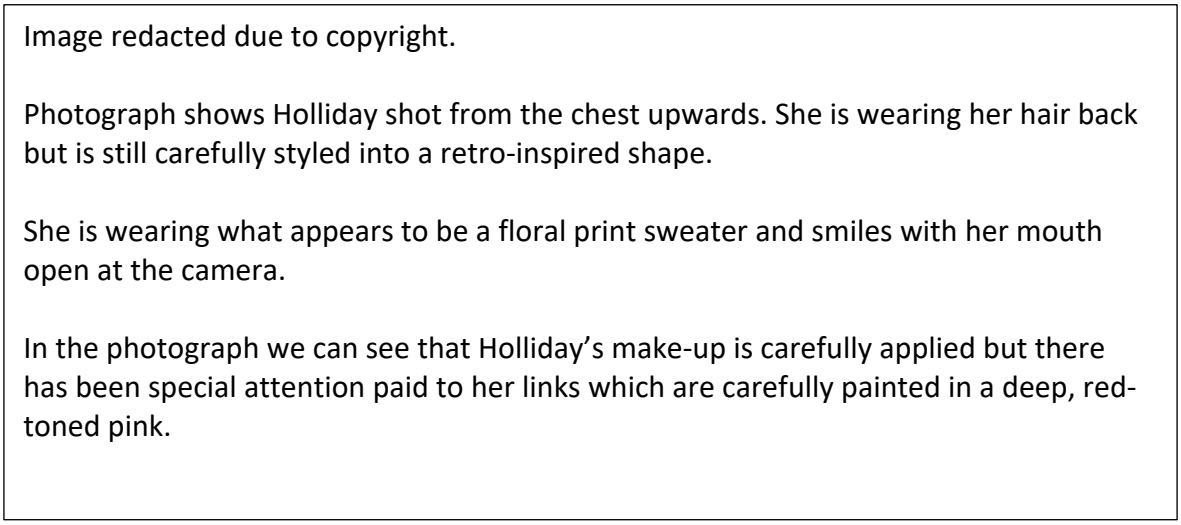
Image redacted due to copyright.

Photograph shows Holliday shot from the chest upwards. She is wearing her hair back but is still carefully styled into a retro-inspired shape.

She is wearing what appears to be a floral print sweater and smiles with her mouth open at the camera.

In the photograph we can see that Holliday's make-up is carefully applied but there has been special attention paid to her links which are carefully painted in a deep, red-toned pink.

Fig. 6, Hackett, Charlotte, *Tess Holliday*, Photograph, 2015, *Daily Mail*, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3076396/Tess-Holliday-flaunts-size-26-frame-black-knickers-modelling-agency-shoot.html.

Pink/red lipstick worn here in a subtle shade but mouth open just enough to form a suggestive 'pout'.

Contouring and blush precisely placed to accentuate cheek bones and help face appear more defined.

Heavily plucked and shaped eyebrows frame face.

Like tattoos, make-up is central to Holliday's aesthetic; her defined brows, contoured cheek bones and pink or red lips are as iconic and classic as her red, heavily styled hair. Even photoshoots that appear to be communicating a more 'natural' beauty – see fig. 4 – include

these important elements. However, it is the bright red lip that she frequently wears along with her pin-up style fashion that I focus on in this section. Red lipstick has a long and complicated history as both a tool and icon for women; it perhaps had its first 'celebrity' endorsement from Queen Elizabeth I whose iconic white lead face offered a stark contrast to the red of her lips (Ogilvie and Ryan 2011). Holliday's left arm even features a tattoo of a tube of red lipstick among stylised drawings of a vanity mirror and collection of make-up brushes.

There are many theories that attempt to explain lipstick's close relationship with femininity but Nicolas Guéguen and Celiné Jacob's (2012) study is helpful here as it explores lipstick's role in heteronormative and idealised beauty norms. Guéguen and Jacob found that women working as waiters in restaurants who wore red lipstick were tipped more by men than waiters who wore no lipstick. Guéguen and Jacob also researched the impact of lipstick on women customers and concluded that there was no change in tipping behaviour if the waiter was or was not wearing lipstick. The study, while assuming that both men and women customers were heterosexual, suggests that men customers who tip more do so because they have a sexual interest in their women waiters. Guéguen and Jacob (1335) attempt to explain their results by suggesting red lips could be associated with 'estrogen levels, sexual arousal and health', although admit a further study using a similar methodological approach would be needed to confirm that theory. However, Guéguen and Jacob are likely drawing on well-circulated and culturally approved ideas around lipstick and biologically female genitalia. Diane Ackerman (1992, 114) suggests that the subconscious reason women wear red lipstick is, 'the lips remind us of the labia because they flush red and swell when aroused'. Ackerman is, by inference suggesting that an attraction to lipstick is rooted in biological desire and that lipstick indicates to men that women are more likely to be sexually aroused and thus more likely to have sex with them.

This idea, although a little far-fetched, is one that has become familiar and although women may not actively be choosing to remind men of their genitals when they wear red lipstick, the myth does take on its own meaning and connotes sexuality, especially when worn as part of a pin-up aesthetic. A red lip has become central to the iconography of the pin-up and is still seen in 'new burlesque' performances. Although Ferreday (2008, 54) argues that 'new

burlesque' is a site of empowerment for some women she invokes Imogen Tyler's (2005) term 'lipstick liberation' to critique this sense of empowerment. Ferreday refutes the reading of burlesque as performances of heteronormativity, but she also argues that the 'visibility' of red lipstick along with other noticeable aspects of burlesque femininity are a problem for consumer culture; establishing that many women's magazines and websites have been quick to 'appropriate' the burlesque style of dress, she contends that many of these images are 'haunted' by a connotation of 'high maintenance femininity'. It is this high maintenance femininity coupled with the transgression of burlesque that perhaps encourages make-up companies to play on the contentious relationship between lipstick and feminism (Ferreday 2008, 55). Brands can use the deviation from the norm of burlesque style to sell lipsticks by providing something subversive that connotes high-maintenance femininity which is achieved through the use of products that they can sell to consumers.

In 2016 Holliday became an ambassador for Benefit's 'Bold is Beautiful' project. Benefit are a Californian cosmetic company that are easily recognised by their vintage and retro-inspired packaging. The Bold is Beautiful project asked Benefit customers to visit their local Benefit 'Brow Bar' throughout the month of May where '100%' of the profits from eyebrow appointments will be donated to the domestic violence charity Refuge and the cancer charity Look Good Feel Better. Benefit claims the project intends to 'spread a feel-good approach' and 'empower women and girls throughout the UK' (Bold is Beautiful, n.d.). Holliday's involvement with the Bold is Beautiful project encapsulates what it means to be a successful body positive celebrity. This project allows Holliday to celebrate her traditional, 'high-maintenance', femininity while maintaining her identity as an activist promoting body positive values. Using Holliday as the face of a Benefit campaign suggests cosmetic companies are ready to embrace a 'new standard' of beauty where body size does not matter while still emphasising a femininity that relies on cosmetic products. The perceived transgression of pin-up approaches to make-up and lipstick allow Holliday to perform the rejection of normative standards of beauty whilst subtly embracing them. Bright red lipstick may not be worn to represent the 'swelling' of the labia, but a carefully applied lip does represent compliance with traditional notions of feminised beauty.

Image redacted due to copyright.

Holliday wears the same outfit described in figure 2. But in this photograph she is facing the camera and visibly laughing.

Holliday's long, red hair is, again, carefully style and falls around her face.

Fig. 7, Holliday, Tess, *Over the Moon that the Campaign I Shot for JcPenney is Finally Out*, Tumblr Post/Professional Photoshoot, 2015, https://tessholidayofficial.tumblr.com/post/130073639425/over-the-moon-that-the-campaign-i-shot-for.

Hair dyed a deep auburn shade, loaded with products, heated and brushed into long 'retro' waves.

Holliday's hair is worn long and dyed a deep auburn and contributes to what Ashley C. Ford (2018), in her cover story on Holliday for *Self* magazine, calls her 'fascinating look'. Ford is quite taken with Holliday's hair and describes it as, 'a bright shade of red, with warm undertones and understated highlights that make it gleam. It reminds me of Jessica Rabbit's[9] hair, but with better conditioner'.

Holliday's hair is central to her representation as plus-size supermodel. Hair both on the head and elsewhere carries significant cultural meaning; there are firmly recognised styles for both feminine and masculine people – long rather than short hair for example. But there are also hairstyles that are symbolic of politics and subcultures such as styles worn by Hippies, Skinheads and Punks (Synnott 1987). Moreover, recently, there has been a popularised celebration of natural hair which encourages Black women – and men – to embrace their natural hair texture.

Hair can be a powerful symbol of individual and group identity, and hairstyles, at least those worn on the head, are able to be 'read' in public in order to communicate conformity to

[9] Jessica Rabbit is a cartoon rabbit who, like Holliday, embraces a pin-up aesthetic complete with red lip, long, heavily styled red hair and figure-hugging red dress. It seems appropriate for Ford (2018) to make this connection considering the emphasis I have placed on pin-up style in this chapter.

femininity and idealised beauty standards, as with Holliday. As Rose Weitz (2001, 672) claims, 'there is widespread agreement that women should spend time, effort and money on making their hair attractive'; for fat women, especially Holliday, this 'agreement' is more accurately an expectation in order to reject culturally accepted notions that fat women are slovenly and do not care about their appearance (O'Brien et al. 2012; O' Brien et al. 2013; Farrell 2011, 34; Leeuwen 2015). Perhaps because of the effort that must be exerted to maintain long hair, long styles have become established as a representation of traditional femininity in westernised cultures (Eicher and Higgins 1993; Gill [2007] 2010). In a *Daily Mail* (2008) poll in 2008[10], 43% of the men interviewed said they preferred 'long, wavy locks' to shorter styles. Holliday's hair in combination with her other typically feminine, heteronormatively desirable features – such as her carefully applied make-up and clothing – suggest that her constructed aesthetic is a conscious process that represents her embrace of traditional femininity.

While the length and cut of hair are vital factors for idealised standards of beauty, it is the dark auburn colour of Holliday's hair that appears to catch Ford's (2018) attention and inspires her to make the comparison between Holliday and Jessica Rabbit. While Holliday has chosen to tattoo 'blonde bombshells' on her right arm, she has chosen to colour her own hair red. When studying perceptions of hair colour Durann Maria Heckert (1997, 374-5) found that red-headed women were often described as 'fiery', 'wild' or 'sexy' and one participant who is a redhead herself mentioned that she is often the butt of overtly sexual jokes. While Heckert's study is now over twenty years old, the stereotypes persist, perhaps more so in American culture, considering the popularity of Dolly Parton and Bruce Springsteen songs about sexually charged, red-headed women. Holliday's decision to dye her hair red allows her to 'stand out' from other similarly famous fat women who largely sport blonde and brunette styles[11] while keeping within the realms of traditional,

[10] Although not an academic study the *Daily Mail* poll does represent what some people believe to be 'common sense' when it comes to long hair, femininity and heteronormative sexuality and desire. Men were shown pictures of celebrities with varying hairstyles and women with long, wavy hair like Holliday's where the 'most popular'.

[11] I am largely referring to Rebel Wilson, Melissa McCarthy, Chrissy Metz and Gabourey Sidibe.

normative, feminine beauty. A fat supermodel with tattoos, an alternative fashion sense and pink hair, for example, may remove Holliday's aesthetic too far away from what mainstream press have come to celebrate as (acceptable) fat beauty.

While long hair is celebrated as a tenet of femininity, there is a contemporary cultural expectation for women to be hairless from the neck down. Being hairless requires work; women are expected to at least appear as though they spend copious amounts of time removing hair from their bodies. Body hair removal is so normative that in their study Merran Toerien, Sue Wilkinson and Priscilla Y. L. Choi (2005, 402) reported that 99.71% of their sample had removed body hair at some point during their lives. As Holliday's constructed public persona is evidenced by her 'attractive' fat model aesthetic, her assimilation into mainstream press and culture requires that she removes her body hair to conform to what is socially expected of feminine women. I suspect that if Holliday were to be photographed with hair on her arms or legs, then her mainstream approach to femininity would be questioned and the likelihood of brand partnerships or celebration in popular press would be in jeopardy.

I suggest this as in 2007, recognisably fat musician Beth Ditto appeared nude on the front of *NME* magazine, sporting a classically pin-up style red lip and cat flick eyeliner, and allowing her right arm to be slightly pulled back to rest on her waist to reveal an unshaved armpit. While Ditto has achieved acceptance and celebration in fat activist communities, even before the *NME* cover, she was already known in mainstream press as someone who was 'out to shock and make a statement with her body' (Tomrley 2009, 51). Ditto's rise to celebrity was pre-popularisation of the body positivity movement but her representation both in *NME* and in tabloids at the time was associated with fat politics and feminism and although she was generally not accepted by the media, she was given her own column in the *Guardian,* suggesting some public and media interest in fat activism (Tomrley 2009, 51). Much of Ditto's aesthetic in 2007 was similar to Holliday's in 2015; both women draw on a feminised pin-up styles but the hair on Ditto's armpits, her lesbian relationship, tendency to dress in 'unflattering' clothing and disrobe on stage meant that Ditto did not reach the

assimilationist[12] success of Holliday. Ditto's mainstream success was grounded in her representation as 'Other' and spectacle, so while many teenage fat girls – like me – were excited to see her on the front of a popular magazine, her aesthetic represented her focus on liberation from idealised beauty rather than assimilation. Holliday, however, removes the hair from her limbs and carefully styles her hair, and while these two practices alone do not represent assimilationist activism, when combined with the increased popularisation of tattoos, a feminised style of dress, carefully applied make-up and an hourglass figure, it is difficult to locate the 'liberation' aspect of body positivity beyond the 'inclusivity' of Holliday as *the* plus-size supermodel.

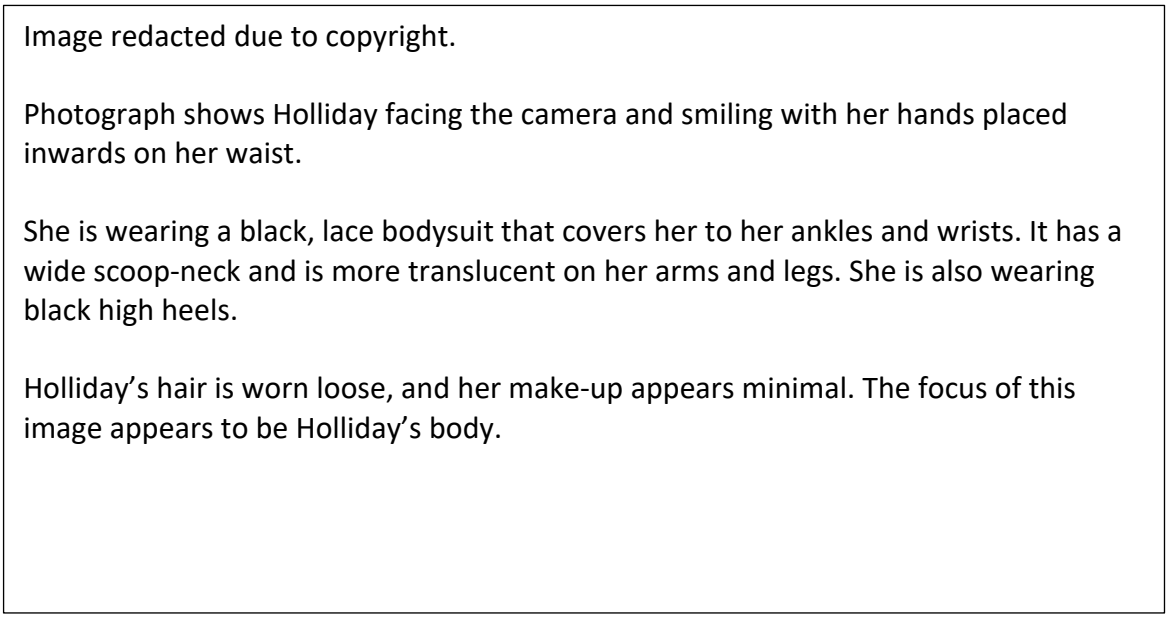

Fig. 8, White, James, *Tess Holliday Photoshoot for People Magazine,* Professional Photoshoot, 2015, https://people.com/bodies/tess-holliday-plus-size-model-blogs-about-challenging-perceptions-of-beauty/.

Tight shapewear worn from shoulders to mid thigh. Worn to emphasise hourglass figure but also to 'smooth' any bumps.

Form fitting clothing which fat women are often advised to avoid. Used here to again, emphasise 'smooth' hourglass figure.

[12] While I am not suggesting Ditto wanted to assimilate, it is important to tease out repercussions of Ditto's 'queering' in mainstream media.

Holliday did not appear on the front of *Cosmopolitan* until 2018 but she did start appearing on the front of magazines in 2015 and accepting brand deals as her fame grew. The photoshoot in fig. 8 was shot for *People* magazine in 2015 and was Holliday's first mainstream magazine cover. In the photograph, while I would argue her hair is the main focal point, she is also wearing an all-black lace bodysuit which draws attention to her hourglass[13] silhouette. Holliday's pose is representative of many of her other shoots, while resting her hands on her waist and sticking her elbows out, she further draws attention to the smallest part of her body – enhancing her hourglass shape. Additionally, while I cannot be sure, it appears that Holliday may be wearing shapewear under her bodysuit which is an item of clothing often used to flatten and smooth the stomach and thighs. Holliday's pose, her outfit, the blank background behind her and the likelihood that she is wearing shape altering undergarments are all used to accentuate her hourglass figure and focus attention on her shape rather than size.

The hourglass shape is often colloquially referred to as the 'Coca Cola Bottle' and, just like Coke, the shape has become iconic especially in the contexts of Americana and the original American pin-up. Mae West (before she became an object of ridicule for her 'larger' frame) once had the idealised silhouette for an American woman and the Coke bottle was often referred to as a 'Mae West' in reference to her slim waist and curvaceous bust and hips (Ryan 2015). The hourglass shape is recognised by hips and shoulders that are 'about the same size' (Grogan et al. 2013, 383) coupled with a small waist; however, while Holliday clearly has the shape, the idealised 'hourglass' is also often categorised by slimness. Sarah Grogan et al. (2013) suggest that this is because 'broadness' connotes masculinity and the hourglass is focused on femininity and fertility, hence the attention paid to hips and breasts.

The hourglass figure was extremely popular in Victorian England (Lauder 2010, 31), the fashion of the time was used to emphasise the shape as wide shoulders, even wider skirts and corsets were popular throughout the period. The twentieth century often denoted the hourglass shape as feminine and sexual and to have the resources to create the exaggerated

[13] Women's bodies are often described as 'hourglass' shaped when hips and shoulders are of a similar width and accentuated by a (much) smaller waist.

hourglass figure suggested a higher position in society (31). Despite the fluctuation in popular shapes during the 20th and 21st centuries[14] the ideal waist always remained slim regardless of the proportions for the rest of the body. The emphasis on Holliday's silhouette through her style of dress, poses and any shapewear she might use contradict the notion that idealised hourglass shapes are always 'slimmer' and despite being fat, she can embrace a normalised and celebrated silhouette as part of her feminine, heteronormative aesthetic.

In addition to helping create an hourglass silhouette, shapewear is often used to smooth out what are often perceived as bodily imperfections. Whether Holliday's shapewear is exceptional or her 'fat rolls' and cellulite have been digitally doctored, the photograph published by *People* magazine has removed signifiers of 'fat'. While the moulding of bodies via digital methods is relatively new, corsetry has moved in and out of fashion constantly over the last 100 years with girdles, bustiers, contour garments and shapewear all having moments of popularity (Steele 2001). Over the last decade, the practice of waist training[15] has become more fashionable and in 2019 British retailer Mothercare even started selling soft corsets as part of their 'post-birth lingerie' line (Saner 2019). Waist training has become more popular as it has received celebrity endorsements on social media from large scale celebrities and although Holliday has not advertised or endorsed the waist trainers, she has been photographed behind the scenes of photoshoots in tight fitting shapewear. Shapewear is usually fitted from directly below the bra line to just above the knee, made of Lycra and traditionally used to make women appear both 'thinner' and 'smoother'. Although shapewear is usually used to minimise women's bodies, padded shapewear that 'bulks out' areas that may need 'extra padding' is often used by plus-size models to enhance their own hourglass shapes (Adlington 2015; Czerniawski 2015; Layne 2014). While the use of such padding reflects the fashion industry's discomfort with using truly fat models, much preferring to repeatedly hire women wearing around a UK size 14 or smaller, it does also

[14] There have been regular reoccurrences of popular athletic physiques throughout the 20th and 21st centuries which Lauder (2010, 62) argues are an attempt to contradict the notion that women are weak and fragile.

[15] Waist training describes the process of waist measurement reduction which is achieved through almost constant wearing of a corset-like garment that fits tightly around the mid-section (Lauder 2010, 198).

suggest that an hourglass shape – at least for plus-size modelling – is critical to both fashion retailers selling clothes and the models they often hire. Holliday, although fatter than many other typical plus-size models, follows the trend of an hourglass figure and has learnt to emphasise her shape and use it as an asset in her assimilation into plus-size fashion industries and mainstream media.

Sprinkle, shown in fig. 1, is wearing a tight-fitting corset that she claims is restricting her ability to breathe in addition to a choker that is 'really' choking her and heeled boots that are both too high and too small, however, regardless of the pain of her outfit is causing her and the time it took to put together she still declares, 'Inspite of it all, I'm sexually excited + feeling great!' Holliday, drawing on the iconography of pin-up style to represent a carefully constructed feminine aesthetic presents a gendered representation that has allowed her to be deemed 'acceptable' by mainstream press and clothing industries. Holliday's style, although focused on heteronormative standards of beauty has allowed her to enter into an industry that has traditionally celebrated thinner women. While I am not sure she is paving the way for larger women, she is, after all often celebrated as the world's 'only' plus-size supermodel, suggesting this 'celebration' is largely about tokenism rather than a sincere step towards inclusion, she is, in many ways successfully assimilating. Much like playing with heels and corsets and dressing in a way that has traditionally been associated with pandering to the male gaze, being accepted in an industry, or even seeing a woman 'like you' be accepted, no matter how superficial that acceptance may be, can feel 'great!'. Body positivity, I argue, is largely about 'feeling good' and 'loving' your own body; if you are a fat, white, feminine, able-bodied young woman, seeing Holliday on the front of *Cosmopolitan* has the potential to feel hugely empowering regardless of what 'fat' and 'power' mean in a wider cultural context. It is hard to underestimate the influence Holliday has had on the popularisation of fat body positivity and that is why I chose to focus on her aesthetic and style to explain my understanding of body positivity in this thesis. Holliday embodies classical beauty in almost every way apart from her body size and depending on perspective, her just radical enough tattoos, the message that centring Holliday and women like her in fat body positivity sends is that fat women can be subjected to the cultural expectations and pressures of femininity too. Holliday's aesthetic perpetuates old standards of beauty but repackages them as body liberation and her celebration in mainstream media

suggests that fat bodies like hers may be celebrated or accepted too providing they adhere to assimilationist body positivity and choose to maintain a feminised aesthetic.

3. ‘Just There for the Fashion Basically’: Locating Fem(me)ininity in Fat Body Positivity

My first introduction to both body positivity and fat activism was through the LiveJournal community Fatshionista in 2010 when I nineteen years old . Having felt excluded by trend-driven fashion as a teenager, finding a community focused on fat fashion was extremely validating for me. At the time, I had just started university and for multiple reasons was feeling very disconnected from other people my age and this was not helped by the fact I felt I could not dress or ‘look’ like my peers. I stood out, not just because of my fat body, but because I only wore black linen trousers and ‘floaty’ tops from Evans. Until I found Fatshionista, it had not occurred to me that fat people in ‘real’ life could play with fashion and once I found the community I checked the forums every day to soak up all the OOTD (outfit of the day) posts, tips and discussions about being a fat, fashionable woman.

The community at Fatshionista and my consequent slow introduction into fat activism changed the trajectory of my life; it was my interest in fatshion that led me to my MA in Women’s Studies at the University of York, and which inspired me to write this PhD. In my MA dissertation I asserted that body positivity and fatshion were undeniably radical movements that ‘empowered’ all fat women, and when I started my PhD programme I had intended to further my MA research and continue studying the ‘radical empowerment’ afforded to women by fatshion . It was not until a year into my PhD that I began to feel uncomfortable with this way of thinking. I began to read more feminist and queer history and realised the terms and labels I had taken for granted, specifically the term ‘femme’, had been taken from other marginalised groups and reused by me and other posters on Fatshionista without a clear understanding of what femme meant to us.

Using ‘fat femme’ as an identifier to mean both fat and feminine was common for Fatshionista users and it was a term I used for myself without much thought. At the time, the term made sense to me, I had never felt it possible for me to be ‘feminine’

and the people in my day-to-day life certainly did not read me as such. One of my best friends when I was a teenager used to proudly tell me he often 'forgot' I was a girl as though my interests in football and (pretend) disinterest in clothing and make-up were things to be proud of. With the majority of my time spent with people who reminded me that my rejection of femininity was my best trait and hearing them talk about feminine women as objects (as heterosexual teenage boys often do), it was difficult to feel as though I could accept and embrace my own femininity, even though I think that is what I secretly wanted.

Femininity did not feel reasonable for me to strive for, therefore, once I found this counter-culture of femme and exaggerated femininity I began to feel more comfortable embracing feminine styles. Femmeness felt more attainable than femininity ever had; I could hide behind the safety of parody, no one would take me seriously as a 'feminine' woman because I was so over-exaggerated. I could douse myself in glitter or I could mimic the way my mother had dressed me as a child (A-line dresses, bright tights and shiny shoes) and I felt comfortable in a way that I had not ever felt as a teenager or young adult. However, I had to work for my femmeness, I had to carefully shop for clothes because I did not have a lot of money and the clothes I desired were not the sort you could pick up in a second-hand shop in my home town of Reading[16]. I also had to spend an extremely long time learning to do my hair and make-up because I had missed those lessons as a teenager. I felt as though I had laboured to achieve my femme identity and felt pride and connection with other femmes. On reflection, my discovery of what I thought was femme does not quite match what was happening with my identity at the time and by my mid-late twenties I began to feel very distant from fat femme culture. I began asking questions about whether my 'femmeness' was linked to my sexuality or my dress, or even the way I behaved as a fat femme woman. I began and continue to wonder whether I had just fallen into the trap of claiming 'queer' identities for

[16] Reading is a large town in Berkshire that is mostly known for being a place of commercial development with significant involvement in information technology and insurance.

myself because I felt and appeared different from popularised representations of femininity.

Finding Fatshionista and people 'like me' was one of the most life-altering experiences I have ever had. However, as I get older, fatter[17], sicker, poorer, I feel the pressure of my own failed femininity and am beginning to ask myself what it means to be a 'fat femme'.

Over the last five years, references to 'fatshion' have become less prominent in body related discussions in the mainstream media, instead body positivity has come to the forefront. In chapter two I focused on Tess Holliday's feminine, pin-up inspired aesthetic. In this chapter I show that exaggerated feminised styles are not specific to Holliday and have a significant place within the history of fat body positivity. 'Conventional' body positivity has received criticism for excluding anyone who does not look similar to Tess Holliday (Dastagir 2017; Dionne 2017; Tinsley 2019), and Jes Baker (2015, 150) argues that as body positivity 'surfaced into mainstream conversation' the messaging tended to be delivered by 'straight, white, hour-glass shaped women' – which Baker admits includes herself. Moreover, I argue that there has been a concentration on the way women dress themselves and although Baker is 'straight, white, [and] hour glass shaped' she is also feminine presenting – just as I am. Learning to dress in a fem(me)inine way is something I learnt to do when using Fatshionista and it is possible to connect the feminised aesthetics I saw to the popularisation of body positive celebrities (like Holliday) in mainstream media. Although 2019 body positivity and fat fashion have strong ties to fast-fashion and marketing many early Fatshionistas made attempts to be critical of brand-focused fashion when the forum first started. If body positivity is depoliticising fat activism, then this chapter aims to locate when that depoliticisation happened and what it has meant to be a fat femme during the rise

[17] At the beginning of my PhD I gained a significant amount of weight but lost that and more when I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

of body positivity. Therefore, I ask, what is the significance of femme within the body positivity movement?

Femininity has no singular definition and depending on the contexts such as race, class, culture and religion can be communicated and performed in a multitude of different ways (see de Beauvoir [1949] 1997; Bartky 1997; Friedan [1983] 2010; McRobbie [1978] 2012; Skeggs 1997). Carrie Paechter (2006, 254), drawing on Raewyn Connell ([1993] 1995), argues that defining femininity is particularly difficult as it is often only understood in binary opposition to masculinity, meaning that masculinity is understood as what 'men and boys do' and femininity is defined as the 'Other' to normative masculinity. But this notion is complex, as what boys and men actually do is culturally varied, which makes it difficult to create an accurate picture of masculinity (R. Connell [1993] 1995; Paechter 2006). Connell ([1993] 1995, 77) further argues that hegemonic masculinity is more definable, as it is the 'configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimation of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'. While Connell concludes it is likely only a small number of men who rigorously practice hegemonic masculinity, any hegemonic masculinity that operates in order to subordinate women can cultivate a variety of ideal ways of 'doing man' (R. Connell [1993] 1995, 79). Yet, hegemonic femininity's practices and historical interplay are, even according to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 848), under-researched. While this chapter will not provide a definition for hegemonic femininity, I am interested in exploring an aspect of femininity through the 'femmness' of fatshionistas and examining how ideas of femininity are subverted through this form of fashion.

Before I begin my analysis of femme fatshion, it is important to draw attention to mainstream representations of fat women in order to establish a cultural context. Fat women in mainstream entertainment tend to fall into several categories: the giggly sidekick, the masculine joke machine or the matronly caretaker of a friend

group[18]. These tropes often leave little room for character development as they rely on known ideas of comedic relief. Camryn Manheim (1999, 158) explains that at the beginning of her acting career her prospects as an actor and fat woman were so limited that her agent began sending her for roles that asked for a 'strong, dignified, charismatic man' on the off-chance the casting crew might consider a woman. It seemed there was no space in television for Manheim to be represented as both 'tough and dignified' while retaining her femininity. Twenty-two years later Jamie Ratliff (2013) argues, when discussing burlesque, that fat women are often labelled as asexual or desexualised, which results in an exclusion from traditional expressions sexual of fantasy. I argue that a similar notion makes sense of the lack of representations of fat women in entertainment's opportunities to explore self through the fantasy of television or cinema. Fat women as femme could offer a chance to explore different representations of gender, specifically as an exaggerated form of femininity away from the recognised stereotypes of fat women. Fem(me)ininity, then, has the potential for fantasy in a way that established tropes do not. Nevertheless, as a caveat to this: as body positivity becomes more mainstream, Tess Holliday makes her debut on *The Bold Type* (2018) and Whitney Way Thore signs on for yet another season of *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (2018), it is important to consider whether femme presentation is still a method to explore otherwise restrictive representations of femininity and sexuality or, just like the 'giggly sidekick', the fat (white) femme has become another trope and expectation for fat women.

While it is no surprise that high-end fashion houses have historically shown little interest in size-inclusivity, even the simple practice of buying *any* clothing can be a struggle for some fat women. In 1999 Manheim (1999, 245) wrote about her displeasure with plus-size US retailer Lane Bryant who were exclusively using

[18] For example, 'Fat Amy' in *Pitch Perfect* (2012), Megan in *Bridesmaids* (2011) or Mary from *The Big Sick* (2017) to name a few contemporary examples. Melissa McCarthy and Rebel Wilson in particular have had successful careers repeatedly playing variations on these classic tropes for television and cinema.

advertising models who wore clothing sizes smaller than the majority of their customer base. In her autobiography, Manheim prints the letter she received from Lane Bryant after they received her complaint. The retailer argued that their use of smaller models was based on market research that suggested, at the time, plus-size women were 50% less likely to purchase merchandise from women who were wearing larger than a US size 12 – around a UK size 16. Over two decades after the publication of Manheim's autobiography, Brittany Gibbons (2017, 62) commented on the styles in plus-size catalogues that tend to skew towards older and more modest styles, observing that plus-size versions of straight sized clothing were more likely to include higher necklines or the inclusion of a strategically placed scarf in the styling. Access to fashionable, plus-size clothing had been difficult for a significant amount of time when Amanda Piasecki created the LiveJournal forum Fatshionista in 2004.

Fatshionista was created by Amanda Piasecki in December 2004, she intended it to be a place that discussed both fat fashion and politics. Lesley Kinzel (2012, 155-6), one of the forum's early moderators, reports that the forum was dedicated to conversations about 'fashion, culture and subculture' and that for every piece of 'fluff' about clothing and fashion, there had to be an attempt for a critical discussion. On the site, which is still accessible, under a sub-heading titled 'Nutritional Facts About Fatshionista', there are a list of rules and expectations for the group. The first 'nutritional fact' states that '(y)es, this is a political community' and it has been since the beginning as Fatshionista was founded by people with a 'size-positive mind set' (Fatshionista n.d.). However, although I cannot determine the date of when this 'fact' was written, it does go on to say that as the community at Fatshionista became more popular, there has been an equal split between political and more 'fluffy', non-political posts (Fatshionista, n.d.), which suggests that as the forum grew its political focus was harder to maintain. In July 2019, the forum has 27642 journal entries and 601943 user comments – most of which seem to have been written between 2007 and 2013 which speaks to its significant

popularity. Although not everyone on the site identified as femme or as woman[19], in my experience, femme women made up the majority of users on Fatshionista. Additionally, when I was using the site from around 2010 onwards, there were few posts which celebrated or were affiliated with fast-fashion brands and the posts that centralised clothing were significantly more about the outfit as a whole rather than a brand it was bought from[20]. While these posts were not discouraged and it is not explicit in the 'nutritional facts' of Fatshionista, the forum, at least in the early 2010s, was significantly more focused on second-hand clothing, or at least affordable shopping, than body positive advocates are in 2019.

Many women, not just me, were inspired by Fatshionista, for instance, Lindsay King-Miller (2014) found Fatshionista in the early 2000s and claims she 'loved' seeing pictures of women her size or larger dressed in 'stylish, interesting, sexy clothes', 'embracing bright colors and form-fitting cuts' whilst 'performing liberation and defiance'. She asserts that finding Fatshionista gave her the tools to build her confidence and self-esteem in a way that engaging with mainstream television, advertising and magazines could not. The popularity of Fatshionista, however, was ultimately its demise, and its contribution to the mainstream acceptance of fat femme style led to people wanting to enjoy fashion without the politics and helped stoke the social media careers of many current celebrity body positive advocates. And, as Gabi Gregg[21] told Kelly Faircloth (2013), many people, including herself were 'just there for the fashion basically'. This focus on fashion without political context is what, I argue, contributed to the assimilation focus of popularised body positivity. The demand for political consciousness became more

[19] The third 'nutritional fact' suggests that users avoid 'ladycentric' language as it may exclude people who do not identify as such (Fatshionista, n.d.).

[20] This is in stark contrast to the more brand-focused body positive advocates and influencers of 2019 who are paid to advertise fast-fashion brands on their social media and blog pages.

[21] Gabi Gregg, also known as Gabi Fresh, as of August 2019 has over 700000 followers on Instagram and has released clothing collections with Swimsuits4All and Playful Promises.

difficult to control as the forum received more traffic and many users gravitated towards a fashion focus rather than an activist one.

Fatshionista, according to Cooper (2016, 172) helped establish femme identity as central to the fat acceptance movement and quickly became a place where femme fashion prevailed (Cooper 2016; Gurrieri and Cherrier 2013; Harding and Kirby 2009; Kinzel 2012). However, despite Fatshionista likely contributing to the popularisation of highly-polished feminised styles of body positive celebrities, there was a softer, everyday femmeness that was explored on Fatshionista and often many people were simply looking for tips on where to find clothing. Fatshionista arose at a particular cultural moment where access to plus-size clothing was still limited but slowly improving. Stephanie Jones (2000, 16) suggests that the new millennium was a particularly 'interesting' time for fat women and clothing.

> We live in interesting times in the UK at the moment, because more clothing manufacturers than ever before have realised that big women do have lives, partners, careers, hobbies and interests, and want clothing that enables them to dress appropriately for all occasions. We also want fashionable clothes, trendy, elegant, classic, funky and sporty clothing in good fabrics, so that we can express all aspects of our personalities. In short, we want the range of choice that has always been available in sizes 8 to 14, and we want it now.

By 2000 clothing options were becoming more accessible to fat women and it was easier to find fashionable clothing that was event appropriate. Additionally, the early 2000s saw a significant change in the way people used the Internet; social media was becoming influential and more people were beginning to get comfortable with finding communities online[22] (Senft 2008). The combination of

[22] While the technology for finding community online had existed for a while Theresa Senft (2008) suggests in her book on cam girls that the 2000s saw people beginning to get more comfortable meeting and connecting with people online.

increased accessibility to clothing and the tentative beginnings of social media as we know it now meant that Fatshionista filled needs for both exploration of plus-size clothing and the locating of communities online.

Despite there being an increase in trend-driven clothing in the early millennium, the need for direction from a community towards more fashionable clothing remained necessary as Lara Frater (2005) argues many of the plus-size clothing options were suffering from 'big flower syndrome'.

> After several stores, I became aware of a deadly style sickness – "Big Flower Syndrome (BFS). In a trend that is almost exclusive to plus-size clothes, a giant flower is placed somewhere near the center of a shirt or top, in order to help hide the fat. It isn't always limited to flowers – sequins, gaudy colors, overabundance of buttons or bizarre patterns often serve the same purpose. Now, I'm not against fat women who want to wear bright, vibrant colors to stand out in the crowd, but it is important when you stop to be able to differentiate between "tasteful" and "tactless." When I judged styles, I always looked at the patterns to see whether or not they suffered from Big Flower Syndrome. It is a disease for which there is no cure, and which the fashion industry wants to inflict on the fat chick, so beware (Frater 2005, 60).

Kinzel (2012, 13) terms the limited access to fashionable, but also occasion appropriate clothing for fat women, the 'built-fat ceiling' where, 'no body past a particular size (an eight? A ten? A – gasp – twelve?) may pass'. While Kinzel largely refers to the difficultly of purchasing suitable business attire for job interviews or day-to-day work activities, the lack of access to clothing (sans big flower syndrome) has the ability to interfere with the way women identify with and 'accept' their fat bodies. This limited access to clothing and obvious frustration of fat positive women who wanted to wear fashionable clothing *now* – rather than having to drop several dress sizes – coupled with the increased popularity of the Internet meant that Fatshionista was created at an optimum time for popularisation.

OOTD (outfit of the day) posts were the most common posts on Fatshionista by the time I found the forum in the early 2010s[23]. Fat women uploaded full-body photographs of themselves in outfits, along with a brief description of where the outfit was purchased, if there were any hand-made elements and usually the occasion the outfit was worn to – an occasion which could be mundane as work or even a day spent at home. The posts functioned as an outfit diary but were usually accompanied by mini blogposts which kept other Fatshionista users updated on the day-to-day life of the poster. Posts would usually attract several comments sparking discussions about specific garments or the poster's day but most common were comments including exclamations of approval or praise for the outfit the poster had put together. A post from 16th March 2011 (Fatshionista 2011), for example, shows nine different outfit photos from that week from the poster. They are all webcam photos taken mainly of the poster's torso, but there is one front-facing camera selfie which also includes the poster's face. The poster has uploaded the photographs along with her clothing size (24 on bottom, 22 on top) and the stores she purchased her clothes from. The post includes small commentaries on each photo such as, 'excuse the hair' and an explanation that the final photograph where she is wearing a lab coat is her 'work outfit'. The comments on this particular post are fewer than usual – I decided to pick a typical OOTD post rather than the 'perfect' OOTD post to showcase the discussion at the time[24] – but includes many

[23] Although Fatshionista has a whole history previous to 2011, I wanted to show a post from a day at a later date which represented the beginning of the individual blogs and social media accounts that stemmed from Fatshionista. Although I am aware that Fatshionista was not intended to be and had not always been a place almost exclusively for fatshion and clothing posts, my intention here is to map the move from Fatshonista and its politics to 'body positive' plus-size fashion.

[24] I decided it was more important to give an understanding of a typical day on Fatshonista rather than choosing a collection of posts I deem 'perfect'. Although my situated knowledge for this research is important, it has been around seven years since I was a daily-user of Fatshionista and I did not want my memories, which may not be truly typical, to singularly inform this representation.

of the usual discussions, one poster just writes ‘fab’ another says she ‘loves that skirt with buttons a lot’[25].

There were eight further posts on Fatshionista that day, six of which were specifically related to plus-size fashion, some OOTDs, some asking for help with items of clothing (e.g. swimwear), and one boot review. There are also posts asking for advice on more general topics, such a, finding a mattress suitable for a fat woman and travelling as a fat person on a plane. These two posts received twelve and twenty-four comments respectively, suggesting that some elements of the spirit of Fatshionista that Piasecki wanted to create w ere still alive; but the forum, even in 2011, was slowing moving towards becoming a less political and solely fashion-focused space.

I want to show a typical OOTD, however, because I am uncomfortable using the photographs and blogposts of accounts that are now defunct, I have decided to include photographs of myself mimicking posts I have seen on Fatshionista. Despite my long-time lurking on the forum, I never uploaded a photograph of myself, largely, due to my low self-esteem but also, in part, for the same reason I do not post many selfies or full-body outfit photos now – it is a lot of work! Baker (2015, 89) admits that selfies and self-portraits have been a powerful tool for her fat acceptance, using the practice of posting photographs of herself online ‘unapologetically’, regardless of how unflattering to force herself out of her comfort zone and bolster her self-confidence. When Baker (2015, 89) started posting online she admits she largely posted photographs she deemed ‘flattering’, often taking significant time to make sure she was ‘sucking her stomach’, ‘hiding her double chin’ and placing a hand on her hip in, what she calls, a ‘teacup’ pose, but, after a

[25] By the time I came to write this thesis, many Fatshonista user’s accounts had been disabled or inactive for a significant amount of time. Since Fatshonista functioned as a community and space for users to talk to each other and because I intend to demonstrate what outfit posts often looked rather than analyse them individually, I decided it would be unethical to use the images and usernames of people I cannot contact.

while, she realised that even posting unflattering photos nothing terrible happened, and she noticed that the feedback she received could be both positive and complimentary. Although I did not post any pictures to Fatshionista, I did take photos, especially as I became more comfortable in my new feminised aesthetic. Fig. 13 and fig. 14 never made it to Fatshionista but the poses, my clothing, even my hair and make-up were all inspired by posts I had seen on the forum. As a result of my reluctance to post the pictures of any other fatshionistas, I offer my own imitations to demonstrate a representation of the everyday femme styles on Fatshionista.

Fig. 9, Gibson, Gemma, *Green Coat in London*, Photograph, 2011.

Fig. 10, Gibson, Gemma, *Fat Girls Shouldn't…,* Photograph, 2014.

Fig. 9 was taken by a friend in 2011 shortly after I had found Fatshionista online; I had been encouraged by other women on the site to buy the green coat I am wearing. That piece of clothing was important to me because I had not purchased a coat in around five years; I told myself that the coat I had worn to secondary school would suffice in lieu of a more fashionable mac or duffle coat. Fig. 10 is a self-portrait, taken sometime in 2014 for a module titled Feminist Cultural Activism; on reflection I am not quite sure I completed the project in the way that was expected but I do remember using it as an opportunity to talk to the rest of my seminar group about body positivity and fatshion.

I recall putting on my white, floral dress and styling my hair specifically for the photo taken in fig. 10 – I changed into leggings and a sweatshirt to meet a friend in the library immediately afterwards – I also devoted a similar amount of effort to my appearance in fig. 9. I had straightened my hair that day, even though it was raining, I was wearing brand new brogues to do tourist-type things around London and they were hurting me, I was wearing tights (I hate wearing tights but still do

every winter). This was not the only shot my friend took of me, I think there are around ten other images like this from that day and in none do I look as relaxed or comfortable in myself as the women on Fatshionista. Perhaps emboldened by the fact fig. 10 was taken for a university assignment, I look slightly more comfortable although my smile is tight and my pose is stiff. I do remember, however, that it took me around an hour to get ready for this photograph and then a further thirty minutes to get a shot I was 'happy' with. While I am no Tess Holliday, my hair has been both heat styled and dyed, I am wearing significant amounts of make-up, my clothing 'cinches' me in at the waist to give the illusion of an hourglass figure and, perhaps most importantly, I am dressed in such a way that, although not an exaggerated pin-up style, is reminiscent of it in the vintage style coat in fig. 9 (it even had a corset back) and the brightly coloured cardigan and white dress with corset boning in the bust in fig. 10 [26]. My style of dress through this time period was not as sexually suggestive as the pin-up styles some fatshionistas wear, however, on reflection, it seems clear to me that I am embracing femme-style – especially in fig. 10 .

Although I was never brave enough to post photographs of my own outfits, finding a community at Fatshionista encouraged me to be more confident in styling, buying and wearing clothing. Of course, the increase in clothing options by the mid-2010s also helped, but Fatshionista specifically encouraged those early adoptions of femme styles for me. However, photographs of women dressed in styles like those represented in fig. 9 and fig. 10 were not all that Fatshionista was intended to be. Kinzel (2012, 155) took on her role as moderator at Fatshionista six months after its creation and explains the 'sense of relief and joy at having a space to discuss the challenges of fat fashion without making obligatory sacrifices to the conventional wisdom around fat bodies – that they are temporary, shameful, and ought to be invisible'. The first rule of Fatshionista, Kinzel (2012, 156) remembers was, 'no fat

[26] Note the clothes rail to the right of fig. 10 that had to be purchased after I filled my *double* wardrobe in my university room and the two dresses at the forefront of the shot suffering from 'big flower syndrome'.

hatred allowed', explaining that it was liberating not to have the pressure of being the 'token fatty' who constantly brought up fat bodies in conversations about representation and inequalities. Another early requirement was, 'for every bit of fluff in a post, there had to be a try for critical discussion' (156). This meant, for example, that for every post about a successful day of plus-size thrifting, there should be an attempted discussion or acknowledgement of the class implications of thrifting too. However, within a year of the forum being online it had over eight thousand members and those new members, had an increased interest in personal transformation posts that depicted the 'success' of the poster's fashionable outfit – much like fig. 9 and fig. 10 – and a decrease in posts based on fat community and politics. By the sixth year of Fatshionista, in 2011, Kinzel (156) recalls that conversations around fat politics or activism that had once been productive and thoughtful, could quickly escalate into 'intense fights with newer members who sought the community out not as a place for political discussion but as a guide to find decent clothes to wear'. However, Kinzel concludes, there are many women who went to Fatshionista looking for ways to feel confident about their clothing and bodies but on the way became interested in fat politics and community (156).

During the years I spent on Fatshionista I went through a process of personal transformation, I built up my confidence, my own personal style and started putting less restrictions on myself as a fat person. My experience, however, is not specific to me, Fatshionista or even body positivity. Personal discovery and self-acceptance have long been important narratives of the fat activist movement and experiences like mine at Fatshionista have been termed 'coming out as fat' (Jones 2000; Pausé 2012a; Saguy and Ward 2011; Sedgwick 1993; Wann 1998). Plummer ([1994] 1995, 54) theorises coming out stories have three common elements: suffering, which gives tension to the plot; followed by a 'turning point' he terms epiphany where something has to be done and finally transformation which usually discusses survival. Pausé (2012a) argues that coming out is an important first approach to living with a marginalised identity and many self-identified fat women and activists have coming out stories. Wann (1998, 10), for example, has written about her 'very bad day' where a person she was dating told her he would be embarrassed to

introduce her to his friend, then she received a letter explaining her health insurance would not be approved because of her weight. These experiences encouraged her to 'come out as fat' in a very public way and eventually encouraged her to start writing her zine *Fat!So?*.

Although 'coming out' is more often associated with queer people 'coming out of the closet', the term more historically means to come out *in* queer society. Coming out in a queer context suggests that the revelation of sexuality or gender could be kept secret until the person feels ready. Yet, fat bodies are not so easily hidden and are, in fact, hypervisible, so Fatshionista became a place where fat women could feel comfortable coming out and joining fat society – albeit online. The no fat hate rule at Fatshionista meant users could avoid negativity and be safe-guarded by moderators. Fat women and femmes could 'test' their outfits and styles online, thus allowing them to gain confidence before entering everyday society. While Piasecki and Kinzel recall being keen to maintain a political aspect to Fatshionista, playing with fashion and gendered styles that have previously felt out of bounds for fat women can feel like a radical act – even if engaging with fatshion can be read as cultural assimilation. Catherine Connell (2013, 209) argues, '[f]ashion is often dismissed as, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, downright counterproductive to the presumably more serious and high-minded business of political action' but fatshion is what encouraged many fat women to come out and begin engaging with fat politics.

The coming out as fat theory has received some criticisms from fat scholars and activists. Lynn Levy (1983, 81) came out in 1973, prior to finding fat liberation, and argues that coming out as fat and finding fat liberation does not make a difference to the practicalities of everyday life such as: preventing airline seats from being too narrow or finding clothes in her size. And, Katariina Kyrölä (2005, 101) argues that based on her research of television shows that feature fat characters, only certain people are allowed to come out as fat. She discerns that even in a 'fat-accepting' programme the majority of the main characters are 'white, heterosexual, mostly middle-class women and men'. Further, Murray ([2008] 2016) argues that the fat

body cannot come out as fat due to its hypervisibility and suggests that the fat body does not *come* out, it is *already* out; calling the process 'unbecoming (out)'. She (2005, 155), explains that fat bodies are expected to perform a continuous process of transformation, 'of becoming, and, indeed, unbecoming' and suggests that coming out is not so much a revelation of the fat body, but rather claiming a fat and proud status and rejecting the process of transformation. Murray (2005) is critical of this process as it relies on the individual to 'change their mind' about themselves, rather than as Levy (1983) alludes to, a changing of society.

Although fat bodies are hypervisible, Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward (2011, 54) suggest 'coming out' in the context of fat is not about 'disclosing, as much as, affirming […] fatness' and Sedgwick (1993) asserts coming out as a fat woman involves speaking the truth about the body. Part of this process includes reclaiming the word 'fat' as a positive descriptive term in the same way that 'queer' has been reclaimed in the past. The naming of Fatshionista then, is very important; a portmanteau of fat and fashion, the name does not leave room for ambiguity and exposes the kind of posts that will be celebrated on the forum. While many people finding the forum for the first time may not have been comfortable with using the word fat to describe themselves, most users were embracing terms like 'fatshion' or 'fatshionista' and slowly began to participate in a forum where 'no fat hate' was allowed.

Coming out as fat does not specifically refer to the revelation of fatness to friends and family, rather, it can be about acknowledging fatness while beginning to engage with what it means to have a marginalised body. Brittany Gibbons (2017, 216) has discussed the way clothes, as a fat woman, changed her approach to the world. On the topic of clothing fat women should 'should not' wear, she writes, 'I started wearing that crop top out of spite, and then I bought five more because wearing them made me feel like a *woman* in a way not much plus-size clothing does. The crop tops reminded me that I was tired of hiding my body and pretending it was different from everyone else's'. For Gibbons, her femininity and womanhood were affirmed when she came out and stopped trying to hide her fat body.

Although Gibbons' fat body is much smaller than mine and she seems to embrace her femininity rather than fem(me)ininity, I identify more with her coming out story than I do with other fat activists'. Gibbons' coming out story, although she does not call it that, heavily focuses on her potential to embrace gendered style of dress and while my first introduction to fat activism and body positivity was through Fatshionista, the site also introduced me to the potential for fat femininity. For women like me, who found a way to engage in gender performance despite the consistent stereotypes of ungendered and desexualised fat women, perhaps we do not come out as fat, but rather we come out as fat femmes.

Coming out as a fat femme and embracing feminised styles of dress will not encourage doctors to take fat people seriously or embolden airlines to widen the seats on their planes but that does not mean fem(me)ininity is not political. Many fat women, including myself, have experienced restrictions on their own femininity, femme style opens up a space for fat women to engage and play with gender identity – even in a society that is broadly fatphobic. During her own personal transformation, Manheim (1999, 244) recalls asking the costume designer on her television show why her character does not wear more skirts. The costume designer is surprised, and Manheim claims one of the unexpected results of self-acceptance is 'allowing myself the desire to look pretty'. And, Virgie Tovar (2012, 167) professes she is, 'one of those take-no-prisoners, potty-mouthed, kiss-my-ass, guerrilla fatties, and my weapons of choice are pink, glitter, cleavage, and impossibly short dresses'. So, while Manheim is not specifically claiming a femme identity and Tovar is claiming a specific type of exaggerated fem(me)ininity, these statements suggest that both women not only came out as fat, but came out as fat women who embrace feminised aesthetics.

Fem(me)ininity builds on and subverts ideas of traditional ideas of femininity. Hannah McCann (2018, 96) argues in her research on femme women that for those who claim both fat and femme as part of their queer identity 'there is […] now a sense that presenting as fat femme means inherently breaking from the boundaries of normal femininity'. Not all of the women McCann interviewed were fat but those

who were, McCann reports, did not necessarily regard their fat femme identity as exclusively linked to their sexuality, and some of McCann's participants associated their fat femme status with their politics. One participant claimed, '[c] oming out as fat made being femme possible, which made being queer make more sense to me' (Quoted in McCann 2018, 96). Coming out as a fat femme is a two-step process where firstly, fat femmes must 'accept' their fat bodies in order to, secondly, embrace the femme identity and aesthetic. McCann's participants all identify as queer as well as femme. While I do not want to speculate about the sexuality of the users at Fatshionista (and other fat women who claim femme identity), there are many women who identify as heterosexual who also identify as femme.

'Queer' is an umbrella term which encompasses a 'differentiation from the heteronormative discourse' and heteronormative discourse, is a discourse which 'reinforces existing power structures and understandings of individuals drawn from essentialist assumptions' (Pausé 2014, 75). However, claiming a fat femme identity if you are heterosexual could be regarded as dilution or depoliticisation of queer activism. However, Lauren Gurrieri and Hélène Cherrier (2013, 291) argue 'that fatshionistas (re)negotiate cultural notions of "straight" beauty' and 'both challenge understandings of what constitutes the "feminine" and idealised body and seek to widen the participation and liberatory expression of those outside of the "norm"'. Fat women, especially those who are unapologetically fat and choose to enjoy fashion and practices usually associated with normative femininity, are queered in their rejection of heteronormative beauty standards. Queer terms, like femme, are not necessarily only linked to sexuality – and in fact may not always even denote sexuality; fat femmes are disrupting normative expressions of gender in a practice of political defiance – even when they are not, like me, aware of the activist implications. The femme style that Fatshionista skewed towards is not only built on an inaccessibility to fashionable plus-size clothing, but rather, is an expression of fem(me)ininity that parodies traditional understandings of femininity. Fat femmes challenge mainstream notions of femininity and how women are expected to interact with their bodies. Cecilia Hartley (2001, 64-5) suggests that fat women 'do not construct bodies that conform to the feminine ideal, [they] are perceived as

violating socially prescribed sexual roles, and that violation is a threat to existing power structures'. Fat women who reject the notion they should constantly be trying to shrink their bodies challenge existing norms and power structures by just existing – especially if they are refusing make themselves seem smaller vocally and culturally.

However, despite this radical representation, I am still troubled by the slippage into the term 'femme'. The history of femme is long and complicated and has been firmly connected with lesbian identity which has, alongside butch identity, been used to organise sexual and gender identity in lesbian relationships (Nestle 1992; Newman 1995; Musser 2016; Pratt [1995] 2005). While I am sure there are fat body positive advocates who do not necessarily present a femme aesthetic, it is only fat femmes who achieve (micro)celebrity status. For example, some of the women I have referred to in this thesis who have written books (Baker, Gibbons, Kinzel) or designed clothing lines (Ditto, Fresh) or appeared on the cover of popular magazines (Holliday), are all recognisable as fat femmes, each carrying some or all of the markers of feminised fat beauty I outlined in chapter two. However, femmes have not always been as celebrated by political movements as they were on Fatshionista; within the radical lesbian feminist movement, butch-femme couplings were accused of political incorrectness as they were seen to be replicating heteronormative relationships which were regarded by many lesbian feminists to be inherently oppressive (Nestle 1992; Newman 1995; Pratt [1995] 2005). However, Lyndall MacCowan (1992, 322) disagrees with this notion, arguing,

> Butch and femme are lesbian-specific genders, two of potentially many ways to be both a lesbian and a woman. They are unliberated only in the sense that they need liberating from the assumption, made by heterosexuals and lesbian-feminists alike, that they are an imitation of heterosexuality, and clinging to vestiges of heterosexual femininity or an attempt to masquerade as a man.

Femme, then, can be both a sexual and gender identity, however, the women in McCann's study were claiming femme as a political identity. McCann (2016, 96) suggests, 'just as many queer women have used short hair to signify crossing gender and thus sexuality, there is also now a sense that presenting as fat femme means inherently breaking from the boundaries of normal femininity, and therefore representing an essentially queer position'. Dressing in fat femme styles makes a person more visible and I argue that, if dressing in plain clothing is a defensive strategy for fat women then the over-the-top style of fat femmes is a resistant strategy. Dressing in a femme style for many fat activists can be read as an act of radical resistance. Joanne Entwistle (2000, 8) argues, 'Conventions of dress attempt to transform flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture; a body that does not conform, that transgresses such cultural codes, is likely to cause offence and outrage and be met with scorn or incredulity'. Dressing in a way that makes a fat body more visible is an overt form of activism. When fat femmes draw attention to their bodies rather than trying to disguise them, they are participating in a disruption of heteronormative beauty ideals and assuming an inherently political position that resists culturally accepted ideas of what it means to be a feminine woman.

Femmes who associate their fem(me)ininity with a political identity are critically aware of femininity and as a result, actively reject it. Kinzel (2012, 17) describes what femme means to her, '[f]emmeness […] is interrogated femininity. Femmeness is femininity dragged through some mud, kicked in the stomach, given a good scrubbing, teased into a bouffant, doused in glitter, and pushed onstage in search of a spotlight'. Fem(me)ininity is 'interrogated', which Kinzel infers, means a significant change to the way femininity is performed. McCann (2018, 140) argues that it is impossible to be both femme and feminine as, 'knowingness' of the oppression of femininity prevents femmes from engaging with femininity uncritically. The early stages of fat body positivity celebrated fem(me)ininity as a political identity which is radical and resists standardised notions of feminine beauty. As McCann (97) puts it, 'it is seen as inherently political to be femme, as a disruptive force within queer and non-queer spaces'. Fat femmes, even if they do

not identify as sexually queer, dress in over-the-top, doused in glitter styles that both Tovar (2012) and Kinzel (2012) describe, are thus exercising a political identity that challenges heteronormative standards of beauty.

Fem(me)ininity and femininity are two opposing ideologies that cannot exist on one body at the same time, however, just as Ferreday (2008) suggests that burlesque performances can be misread as reproductions of normative heterosexuality, I argue that femme styles have been misread and popularised as normative femininity. The muted and 'modified' femme styles that emerged during the lead-up to the 'year of body positivity' in 2015, have largely represented an adherence to culturally approved feminine styles of dress. In the gender conformity of many plus-size celebrities, bloggers and microcelebrities there is a lack of political identity that seems to ask whether fat women can be *included* within the boundaries of standardised beauty rather than subvert them.

The modified femme styles that began their life on Fatshionista have gradually leaked over into mainstream representations of fat women's styles – this is clear from Holliday's success and the endless social media accounts dedicated to fat fashion. Baker (2015, 172), who began her career as a fat acceptance blogger, recalls that when blogging about fashion, she wanted to prove that anybody could 'rock any look'. In 2012 Baker started documenting what she calls the 'smashing of personal style rules' on her blog: 'strappy sandals, crop tops, sleeveless dresses, vinyl miniskirts, swimsuits, not-exactly business casual, maxi-skirts, AND short hair' (Baker 2015, 172). Baker also mentions, echoing some of the early 'rules' at Fatshionista, that when she started blogging, she did not want to discuss fatshion as she felt talking about politics, rather than peplum skirts, would be a far better use of her reader's time (171). Baker is now one of the most well-known fat body positive advocates due to her creation of a campaign directed towards Abercrombie & Fitch in 2013. The CEO Mike Jeffries told an interviewer that he did not want 'fat' or 'not so cool kids' wearing his company's clothes (Fairchild 2013). In reaction, Baker posted several professionally photographed black and white pictures of her and a topless, conventionally attractive man and mocked the A&F

abbreviation, suggesting that it stands for 'Attractive & Fat'. In some photos Baker is wearing a men's XXL Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirt and in others (fig. 11) she is topless. Baker's campaign suggests there should be no distinction between attractive and fat, and that a woman can be both simultaneously. However, the use of a male model who is both slender and toned implies that being 'attractive & fat' is only achievable for some people – specifically 'acceptable', heterosexual, feminine, white women. The sexually suggestive poses also insinuate a fat woman's worth is dependent on her appeal to heterosexual men. Baker's 'Attractive & Fat' campaign represents the shift from the subversive fem(me)ininity demonstrated at Fatshionista to a more assimilationist demand that fat women be included in heteronormative standards of beauty. The 'Attractive & Fat' campaign ultimately fails to question whether being 'attractive and fat' is always beneficial to fat women. And, whereas the femme styles popularised at Fatshionista largely represented a liberation from culturally restrictive beauty norms, Baker's campaign suggests it is possible and potentially necessary to conform to those same norms.

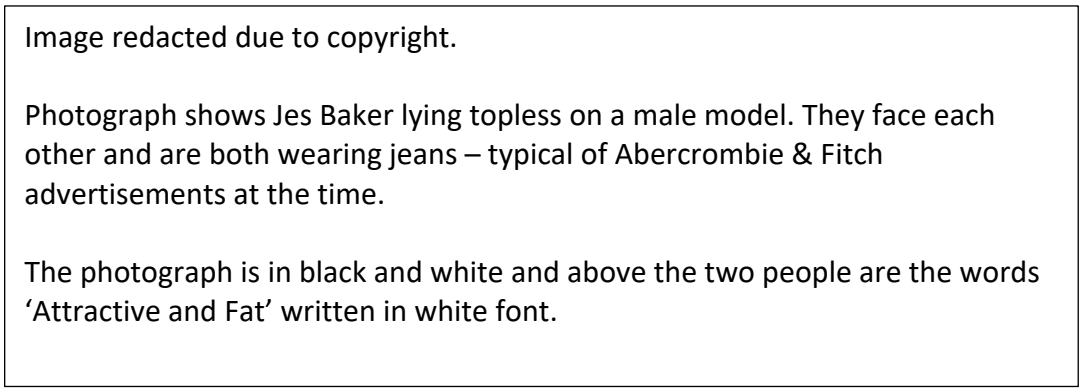

Fig. 11, Baker, Jes, *Attractive & Fat*, Photograph, 2013, *The Militant Baker*, http://www.themilitantbaker.com/2013/05/to-mike-jeffries-co-abercrombie-fitch.html.

While fat women before the popularisation of fat body positivity may have had reprieve from everyday expectations of femininity due to lack of 'feminine' representation in mainstream media and access to clothing, with the new 'celebration' of fat women comes an expectation of a specific day-to-day appearance. When I worked at the plus-size clothing shop Evans it was made clear to me that I had to look 'inspirational' to our customers by dressing in fashionable clothing despite being on my feet all day and often clambering around in the dusty,

overheated stockroom. The generalised assumption about fat people, and more specifically fat women, is that fatness is a representation of how little care is taken with bodies and health, but Kinzel (2012, 25) suggests fatshion has the power to counteract this assumption,

> As much as fatshion choices may mean to the individual, they represent even more when drawn out into the public discourse. Culturally speaking, participation in fashion in the first place represents how we care for ourselves, and that we care for ourselves at all. The successful application of style to a fat body can mitigate many of the negative assumptions people will inevitably make about that fat person. This is useful to know, especially when faced with circumstances in which "making up" for one's fatness is a necessity, and in which being radical is not an option. This is why we wear suits to job interviews. This is why we pull out our most "flattering" dress for a first date.

With the increased popularisation of fat body positivity, and specifically the depoliticised and feminised body positivity I have outlined above, it seems as though those of us who have referred to ourselves as fat femmes have inadvertently created another standard of beauty for fat women where we must try 'extra' hard to, as Kinzel suggests, make up for being fat. In 1990 Judith Butler ([1990] 2010) argued that gender is performative and produces a series of effects. Fat femmeness is a way for fat women to communicate to wider society that they are aware they are fat and accept that fatness and their inherent difference to thin women. However, much like femme and butch have been claimed as genders in lesbian communities, femme is now recognised as a 'new' gender for fat women and with that, there are a set of 'rules' and 'signifiers' that are constantly being reproduced. When discussing the concept of sedimentation, Butler writes (1988, 523),

> My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist

> point of view, one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic.

Fat women are often 'ungendered' or hyperfeminized by mainstream society (Braziel 2001). I learnt how to be femme from the women I interacted with on Fatshionista, but so did many other women and, as Kinzel (2012) reminds us, not all of these women were invested in political change for fat people, some were simply interested in clothing and fashion. While those styles and fashions were being increasingly replicated in mainstream media and women like Tess Holliday were gaining in popularity, the expectations for fat women were changing and unwittingly fatshionistas participated in the performativity (Butler 1988) of new fem(me)inine beauty ideals for fat women. Once styles like Holliday's became more familiar to public consciousness, there arose new standards of beauty to follow; while fat women are not necessarily 'acceptable' within the realms of heteronormative beauty standards, there have been, over the last decade, new pressures to conform, and not just by wearing a suit for a job interview or our most flattering dress for a first date.

The representation of some of these specific femme traits has been referred to as 'flaunting fat' (Gurrieri and Cherrier 2013; J. Lee 2014; Saguy and Ward 2011,). By 2011 Fatshionista was undergoing a change and over the following two years many posters began to move away from its more radical side. While sites like LiveJournal which hosted Fatshionista were losing momentum, sites like Tumblr and Twitter were rapidly picking up users and it became easier to direct potential readers to individual fatshion blogs. Both Twitter and Tumblr are websites which encourage microblogging as their primary use. While Tumblr is more picture-based, Twitter encourages its users to condense their thoughts into 140 characters or less – although the character limit has recently been increased. The result of both sites and the increased availability of smartphones meant that sharing – both photos and thoughts – could be more instant and in 'real time'. You did not have to save up

nine different outfits to make one post, you could share what you were wearing that day in a matter of seconds.

Some Fatshionista users moved over to their own individual blogs and many others embraced the microblogging sites that were gaining in popularity. Many of the new blogs initially embraced the spirit of Fatshionista; they focused on similar themes, such as thrifting, and some still connected fat politics with fatshion. However, many blogs emerged that focused on the fast, easily accessible fashion that was becoming more available to fat women. The latter blogs were more about styling than they were about 'fatshion' and had significantly less engagement with fat politics – Gabi Gregg's now defunct blog would be a good example of this but British bloggers Callie Thorpe (Callie Thope, n.d.) and Danielle Vanier (Danielle Vanier, n.d.) still have active sites where you can view archived posts from the mid-2010s. However, despite the shift in focus and platform, fatshion blogs became a critical part of the Fatosphere. For a while fatshion blogs became what Fatshionista had once been; a seemingly safe and comfortable place for fat women to explore their fat femme identities and experiment with fashion. Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013, 289) suggest that the 'flaunting' that took place on some of these early fatshion blogs 'provides the fatshionistas with a visible way of rejecting normative beauty standards promoted in advertising, entertainment and the media'. Over time this 'flaunting' became more popularised and images of fat women 'flaunting fat' in fashionable clothing were easily uploaded and shared.

In 2011 Tumblr user Jessie Dress began a Fatshion February campaign on her blog which she ran until 2014. Although Dress stopped running Fatshion February on her blog, it is still 'celebrated' annually through the use of hashtags on multiple social media sites such as Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. On the Fatshion February 'About' page Dress (2014) writes:

> In 2011, Fatshion February was born as a labor of love (and breakup healing). I was astounded and overwhelmed by the participation of hundreds of amazing femmes (fat and otherwise bodied). Your fashions inspired me, reblogging your

> posts gave me something to do every day, and this project challenged me to engage with the politics of fashion in new and complicated ways.

Dress's Fatshion February encouraged Tumblr users to tag their OOTD photographs with the hashtag #fatshionfebruary or submit their pictures directly to the Fatshion February Tumblr. Dress would then go through the photographs and reblog the pictures that fit the ethos of Fatshion February. These activities flooded the microblogging site with photos of fat femmes, usually smiling and showing full body outfits. These outfits, much like the outfits at Fatshionista, varied from everyday work outfits to more special occasion outfits and even wedding photos. While Dress seemingly took care not to exclude anyone, the account did focus specifically on 'fat femmes' which meant there were an abundance of fat, white, cis, femmes being reblogged on the site. Dress (2014) recognised the centrality of white, heteronormative beauty and amended the Fatshion February 'about' page to add that, in the future the campaign would 'be more explicitly inclusive of trans women and queer people of color' as 'this blog has been overwhelmingly white and cis'[27]. While Fatshion February had tried to be inclusive in previous years, even in 2014 there is a sense that fatshion is dominated by white, cis women, not unlike the more 'mainstream' fashion world we are more familiar with. The popularity of Fatshion February came at a very influential time: just a year after this significant 'about' page was written, Tess Holliday made mainstream news as the first ever plus-size supermodel, many UK brands starting to sell up to size UK 28 clothing, and 'body positivity emerged as a coherent and understood 'movement' – and if not a 'movement' then a recognised social phenomenon. The popularity and quick, easy sharing of images devoid of political context coupled with the emergence and popularity of fatshion blogs, represents the increased focus on consumerism and conformity to normative feminine styles that would eventually evolve into the fat body positivity that has become so recognisable in recent years (C. Connell 2013,

[27] The last post on the Tumblr page, however, is from 20 January 2015 suggesting that although Fatshion February took place in many other parts of the Internet in February 2015, Dress's specific blog was not one of them.

217). With the introduction and ease of microblogging and the growth of fat fashion, it became easier to quickly consume hundreds of these images of women performing a specific fat aesthetic. Fatshionista did not have that sort of traffic, and even at the height of its popularity each poster was encouraged to add nuance to their photos with a political discussion. The popularisation of Tumblr and microblogging meant that the consciousness of fat activism and fatshion was often lost to a 'celebration' of specific feminised styles and aesthetic.

With the tolerance of 'acceptable' fatness being further ingrained into mainstream media, being 'feminine' became both easier and harder. Accessibility to new fashions and clothing was easier but the expectation day-to-day became significantly harder. I cannot pretend I am upset that is now easier than ever for me to enjoy clothing and fashion, but I am often burdened by the price that fat women have to pay for their inclusion in fashion and popular culture. To be 'acceptable' do fat women also have to be heterosexual? Or at least desirable to men in some way? Do we have to be these hypersexual and hyperfeminine beings that somehow 'make up' for our fatness through concentrated cosmetic attention to our bodies? The more I see fat body positivity growing and becoming a part of mainstream media campaigns, the less I see of the old fat activism, the less I see of fat fem(me)inity and the more I see conformity to traditional femininity. When discussing 'new' burlesque and femmes Ferreday (2008, 56) argues that conventional femininity is grounded in shame, it is about removing hair or disguising 'incorrect' features. When I see Spanx[28] sold along all these beautiful new clothes I now have access too I cannot help but be reminded of that shame. However, body positivity is not singularly to blame in the creation of these new models of femininity for fat women, the styles and aesthetics that were mimicked at Fatshionista happened within a forum created by self-identified fat activists. Fat body positivity did not take from a 'perfect' representation of fatshion, the perfect representation never existed. Once the forum was created, fat women wanting to interact with their femininity used the site and the styles they saw there in a way

[28] Lyrca based underwear that are designed to 'suck in' and 'smooth out' fat stomachs and thighs.

that they felt liberated them. Although that 'liberation' may have led to further conformities to gender ideals and erasure of women who do not conform to white, cis, young, able-bodied beauty expressions, fatshion was not simply exported into fat body positivity whilst having its political voice removed overnight. Rather, individuals responded and used a tool that was accessible to them to 'assimilate' and exist in a fatphobic world as best they could.

4. ‘Talk About a Big Splash!’ Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Fat Activist Movement

*While representations of fat fashion evaded me until my late teens, as an adolescent I was all too aware of tropes of fat sexuality. Mainstream entertainment offered me two options: the exaggerated heterosexuality of Thalia (Hercules 1997) and Miss Piggy (*The Muppet Show *1976-1981*) *or the more matronly, goofy stereotypes of ‘Fat Monica’* (Friends *2000) or Sookie (The Gilmore Girls 2000-2007). Was I supposed to laugh? To see my future? I did not see myself in any of these representations, but I much preferred them to the clichés of real heterosexual fat women that were featured in late night documentaries on British television. These sensationalised documentaries often featured fat women in the role of feedee who aimed to eat to the point of immobility for the sexual satisfaction of their heterosexual male partner. These shows were my only access to the sexuality of real fat women, and I remember feeling uncomfortable when I saw thin men encouraging their fat girlfriends to eat excessively and gain weight. The more I saw television programmes like these, the more I began to wonder if my sexuality would always be determined by my ability to appeal to men who sought to immobilise me.*

As I became more knowledgeable about the fat body positive community, I realised there were more ways to engage with sexuality than the options that had been presented to me as a young teenager. Further, I began to understand that, at least publicly, many advocates for fat positivity actively rejected the advances of people they termed fetishists. I say publicly, however, because I also recognised that some groups and individuals made a distinction between a ‘fat admirer’ and a fat fetishist – which is a distinction that I still do not quite understand.

As body positivity became more popularised, I also began to notice that many fat body positive advocates were in long-term relationships with men, and their heterosexual relationships seemed to be part of their self - branding. I know the name of Tess Holliday’s husband, for example, and I also know he has a passion

for vintage clothing and that they met on Tumblr. *I also am aware that Gibbons, Baker, Kirby, Harding, Kinzel, Renn, Miller, Wann and Thore have all, at some point, had romantic relationships with men. With the exception of Beth Ditto, who I would argue is not a fat body positive 'celebrity' in the same way some of these other women are, romantic relationships with men seem to be a central to fat body positive celebrity imagery.*

Although body positivity is supposedly about self-love, the implicit messaging I received was that to embrace your own sexuality, you needed to have a heterosexual long-term partner – the more conventionally attractive (and thin) the better! Moreover, that partner should not identify as a fetishist – which is frowned upon in both fat activist and body positive circles – and be attracted to their partner for reasons other than their fat body. These rules, that were often never explicit, confused me. If a man was not attracted to my fat body, then was he attracted to me in spite of my fat body? And did 'allowing' myself to be loved by a thin man who has dated other thin women, rather than exclusively fat women represent the success of my body positivity journey?

Talking candidly and expressing my sexuality publicly has always been difficult for me because I am unclear about what representations of sexuality are socially 'appropriate' for fat women. I do not want to become the asexual butt of a 'fat girl' joke, nor do I want to be laughed at for being the fat woman who cannot control her appetite for sex or food. As fat body positivity advocates started talking about their relationships more and including their heterosexual partners in blogposts, magazine articles and extensively discussing them in their memoirs, I started to feel a compulsion to perform heterosexuality in a way I had not before. Therefore, to complete my journey to body positive utopia, I felt I had to wear the new 'fatkinis', dress in feminine (not fem(me)inine) clothing and, most importantly, find myself a heterosexual boyfriend that was categorically not a fetishist!

At the beginning of 2019 the online streaming site Hulu aired *Shrill* (2019a), their six-part series based on Lindy West's memoir of the same name (West 2016). The

episode titled 'Pool', which saw the protagonist Annie attend her first ever 'fat girl' pool party, garnered a significant amount of attention in the online body positive community and many fat women either published or reshared their stories of the 'magic' of fat pool parties[29]. Each article, in some way, discusses the feeling of being 'normal', or 'at home' with other fat women in a space where fat women have traditionally experienced a significant amount of ridicule (Cummings 2019; Gruenwald 2019; Kinzel 2019; Laurion 2019; Romero 2019; Shoemaker 2019). The *Shrill* pool party scene was important to many fat women as fat representation in mainstream media has historically been reduced to a handful of tropes that categorise fat women as the 'asexual' butt of jokes, a supporting role to a thinner woman's romantic lead or cautionary tale of sexual failure (Flynn 2010; Giovanelli and Ostertag 2009; Himes and Thompson 2007). As fat body positivity becomes more popular in mainstream media, small steps are being taken towards more subtle representations of fat heterosexuality on screen (*Shrill* 2019a; *Empire* 2015) and ideas arising from fat body positivity are infiltrating and challenging some negative tropes around fat and sex, denting the kind of notions I grew up with, of fat women as hypersexual or asexual.

Pool parties have an iconic status among many fat activists and body positive advocates. While there are many pro-fat organised fat swims, notably Stacy Bias, Stef-Anie Wells and Krissy Durden's Chunky Dunk, the first formal fat swim is credited to the US organisation NAAFA (National Association to Aid Fat Acceptance) in 1969 (*Chunky Dunk*, n.d.). Although reviews of the *Shrill*'s (2019b) pool party focused on the sheer joy of women having fun at this all-woman event (Laurion 2019), the NAAFA pool parties were for fat women and their male admirers and highlighted an aspect of fat body pleasure and sexuality – specifically heterosexuality. Although NAAFA is much critiqued by contemporary fat activists (Cooper 2016, 114-117), the more I read about the organisation the more I felt

[29] The representation of the pool party in *Shrill* (2019b) was one of joy, amazement and belonging. Annie arrives at the pool party fully clothed and after being encouraged to dance with women the same size as her or larger, quickly disrobes and jumps into the pool.

resonances between the NAAFA heterosexual ethos and the heterosexual celebrations embedded into contemporary body positivity. This chapter therefore attempts to identify the implicit and explicit heterosexuality of NAAFA. I ask: how did NAAFA embed heterosexuality into its early fat activism; what kind of heterosexuality was cultivated; and what are the reverberations of these NAAFA-inspired sexual cultural norms within contemporary body positivity?

Before moving on, I must define what I mean when I refer to heteronormativity in this chapter. Significantly, the concept depends on understanding gender as binary, as Stevi Jackson (2005, 17) explains,

> At birth, we are classified as one of two "sexes" (girl or boy) on the basis of assumptions made about parts of our body designated as "sex organs"; we are then expected to grow into adults who "have sex" with the "opposite sex," thus deploying our "sex organs" in the proper way. In this way, femininity and masculinity are defined as "natural" and heterosexuality is privileged as the only "normal" and legitimate form of sexuality.

Heterosexuality, through various interpretations of 'sex', becomes the 'norm' and assumes sexual and romantic relationships are more likely and acceptable between members of the opposite 'sex'. However heterosexuality, Jackson (2006, 107) argues, is not just a form of sexual expression and is not just an intersection between gender and sexuality, but instead has an impact on the non-sexual aspects of social life or as Jackson (2005, 18) puts it, heterosexuality 'entails who washes the sheets as well as what goes on between them'. Heterosexuality in contemporary culture is not just 'normative' in terms of sexuality, but in the ways we understand cultural and social interaction.

Moreover, heterosexuality – as Adrienne Rich (1980) famously argued – is not just normative but compulsory. Compulsory heterosexuality is the constant reassertion of heterosexual norms, which results in the idea that women's heterosexuality is enforced by patriarchy through 'normative' understandings of heterosexuality as

'natural' and the accusation of anyone who deviates from the 'norm' as 'deviant'. These ideas are deeply embedded, even among feminists who, one might assume, have interrogated these ideas. In 1992, Celia Kitzinger, Sue Wilkinson and Rachel Perkins sent letters to 1000 feminists they thought were heterosexual and found that many of the women they contacted were offended by that inference. The researchers responded to the feminists who were upset by their receipt of the letter and asked them to challenge why they were so insulted by the labelling of their heterosexuality which, before the letter, was something the feminists had allowed to go unchallenged and unrecognised. Kitzinger, Wilkinson and Perkins' conclusion was that while 'lesbian' was a politicised identity, 'heterosexual' was 'apolitical' in nature (Kitzinger, Wilkinson and Perkins 1992). Therefore, even amongst feminists, heterosexuality has historically been regarded as the norm and an identity that is assumed and does not have to be verbalised. This assumed heterosexuality in feminism suggests a similar ideology in other activist movements. NAAFA was formed over twenty years before the publication of this research, and its main aims focused on the 'normalisation' of fat people, which resulted in a largely assimilationist activism[30].

Showing an adherence to heterosexuality is important for fat assimilationist activism as fat is already considered a threat to heteronormative systems. Jeannine Gailey (2015, 53) suggests 'men who are attracted to fat women have failed to embody hegemonic masculinity' and fat women who easily pursue and obtain heterosexual male partners subvert conventional beauty norms and feminine discourses. Similarly, Francis Ray White (2016, 963) argues that despite a wide medical literature on obesity and reproduction, there is a generalised, cultural idea that 'obesity' can damage your sex life which, White suggests, 'positions fat people negatively in relation to a hegemonic model of sexual "success" which assumes certain (hetero) normative standards of sexual desire, function, and reproductivity'. Yet, despite the abundance of medical articles on the 'limits' of reproductivity in fat people, White (2016, 972) notices there is an erasure of homosexual sexuality from

[30] I revisit this assertion in chapter five.

the research and that the majority of the studies observed 'fail to mention the existence of non-heterosexuals'. Fat sexuality across medical and cultural contexts, is inherently heteronormative and it is from this position that I explore the celebration of heterosexuality in fat body positivity.

Fat body positivity is chiefly woman-focused and a large majority of its most well-known advocates are women. Yet one of the key beginnings of fat activism as an organised movement was NAAFA, which was formed by two men: Lew Louderback and Bill Fabrey. In 1967 Louderback (1967) published an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* titled 'More People Should Be Fat'. According to Cooper (2011) this article was one of the first, if not the first, piece of critical writing on fatness published in mainstream US media, and I have not been able to find an earlier example. Louderback's article attracted the attention of Fabrey, and although not fat themselves, they were similarly concerned about the treatment of their fat wives. Cooper, correctly in my opinion, argues that Louderback's article is 'pre-feminist' as 'the wife', Ann Louderback, is mentioned but does not 'speak' for herself. In June 1969, Fabrey and Louderback gathered a group of nine people and began NAAFA (NAAFA, n.d.). Fabrey (quoted in Cooper 2016, 113) explains that although he wanted to create an organisation to further the rights of fat people, what he actually helped to create was a more responsive fashion industry and a subculture of people who 'accept themselves and those who admire them'. Since its inception NAAFA has been characterised by its annual conference – home of the infamous pool party – and by social clubs, both ways for fat people and their admirers to create community with each other.

Fat admirer, which is a term Fabrey asserts 'he helped coin' (quoted in Cooper 2016, 113), is widely used at NAAFA. Despite Fabrey's apparent aspiration to use NAAFA to mobilise social change, he reports that he quickly learnt that many fat women and their admirers coming to NAAFA were less interested in radical politics and more invested in finding a sexual or romantic partner. In response, Fabrey created the NAAFA dating service and began social clubs and activities (Saguy [2012] 2013, 55). The annual NAAFA conference – which celebrated its fiftieth

anniversary in June 2019 – hosts papers and panels about weight stigma but also evening fashion shows, dinners, socials and, of course, pool parties. Although NAAFA's activities are still tangentially connected to fat liberation, they are most well-known for social gatherings that attract fat admirers and fat women seeking sexual partners (Cooper 2016; Saguy [2012] 2013; Simic 2014). Fat admirers are often significantly outnumbered at these events and Anna, a participant in Cooper's (2016, 115) research on fat activism, recalls the 'fierce competition' between fat women for the attention of a few 'skinny guys'. And, Abigail Saguy ([2012] 2013, 153) reports that as she took part in a synchronised swim class at one conference, there were fat admirers present vying for the attention of two fat women sat beside the pool in bikinis. The relationships between fat women and fat admirers have been part of NAAFA since it first began and while the organisation is known for other activist activities[31], the focus is largely on acceptance. This acceptance extends to fat admirers; the NAAFA pool parties and fashion shows allow fat admirers to explore their sexual interests in fat women away from the social stigma that can come with a sexual attraction to individuals who are part of marginalised groups. NAAFA and the events associated with it allow people space to explore their sexual preferences without spectacle. However, many of these events take place in a vacuum away from people who are not involved in NAAFA and therefore do little to disrupt the normative representation of sexuality in mainstream culture. So, while there is acceptance at the social clubs and the annual conference, there is little to suggest the events challenge cultural norms and further, whether a reproduction of normative heterosexuality assists with the with the fight for 'fat rights' that Fabrey originally intended.

[31] There are members of NAAFA, of course, who have done and continue to do important work outside of the organisation's social scene. For example, Elizabeth Fisher is well known for her activism as a part of NAAFA which continued until her death in January 2016. Most notable was her work at Louisiana State University where she campaigned for desks large enough for herself and other fat students (ifisher, n.d.) and her Honda seatbelt project where she campaigned for safe seatbelts for people of size (ifisher, n.d.).

Erich Goode and Joanne Preissler (1989, 176) suggest that fat admirers are 'excited by the softness, the roundness, and the weight of women' and also claim '[o]nly a minuscule handful of women of average weight attend NAAFA's functions. The organization's principal function, thus, can be seen as a means for fat women and men who are FAs to socialize with one another' (176). Goode spent three and a half years – from 1980 to 1983 – consistently in participant observation at NAAFA events. What Goode and Preissler's 1989 article does not include, however, is that Goode was much more than a detached observer. In 2002, over a decade after the original publication of his article on fat admirers, Goode (2002, 502) published a further article which details his time more specifically at NAAFA where he 'engaged in personal— that is to say, romantic and sexual—relationships with more than a dozen women in the organization'. This particular immersion in NAAFA is a further indication of its heterosexual premise. Although, as I have indicated, NAAFA is often cited as the beginning of fat liberation, Goode (2002, 506) suggests that there was little 'activism' in its traditional sense happening at the time he was there:

> It turns out the "fighting back" or civil rights theme which Gladys [a respondent] had so forcefully emphasized was of practically no importance whatsoever to the organization's rank-and-file, while the sexual or romantic theme turned out to be its central and practically its sole function. Members devoted relatively little time, effort, energy, or emotion to social movement goals. In fact, I soon discovered that NAAFA served as little more than a "Love Boat" for fat women and mostly average-sized men who were erotically attracted to fat women.

Goode also clarifies that the directors of NAAFA, some fat admirers themselves, acted as gatekeepers who would only allow access for Goode and his research if he identified as a fat admirer too. One of the NAAFA board members is quoted in the article saying to Goode (2002, 508), 'I want to make sure you like fat women. I want to make sure you are here because you like fat women. I mean sexually'. Goode, who confesses he feels as though his loyalty to NAAFA is being questioned, is then asked what his favourite thing about fat women is. He answers in a way that suggests he likes 'jiggling flesh' and is thus allowed access to continue his study at

NAAFA, which ultimately results in several sexual relationships and an accidental pregnancy (509).

This almost-confessional article led to several responses in the following issue of *Qualitative Sociology.* Peter Manning (2002, 541), acknowledging that Goode may have inflicted harm on his participants, also argues that there is an 'absence of a clear research purpose or motivational account emphasizing scientific work', suggesting Goode never clarifies a focus for his research other than the possibility of writing a book. Susan Bell (2002), Abigail Saguy (2002) and Christine Williams (2002) all focus more directly on Goode's unethical procedures while researching at NAAFA. Bell (2002, 537) questions Goode's lack of reflection around the gender of his subjects, arguing that although Goode insists in the article that he will not speak on behalf of female researchers for whom sex with participants may provoke 'peril', he is comfortable speaking on behalf of his participants who are mostly women and challenges his lack of understanding around the power between researcher and participant. Williams (2002, 557) questions the two themes of Goode's article, first that having sex with a participant provides 'unique insight into their feelings, motivations and understanding of the world' and second that discussing the sexual encounter with respondents could inflict harm by the researcher, and suggests that the two themes are in opposition. While Williams (2002, 560) suggests Goode is not likely to mean physical 'harm' – although she questions Goode's involvement in unsafe sex with a participant that resulted in pregnancy – she does interrogate the psychological harm that may have been done. Williams argues that respondents may confuse a researcher's interest in them with therapeutic intervention and, as a result, may experience transference when the interviews broach the more intimate details of their lives, thus leaving it up to the researcher to be 'attuned' to their own desires and take precautions not to let the situation turn exploitative. And finally, Saguy (2002, 533) can give greater insight into Goode's research practices at NAAFA as she too has conducted ethnographic research on the organisation. Although, she argues 'good teachers know that students learn better when they are having fun' (533) and it is plausible the researcher may learn more if they are having sex with their informants, (533) Goode's account of his research suggests he

did not learn anything from his sexual relations with fat women at NAAFA. Saguy (549-550) goes as far to call Goode a sexual predator based on her consideration of two behaviours which she believes Goode engages in, first, targeting vulnerable populations and second suggesting that Goode had no reason to engage in sexual encounters with his respondents considering Saguy herself has managed to research NAAFA members without sexual contact.

Each of these scholars provide valid critiques of Goode's time at NAAFA which I agree with. However, while it seems secondary in Goode's (2002) article, he does outline some behaviours at NAAFA which hint at a compulsory heterosexuality, not unlike some of the narratives that are being celebrated in mainstream fat body positivity. Firstly, to gain access to the women at NAAFA, Goode had to present himself as a fat admirer and go into detail about what he liked most about fat women. The board members at NAAFA seemed to be more concerned with whether he was a 'true' fat admirer, rather than how he might conduct himself in an activist organisation as a researcher. This suggests that men with power at NAAFA were engaging in similar activities and the conversation between the board members and Goode implies that his heterosexuality and attraction to fat women were all that really mattered to gain acceptance into NAAFA. Secondly, Goode also confirms that activism at NAAFA, at least at the events and meetings he attended, was not the central focus and members were more interested in social and dating events which calls into question the political nature of early fat activism, at least within this context. These issues alone suggest the power of implicit – compulsory – heterosexuality, and specifically a male-focused heteronormativity.

Pool parties, within the context of a NAAFA that encourages or, at least does not prevent, predatory behaviour from researchers at its social events, carry a different meaning to the events like those that were represented in *Shrill* (2019b). Fat pool parties have an important place within the history of fat body positivity and this importance has been revisited since the episode aired and people started resharing their experiences of attending. The articles I referred to at the beginning of this chapter represent pool parties as a place where fat women can feel comfortable in

their bodies as they are. After the airing of the 'Pool' episode Kinzel wrote an article reflecting on her previous willingness to dismiss pool parties as 'just being fun', without questioning the worthwhile purpose of 'fun' for people who have experienced discrimination, or as Kinzel (2019) terms it, 'legitimate trauma' at swimming pools. And, on a surface level, I tend to agree, I have struggled in swimming pools myself but the liberation that some women may feel at pool party events needs to be read alongside the cultural history of the NAAFA parties, and the connotations of events that happen in a fat-positive vacuum that seek to replicate the thin experience.

The pool party depicted in *Shrill* (2019b) has one fairly obvious difference to the pool parties that take place at the NAAFA conference – there are no men in attendance in the *Shrill* (2019b) scene, thus removing an element of compulsory heterosexuality from the party. NAAFA pool parties are infamous in the fat community and like other fat swims give people, although specifically women, the opportunity to socialize around pools in swimsuits or clothing they may not be comfortable wearing outside of a fat-specific space. Marilyn Wann (humbly) brags in *Fat!So?* (1998) that her tailor-made thong bikinis have become a widely anticipated part of the event and they become both smaller and more extravagant every time she returns and receives positive feedback. However, the inclusion of men at these events, which Saguy suggests gives women the opportunity to meet men who are attracted to fat women, changes the motivation behind the parties. Saguy (2002, 551) also reports that women at these events significantly outnumber men, meaning that although it may be difficult for fat women to meet a romantic interest within the confines of NAAFA, it is largely uncomplicated for thin men to find relationships within the organisation suggesting that although NAAFA promotes acceptance, fat women and fat admirers are socially unequal – even within the context of NAAFA.

Although Annie's friend meets a woman at the pool party in *Shrill* (2019b) and eventually begins a romantic relationship with her, the NAAFA pool parties have a firmer history of reproducing heteronormativity. The parties are organised as

private events and most are billed as part of the annual conference at hotels or conference centres that have been hired for the weekend. An account in *Dimensions* (Blickenstorfer 1997) from the 1997 NAAFA conference gleefully remarks:

> Talk about a big splash! When NAAFAns get together in and around the pool, there is always a very special feeling of community. It's a safe place to go and put on that hot bathing suit, and, needless to say, all FAs [fat admirers] present were in for a super treat. Sensory overload for sure. Sadly, no cameras are allowed at the pool parties, so use your imagination!

This account infers that the real purpose of the NAAFA pool parties is for fat admirers to 'enjoy' the 'sensory treat' of fat women in their bathing suits and possibly meet a sexual partner. Yet, despite this focus on the FAs, Murray ([2008] 2016, 124) contends that the NAAFA organised pool parties and fashion shows exist to give fat people, specifically women, the opportunity to engage in normalised heterosexual activities, similar to those enjoyed by thin women. While Murray offers a possible reading of the pool parties as a parody of heteronormativity, she argues this cannot 'unequivocally' be the case. She suggests that attempts to experience and access 'normative female bodily experience and sexuality' through items of clothing like a thong swimsuit permits a visibility of a fat body that is used to being hidden. While she acknowledges that it is not unusual to want to access privileges that have been denied to fat women, pool parties are domains usually reserved for thin women which results in a practice which 'still upholds a visual regime that asserts "thinness" as the preferable modality of female bodily being' (Murray [2008] 2016, 124). The creation of alternative events where thin women are not in attendance and heterosexual fat admirers are invited replicates a certain form of heteronormativity while keeping fat sexuality firmly within the confines of NAAFA. This 'privacy' calls into question the activist nature of NAAFA events. Hosting events where fat women can feel comfortable in their swimsuits, only inviting people who are either fat or have a sexual interest in fat women and

banning cameras, does little to challenge mainstream fatphobia that attendees at the pool party will have to endure when the event ends.

Events could be kept private due to the hefty entrance fee at the conference or a strategy to make sure fat people can be more comfortable knowing only people who accept their bodies are in attendance. However, I do wonder whether the privacy is, at least in part, in place for the fat admirers too. This privacy reminds me of Gibbons' (2015) story of being a 'secret girlfriend' in her adolescence. Secret girlfriends are women who have legitimate romantic relationships with men but only in private. Gibbons explains that men she went to high school with began noticing her body as she got older and with that came requests for secret meetings in cars or empty houses. Like Fabrey and Louderback, these high school aged men found being sexually attracted to fat women socially difficult but rather than advocate for a more socially 'accepting' world, they kept their fat girlfriends a secret. Gibbons goes on to note that she would see several different men from groups of friends and none of them would be aware of each other as her sexual partners. Drawing on Erving Goffman's 1963 theory of 'courtesy stigma', Gailey (2014, 57) suggests that thin men who have a sexual interest in fat women may be concerned about being on the receiving end of stigma if they are seen in public with their fat partners. Additionally, Saguy wonders why Goode, believing that sex could help his research, did not seek out a more serious relationship with a member of NAAFA and questions whether he is one of the 'closet FAs' that he discusses in the article (Goode 2002, 518; Saguy 2002). These private events at NAAFA allow fat admirers to engage in sexually charged social events with fat women whilst being able to, at least in Goode's case, avoid stigmatisation outside of the organisation. While some of NAAFA's activism has been based within fat assimilationist activism, at least some of the activities at the organisation seem more focused on finding opportunities for fat admirers to meet women who fulfil their sexual interests in private which, therefore has less to do with assimilation and more to do with immediate sexual gratification. Some NAAFA members then – and indeed some board members if Goode (2002) is correct – are, at least historically, more inclined

to organise and attend events for fat admirers to explore their sexual freedom than they are to mobilise an organisation that 'advances' fat rights.

While fat admirers are celebrated at NAAFA, fetishism is often categorised separately and is rebuked by many fat activists. Yet, although I have been researching fat activism for the last five years, I still struggle to neatly define the difference between a fat fetishist and a fat admirer. Saguy (2002, 554) argues that from her observations, there seems to be little difference between 'fat heterosexuality' and 'thin' heterosexuality, but other eroticised behaviours such as 'feeding' and 'squashing' are less mainstream. A simplified explanation of the differences between fat admiration and fat fetishism would be that the sexuality of fat admirers has much in common with the sexuality of people who are attracted to normative bodies, whereas a fat fetishist can be categorised by their arousal of practices like squashing and feeding. However, I am concerned the actuality of admiration and fetishism and the understandings of them by fat body positive advocates are much more complex than that. Hanne Blank (2011, 67) suggests: 'The kinky spectrum includes fetishes for body parts or inanimate objects, interest in particular types of sensations (including pain), interest in particular emotional or psychological states, interests in certain social power dynamics, and much else'. In this definition of kink, the fat on a person's body has the potential to be sexually appealing regardless of who the person is. Fat fetishism could be categorised by an attraction to an inanimate body part, such as a stomach, the 'sensation' of fat, or even the social stigma and perceived deviance that accompanies a sexual attraction to fat women. Goode (2002) suggests that his favourite thing about fat women is their 'jiggling flesh' which arguably moves him, and some of the NAAFA board members from the category of fat admirer into fat fetishist. My experience with both fat admirers and fat fetishists is limited but from what I understand through the narratives of fat body positive advocates, a fetishist is recognised by their lack of consideration for the emotional or physical wellbeing of the fat woman they are sexually attracted to.

The practice of hogging, for example, involves men preying on fat women to 'satisfy their competitive and/or sexual urges' (Gailey and Prohaska 2007, 32). Groups of men, according to Jeannine Gailey and Ariane Prohaska, attend bars in groups and compete to pick up the 'fattest' woman they can find; she is then taken to a hotel room where the men sexually humiliate and, in some cases, rape her. Young men who were interviewed in Gailey and Prohaska's (40) study suggested that the fat women deserved this treatment because they are 'overweight' and 'desperate'. For the men engaged in hogging, both the fat woman's body and her sexual desire are a joke and they believe fat women should be punished for presuming their body could be desirable. Male heterosexuality is used to humiliate and remind the fat woman of her place in society; the act of hogging suggests that these men do not see fat women as serious romantic partners, but rather as objects to be used for their own violent sexual satisfaction. Although not a particularly well-known fetish in mainstream culture, the reduction of fat women to objects coupled with the sexual violence that is used to remind these women of their lack of power suggests that fat women in these contexts are being fetishized. Hogging is an extreme example of a violent fetish but there are similarities in the way that fat women's sexuality is treated by both fat admirers and fat fetishists; that is sexual relationships between fat women and heterosexual men are often categorised by the fat woman's body. Whether a fat admirer or a fat fetishist, these relationships and sexual encounters focus specifically on the man's preference for fat women and thus fat women's sexuality and preferences are secondary.

The representation of fat women's sexuality (or lack thereof) is often categorised by their physical embodiment as fat – and even I recognised as a young teenager that there are two mainstream definitions of fat women's sexuality. Jana Evans Braziel (2001, 233) suggests the first is more easily described as a lack of sexuality or asexuality; a sexuality that is so 'unpalatable' that it is also unpresentable. The second definition, Braziel (2001, 233) explains, is that of the hypersexual fat woman which she describes as a 'site of sexual masquerade – conveying both an excessive salaciousness and a hyperbolic derision of prurience'. Shelley Bovey (1989, 111), for example, reveals,

> A great many men have admitted to me that they do like a woman to be 'cuddly' in bed, and that they like something to get their arms round and be enfolded by. . . They like to cup a full breast in their hand rather than to stroke the flat 'poached eggs' that are the breasts of thin women lying down. And somewhere in their deep unconscious lies the memory of a time when breasts and arms and belly were much larger than they were, and that largeness came with warmth, food, and safety.

These two readings of fat sexuality are reliant on fatness itself. The first represents a deviation so far removed from heteronormative expectations of sexuality that it cannot be represented and is therefore ignored or carefully hidden. The second relies on the physical largeness of fat women which is unable to be hidden and demands attention. Both representations though, rely on the recognition of other people and specifically in Bovey's case, heterosexual men, which suggests mainstream representations of fat women's sexuality are defined by the people that find them sexually appealing (or not). Furthermore, because culturally accepted notions of fat women's sexuality do rely so heavily on attention from heterosexual men both representations, depending on context are easily fetishized. An individual fat woman may not change from context-to-context but the way she is read as a suitable sexual partner determines her ability to embrace (hetero)sexuality. When a fat woman is read as asexual, she may end up as the subject of ridicule from men who engage in hogging thus rendering her sexuality irrelevant, and to an extent, invisible. If a fat woman is read as a worthy sexual partner based on the largeness of her body and, at least in Bovey's example, a connection to motherly love and safety, she becomes as hypervisible as her hypersexuality and is further objectified by her sexual relevance which balances on the recognition of heterosexual men.

Categorising who is a fat fetishist and who is a fat admirer is complex and while I can understand why fat body positive advocates do not want their partners to be attracted to them *exclusively* for their fat bodies, I cannot imagine it is much better

for their partners to be attracted to them *in spite* of their fat bodies. However, fetish, in all contexts is often treated as 'Other' in popularised fat body positivity. Holliday (2017), Kirby and Harding (2009) and Thore (2016) have all written about their experiences with fat fetish and ultimately conclude their discussions by asserting they find many of the practices associated with fat fetish unappealing. Despite the overt rejection of fat fetishism though, Harding and Kirby, writing in a time before the significant rise in popularity of fat body positivity, use the term fat admirer to mean something distinctively different from fat fetishist. They argue that there are many people who meet the *right* fat woman and those people are 'known as "fat admirers", who are not interested in force-feeding you or objectifying your body but simply have a natural preference for the look of a fat person, just as other people strongly prefer those who are muscular or tall or, yes, thin' (Harding and Kirby 2005, 103). Harding and Kirby bring up two separate points here, the first is that rather than being attracted to *every* fat woman, there are some people who simply meet the *right* fat woman and therefore become fat admirers. I am not sure why the partner of a fat woman would need an identifier like this, we do not, for example, refer to men who are romantically involved with thin women as 'thin' admirers. Additionally, to my knowledge, fat admirers are not mobilising in any way to tackle the stigma of dating fat women, rather, they seem to have a history of creating a 'boys club' at NAAFA which focuses on sexual attractions to fat women in general.

Secondly, Harding and Kirby infer that fat admirers are not interested in force-feeding or objectification and attempt to draw a line between what they define as an admirer and what they define as a fetishist. The difficulty of that statement, however, is that there are some women who enjoy being objectified and there are many more who consent to fat fetishism. Goda Klumbyte and Katrine Smiet (2014, 145) found in their study on fat porn that while some women are 'creeped out' by men who enjoy fat fetishism, there are some women who actively seek out people who fetishize their bodies and fetish experiences. It is possible, in my opinion, to be both fetishized and respected within a sexual relationship, as sex, after all, is not always romantic and can be reduced to the act itself rather than as part of a

progressing relationship. This idea is problematised further by Saguy (2002) who suggests that fat women are socially marginalised and therefore sexual and romantic relationships with thin men have the potential to be manipulated by a power imbalance. Blank (2011, 161) also argues that although enthusiastic consent is important for anyone who is sexually active, it is *more* important for people who are at a social or cultural disadvantage – like fat people. She argues that fatness is so vilified and fat people can become so accustomed to being mistreated that they may end up engaging in sexual activity they are not completely comfortable with as they feel they have little choice when it comes to their own sexuality. Fat admirers in general, but specifically those attending NAAFA events, can be associated with both casual objectification of fat women's 'jiggling' body parts and taking advantage of the socially constructed power imbalance. Based on these two ideas, then, I am not convinced there are definitive differences between those we label as fat admirers and fat fetishists – rather the label seems to be applied based on what fat women consent to sexually.

Although the line between fat admiration and fat fetishism is blurred within the context of normalised heterosexual interest in fat women, a more definitive and specific line is drawn when fat body positive advocates discuss feedism. Feedism is fundamentally the desire to see a person (usually a woman) eat and get fatter, sometimes, but not always, to the point of immobility. Feedees are people who have 'chosen' to reach a goal weight and eat excessively to reach that goal. Feeders are the people who encourage and sometimes help feedees to eat and reach a goal weight. The sensationalised and often exploitative documentaries[32] that have been created around feedism suggest that the feeder is always a heterosexual love interest who lives with and cares for the feedee – especially if the feedee does reach immobility. According to NAAFA, encouraging weight gain is disrespectful to a potential feedee whose body should be appreciated regardless of size (quoted in Prohaska 2014, 264). However, Prohaska argues that being judged on appearances and being asked to change weight for a sexual partner is not all that different from

[32] *Fat Girls and Feeders* (2003); *Feeder* (2014); *My Big Fat Fetish* (2012).

thin heteronormative approaches to sexuality and beauty. Yet, feedism is largely represented as deviant spectacle – especially in fat body positive communities. Perhaps what is deviant then, is not that fat women are changing their bodies for their sexual partners but rather that they are making themselves larger which subverts mainstream ideas of heteronormative standards of sexual desirability. Kyrölä (2011, 129) suggests that feedism may not be perceived as so deviant if the genders were reversed, she argues that westernised cultural norms enforce the role of women as caregivers and so while it is normalised for women to feed men, the role of fat woman as feedee subverts what is culturally expected in domestic spaces. Part of the deviance of feeding thus comes from its disruption of heteronormativity and when they become feedees, fat women are simultaneously rejecting their roles as caretakers and their duties to heteronormative standards of beauty and sexuality. Since body positivity is largely focused on assimilationist activism, it follows that that body positive celebrities slowly moving their way into mainstream focus would feel the need to openly reject sexual acts that infringe further on their quest for normalisation.

Nevertheless, just as there are problems with consensual objectification, there are complexities of consensual fetishism – especially if that fetishism leads to immobility and reliance on one specific person. As Angela Carter ([1979] 2006, 163) asserts,

> If one sexual partner is economically dependent on the other, then the question of sexual coercion, of contractual obligation, raises its ugly head in the very abode of love and inevitably colours the nature of the sexual expression of affection. The marriage bed is a particularly delusive refuge from the world because all wives of necessity fuck by contract.

In feedee relationships where the feedee reaches immobility, the feedee is not just economically dependent on her partner, she is physically dependent, reducing her agency and choice in all aspects of her life. Although Prohaska (2014) has argued that in her research, she has rarely seen incidents of abuse in feedism communities

online she does admit that she has witnessed a few incidents and since this particular study took place online, it is difficult to know certainly what happens offline. My assertion is that if a goal of fat activism, or even body positivity, is to bring some of the problematics fat women face into the mainstream, then the possible abuse fat women may experience as the partner of a feeder or even a fetishist should be given attention too – that is, even people who practice fetishism should be included in the mainstreaming of fat activism. In spite of that, it seems that fetish narratives are completely erased or ignored from fat body positivity. The more contemporary movement seems to have learnt its public relations strategies from NAAFA whose involvement in publications like *Dimensions* and focus on dating services, socials and pool parties suggest, at least in part, a sympathy for people who fetishize fat women. The term fat admirer, that Fabrey has asserted he helped coin (quoted Cooper 2016, 113), is used to distinguish the practices of people involved in NAAFA from the practices of people labelled fetishists and yet, it seems, the differences between the two groups are not so easily recognisable.

NAAFA is not the only link between fat admirers and fat activism. In Camryn Manheim's (1999) autobiography she describes discovering the fat activist movement and subscribing to every magazine and zine she could find. When the zines arrived, Manheim noticed that some of them were about fat fetish rather than fat activism. In one of the zines Manheim comes across several adverts that both startle her and make her uncomfortable. For example,

> Hi, My name is Cathy. I am a 681-lb. submissive eating machine that is addicted to eating and being so stuffed I can't move! Would like to talk to anyone who is supportive of my lifestyle. I am actively being force-fed and funnel-fed, and the fatter I get, the fatter I WANT TO BE. Would like to talk to women and men who share my relentless need to be stuffed and packed with fattening foods till I can't move (quoted in Manheim 1999, 131).

Manheim (1999, 123) responds to the advert in her autobiography, 'I would never disparage a woman for her weight, nor would I condemn a man for loving her. But

when weight is the only prerequisite listed, it is just as narrow and demeaning as men who want a 36-24-36 woman in a size 4'. Although Manheim makes a similar argument to Prohaska (2014) and compares thin heterosexuality to fat heterosexuality and seems uncomfortable with the idea of feedism, it does not seem like a coincidence that these adverts for these zines appear in otherwise fat acceptance publications. While the party line on fat fetish for many fat activists, even those at NAAFA, is that it is exploitative, the advertising of zines that includes adverts like Cathy's in fat acceptance publications does hint at some crossover of interests – whether fat activists admit it or not.

The rejection of fat fetish from fat positive narratives is not limited to the 1980s, 1990s and fat acceptance zines. Whitney Way Thore, whose autobiography is titled *I Do It With the Lights On* (2016) has also documented her experiences with fat fetishists and specifically feeders. Unlike other narratives I have become accustomed too, Thore admits that although she is initially shocked by the approach of a man who is interested in her *because* of her fat body, she reveals that she found her 'sexiness' through a heterosexual man with a fat fetish. Yet this is not a straightforward response: Thore (2016, 157) reveals that she does not practice any form of fat fetish, and tells the story of this man who initially sends her a photo of a fat woman in 'skimpy' lingerie to 'see what she thinks' and then asks her for 'fully-body' photos. Thore, who is used to men overlooking her body, recounts that at that time she mentioned to her friend that she believes 'something is wrong with him'. Thore confesses that she found both the pictures and attention she received from this man uncomfortable, but could not at first locate the root of her discomfort. When she is sent a link to a website that has been documenting her weight gain, she manages to verbalise the feelings she is having:

> There were so many emotions to deal with. There was utter surprise, as I was still digesting the concept that there were men in the world who preferred fat women specifically. Then there was an element of flattery, as I had felt almost completely deprived of positive sexual attention for all of my adult life. But the emotion that demanded my attention the most was mild disgust. My knee-jerk

> reaction is that it's gross and sleazy to saddle an unwilling or unknowing participant on the Internet with overt sexual attention. After all, I hadn't intended any photos or videos of me to be used in anyone's spank back, so a forum designed to share this type of material made me feel violated. I felt objectified (Thore 2016, 172).

While the documentation of Thore's weight gain is deeply unethical and a violation of her privacy, I was surprised to see her admit that, despite the inevitable feeling of disgust that must accompany all fat body positive advocates discussions of fat fetish, she did also feel flattered. This admission of flattery is a rare. Other fat body positive advocates have written about similar experiences but left any positive emotions out of the narrative – or made them implicit rather than explicit. Kinzel (2012, 47) has written about her first experience of seeing fat women being both 'beautiful' and confidently sexy was in a goth club. 'I ran into a lot of bog-standard chubby chasers (known also as "fat admirers") at the goth club – straight men who are quietly queered by their attraction to fat women, and who seek out subcultural spaces where no one judges their proclivities'. Her account is mostly neutral, but it is does not seem coincidental that Kinzel's first encounter with fat women she thought were both beautiful and sexy was in a goth club with heterosexual men who found them attractive. It is possible there was nothing particularly different about the women to make them more beautiful or sexy than other women Kinzel had seen before but rather, the presence of men who were approaching fat women because they were interested in them sexually, confirmed to her that fat women could be 'sexy' too. Similarly, Baker (2015, 106) has disclosed how finding body positive Tumblr pages changed the relationship she has with her own body:

> I'll never forget an image a plus-size woman had posted of her and her thin boyfriend. They were taking a mirror selfie in the bathroom; she was wearing lingerie, her fat body unapologetically spilling out over her undies, and he was behind her, holding her in an intimate embrace. They were the essence of everything SUPER schmexy love looks like.

After finding these images, Baker reports she approached her dating life differently, she changed her screen name to 'SexyAndFat' and then began to appreciate the sexual appeal of her own body, making sure to always upload full-body pictures on her dating profiles. While I cannot be sure that the image Baker saw was posted within the context of fat fetish; that Baker specifically points out the man in the photograph is thin is reminiscent of fat admirer imagery. These three stories of interactions with fat fetish denote an honesty but also contradiction within fat body positivity. There seems to be a reluctance to admit that being sexually objectified by someone who is not your romantic partner can evoke positive feelings in some contexts. This reluctance is strange considering the history of NAAFA and its acceptance of fat admirers. The dominant messaging from fat body positive advocates suggests that sex is something to be celebrated but only when in a romantic relationship with someone who does not fetishize your body. However, as body positivity begins to create its own celebrities and supermodels, participation in a heterosexual relationship seems increasingly important.

The body positive advocates I have focused on in this chapter, that is Holliday, Gibbons, Thore, Kinzel and Baker, have all written about or made their heterosexual relationships visible. Heterosexual, often conventionally attractive, partners have become a badge of honour for many celebrity body positive advocates, and despite their up-front assertiveness it is hard not to conclude these fat woman's worth is inherently tied to their sexual appeal to men with normalised sexual interests. The rejection of fat fetishists and the embrace of fat admirers in both body positivity and fat activism seems, to me at least, contradictory. Many of the practices and sexual interests of admirers and fetishists are similar, yet the emphasis is placed on fat women to find a heterosexual male partner that is only interested in one fat woman – as though his choice to pick a fat woman over a thinner partner represents her ability to successfully compete with thin women. NAAFA's early emphasis on heterosexual relationships and indeed, its creation by two self-proclaimed fat admirers, has had a significant impact on the body positive proxy of fat activism – even Wann, who Cooper (2016 12-13) suggests popularised this proxy, has had significant involvement with NAAFA. Assimilationist activists seek to

normalise the experiences of the marginalised people they advocate for. Promoting the idea that is acceptable to find fat women attractive and endorsing heteronormativity means that the activism of NAAFA and more contemporary fat body positivity operates to create only a slightly different representation of heterosexuality. The message, however, is clear, it does not matter if you assign men who are sexually interested in fat women the label of fat admirer or fat fetishist, a fat woman's worth and social acceptability is still situated in her sexual appeal to heterosexual men.

5. 'It's Always "Open Season" on the Overweight': The History of Inclusivity and Whiteness in the Body Positivity Movement

When I started this research in 2014 Fatshionista's users were already dropping off and people were increasingly writing and reading personal fatshion blogs. Hungry for more fatshion related content, I followed dozens of these blogs on a website called BlogLovin' that organised new blogposts into a timeline I could click through. However, during the time I spent two years taking my research in the wrong direction, I also stopped reading fatshion blogs as the carefully cultivated feminine styles increasingly seemed out of reach for me. But, when I decided to put myself back into my research, I logged into my old BlogLovin' account and started making a note of the blogs I had followed two or three years before.

I remembered Fatshionista as a diverse, inclusive space that celebrated fat fashion on multiple body types and I thought the blogs I had chosen to follow reflected that too. As a white woman, I had always thought of myself as a non-racist[33], yet, when I opened my old BlogLovin' account I was surprised to find that I had only ever followed white, cis, young, able-bodied women – women 'like' me at age twenty-two. It was not that women who did not fit into these narrow perimeters were not writing their own blogs or engaging with fatshion, it was that I had chosen, whether consciously or not, I cannot remember, not to follow them.

When I recognised I had been complicit in the centralising of whiteness in fatshion, I immediately felt shame and confusion. What I had seen as a fat-girl utopia had actually been a fat white girl utopia and while I had been excitedly telling people about the inclusivity of body positivity and fatshion for over five years, I had just meant the inclusivity of white women. It seems a strange thing to believe now, but I

[33] Although I am aware of the actual meaning of this phrase now, I believe it is important to include my own ignorance in this story.

think growing up fat, and not particularly having an easy time doing so, meant that I had never really been encouraged to question my privilege as a white woman. But during my master's I met my best friend, who is neither white nor British, and through conversations with her where she gently pushed me to think about my raced whiteness I realised that, in many ways, fat white women had unified to create a specific fatshion that preached inclusivity, but never really interrogated what that meant.

I write this thesis, and particularly this chapter, as a self-conscious white woman still learning what my whiteness means both in the context of body positivity and life more generally. I relearn regularly that my whiteness infiltrates everything I do and say. For example, earlier in 2019 a well-known fat activist accused a white writer of plagiarising the story of her first experience at a fat pool party. I had not seen the Ted Talk or read the book the fat activist referred to, but I was quick to outrage anyway. It was not until I started seeing other women quietly sharing their experiences of fat pool parties, which were written many years before the Ted Talk or the book was published, that I began to reflect on that outrage. Even I had written a chapter of my thesis on pool parties before these stories had been published; I wrote my first draft even before the Shrill *(2019b) episode aired – although after the buzz I had to do some careful rewrites. I realised that my white guilt and the shame over what I had included myself in several years earlier had clouded my judgment; I was too scared to be critical or reflective when it came to discussions around race. But when white women ignore race, we also ignore our own raced whiteness, we ignore the fact that we grouped together to form a specific kind of fatshion that then went on to be celebrated by brands and on magazine covers. I expect to make mistakes as I navigate new understandings of my race and the privileges that come with it; but once I realised that as a proudly feminist twenty-two year old I had been complicit in the celebration of exclusively white women in fatshion, I knew I had to write this chapter.*

Body positivity has been accused of depoliticising an otherwise radical message about fat acceptance. One theme that runs strong through many of these criticisms

is that body positivity disproportionately celebrates white women. Journalist and self-identified fat acceptance advocate Stephanie Yeboah has been particularly vocal about the exclusion of Black women from body positivity; arguing that when brands only use white influencers for their advertising campaigns they tell Black women they do not belong (Yeboah 2019a) and that body positivity is not for slim, white bodies already accepted by society (Yeboah 2019b). She also suggests that fat Black women (Yeboah 2017) and women of colour (quoted in Kessel 2018) are responsible for the re-emergence of body positivity on social media. This thesis is tied together by my autobiographic story and I cannot confirm or disprove Yeboah's suggestions as that is not what I came across in my research and I now know that my experience of both fatshion and body positivity has been very white-centred. Nevertheless, what I can do is trace the centrality of the whiteness that I have witnessed in body positivity and managed to research historically in both fat activism and fat studies. This chapter aims to interrogate the origins of whiteness in these movements which led to white women becoming the focus of mainstream fat body positivity. I ask, in what ways are the celebrations of 'inclusivity' and 'intersectionality' of body positivity undermined by the centrality of white women within the movement? And, how did white women become the focus in body positivity?

Fat activism is not a unified movement with specific aims and ideas in mind: LeBesco (2004) argues that some proponents of fat rights may be assimilationist activists who do not necessarily agree with fat liberation activists, Murray ([2008] 2016) has written extensively on the alienation she felt from self-love narratives of fat activists and Cooper (2016) shows that what some people may call fat activism could be a proxy for a larger movement. Despite this, there are certain texts, ideas and activists who have become canonised within fat activism. Some of the people who perpetuate these ideas are also fat studies scholars; fat studies is an academic field of study which has significant overlaps with fat activism. Although scholars and activists may not always agree with each other, there are mantras and ideas that, without knowing specifically where they came from, I quickly became familiar with as I learnt more about fat studies and fat activism. One of those ideas, is that fat is

the last 'acceptable' prejudice. For example, in 1989, Shelley Bovey (1989, 13) suggests,

> Prejudice towards and hatred for fat people is a double edged oppression. However deeply racist, sexist, ageist or anti-Semitic some people may feel, they are encouraged in Western society to quash those feelings and for obvious good reasons.

And eleven years later in 2000, again Bovey (2000a, X) argues,

> […] one woman applying for a health visitor's post was told, 'We've got so many applications we don't need a fat one.' No other group in society is discriminated against so blatantly; it's always 'open season' on the overweight.

This idea, exemplified by Bovey twice, and eleven years apart, represents a general idea that seems to have taken root in more mainstream body politics. Indeed, thirteen years after Bovey made her second assertion, Megan Greenlaw (2013) published an article in the online news and media website *The Inquisitr* that received significant attention in online comment sections and several response articles. Greenlaw cites several studies that suggest that fat people experience stigma in many spaces: on public transport, in the criminal justice system, at their place of work and, of course, whilst seeking healthcare. Although the article is short in comparison to Bovey's body of work, Greenlaw's suggestions resonate with Bovey's ideas; that US and UK culture has largely come to understand that racism and homophobia are unacceptable and there is a general agreement that people who exhibit unacceptable behaviours towards marginalised groups are punished or dealt with appropriately.[34] However, Bovey and Greenlaw argue that the same

[34] Although there have been several political incidents since 2013 that may have changed public opinion on whether people who exhibit homophobia or racism are dealt with appropriately in the UK or US.

boundaries are not in place for fat people, hence the idea that fatphobia is the only prejudice that you can overtly display at work or in social situations and not receive negative feedback or punishment. Greenlaw's article cites a study that suggests twenty-four percent of nurses are repulsed by their fat patients, and it does seem unlikely that the same number of nurses would admit to feeling repulsed by other socially stigmatised groups. However, being less likely to admit a prejudice out of concern for social or legal retribution does not suggest the prejudice is eradicated. And, more importantly, as Peggy McIntosh ([1988] 2001) argues 'racism, sexism and heterosexism are not the same' and therefore the disadvantages associated with them cannot be compared. Further, it is not particularly useful to compare these disadvantages even within the context of fatphobia as fat can quickly become a recognised singular identity which can infer a fat person cannot simultaneously be impacted by racism, (hetero)sexism and fatphobia.

The timing of Greenlaw's (2013) article and the attention it received is significant. Body positivity was not quite at its peak – I would argue this happened in 2015 – but it was slowly coming into mainstream consciousness and the article represents the already emerging white centricity. Body positivity does not focus on all white people, mostly just white women which, sometimes gently and sometimes forcefully, implies body positivity is inherently linked with feminism. However, in chapter four I discussed how the first organised group of fat activists in North America was founded by two men, heterosexual fat admirers who were not feminists. That is not to say there are not people with feminist ideologies involved in NAAFA but rather that fat activism has not always been a definitively feminist movement. The Fat Underground, a splinter group of the larger NAAFA who are perhaps best known for their protest in reaction to the death of Mama Cass Elliot who died in 1974 from heart failure[35], was founded by two white Jewish feminists:

[35] The press at the time made a joke of her death claiming Eliot had choked on a ham sandwich while The Fat Underground claimed the heart attack may have been exacerbated by Elliot's dieting in an effort to lose weight. On Women's Equality Day in 1974, a protest was led by Mabel-Lois where a eulogy to Eliot was performed along with a funeral procession. The Fat Underground intended to

Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, who are also known as Vivian F. Mayer and Sara Golda Bracha Fishman. The group originally began as a chapter of NAAFA with six members but when asked by NAAFA leaders to 'tone down' their feminist messaging, they left NAAFA and formed their own group (Fishman 1998). Freespirit and Aldebaran were also part of the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective in Los Angeles. Cooper (2016, 117) explains '[r]adical therapy was critical of medicalisation and de-politicisation of ordinary human experience and oppression, it was a social model of mental health, it sought systematic change, and was based in a Marxist approach to power' and most importantly for feminist fat activism, feminist radical therapy included an analysis of gender.

Feminist fat activism started with The Fat Underground, that is at least Cooper's (2016) inference and I am yet to see anything to contradict this notion, but just as I did not recognise the centrality of whiteness in body positivity, there is evidence that The Fat Underground were not always reflexive about race either. At the end of 1973 The Fat Underground published their widely circulated pamphlet titled the *Fat Liberation Manifesto.* The document includes statements such as: '[w]e are angry at mistreatment by commercial and sexist interests. These have exploited our bodies as objects of ridicule, thereby creating an immensely profitable market selling the false promise of avoidance of, or relief from, that ridicule' and '[w[e see our struggle as allied with the struggles of other oppressed groups against classism, racism, sexism, ageism, financial exploitation, imperialism and the like' (Fishman 1998). The *Fat Liberation Manifesto* is powerful, and it represents the radical standpoints of many of the Fat Underground's members but just as Bovey (1989; 2000b) and Greenlaw (2013) do several decades in the future, the Fat Underground compare the struggles of fat people to the struggle of those who are racialised without clearly suggesting it is possible to experience more than one form of oppression. The *Fat Liberation Manifesto* was more radical than the activism

draw attention to both the disrespect surrounding the reporting of Elliot's death and the negligence of a weight-loss focused health narrative that could have contributed to the death of not just Elliot, but many other fat women (Cooper 2016, 125).

NAAFA were involved in but there is some evidence that there was a misunderstanding of how fatphobia can oppress multiple groups in society differently. A close reading of the manifesto suggests The Fat Underground are allied with *other* oppressed groups but does not seem to recognise those oppressions might co-exist in a fat body. Fat people are a marginalised group but when the struggles fat people experience are compared to the oppression of other groups separate from those who are fat, there is an implicit suggestion that fat is definitively white and that the difficulties that may be experienced as a fat person are firmly based within the white experience. What I believe is supposed to be good-natured messaging in solidarity with groups of people in society who have experienced severe oppression actually hints at the centrality of whiteness in early fat activism. That this messaging was still being circulated in 2013 suggests that this is the context that body positivity was popularised which could explain, in part, the ease with which many people, like me, accepted the focus on whiteness.

Like fat activism, feminism is not a unified movement and Cooper (2016, 104) has suggested that the radical lesbian feminism that 'incubated' fat activism is now quite unpopular and problematic with a younger generation of feminists. She argues that the problems that existed within feminism, particularly pertaining to the struggles around race, imperialism, class and trans people, are reflected in fat activism (102). The early women's liberation movement, which emerged in the 1960s and around the same time as fat activism, has been accused of being racist and as Winifred Breines (2007, 18) reports, critiques at the time and since have suggested that a feminist emphasis on gender at the expense of race and class were naïve, hurtful and obtuse. She admits that early women's liberation activists, like herself, were and still continue to be sentimental about race segregation and believed they were working towards a colour-blind society where race would be irrelevant and 'integration would prevail'. Breines (20-1) argues that some white feminists had sophisticated understandings of race but that there were contradictory themes running through the movement where feminists would simultaneously emphasise gender as an explanation for women's oppression, in an effort to encourage a Sisterhood between all women whilst acknowledging that

gender could not explain all women's struggles and that race and class were important too. bell hooks (1984, 53) suggests that one reason white women were unwilling to tackle racism head-on was that they naively believed their call for Sisterhood was a non-racist gesture and would invite Black women to the movement as though white women owned it and they were making a gesture of inclusion. White feminists, hooks (54) argues, bond on a basis of shared racial identity without a conscious awareness of 'the significance of their actions' and this can be dangerous because it is particularly difficult to change racist attitudes if there is no recognition of their existence. Therefore, she maintains (52), because the United States has an interest in maintaining white supremacy, when given the choice to respond to the needs of white women or black people, the establishment much prefers to respond to white people, regardless of gender. Although hooks and Breines refer specifically to the US women's liberation movement, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar (1984, 3) argue that the US situation is comparable to British circumstances and assert that westernised feminism has found ways to establish itself as the only legitimate feminism. Amos and Parmar (3) argue that the 'unconscious consensus' of feminism has meant that large numbers of Black women have been prevented from participating in the women's movement in any beneficial way and there has been little call by white women to change that fact as women 'organising' is regarded by white women as 'positive' regardless of who is included or excluded.

Feminist fat activists have made similar mistakes to some white women engaged in second wave feminism, and this is reflected in the contemporary movement's white focus. Cat Pausé (2019, 7) argues that fat studies suffers from a lack of not only indigenous but 'non-white' scholars and, as a field, is a 'bastion' of whiteness. She recalls that when she guest edited an issue of the *Fat Studies* Journal in 2014 she failed to attract submissions from people of colour on issues of race, blackness or indigeneity and that there has been limited work published on fatness and race specifically by Black people (Pausé 2019, 7). The feminist fat activism of The Fat Underground and the centrality of white women and fatness as a 'unified' oppression seems to have echoed through fat activism and into body positivity.

Inclusivity based on body size alone appears to be the focus for popularised fat body positivity, thus rather than completely overthrow already understood representations of beauty, body positivity seeks to include more fat women in spaces that have been historically dominated by thin women. While the specific terminology of Sisterhood is used less than in second-wave feminism, the mobilisation of fat women as a homogenous group with similar oppressions has resulted in a movement that recognises the achievements of fat white women – like Tess Holliday – as a victory for all fat women.

Body positivity is often celebrated alongside popular feminism which, over the last decade, has increasingly propagated terms like inclusivity, diversity and intersectionality. Intersectionality, or at least a generalised idea of intersectionality, is having a cultural moment (not unlike body positivity). However, I have learnt to use this word cautiously after reading Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989; 1991) work for the first time two years ago and realising that intersectionality meant much more than a broad attempt at inclusivity. Even Crenshaw herself has suggested that although intersectionality has a 'wide reach' it is not 'very deep' and that it is both an 'over- and underused' concept which sometimes she cannot even recognise in the literature anymore (quoted in Berger and Guidroz 2009 76, 65). In 1989 Crenshaw (1989, 140), speaking from a legal perspective, suggests discrimination is understood in a 'single categorical axis' meaning that in race discrimination cases, discrimination is viewed in terms of sex or class privilege and for sex discrimination there is a focus on race and class privilege. Crenshaw proposes that when there is a focus on the most privileged group members of a larger oppressed group there is a tendency to ignore the oppressions of those who are 'multiply-burdened' and argues that Black women can be excluded from both feminist theory and antiracist policy because, 'both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender' (140). Crenshaw cites several cases where there has been a refusal to acknowledge both the sex and race discrimination of Black women, including an employment case where Black women lost their jobs but there was no legal case because the company had continued to employ white women. The acknowledgment of Black women as an

oppressed group was stunted by the misunderstanding or unwillingness to understand that Black women could be both effected by racism and sexism simultaneously.

While the *Fat Liberation Manifesto* acknowledged the existence of other oppressions, those comparisons to stigmas like homophobia and racism can appear flippant and largely only seem to be acknowledged in relation to a generalised fat liberation. The mistake that fat activism makes that is so similar to second wave feminism is failing to recognise the unique challenges of being racialised. Once whiteness has been centralised in a movement, rectifying those mistakes are not as simple as 'reconsidering' Black women's place within fat activism. In the context of intersections between race and gender, Crenshaw (1989, 140) argues, problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure because that structure cannot understand how Black women are uniquely oppressed. Black women are then forced to choose between their identity as Black or their identity as women. The solution towards an intersectional approach to activism, is a 'bottom-up' ideology, or, as Crenshaw (167) puts it, 'When they enter, we all enter', meaning that when people who are multiply burdened in society are treated well, it will follow that people with more privileged identities will also be treated well.

Intersectionality, to an extent, much like body positivity, has been depoliticised and is now used as a buzzword to mean something similar to inclusivity. According to Sirma Bilge (2013, 408) intersectionality has been transformed by the popularisation of 'neoliberal diversity culture' and 'identity politics' and in the process has acquired intellectual, political and moral capital which she argues has proved 'fertile ground for opportunistic uses of intersectionality' called ornamental intersectionality. She asserts that ornamental intersectionality should not be regarded as benign as it has been active in the neutralisation of radical politics and social justice as it provides a label for individuals and institutions to use so that they are recognised as politically motivated and involved with social justice without having to dismantle underlying structures of oppression (408). It is expected that

companies may use deceptive tactics to encourage consumers to buy products from them, but the misuse of intersectionality extends to individuals too. Sarita Srivastava (2005, 472) argues that being seen to be non-racist or anti-racist is of high importance to feminists and other activists as they are often invested in projecting a sense of 'goodness' that aligns with their political identity. Similarly, Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack (1998, 339) suggest that there can be a 'race to innocence' among groups of marginalised people where there is an impression that because they are in a subordinated position, they are unimplicated in the oppression of others. Some white feminists may struggle to see why centring whiteness and white women in political movements is not intersectional and actually harmful. Sara Ahmed (2004, n.p.) terms the expression of anti-racism without challenging racist systems of oppression the 'non-performativity of anti-racism'; a person may refer to themselves as an 'intersectional feminist', for example, and see themselves as anti-racist, but if all that person does is verbalise that they are 'intersectional' then there is likely nothing being done to tackle racism even on a micro level. Similarly, Ahmed (2004, n.p.) argues that if a person expresses shame about their racism then that 'shows' they are not racist and indeed, being ashamed of racism or whiteness may actually, rather than tackle systems of oppression, 'provide conditions for a new discourse of white pride' where a white person can feel pride in their ultimately superficial anti-racist identity. Popularised body positivity is a movement that claims to focus on the inclusion of women of all sizes in mainstream media; its focus is representation and it moves towards its fuzzy goal slowly. However, body positivity's ornamental intersectionality does little to actually diversify the mainstream media and the use of words like 'intersectional' and 'inclusive', in my opinion, misrepresent an anti-racist discourse so that the movement, especially in mainstream media, can be recognised as being as inclusive as possible while still focusing almost exclusively on the success of white women.

Body positivity does not use a bottom up approach; rather, as I discussed in chapter two, minor modifications are being used to represent 'new' standards of beauty which tend to be similar to the 'old' standards of beauty – just in a larger body.

Diversity, as Ahmed (2004, n.p.) argues is not a 'tied down concept' and is not understood as signifying something in particular which means that both individuals and institutions can use diversity as a term to mean almost anything which can block actual political change. Diversity in body positivity means putting Tess Holliday on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* (2018) or campaigns like the one featured in fig. 12. In 2015 plus-size clothing retailer Evans launched a campaign called 'Style Has No Size' but failed to include models of varying sizes; the largest model was around a UK 18. In the promotional photographs, a Black model is featured along with two white models, the 'diversity' here, I assume, is that the company chose to feature models who are *slightly* larger than the industry norm – although still small considering their sizing goes up to a UK 32 – and the use of a Black model. Evans have become so accustomed to creating their own meanings of diversity and inclusivity that for a campaign that proclaims style has 'no size', it did not occur to the model recruiters to pick women that reflected that slogan, rather, they picked three models with similar body types and their diversity was supposed to be reflected through their use of one non-white model. This performed diversity has become a proxy for intersectionality where using models who have one or more marginalised identities is supposed to communicate the political consciousness of a brand or company.

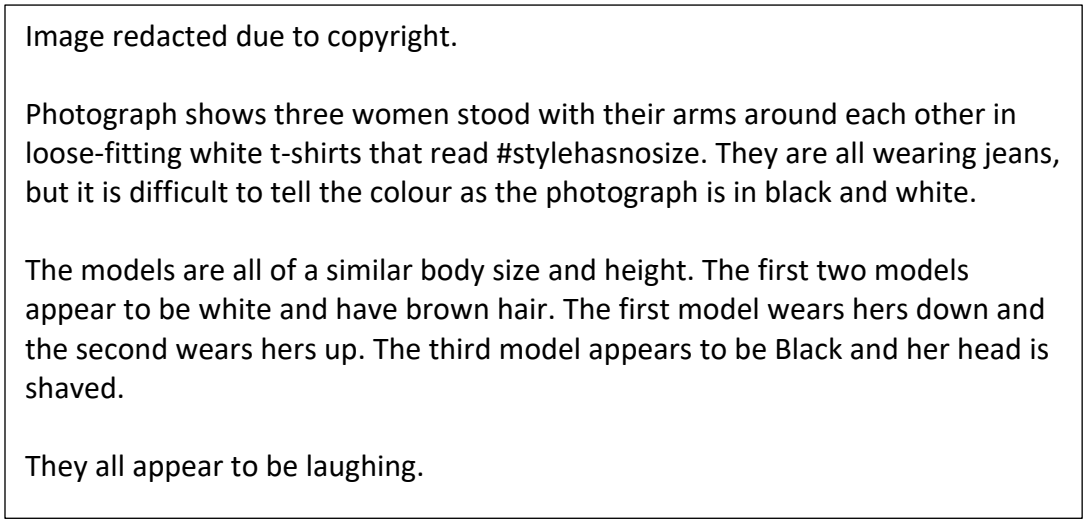

Fig. 12, Evans, *#STYLEHASNOSIZE*, Professional Photoshoot, 2015-2019, https://www.evans.co.uk/en/evuk/category/style-has-no-size-campaign-4441795/home.

Amanda Czerniawski (2015, 31) has first-hand experience of plus-size casting calls as she conducted an autoethnography of the plus-size modelling scene in New York. She notes that if a casting was arranged by her agency, the majority of the models at the castings for jobs were white, however, if it was an open casting call, 'the majority of models were African American and Latinas with a handful of white models'. The suggestion then is that agents are receiving casting calls for a very 'specific' model. Czerniawski (2015, 31) also observed that,

> It was not simply a model's body size and shape determined her ability to find representation with an agency, which in turn led to job opportunities. Her racial and ethnic status was also key to determining the quantity and quality of work available to her. High-profile modelling agencies, with access to high-status clients and generously paying jobs, preferred to work with models on the smaller size of the spectrum of "plus-size".

There are other issues with plus-size models of course, but even during the ascension of body positivity, Czerniawski confirms what many of us suspect about the industry and is exemplified in this Evans campaign – that white women are wanted and asked for by model agencies and women of colour are an afterthought, or, in some cases, as I suspect is the case in fig. 12, used as a tokenistic gesture towards diversity.

In chapter one and two I discussed how Tess Holliday's signing to MILK Model Management became one of the defining moments of 2015 as the 'year of body positivity'. Her signing and consequent rise to fame hinted at a new inclusivity for the fashion industry. However, Ashleigh Shackleford (2015), in an article titled 'The Body Positivity Movement looks a Lot Like White Feminism', argues that Holliday could never truly lead the way into a new inclusive and intersectional body positivity and not just because she is white, cisgender and able-bodied. To succeed in the way Holliday has, Shackleford argues, she has engaged with white supremacist capitalism which limits how much she can actually change without risking her career or image. They also ask,

> Is Tess willing to give up a paying modeling gig to offer it up to a brown skin Black fat femme? Would Tess be willing to give up working with certain high end brands by openly critiquing their fatphobic classist ways of excluding certain bodies from representation and overcharging for their clothes? Would Tess provide economic support to fat femmes of color who are educating her and the rest of the movement about our marginalization? (Shackleford 2015)

Shackleford suggests that while Holliday is maintaining her image as body positive celebrity and dominating spaces for inclusivity, she is a 'willing participant' in a system that violates Black women. Holliday (2017, 287) responds to commentary like Shackleford's in her autobiography arguing that she is the 'ONLY visibly FAT plus, size mainstream model' and will 'fight' to make sure doors are opened for 'more women of color, more trans models, and wider representation of ages and sizes'. Holliday, in arguing that she is the only plus-size model receiving the mainstream attention in the way that she does, misses the point of what critiques like Shackleford's are actually suggesting. Chapter two of this thesis is named '[b] orn to stand out' as Holliday (2017, 2) suggests in her memoir that this is the reason for her success. The implication of that statement is that her look was so unique she could not help but 'stand out' and go on to be the world's first plus-size supermodel. While Holliday does 'stand out' amongst more traditionally plus-size industry models by being significantly larger, it is more likely that her success is based on the other ways that she conforms to idealised beauty norms rather rejects them. Bilge (2013, 413) suggests that intersectionality has undergone a process of whitening where race is no longer the focus and rather than being closely associated with critical race studies, is now widely regarded as the 'brain child of feminism'. Similarly, body positivity's inclusive focus, which is often misrepresented as an intersectional focus, minimises the necessity to acknowledge the different difficulties of fat Black women that cannot be remedied through a movement that is closely focused on the assimilation of white fat women. Like second wave feminism, body positivity encourages the narratives of Sisterhood so that when

someone like Holliday succeeds, she is comfortable enough to suggest that *all* fat women should be happy as she represents all of us. In this context, Crenshaw's (1989, 167) assertion of '[w]hen they enter, we all enter' takes on quite a different meaning.

Assimilation through idealised beauty norms is not a new concept designed and popularised by body positive advocates. Black women were not allowed to participate in the Miss America pageant until 1970 and Vanessa Williams was the first Black woman to win the pageant in 1984. Andrea Shaw (2006, 20) suggests that Black women are fighting against multiple stereotypes but perhaps none are as prevalent than that of the sexless and matronly Mammy. Therefore, Shaw suggests, Black beauty queens must 'mimic white physiology and behaviour' to be deemed 'acceptable' and avoid the exaggerated blackness that accompanies the Mammy stereotype. Julia Starkey's (2009) essay in *Lessons from the Fat-O-Sphere* (whose two main authors are white but who scatter essays written by other fat activists throughout) describes her experiences of being a fat, Black woman and the pressure to look 'presentable'.

> Presenting oneself well, in the best suit, was an important aspect of being the stereotype breakers. In order to have a chance of being taken seriously, you had to look clean and put together from head to foot. Your hair had to be neat (and for women carefully straightened) because frizzy hair made you look like a "bush person". The best way to describe the look is "controlled" (Starkey 2009, 93).

Starkey's description of being 'controlled' speaks to the pressure she feels to conform to specific standards of beauty, much like Shaw's Black beauty queens. Starkey discusses photographs of several generations of her family who have always taken time to match their outfits and make sure they were neatly dressed. She argues that the concern she and her family have about being presentable is a struggle that many Black people face but is particularly difficult for fat Black women as they are constantly fighting against the long-ingrained stereotype of Mammies

(93-4). In addition to the desexualised, degendered and often healthist assumptions about fat women, fat Black women have to navigate additional barriers and caricatures of Black-specific fatness. However, as Crenshaw (1989) reminds us, problems of exclusion should not and cannot be solved by simply including Black women within an already established white structure so, while there may be some crossovers between the experiences of some fat white women and some fat Black women, not critically engaging with the differences and dismantling fat activism in an attempt to build something new means, as a result, body positivity will remain inherently white.

Fatshionista was a space largely dominated by white women and the femme style of clothing popularised on the forum was quite specific, it was often retro, vintage and reminiscent of 1950s and 1960s pin-up fashion. However, Shaw (2006) argues that for fat Black women, exaggerated femininity can sometimes look quite different. What Shaw terms a ghetto fabulous style of dress can be read as a way to reverse the racist stereotypes placed on fat Black women; she describes the clothing as 'highly erotic' and worn to show off the body of the wearer. She also adds that these outfits are often accompanied by hairstyles that are typically seen on white women and indicates this could be in an effort to subvert Eurocentric standards of beauty (23). The ghetto-fabulous style, Shaw argues, can be read as an 'effort to inscribe femininity on the black female body' (24) and reverse the racist impacts of the negative stereotypes placed on Black women by a large proportion society that values white beauty above all else. Shaw asserts that the ghetto fabulous style has been most embraced in working-class cities in North America; the intersectional oppressions of gender, economic wealth and racism she suggests, mean that there is a further displacement from the 'Euro-feminine boundaries' (23) and therefore the pressure to represent femininity becomes more necessary. Unlike ultra-femme styles that are worn by both Black and white women, ghetto fabulous styles immediately evoke 'a blackness with no apologetic constraint', however, unlike femme styles at Fatshionista, ghetto fabulous dress has come to represent 'tastelessness' which Shaw (2005, 147) suggests is based on the aesthetic which connotes a 'disregard for cultural assimilation'. This perceived tastelessness,

Shaw surmises, is likely based on the style's tendency to exaggerate Euro-feminine norms of dress but, unlike femme styles on white women, ghetto fabulous dress is more often worn by Black women to rebuke the suggestion that 'black womanhood is not feminine' (149). That body positivity, and specifically Fatshionista, has been complicit in popularising very specific femme styles almost exclusively on the bodies of white women suggests that the movement is not yet ready to be truly inclusive or 'intersectional' and that rather than creating a space where all modes of fashion on all bodies can be celebrated, popular fat body positivity has further inscribed white standards of beauty onto fat Black bodies. It seems that for fat Black women to be 'included' in body positivity they have to follow the rules Shaw (2006, 20) outlined of the Black beauty queen.

I am aware that I may have inferred that Black women want to be part of a white body positive movement; I want to be clear now and argue that I do not necessarily believe this to be the case. Rather, in an effort to perform anti-racism, it seems to me that white women, at least superficially, want to 'include' Black women in a body positivity they believe is of their own design. However, while this thesis follows the trajectory of body positivity through fat activism, there have been other movements and narratives which call for a renegotiation of normalised beauty standards. While women's liberation and fat activism were both gaining traction in the 1960s and 1970s so was the Black is Beautiful movement which argued that there was an ongoing cultural portrayal of Black people as unattractive and undesirable (Anderson and Cromwell 1977; Camp 2015; Laneri; 2018; Sayej 2019). The Black is Beautiful movement encouraged Black people to shed the ideas of beauty that focused on whiteness and embrace Black-specific beauty – the natural hair movement stemmed from the Black is Beautiful movement and is still very much active in the late 2010s (Banks 2000; Craig 2002). However, Shirley Tate (2010, 195) argues that, despite all that work, the suggestion persists that Black women *want* to adhere to the beauty standards that privilege whiteness because white beauty has become so 'iconic'. This myth likely exists as part of the leftover slave narrative where, in the United States, 'Black women who were lighter-skinned and had features that were associated with mixed progeny (e.g., wavy or straight

hair, White/European facial features) tended to be house slaves and those Black women with darker-skin hues, kinky hair, and broader facial features tended to be field slaves' (Patton 2006, 26). Tate (2010, 196) suggests that this binary of 'Black ugliness/white beauty' has been several centuries in the making which has resulted in any form of aesthetic surgery being performed on Black bodies being viewed as 'wanting to be white', but strongly asserts that many Black women have no interest in 'being or passing as white'. Using the example of Lil' Kim, who received large amounts of criticism in 2008 for her aesthetic surgery, Tate argues even if a Black woman undergoes extensive surgery to change their looks it does not mean that their race or ancestry changes. Tate maintains, '[s]he [Lil Kim] is not passing for anything but herself, a Black woman' (201). When Black women undergo aesthetic surgeries or changes and those changes become a trend – the example Tate uses is 'Black Blonde' – it opens up ideas of beauty as not linear and expands options for new styles and practices. When this happens, Tate argues, the motivations are not based on Black women 'wanting to become white' but rather on there being different 'versionings' of Black beauty (204). So while fat femme style on white women becomes a subversive play with both hyperfemininity and hypersexuality, due to the insistence that white, Eurocentric beauty is a beauty for everyone to aspire to, when Black women alter or change their appearance it is assumed they do not want to subvert or play with beauty as Black women, but they desire to be white. A freedom and assumption of political engagement is afforded to fat white women in a way that fat Black women do not get to participate in. If Black women are not exaggerating their femininity, then they are desexualised, if they are exaggerating, playing or disrupting traditional femininity, then it is not called 'femme' and celebrated on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* (2018), instead, it is mocked in mainstream media. If a Black woman, however, goes 'too far' in her adherence to the Black beauty queen representation of 'acceptable' Blackness, then she accused of abandoning her own ancestry in a desire to fit into white beauty standards. The experiences of fat white femmes and fat Black femmes are not comparable. While some of the struggles faced, such as access to clothing and healthcare may be similar, the multiple stigmas mean that fat Black women are expected to try even harder to assimilate into popularised standards of beauty and body 'liberation' and

even body positivity's goals cannot be met while fat Black women are struggling in ways that fat white women never have to.

While the reality is that fat Black women have to struggle with multiple oppressions, there is still an assumption by white fat activists and body positive advocates that Black women are more likely to be accepted for their fat bodies. This assumption is not just prevalent in grassroot activism, but within fat studies and academia too (Czerniawski 2015; Kulick and Meneley 2005; Schwartz and Brownell 2004). Starkey (2009, 96), explains that she is frustrated when she hears white woman in the fat acceptance community jealously and bitterly suggest that the Black community is more fat positive than 'their' own – especially when these same women have not spoken to fat Black women about their experiences of fatphobia. 'Baby Got Back' a rap song by Sir Mix-A-Lot, is often used to suggest that Black men find fat women more sexually appealing but the part that is most often forgotten is that the beginning verse of the song emphasises that the woman must have an 'itty bitty waist' (96). The exact lyrics of 'Baby Got Back' however, are irrelevant compared to the assumption that Black women are not experiencing fatphobia because certain aspects of Black culture have been celebrated in the mainstream. Starkey explains how she must control not only every aspect of her look but also of her personality, 'when I want to toss a scarf over my messy hair and go grab some milk at the store, when I want to snarl at someone rather than do racism 101 for the umpteenth time' (97) she feels as though she cannot because she will confirm racist stereotypes that Black women are aggressive. So, when white women suggest that 'fat acceptance' is easier for a Black woman, it is a reduction of the complexities and differences of all of her identities. Stephanie Jones (2000, 20) suggests some of these assumptions are made because of the way Black women's style is represented and celebrated.

> I think that the size acceptance movement in the UK often assumes that size is either not an issue for black women, or that it is less of an issue because large black women are seemingly more accepted by their communities. I think it just *appears* to be less of an issue because one is more likely to see

> large black women who look at ease with their bodies and who are wearing clothes that large white women would probably hesitate to purchase, let alone wear out on the street.

Jones (2000, 20) describes the difference between what is acceptable dress in Black communities in comparison to white communities; she suggests that one only has to attend a wedding to see the differences in style. Whereas the clothing some white women might wear to a wedding is more appropriate for what Jones may wear to work, Black women's style at weddings is more flamboyant and detailed. Perhaps as Shaw (2006) suggests, Black women have been expected to reclaim their femininity and sexuality with dress for much longer than white women, which could explain the assumed ease that some fat Black women exhibit through their style, femininity and womanhood in dress. However, LeBesco (2004, 61) argues that when views on fatness in Black communities choose to include voices of Black people, fatness is explained as much more contradictory and inducing of discrimination than the 'utopic' rhetoric of fat women's Blackness that is assumed by white fat acceptance communities. Further, the oppression that fat Black women experience is often confused with poverty or ignorance so, LeBesco (2004) asserts, assuming that fat Black women have an easier time in Black communities is a convenient way to cut them off from the rest of society, and in this case, from body positivity too.

The reputation that both body positivity and fat activism have in mainstream media contradicts some of the examples of Black women's erasure and the centralising of whiteness I have discussed. Rather, there seems to be an understanding that there was a time when body positivity was as inclusive as its current marketing suggests. Yeboah, writing for *Elle* in 2017, discusses finding the body positivity movement online in 2014. Yeboah maintains that at that time body positivity was still fairly 'inclusive' and promoted radical self-acceptance as, she suggests, the re-emergence of body positivity from fat activism stemmed from Black femmes on social media (Yeboah 2017). As the conversations around body positivity became more mainstream Yeboah noticed that they became more focused on white women. She

suggests, '[a]rguably, much like the feminist movement, body positivity has become non-intersectional and prioritises/celebrates the thoughts, feelings, opinions and achievements of white women, with a small number of 'token' people of colour to help fill up the "look at us being diverse!" quota' (Yeboah 2017). Yeboah draws attention to the way that fat Black actor Gabourey Sidibe has been treated in the media, from being referred to as 'Precious' (a character from one of her first acting jobs) to being called 'the most enormous fat Black chick' on Howard Stern's radio show (Breslaw 2014) in comparison to Rebel Wilson who has become somewhat of a media darling and has released her own clothing line with American plus-size brand Torrid (Borovic 2015). Yeboah also highlights the online harassment and body shaming that actor Leslie Jones received on Twitter in 2016; the incident happened around the release of the new *Ghostbusters* (2016) film where body positive advocate Melissa McCarthy was a co-star. Yeboah indicates that none of Jones's co-stars, including McCarthy, immediately came forward to defend and protect Jones which suggests it is not in a celebrity's interest to champion body positivity when it is not centralising white women.

When body positivity is accused of ignoring or diluting the politics of radical fat activism, it suggests that fat activism has many of the desired qualities many of us want for body positivity now. But even the most well-known and circulated text on feminist fat activism evidences some of the white centrality I have focused in this chapter. As Joan Dickenson (1983, 40) points out, Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* ([1978] 2006) only discusses white and middle-class women and completely ignores economics. Dickenson also asserts that it is difficult to trust anyone who uses 'women' when they actually mean 'white women'. Although Dickenson's critique was published in *Shadow on a Tightrope* in 1983, Orbach's ideas are still celebrated in wide-spread media, most recently in 2018 when *Fat is a Feminist Issue* turned forty years old and a heavily publicised article was published by Orbach (2018) for the UK newspaper the *Guardian.* That is not to say that *Shadow on a Tightrope* is a perfect representation of 'intersectional' fat activism. Despite acknowledging that Orbach does not include a critical analysis on race in *Fat is a Feminist Issue,* Dickenson writes (1983, 42), '[m] y racism or homophobia is my

problem and my responsibility, because it hurts people. But my fat renders me a victim, not an oppressor' and goes on to suggest that feminists do not insist Black women bleach their skin or lesbians try to love men, but they do sometimes insist that fat women strive for thinness. To present fat activism as a unified movement without considering the ignorance of racialised oppression is a mistake. Fat activism mirrors not only the problematics of second-wave feminism but more contemporary feminism too. As far as I am able to tell, although I am only in my late-twenties now, fat activism has never had a series of glory days where people of multiple marginalised identities have been heard and able to use fat activism in a way that fits and enhances their specific needs. Fat activism, just like all activist movements, has struggled to find a way to include and listen to people who experience multiple oppressions and, at times, has preferred to present fat people and specifically fat women as one homogenous group.

Of course, *Shadow on a Tightrope* is not cohesive of all that fat activism was and is but there have been other incidents that represent the white feminist tendencies of fat activism. Marilyn Wann, who Cooper (2016) suggests had a significant influence on the popularisation of body positivity proxy of fat activism, published her landmark text *Fat!So: Because You Don't Have to Apologise for Your Size* in 1998 and in it she compares the oppressions she faces as a fat woman to the oppressions of racialised people. Wann (1998, 83) includes a rather lengthy section where she compares the inability of her to change her weight to the inability to change the colour of one's skin colour. The essay includes statements such as: '[i]f I cared about myself, I'd do something about this disgusting pallor. I don't get as much sun as I should', '[t]he white-loss industry offers a variety of cures, although they no longer get away with promising total melanin enhancement. (Too many people have gone through the heartache of white loss, only to regain in their natural lightness in a matter of months),' and '[t]he fashion industry, the advertisers, and the media would have the public believe that only brown-skinned women are beautiful. Call me crazy, but despite everything, I think I look just fine with white skin'. The essay presumably is supposed to be humorous, of course Wann cannot change the colour of her very pale skin and the absurdity of the idea suggests that

to make large efforts to change your body is both futile and laughable. While Wann is talking about her own pale skin, there does not seem to be any critical recognition of the fact that a lot of people do struggle with the colour of their skin and that there is very lucrative 'skincare' market that caters to people who want to lighten their skin. While ignoring that there are entire companies built on the idea that skin could be paler, Wann also centralises the fat white experience and forgets that some people may be encouraged by normative standards of beauty to change both their weight *and* skin colour. And, ten years later Wann makes another mistake that centralises not only the white experience, but the westernised experience too. On Hiroshima Day in 2008 Wann organised a protest which sent 1000 Fat Cranes into the air on a 'peace mission to Japan' in response to the proposal of a Japanese policy that would monitor the waist size of employees, (Cooper 2016, 156). Wann took a symbol of peace that was well-known in Japanese culture, of Sadako Sasaki who died in the Hiroshima atom bomb attack and used it to promote a different message that suggested fat people should make 'peace' with their bodies (Cooper 2016). While Wann (2012) did apologise for this protest four years later in 2012 calling it 'wrong, racist, and culturally appropriative', there is no denying how important Wann has been to popularisation of fat body positivity which means that even her mistakes matter when tracing the history of the movement.

The result of all this history and the mainstream media's preference for picking up white fat women before anyone else means that the same familiar faces reappear in advertising, print and online media. Shackleford (2017) argues the same happens with popular entertainment and names what they call the 'most notable forerunners for high profile body diversity' as: Tess Holliday, Mary Lambert, Adele, Melissa McCarthy, Amy Schumer, Beth Ditto, Christina Hendricks, Brooke Elliot, Lori Beth Denberg, Lena Dunham, Jennifer Lawrence, Kirsty Alley and Rebel Wilson. Shackleford points out that these women all have something in common – their whiteness, and argues that mainstream media does not hold 'femmes of colour' in the same regard they do white women. Throughout my thesis I draw on the memoirs of some well-known body positive advocates, the majority of them are

white: I did not consciously choose to study mainly white women, I chose to pick the memoirs that had been published and distributed around the world for a mainstream audience and the large majority of them are written by white women – likely because the popularity of fat white femmes in mainstream press suggests to publishing houses that books written by these women will sell well. That is not to say women of colour are not writing books, one controversy which highlights the 'popularity' issue arose from Bethany Rutter's 2018 book *Plus+,* published by Ebury, a division of Penguin, which includes photographs of many fat femmes in an effort to celebrate 'all shapes, sizes and aesthetics' but the concept of Rutter's book was recognised by many people, including myself. Rachele Abellar's self-published title *The Little Book of Big Babes* (2015) used the same concept but was published three years earlier and had not garnered as much attention[36]. The importance of this issue lies in the fact that Rutter is white and has used her body positive 'activism' to achieve microcelebrity online, whereas Abellar is Filipino and remains relatively unknown to mainstream body positivity (as of 19 March 2019 Rutter has over 20000 Instagram followers whereas Abellar has 3185). The suggested inclusivity of body positivity has allowed mainstream publishers, television networks and the media in general to extend opportunities to fat white women to satisfy a public demand for diversity while not straying too far away from the culturally accepted norm. The rhetoric of the popularised body positivity movement that suggests women should support each other makes it difficult to criticise this white centrality and be heard. Body positivity is ingrained in fat activism and through a series of mistakes and lack of critical engagement around the differing oppressions of racialised people, a movement has been created which is too far gone to truly be either intersectional or inclusive.

[36] It would have been very easy for me to use Rutter's (2018) book as a visual example of fat femmes in mainstream media – especially in chapter three. However, as I have not been able to acquire a copy of Abellar's (2015) book, I decided to omit both titles from my thesis discussion, not wanting to further celebrate Rutter's book without being able to acknowledge the content of Abellar's.

While it is important to allow activists (and humans) to apologise and learn from their mistakes, it is the mistakes that were made ten, twenty and even fifty years ago by fat activists that influence the way body positive advocates engage with activism in 2019. It is naive to even subtly suggest that the perceived radical politics of fat activism always had intersectionality in mind, even the few incidents I evidence here prove there was not a cohesive understanding of how multiple oppressions could be used to evolve fat activism past a white centrality. It is politically useful to fight for the rights of a unified group of people but in the push for fat rights and acceptance, fat rights became white fat rights. The focus on whiteness in body positivity is not necessarily a dilution of the radical politics of fat activism, rather it is a continuation of the body positive proxy that has always assumed white experience as universal. In a movement like body positivity that contributes to the dismissal and alienation of women of colour, it is disrespectful at least and actively harmful at most to ignore the history of a fat activism that has always struggled to de-centralise whiteness.

6. Health(ism) at Every Size: Body Positivity and the Morality of Health

I have been fat my whole life. When I was in primary school, aged 6 or maybe 7, I was put on my first diet as recommended by a local dietician. While my friends ate sandwiches and crisps at lunch, I would be in the corner of the playground trying to swallow celery and raw green pepper; on lucky days one of my best friends would offer me parts of her lunch and we would throw my 'healthy' food away. I spent the remainder of my school career feeling guilty for being fat. I grew up in the age of the 'obesity epidemic'; you could barely pick up a newspaper without seeing another headline suggesting that children would die before their parents if they did not stop eating. So, after that first diet, I tried many more: Weight Watchers, Slimming World, The South Beach Diet. Every time I would lose weight and my family and friends would congratulate me, but I would quit after a few weeks – I couldn't handle the restriction and I felt miserable every time I dieted.

At around seventeen I stopped visiting my doctor. I had attended an appointment for my usual refill of acne medication, and I thought it had gone well. However, as I began to get ready to leave a doctor who I had trusted for years turned to me and asked, 'so what are we going to do about your weight?' She asked me if I ever wanted children and if I understood the elevated 'risks' associated with being very 'overweight'. I understand now that this is a relatively mild 'telling off' from a GP – fellow fats have experienced much worse in the doctor's office – but for a teenager with self-esteem problems and already carrying the guilt of an imperfect body this was a breaking point. I left the office in tears and never went back to that surgery.

Despite my yo-yo dieting, my avoidance of health professionals and my 'weight', I remained in – as far as I know – good health until my mid-twenties. I remember visiting a doctor for the first time as an adult. I was twenty-two and I was requesting assistance with my depression, which, at that point had become unmanageable. The doctor suggested that I perhaps had a more physical reason for

feeling so low and requested blood tests. The tests all came back fine but I was called back into the GP's office anyway. When I got there, the doctor read through my blood tests with me and then suggested that my depression could be treated with 'healthy' eating. He suggested Slimming World and feeling helpless I agreed. While on Slimming World for what felt like the fortieth time, I began reading about Health at Every Size (HAES) which I had heard about through the blogs of body positive advocates. From what I could understand it sounded like an excellent approach to health. Yes, people can be fat and healthy, I know I am! I abandoned Slimming World and started eating what I wanted when I wanted, and I only exercised when I felt like it.

Four years later, in April 2018, I felt very, very unwell. I made my fourth visit to the doctor in ten years and told them I felt dizzy, nauseous and tired all the time. The doctor I saw was careful with me and suggested that I might be pregnant but wanted to order blood tests just in case. The day after my blood test, the same doctor rung in a mild state of panic. Type 2 diabetes at 26. 'You can manage it', she said, 'I will refer you to our special clinic at the GP and the hospital. Would you like to start medication tomorrow? I can organise it for you'.

This is where my relationship with my health got a little more complicated. For a while I had known I had a problem with binge eating and restriction. I was desperately trying to follow the HAES advice on eating and nutrition in the hope my eating disorder would be cured but it never happened. In May 2018 I was referred to the eating disorder clinic at the hospital where I told a dietician that I was worried about eating, constantly concerned about the damage I was doing to my body. She recommended Slim Fast shakes twice a day[37]*.*

I have been a type 2 diabetic for over a year now. I was concerned about taking insulin, so I decided to attempt to manage my eating disorder and change my diet

[37] The first two out of three ingredients in the shake she suggested were sugar and dextrose (also sugar). Confusing advice for a newly diagnosed diabetic to receive.

and to some extent succeeded as I now take the minimum dose of Metformin[38] and my medical team are happy with my current blood glucose readings. But now I am too scared to loosen the way I eat for even a day in case I become unwell again.

While being treated for a serious metabolic condition and readjusting the way I ate, I lost a significant amount of weight. I am still fat, but I am not as fat as I once was. Before I was diagnosed, I was struggling to walk for any distance, not sleeping well and tiring out easily. I was living the life of someone three times my age because my body could not cope with the life I wanted. Treating my eating disorder, my diabetes and losing weight all helped those issues. There is never a good time to be diagnosed with diabetes but halfway through a PhD exploring body positivity and HAES is perhaps one of the worst. I still do not know how I should feel about my body or my weight loss. I feel like a traitor and I know I have let some people I love down. I have lost friends and know I am not trusted in the small community of fat people I have built around me in York.

When I first started writing this PhD, I was adamant that I did not want to talk about health. Health is not a subject I pretend to be an expert on, and I believed there to be enough nuanced discussions in fat studies without adding my own. However, my mind was changed when, not long after my diagnosis, I decided to read Linda Bacon's Health at Every Size *and was surprised to find it was not the radical book I had been led to believe. Lots of fat activists and body positivists will tell you that health should not matter, in the same paragraph those same people will tell you that they are healthy though. They have perfect blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol numbers. That is great for them, of course, I would not wish ill health on anyone. But when I am at a conference and I see the word 'diabetes' flash up on a screen without proper context, or I see that Tess Holliday is making fun of a nurse in her memoir because she has to insist several times she does not have diabetes, I am unsure what that means for me. If not having diabetes is something to be proud of, something to write on your blog posts or share in your*

[38] A diabetes drug used to help with insulin resistance.

memoir or to even to tell The Guardian *about, then does that mean I should be ashamed of my diagnosis? And, since I cannot eat carbohydrates without my body having an extreme response, is it even possible for me to be healthy 'at every size'?*

Growing up during the time of the 'obesity epidemic' I was reminded almost daily by both the media and the people around me that my body represented my lack of health. News media in westernised press seemed to be constantly churning out articles that reminded me that my body represented my imminent death. Natalie Boero (2012, 41) reports that *The New York Times* published 751 articles on obesity from 1990 to 2001. Since the millennium the moral panic over 'obesity' has only intensified, Michelle Obama's cause as First Lady was to tackle 'childhood obesity' with the Let's Move Campaign (Let's Move 2017) and childhood obesity narratives in the UK followed the same trajectory (Carvel 2006; Chand 2017). In May 2019, the city of Leeds was celebrated for successfully 'lowering' childhood obesity (Berry 2019) by training early years workers and young families in in wellbeing, nutrition and exercise, but the panic surrounding obesity does not stop with children. At the time of writing on 10 May 2019, *The Guardian* have published 9 articles on obesity in the month of May – that is almost one article a day – and searching 'obesity' on *The Guardian* website brings up a specific page dedicated to the 'issue' with 2396 search results (*The Guardian* 2019). Discussions around health and medical care are constantly at the centre of anything related to fatness or 'obesity' and these narratives are often uncritical of stigma that may impact the healthcare of fat people. For example, Sondra Solovay (2001) reports that of over 1300 doctors surveyed in a study on medical fatphobia, 17 percent of them did not want to perform pelvic exams on fat people. The NHS page on obesity (which is listed as a 'condition') explains that a BMI between 25 and 29.9 means a person is 'overweight', between 30 and 39.9 is 'obese' and 40 or above (consequently my current BMI) is severely obese (NHS n.d.). The website then helpfully goes on to explain that 'obesity' effects 1 in 4 adults and 1 in 5 children and lists some of the 'serious health conditions' that can be caused by obesity such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, metabolic syndrome, coronary heart disease

and cancer. The 'health condition' portion of the site then reminds us that obesity shortens life expectancy by 3 to 10 years 'depending on how severe it is' (NHS n.d.).

'Obesity' narratives are complex, and much work has been written to counter the moral panic around Britain's 'obesity epidemic'; Paul Campos et al. (2006, 55) argue that there are limited scientific claims to support the representation of obesity as a health 'crisis' and suggest that the panic around 'obesity' is driven by cultural and political factors. Cooper (2010b) asserts that fat is not the problem but rather cultural productions of fatphobia and Boero (2012) proposes that the 'obesity' crisis mimics similar moral panics of the past and is perpetuated by government agencies and media as a form of social control. Despite these counter narratives, health is often central to arguments that disagree with nuanced representations of fat people and as Deb Burgard (2009a, 42) suggests, there is 'at least some self-consciousness about the impoliteness of expressing blatant revulsion about fat' but most people are quite willing to support the stereotype of fatness signifying ill health'. Understanding the context in which health is discussed in relation to fatness in westernised culture is important but is not the focus of this chapter. Rather, what interests me is how body positive advocates discuss their own health using concepts adopted from the fat activist movement. Fat activists often take a critical approach to the individualising of health and are critical of narratives that equivalate fat with good health. For example, Cooper (2016, 3) in the introduction *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* makes clear her position on fat and health,

> I am not going to explore whether or not fat people are healthy, the prime concern in the world of obesity, although I am very much interested in how fat people cope with being treated as unhealthy. Neither will I explore whether or not fat people are a drain on resources, a factor in global warming, a symptom of over-consumption or a product of obesogenic environments. People preoccupied with how fat people can be caused, managed and prevented will not find much about it here.

My interests and aims are similar, although based within a body positivity context. Through my research, both for my PhD and my own health, I have come to understand one of the ways fat people 'cope with being treated as unhealthy' (Cooper 2016, 3) is through a Health at Every Size (HAES) approach to health.

My own relationship with HAES is quite messy, I tried in vain to adopt the approaches I read about through the work of fat activists and body positive advocates but could not make it work for me; my underlying eating disorder always tripped me up. However, there is conflicting information about what a HAES approach actually is. Cooper details how HAES began with fat activists 'talking and organising around their dismal experiences of health care' and references to HAES-like approaches can be found as far back as The Fat Underground's 1973 *Fat Liberation Manifesto* (Fishman 1998). As Cooper details (2016, 176), in 2010 the concept of HAES was trademarked by ASDAH (Association for Size Diversity and Health) in order to prevent weight loss companies from appropriating HAES in order to make a profit. The Association for Size Diversity and Health's website reports that to use the Health at Every Size or HAES trademarks, services must adhere to five basic principles which are: weight inclusivity, health enhancement, respectful care, eating for well-being and life-enhancing movement (ASDAH n.d.). The result of trademarking HAES, however, meant that it no longer belonged to the activists who worked to build it but rather professionals, or as Cooper (2016, 176) calls them, 'self-appointed moral guardians'. The claiming of HAES by health professionals has led to some confusion in how body positive advocates interact with health while loosely relying on work done by both health practitioners and HAES activists. There seems to be an inference that fat body positivity advocates must be in 'good' health whilst simultaneously being fat, meaning that there have been disagreements within fat body positivity when 'icons' of the movement have lost weight through means separate from what is understood about HAES. Therefore, using key HAES texts I ask: How is HAES constructed in popular discourses of body positivity? How might a close reading of the meanings of HAES for advocates of body positivity tease out some of the problematics and challenges of health within the body positive movement? And finally, what does a HAES

approach to fat specific body positivity mean for those of us who have intentionally lost weight or changed diets?

HAES ideas are thus not new: ideas were mooted as early as the 1960s (Louderback 1967) and there was a small burst of publishing in the 1980s that encouraged an intuitive eating approach to health which sometimes resulted in weight loss as a side effect (Bennett and Gurin 1982; Groger 1986; Polivy and Herman 1983; Schwartz 1982). However, the book I chose to focus on in this chapter is Linda Bacon's *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Your Weight* ([2008] 2010), for three important reasons. The first is its comprehensiveness. Bacon's book is one of five books with HAES in the title that has been published over the last fifteen years, the others are: Ralph Burton's *Health at Every Size: Practical Steps to REVIVE Your Health* (2015), Ellen R. Glovsky' *Wellness Not Weight: Health at Every Size and Motivational Interviewing* (2013), Erin Fowler's *Abundance of Health: Health at Every Size* (2018) and Sarah McGovern's *Intuitive Eating: A Beginner's Guide to Intuitive Eating and Enjoying Health at Every Size* (2015). However, Bacon's book is by far the most substantiated at 326 pages in comparison to the others which each all except Glovsky's have no more than fifty pages. Not only is the book's scope extensive, but it is also very popular, which is my second reason. This popularity is demonstrated by its status as 'number one' text when I search for literature on HAES on Amazon, Google and Google Scholar; and its appeal on Goodreads: as of 28 April 2019 Bacon's book has 2055 ratings in comparison to Burton's 16, Glovsky's 5, Fowler's 0 and McGovern's 7, with a similar trend on Amazon.co.uk. Thirdly, Bacon's ideas are expanded by the HAES website which she manages (HAES Community n.d.), thus extending the scope of her influence.

Understandings of HAES are not easy to define and because of its activist origins HAES is often left to interpretation. As I imply in the autobiographical introduction to this chapter, I garnered my ideas of HAES from multiple cultural sources, and even though I was aware of the foundational nature of Bacon's text I did not read the book until quite recently. This method of absorbing HAES ideas is common, and so the idea takes on multiple meanings. When I first read *Health at Every Size*

([2008] 2010) I was surprised to find it was not as radical as I had first believed. Yet the ideas promoted by health professionals like Bacon are interpreted as authoritative canon – even though the work of these professionals does not always correlate with other popular or activist understandings of HAES. Nevertheless, one aspect of HAES that body positive advocates and HAES professionals agree on is outlined on the UK HAES website's 'about' page:

> Many people first come across HAES® as an alternative to dieting. And what an alternative! Rather than pursuing weight change, HAES® advocates help people focus on health-gain and body respect. There are huge benefits for quality of life, sense of wellbeing and physiological outcomes that come from making peace with your body, not least having a healthy relationship with food and enjoying being active (Health at Every Size n.d.).

The first sentence here is particularly important as the idea that diets do not work emerges time and time again within fat body positivity circles. Megan Crabbe, author of *Body Positive Power* (2017), wrote a memoir about her struggles with dieting and the quest to be thin. Kirby and Harding offer more anecdotal evidence in *Lessons from the Fat-o-Sphere* when they suggest that diets may work in the short-term; Harding (Kirby and Harding 2009, 8) lost 20 per cent of her body weight twice but regained it all back over the course of three years. Lonie McMichael (2013, 98) argues that accepting diets do not work is actually part of a recovery process, drawing on Harding (2009) she suggests it can be difficult for many fat people to accept that dieting is rarely a feasible option as first they have to accept that they will never be the thin person they want to be. Even Oprah Winfrey, although not necessarily a body positive advocate, is an influential celebrity woman who has been fat and has publicly struggled coming to terms with her weight; telling *People* in 1991 that she had been dieting since 1977 and the reason she failed is because diets do not work (quoted in Bernstein and St. John 2009, 82).

These anti-diet stories are supported by HAES practitioners (Burgard 2009b; Gaesser 2009; Aphramor 2009) and Bacon ([2008] 2010, 47) spends a large portion

of her book arguing that traditional low-calorie diets do not work. She asserts, '…here's the thing: Not one study has ever shown that diets produce long-term weight loss for any but a tiny number of dieters. Not one'. Bacon specifically cites the Women's Health Initiative, which found that of 20000 women over a fifteen year period of trying low-fat diets with a calorie deficit, there were almost no changes in weight at the conclusion of the study and some participants waist measurements had actually increased (Bacon [2008] 2010, 47; Women's Health Initiative n.d.). Bacon also cites a smaller study where a group of women with a BMI greater than 30 but lower than 45 were asked to complete questionnaires focusing on their health status and were then split into two smaller groups. One group followed a low-calorie diet and the other was tutored in a HAES approach to eating and exercise. Bacon reports that, '[t]he HAES program won hands down, showing phenomenally better results than the conventional diet. Among the many great outcomes, these women no longer struggled with food issues' (Bacon [2008] 2010, 167). The dieters remained restrictive eaters which Bacon asserts 'is just what diets teach us to do' (167). Bacon also suggests that the study shows that when left 'unrestrained', women could manage their 'food issues' much more successfully (167). And when finishing the 'diets do not work' section of her book she writes, '[a]nd here's the final nail in the dieting coffin: The dieters' self-esteem plummeted while the HAES women grew more empowered. It didn't surprise me: Happier, healthier people feel more empowered and make better choices' (169).

The idea that diets do not work is backed up by anecdotal evidence and scientific studies (Bacon [2008] 2010; Boero 2012; Bruno 2016; Crabbe 2017; Kirby and Harding 2009; McMichal 2013). However, the interpretation and perhaps 'wooliness' of HAES has led to some interesting assertions from body positive advocates. LeBesco (2004, 112) writes in detail about a concept she calls 'the will to innocence' which is undertaken by assimilationist fat activists as a response to the anti-fat propaganda in mainstream circulation. These specific fat activists retort to the shame narratives that are often accompanied by the moral panic of the 'obesity epidemic' with a 'rhetoric of innocence' which seeks to absolve fat people of the 'blame' for their fat bodies. Using what LeBesco calls a 'scientific rhetoric', fat

activists can counter the mainstream ideas of fat being inherently unhealthy and due to lack of willpower by citing specific 'science' that argues fat is not a moral choice, but a biological inevitability (115). For example, later in this chapter I discuss in detail the HAES concept of a 'set weight point' which is the weight a person's body may settle at when they are successfully following HAES. LeBesco argues that the fat body has 'undergone a transformation in some minds' with the 'discovery' of a fat gene which found some people are biologically predisposed to 'fat' and are not necessarily carrying 'high' BMI scores due to laziness and lack of will (115). She queries whether this is a useful transformation for fat people and is very critical of the will to innocence. Within the context of body positivity, I suggest that while being fat does not carry the moral implications it once did, a disregard of HAES or simply being 'unhealthy' makes a fat person a moral failure.

BMI is one metric that is used by health professionals to gauge the health of individual people. Boero (2012, 131) asserts that HAES professionals critique the use of BMI within the context of 'good health' suggesting that correlations between obesity and poor health are more complex and can be influenced by both social and biological factors. There are though, other 'numbers' that can indicate 'good health' among individuals. When discussing fat people who take a HAES approach to their wellbeing and health, McMichael (2013, 169) argues that HAES has a longer term 'positive outcome' on other health indicators such as blood glucose, blood pressure, heart rate and cholesterol. The idea of 'good health' numbers seems to have been adopted by many fat body positive advocates. For instance, on her intuitive eating journey Kelsey Miller (2016, 194) found there were 'other numbers she could enjoy'. She reported that, '[i]n the few months since I'd quit dieting and begun a regular fitness routine, my blood pressure had normalized, my resting heart rate had dropped, and my body fat percentage had taken a serious hit'. And, Hanne Blank (2012, 54) suggests, '[w]ith the exception of things that can be measured objectively—your blood pressure, for instance, your blood sugar level, and so on—everything else is an opinion, an interpretation, or a judgment'. The will

to innocence is present in Wann's self-love themed fat activist book *Fat!So?.* Very near the beginning of the book[39] Wann (1998, 10) lets her reader know,

> Being fat outweighed everything else about me. I am five-feet four-inches tall, and I weigh 270 pounds. My blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugars—the three best health indicators—are all normal. I have no history of serious illness. I don't smoke. I exercise and eat my vegetables.

Wann's assurances to readers of her book about her health use both the scientific and innocence rhetoric discussed by LeBesco (2004). Wann tells us her exact weight and counters that number with the confirmation that the 'three best health indicators' are 'normal'. Wann's fat body cannot carry the immorality of an 'unhealthy' person as she has scientific evidence to suggest otherwise, we are also told that she eats her vegetables suggesting that there may not be a social issue with her weight either. Wann's approach to her fat body takes the 'transformation' route that LeBesco suggests. Fat, for Wann, is not a moral failure or a representation of a lack of will power, it is biologically predetermined.

Since the publication of *Fat!So?* (Wann 1998), Wann has criticised her desire to value health within a social justice movement, '[a]s a fat activist, I often want to say, "But I'm healthy! Look, I eat my veggies and exercise. While it's fun to flout stereotypes, social justice is unacceptably precarious if it depends on good behaviour, or on access to other flavors of unearned privilege"' (quoted in McMichael 2013, 275). However, much of the body positivity movement's more 'political' ideas come from this kind of self-love fat activism and while the idea that one must perform health to be valued did not necessarily start with Wann, it did not end there either. In conversation with Murray, Cooper proclaims that people who transgressed the concepts of the will to innocence 'have become queered as a

[39] Wann (1998, 32) mentions her other 'good health' indicators again 22 pages later, '[m] y blood pressure, blood sugars and cholesterol levels are all normal. I feel great, and I weigh 270 pounds. I'm living proof that you don't have to be thin to be healthy'.

joke' (Cooper and Murray 2012, 135) and deemed 'bad fatties'. Bad fatties are fat people who do not work hard to become thin, they are often presented as a caricature in mainstream media as a grotesque figure who does not exercise and eats to excess. The bad fatty is the opposite of the 'good fatty' who 'is an apologetic fat person who takes "care" of themselves (read: well groomed, fashionable, and active) and acknowledges that they could and should be pursuing lifestyle choices that are socially palatable' (Pausé 2015, n.p.). The bad fatty is a joke within fat activism but for good reason, the pressure to maintain a good fatty approach to health within body positivity is extremely noticeable in the memoirs and blogs of fat body positive advocates. The good fatty is a person that society is willing to humanise differently to bad fatties as they are making strides to change the fate of their 'poor health'. Wann's 'eat right and exercise' approach to health (Wann 1998, 61) has manifested into an almost saintly performance of health within body positivity. However, Burgard (2009a, 51) disagrees and in a in a list of 'myths and realities' about HAES, suggests that the idea the HAES model 'perpetuates the oppression of fat people by defining healthier people or people who exercise as the "good" fat people while condemning people who are sedentary or in poorer health' is a myth. She argues that rather than exercise being a moral imperative, HAES tries to find safe and accessible ways for people of all sizes to move their bodies. That is perhaps one way that HAES operates but from my research I have found that body positive advocates frequently proclaim that they are healthy; this can sometimes be done by assuring readers that their health indicators are within what is perceived to be a good or normal range or the distinct way they talk about healthy eating and exercise (Blank 2012; Harding and Kirby 2009; Holliday 2017; Kinzel 2012; Miller 2016; Wann 1998).

Despite Burgard, Bacon and many other HAES advocates reiterating that diets do not work, large parts of Bacon's *Health at Every Size* is dedicated to diet tips which Bacon calls 'tricks' (Bacon [2008] 2010, 205). Although Bacon does include the disclaimer, 'These tricks are intended to support you in feeling fullness and stopping when you're satisfied…' (205), the intended goal is to reduce the amount of calories consumed. Therefore, the tricks are similar to diet tips that many

seasoned dieters will be familiar with. For example, Bacon suggests keeping a 'journal [which] can help you recognize hunger and fullness and identify patterns between eating your physical state, emotions, thoughts, and moods' (199). She explains that this is not the kind of food journal that diet plans usually prescribe which would help you understand quantities of food in a bid to help you control the amount of food you eat, instead, '[t]he goal is to explore whether the timing, quantity, and quality of foods you eat are truly satisfying and to figure out how to make your eating habits more enjoyable' (199). Followers of HAES are also encouraged to, 'eat off smaller plates' (205) in a bid to eat smaller portions and feel 'as satisfied' and 'choose high-volume food' as 'dozens of studies show that you eat the same volume of food at a meal, as opposed to the same number of calories' (206). Despite Burgard (2009a) and Bacon ([2008] 2010) arguing that HAES is not only for people who are medically 'overweight', all these tips seem to suggest that a person who is interested in incorporating HAES into their diet is overeating. The focus of the tips is on controlling what a person may eat in an effort to reduce their calories: the smaller plate 'trick' infers that a person must be overeating and the introduction of a small plate will reduce the volume of food they include in their meal portioning. Bacon ([2008] 2010, 83) also includes a section on 'foods to avoid', suggesting that people following HAES may want to avoid fat.

> Another nutrient that affects your weight regulation system is fat. Fat consumption has clearly increased over the years: Americans ate an average of 523 more calories in 2003 than in 1970. Interestingly, while the *percentage* of fat in our diet has dropped (given our overall increase in calories) much of the fat we're eating today is *added* fat, as opposed to naturally occurring fat in foods. Average consumption of added fat jumped from 53 pounds per person in the 1970s to over 74 pounds in the year 2000, a 40 percent surge.

Bacon connects an increased consumption of foods rich in fat with increased weight gain. Considering she consistently reminds her reader that *Health at Every Size* ([2008] 2010) is not a diet or weight-loss book, it seems strange to suggest that

HAES followers limit their fat intake as it has been correlated with increased weight gain. Further, the suggestion to limit fat in a 'healthy' diet as much as possible, is reminiscent of many popular diets in westernised culture. For example, in the UK Slimming World supports a low-fat approach to eating. In 2000 Slimming World helped develop the first NHS weight management referral scheme which enabled health professionals to refer patients to Slimming World groups in an effort to 'manage their weight' (Slimming Worldc). Slimming World uses an approach to 'healthy eating' called 'food optimising' which helps dieters to 'enjoy delicious, satisfying, healthy meals made with everyday ingredients' (Slimming Worlda). The diet encourages 'filling up' on 'free foods' which tend to be foods low in fat but high in protein and carbohydrates (lean meat, eggs, fish, pasta, potatoes fruit and vegetables). The NHS website also asserts '[o] besity is generally caused by consuming more calories, particularly those in fatty and sugary foods' (NHSb). While Slimming World and the NHS both support a 'balanced' diet which suggests that foods high in fat could be included in a healthy diet in moderation, Bacon outwardly suggests that HAES followers should *avoid* fatty foods. Bacon's language is thus much more rule-based than that of either Slimming World or the NHS and sounds, at least from my perspective, much more like a diet than either of the other programmes.

Bacon is also a proponent of intuitive eating – even for diabetics (Bacon and Matz 2010) – and like HAES, despite being trademarked, intuitive eating does not have one singular approach. Rather, it revolves around the idea that calorie counting is not a healthful way to eat and a person should instead listen to their body and determine what they eat based on what their body tells them. I first heard about intuitive eating from body positivity advocate Kelsey Miller (2016, 66) who, when searching for new diets to help her lose weight, found the way of eating through search-engine recommendations. Yet, for Miller, 'intuitive eating is not a diet' and the goal, Miller explains, is to heal your relationship with food and to end binging and restriction cycles.

> It took two weeks. Two weeks of teaching myself permission to eat carbohydrates, and my brain got the message. There was no need to hoard it and no one would take it away. I could eat scallops on a bed of sautéed spinach for dinner and enjoy every bite. There was no need to fear that it would be only lean fish and greens from here on out. Learning that, not just in my mind but also in my body, made pasta and the scallops both so much more delicious. I could finally eat them both with a sense of calm. I could pick up my fork and put it down, push the plate aside and take it back. I could get second helpings or I could leave whatever I didn't want on the plate (Miller 2016, 91).

Miller's understanding of intuitive eating is that you should allow yourself to eat the foods you crave today and teach yourself to understand that food you do not will always be there tomorrow if you should want it. This approach is supposed to remove morality from foods in an effort to prevent guilt-related binging. However, the idea of weight loss is still looming around this rhetoric of intuitive eating and when having some doubts Miller is reminded by her personal trainer, '*[d]iets* are about weight loss. This is about changing your relationship with food, remember? Weight loss is a natural side effect if you have excess weight to lose, and we welcome that' (Miller 2016, 170). Towards the end of the book Miller admits, 'I wasn't trying on my skinny clothes yet, but my wardrobe had nearly doubled as I began to fit into my slightly-less-fat clothes. It was such a subtle shift that at first it barely registered. When it did start to sink in, I actively tried not to get too excited about it' (194). Miller writes that when she allowed herself to feel excited about her weight loss her anxiety reappeared which caused her to gain weight until she began following the intuitive eating protocol again. This narrative of weight-loss as a happy, accidental outcome is persistent in not only Miller's writing but many intuitive eating and HAES approaches to health too.

Both Miller's and Bacon's approaches to eating suggest that after following intuitive eating plans for a while a person's body will become accustomed to 'craving' 'healthy' (fat-free) food. Bacon assumes that once food becomes a pleasurable

experience rather than one filled with guilt or shame, HAES followers will stop 'triggering' their drive to eat (Bacon [2008] 2010, 195) and they will settle into a 'healthy' weight for their body size. If a fat person is eating fewer calories (in low fat food) than they expend in a day and are still not losing weight, this contributes to that particular fat person's image as a good fatty and solidifies their 'innocence' within the context of medicalised 'obesity'. This is not a new idea. In 2004, Wendy Shanker ([2004] 2006, 1-2) insisted,

> I don't sit around in my jammies eating bonbons all day. I go to the gym four or five times a week. I count my proteins and carbohydrates, and usually record what I eat in a little notebook at the end of the day. I follow the latest medical news and research new ideas. I go to the doctor to stay on top of my blood pressure, cholesterol, and triglycerides. I haven't stopped trying to finesse my body into a shape that would make life easier for me and simpler for society to accept.

Early expressions in fat positive spaces of dismissal towards 'unhealthy' fat people have been solidified in a more contemporary body positivity movement and are easily traceable through some of the popular body positive memoirs. In 2012, Kinzel (2012, 3) writes,

> Furthermore, I adore cooking and refuse to keep anything less than real butter in my house. I eat very little meat but not for moral or ideological reasons; I just dislike preparing it. My diet consists primarily of fresh vegetables and whole grains, and I have a serious weakness for good cheese. I keep a jar of bacon fat in my refrigerator and I occasionally use it to cook big leafy greens, because big leafy greens do best with a bit of bacon fat. I exercise; I have a gym membership and I use it. I take the stairs at work five or six times a day, but only because I am too impatient to wait for the elevator. By the tests and non-BMI numbers doctors use to measure such things, I am healthy.

And in 2016, Whitney Way Thore (2016, 174) writes about an incident with a feeder where she adamantly denies eating 'unhealthily' all the time,

> Boo Boo and I were starving; neither of us had eaten at the wedding, so we were giddy over the mashed potatoes, meat loaf, and broccoli casserole we'd happened upon at midnight. When Matt texted me and asked what I was eating, I set him a picture.
>
> *Mmm. I bet you love to eat that Southern cooking,* he replied. I responded honestly and without thinking.
>
> *Actually, I rarely eat food like this. I'm sure I eat waaaaay healthier than my figure would cause you to believe.*

Then in 2017, Tess Holliday (2017, 61) published in her memoir, 'As a model I get asked a lot of skincare tips and I always say that the best things you can do are eat a healthy, balanced diet and drink lots of water'. Whether it is a HAES or intuitive approach to eating, the appearance of eating a healthy diet has become of great importance to fat people who are also fat public figures. Shanker, Kinzel, Thore and Holliday have all had some success as writers or body positive celebrities and it is not a coincidence that each of these women fall into the category of the 'good fatty' when it comes to their diet. In contemporary culture fat women are permitted to be fat providing they are not over-eating and it is even better if they can prove they are eating less than a thin person. However, LeBesco (2004, 114) argues that the insistence that fat people eat as much or less than thin or average sized people 'drains pro-fatness rhetoric of its power'. So while Bacon's inference is that people who do not know how to eat healthily can adopt her tricks and lose weight, LeBesco argues that this does a disservice to fat people who understand healthy eating and food pyramids but eat in a way that encourages weight gain anyway (133). An approach to healthy eating has become an important factor in the assimilationist activism of body positivity where fat people may be celebrated but

only if they have exhausted all methods of 'healthy' eating that may allow them to lose weight.

The third duty of the good fatty, after having 'good health' and eating 'healthily', is the ability or will to exercise. The claim that *Health at Every Size* ([2008] 2010) is not a diet plan is made several times throughout Bacon's book, however, Bacon also assures us that HAES is not an exercise plan either. Bacon calls a HAES approach to exercise 'active living' (217) and her suggestions will sound familiar to those of us who have subscribed to weight loss programmes: '[i]t means taking the stairs instead of the elevator, raking the leaves yourself instead of recruiting a neighbourhood child to do it or using a leaf blower, or parking at a distant spot instead of circling the parking lot looking for the closet space' (217) and she encourages people to 'walk to a different floor or neighboring building to use the restroom', 'set challenges for yourself: How quickly can you get from your office to the lunchroom' and '[u]se an old-fashioned push mower for lawn work' (218). The inference of these exercise tricks, much like the diet tricks, are that the majority of HAES followers may be under-exercising rather than over-exercising which casually connects under-exercising with over-eating and weight gain.

For a book that supposedly does not focus on weight loss, there is a surprising section in *Health at Every Size* that refers to unborn children of dieting mothers as 'couch potatoes' (Bacon [2008] 2010, 55) which contradicts a statement she makes later in the book where she encourages her readers to 'be confident in your right to exercise. Stand up to people who ridicule you and let them know that *they* are the ones with the problem' (222). Being comfortable enough to call people who do not enjoy exercise 'couch potatoes' whilst simultaneously encouraging other people to stand up to those who ridicule them suggests that Bacon, whether consciously or not, believes bad fatties who do not engage in exercise *do* deserve to be ridiculed. It seems, that according to what is written in *Health at Every Size* ([2008] 2010), fat people who exercise are deserving of the rhetoric of innocence and if fat people start walking further to use the bathroom and using an old-fashioned lawn-mower then they are good fatties who deserve to be treated well and avoid ridicule.

The moralisation of exercise, just like the moralisation of a 'healthy' diet has ebbed over into the body positivity movement. For example, Hanne Blank's book titled *The Unapologetic Fat Girls Guide to Exercise and Other Incendiary Acts* carries many good fatty instigations of the movement.

> I also exercise a lot. You heard me right. I exercise. Frequently. Five or six days a week, most weeks. Sometimes seven. Once a day. Or sometimes twice. Occasionally three times, but I reserve that sort of silliness for weekends and vacations, because who has time to go swimming *and* for a nice long walk *and* ride bikes during the workweek? Sometimes I exercise energetically, sometimes lackadaisically, sometimes joyously, sometimes meditatively, and sometimes with a virtuosic and well-honed grumpiness that puts even my eighteen-year-old cat to shame (Blank 2012, 2).

And, in her memoir Holliday (2017, 277) also discusses her experiences of various types of exercise,

> At the time I was seeing a personal trainer three times a week but why should I divulge that just because someone is fat-shaming me? In truth I made peace with exercise when I made the decision to take the pressure off myself. If I don't want to go to the gym, I won't. Instead I'll take my kids to Disneyland and walk a half dozen miles while enjoying the park. Believe it or not, this fat girl does get her cardio – but not at the demand of trolls. You can say what you like, but I'll do it my away.

Additionally, in *Lessons from the Fat-o-sphere,* writing in the third person Kate Harding (Harding and Kirby 2009, 19), explains how she began to understand the meaning behind a 'runner's high'.

> One morning she went out wearing several layers of clothing (given how notoriously bad she is at dressing her Floridian body for the actual weather,

> this is itself kind of amazing) and instead of feeling frozen, she felt invigorated. She wanted to jump up and down. She wanted to spin around in dizzy circles. She wanted to walk really fast to her destination.
>
> And then she was passed by a jogger. And something in her head just clicked: This is why people jog. They do it for the exhilarating rush, for the thrill of moving through space under their own power. The previously elusive concept of "runner's high" finally made sense.

Bacon, Blank, Holliday and Harding are all alluding to good fatty status without explicitly acknowledging the concept. The intention, I assume, is to promote the idea that fat people can and do enjoy exercise which works to debunk some of the negative stereotypes about fat people that suggest they are lazy and inactive out of choice. That fat people can exercise – even three times a day (Blank 2012, 2) – solidifies the innocence of the good fatty and allows them to assimilate while being forgiven for their fat bodies as they are engaging in behaviours that have been culturally determined to help people lose weight. So, even if the good fatties remain fat, their 'condition' can be attributed to a medical issue rather than a social issue thus releasing Blank, Holliday and Harding from the comparisons to popularised caricatures of the slovenly fat woman.

There is an assumption in *Health at Every Size* ([2008] 2010) that all bodies have the ability to participate in exercise and that movements can be modified so that all people can engage in exercise routines. But not all types of exercise and physical movement are available to every person and every body. Bacon suggests that active living is possible for all people of varying mobilities, she recommends 'chair dancing' for people in wheelchairs as she has recently had a great time 'rocking out' with some friends (Bacon [2008] 2010, 220). The implication of this statement is that people do not use their wheelchairs to aid their limited mobility but are rather hindered by the confines of the wheelchair itself. Suggesting and expecting 'chair dancing' from wheelchair users as though people who use wheelchairs all have similar abilities alienates people who do not have that range of movement.

Additionally, considering the weight loss narrative throughout this 'non-diet' book, this notion suggests that minimising a person's body is more important than considering the pain and difficulty of engaging in any exercise – even with the support of a wheelchair.

Just as body positive advocates have mimicked ideas of HAES in the contexts of healthy eating and enjoying exercise, it follows that the lack of acknowledgment for people of varying abilities has leaked over into the body positivity movement too. Jes Baker's memoir is peppered with small sections she calls 'The Fat People: *Do All the Things!* Challenge'. Below is number three:

> I'm not even going to dignify the idea that fat people shouldn't ride bikes by speculating as to why that might be. Instead, I'm just going to talk about how much I love Tuscon, and bike riding. Guys I fucking love both of these things a lot.
> I used to ride a bicycle everywhere, and didn't even have a car for years. So fuck you, haters. I love bicycle riding more than I love a lot of things, and I'm not quitting anytime soon. Oh yeah. And I totally ride bikes in miniskirts. No big deal.
> **Your challenge:** Rent a bike from a bike shop or bike-share program in your city, buy your own, or dust off that old two-wheeler from the past. Strap a helmet on and get riding! (Baker 2015, 43)

The assumption made by Baker is that a person's only barrier to riding a bike are the 'haters' that she mentions, however, Baker is a smaller fat person and perhaps while it is fairly easy for her to rent or even buy a bike, for people with larger bodies, that is not the case and it seems she may not have considered this. For example, in early episodes of Thore's reality television show *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, after being diagnosed as prediabetic she decides to take up bike-riding (*My Big Fat Fabulous Life* 2015). During the episode Thore has to have a bike that is built for her specific 380lb proportion as she exceeds the weight limit of most bikes. Even with a specialised bike, Thore struggles and an episode in a later series shows Thore

explaining, 'with this bike ride, every single time I pedal it's uncomfortable, it's painful, it hurts, and it doesn't get any easier, because of my ergonomics, because of my body, because of this skin, this fat' (*My Big Fat Fabulous Life* 2016)[40]. Suggesting that fat people can do everything that thin people can and reducing physical embodiment to weight alone is destructive to a social justice movement like fat activism which claims to campaign for equity among people of all body types. However, these ideas and the will to innocence find a home within fat body positivity, whose advocates in one breath preach self-love and in another perform the duties of the good fatty because their able-bodies allow them to. Implying fat bodies are capable of everything thinner bodies are, creates a narrative that fat people *should* be performing the same exercise behaviours as thin people regardless of whether that fat person finds exercising enjoyable or exhilarating. Bacon ([2008] 2010, 222) suggests that HAES followers 'ditch the self-limiting attitude' thus affirming that fat people are only restrained by their own self-doubt. The fat people who do exercise and eat healthily are overcoming their self-limiting attitude and should receive praise from HAES advocates and health professionals. Fat people in 'good health' are to be celebrated and treated better than bad fatties as the habits of the good fatty leave them truly 'innocent' from their fat bodies.

While Thore did find biking difficult, with the financial cushioning of a multi-series TLC show and the profits of a small company, she was able to buy a bike that suited her body. However, Bacon ([2008] 2010, 225) seems to ignore economic restrictions and suggests that HAES followers 'eat real food' as real food comes from nature, not from a box and processed food is 'generally unhealthier'. HAES is marketed by Bacon as being accessible for people of all sizes while simultaneously assuming that fat people are paying other people to do their yard work, or indeed

[40] My supervisor has recently suggested to me that this episode sounds like an anti-fat comedy. *My Big Fat Fabulous Life,* at least for reality television, is a fairly nuanced representation of what life as a fat woman can be like. Unlike shows that focus on weight-loss or immobility, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* carries more overt 'body positive' messaging. While early episodes of the show do follow Thore trying to lose weight, later episodes show her skiing, dating, teaching dance classes and motivational speaking and thus humanise Thore in a way that I have rarely seen on contemporary television.

that they even have gardens – I do not! There is an assumption that all people are making a 'choice' to eat processed food over food that is unprocessed with little consideration for the time or cost of those 'choices'. Bacon also alludes to diabetes being caused by a diet high in meat and then goes on to term diabetes and heart disease 'diseases of affluence' (225); yet type 2 diabetes has been proven to be more strongly linked to poverty in societies where cheap high-fat, high sugar foods are readily available (Chih-Cheng et al. 2012, Mendanhall et al. 2017). The connection that Bacon makes between diabetes and affluence is representative of the assumptions she makes about fat people throughout *Health at Every Size* ([2008] 2010), that is, individuals have all the tools and accessibility to 'choose' to make 'healthy' changes to their lifestyle but through ignorance of, or deviance from, cultural norms, they choose not to.

My diabetes, it seems, represents my ignorance too. Wann (1998, 10) measures her good health on what she calls the 'three main health indicators'. This is a common understanding which includes blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose. My blood glucose, even with medical intervention and extreme dietary changes, is difficult to control and according to those indicators, I am not healthy and therefore cannot perform to the good fatty trope – even if I want to. Over the last year, I have become used to people referring to their lack of diabetes in a way that is supposed to confirm their moralised good health. For example, Holliday (2017, 178) describes an incident that happened when she was pregnant with her second child. Her nurse, she recalls, asked if she had diabetes six separate times and frustrated by this questioning, Holliday retorts, '[f]at people can have a healthy pregnancy,' and '[s]o no, I do NOT have diabetes – just like the last five times you asked'. Similarly, Saguy ([2012] 2013, 10) writes that there is widespread 'concern' about the growing prevalence of type 2 diabetes among children, but counters this by arguing 'this remains a very low prevalence condition among youth, occurring primarily in children with a strong family history of diabetes or who have a BMI in the 35 to 40 range or both'. The inference of both of these statements is that you cannot have good health and diabetes. Increasingly, at conferences and fat meet-ups, I feel as though my diagnosis is an inconvenience to people who want to represent fat

people as 'good' and healthy – just like thin people in larger bodies. Just as many people do not have diabetes, plenty more of us do – some of us are even thin – but the more diabetes is used to indicate 'good' health, the more people with this diagnosis are marginalised and treated as though they have brought bad health upon themselves. Body positive advocates, and unfortunately, I have witnessed fat activists and fat studies scholars do this too, centralise and elevate good health in what I can only assume is an effort to counter negative stereotypes of fat people perpetuated by the concept of the 'obesity epidemic'. So, while Bacon and other HAES advocates celebrate health at *every* size, I am left wondering if as a diabetic I can achieve health at *any* size.

The suggestion by Bacon and popular body positivity advocates that good health is a choice exists to counteract the narrative which Murray (2008, 213) calls 'physical and moral failure'. While LeBesco (2004, 119) does suggest that fat people have been moved from the category of 'morally inferior' to 'biologically' inferior these healthism narratives still persist. Comparing the work of Dr James McLester (quoted in Murray 2008, 213), which draws attention to both the aesthetic and moral failing of fat women, to narratives surrounding the 'obesity' epidemic in the late 2000s. Murray (2008, 213) argues that dominant discourses around 'obesity' position the fat woman's body as a 'moral failure, a diseased body and as a site of unmanaged desires' even when located within the 'objective' language of science. Murray compares McLester's account of fat which suggests women are 'products of their own failures of will' (quoted in Murray 2008, 214) who should therefore be blamed for their own deviation from the normative body ideals to the more contemporary 'moral panic' around the excessive desire of fat women who cannot or will not regulate their desires and impulses. She argues that excess and control have always been associated with femininity and while men are encouraged to eat heartily, women are expected to exercise 'control' around food and restrain themselves – and their desires more generally. Murray ([2008] 2016) argues fat women carry a signifier of eating to excess around on their bodies at all times in the form of their perceived' excess' weight which means the moral failure of fat women is recognisable at all times. The HAES that is promoted by body positive advocates,

and the 'biological' inferiority suggested by LeBesco, gives fat women the opportunity to opt out of the moral failure that Murray outlines.

The way that fat women address their 'moral failure' is important to both body positivity and more mainstream discourses of health. While body positive activists suggest that health can and should be achieved in whatever size your body is, more mainstream narratives argue that people should work to reduce the size of their bodies. April Herndon (2002) compares fat people who refuse weight loss surgery to hearing-impaired people who refuse cochlear implants. Both fat and deaf people are then regarded as unwilling, and being either fat or deaf becomes an 'elective' disability. Herndon asserts that when a disability becomes elective, fat and deaf people are no longer recognised as marginalised which works to depoliticise their embodiment. HAES has a similar impact on body positivity; when a fat person is not healthy, this is often regarded as a choice, while it is unlikely there are many people making the active 'choice' to remain unhealthy, when they do not constantly participate in the duties of the good fatty, (such as checking all health indicators are 'normal' with our doctors, eating healthily and exercising) they are excluded from this specific kind of fat, body positive assimilationist, activism.

When it comes to weight loss, even when it is 'health' motivated, there are some conflicting views within fat body positivity. *Intended* weight loss is not encouraged by any of the body positive advocates I have referred to, including Bacon, but *accidental* weight loss via a HAES approach is, as Miller's (2016, 170) personal trainer reminds her, something to welcome if 'you have excess weight to lose'. Drawing on Bennett and Gurin's (1982) work, Bacon suggests that each body has a genetically set, predetermined weight and that can range from what we understand as thin to fat. Using the analogy of a thermostat Bacon (Bacon [2008] 2010, 13) calls a person's 'healthy' weight a set point weight. The 'thermostat' is set to what is most comfortable and then regardless of the changes in environment (or diet or exercise) the thermostat will work hard to bring the temperature back down to what is 'comfortable'. Therefore, if my body weight is around 310lbs and I am eating a 'healthy balanced diet' and exercising regularly and I do not lose further

weight, 310lbs would be body's set point weight. Bacon reminds HAES followers they, '…will find that biology is much more powerful than willpower' (xxv) and regardless of whether people lose weight, overall health after following HAES will be significantly improved. Burgard (2009a, 49) suggests, '[a] weight-neutral approach focuses on loving self-care and the decisions that people can make on a day-to-day basis that are sustainable for a lifetime. HAES is not against weight loss; it is against the pursuit of weight-loss'. Saguy ([2012] 2013, 50) also argues that proponents of HAES, 'emphasize *weight neutrality*, or the idea that people might gain or lose weight when practicing a HAES approach, but that is not the intended or pursued outcome'. As I have already shown though, it is not assumed, at least by Bacon, that people are undereating or over exercising: *Health at Every Size* (2008 [2010]) is written for people who feel they struggle with binging and enjoying movement.

The difficulties around discussing weight loss within fat activism existed before the more recent popularisation of body positivity. Writing about Blank's documented weight loss attempts in 2007 on her now defunct blog, Zoë Meleo-Erwin discusses Blank's difficulty with accepting a fat activist movement where accidental weight loss is accepted but those who chose to lose weight are demonised, and in 2008 Karen Throsby (2008, 84) observed the shame narratives fat people experienced when revisiting their communities post-weight loss surgery. Throsby outlines two contestations with weight loss surgery, firstly undergoing weight loss surgery is regarded as a 'moral failure' wherein fat people have failed to lose weight through normative means such as diet and exercise and have, in turn, made a decision to participate in an unnecessary practice 'of violence against the self'. Bacon ([2008] 2010, 62-3), seems to agree with at least the second part of this contestation, calling elective bariatric surgery, 'high-risk disease-inducing cosmetic surgery' and outlining the high mortality rates for people who undergo the procedure. Boero argues that weight loss surgery is often mis-sold to people on the basis that achieving and maintaining long-term weight loss on their own is not feasible but if the weight loss procedure fails, Boero (2012, 118) explains that the 'fault' is often laid on the patient for not following 'behaviours associated with traditional dieting'.

The second contestation is also based within a moral failure, but the failure is more firmly connected to the disappointment of a fat or body positive community. Throsby (2008, 84) argues the second mode of critique places blame (in the first instance) on providers of weight loss surgery and an anti-fat rhetoric that is perpetuated in media and culture. However, as Throsby reports, the International Size Acceptance Association's (ISAA) stance on weight loss surgery is 'against the surgery, not the people who have the surgery' (quoted in Throsby 2008, 95). The problem, as Throsby points out, is that given the elective nature of weight loss surgery, this is quite a difficult political position to uphold, meaning that there have been widely publicised incidents where 'former' fat people have received blame for undergoing weight loss surgery or even actively making an attempt to lose weight. The concept of weight loss or weight loss surgery being a 'betrayal' to a movement, again, is not new. Wann (1998, 56) refers to 'phenomenon' she calls 'celebrity wasting syndrome', which is the 'trend' of celebrities losing weight as their success and fame increases. Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John (2009) talk about formally fat celebrities who have undergone either extreme weight loss or weight loss surgery: Ricki Lake lost a substantial amount of weight through diet and exercise, Carnie Wilson broadcast her bariatric surgery live on the Internet, Oprah Winfrey's weight losses and gains have been popular media discussion for decades and Roseanne Barr received a gastric bypass. Bernstein and St John suggest that all of these women betrayed other fat people like them but Barr's betrayal 'hurts the most' as she had previously made informed critiques of the diet industry and used her influence as a celebrity to support the fat community but her weight loss surgery shows, according to Bernstein and St. John, that she cannot tolerate 'living in a marginalized body herself' (267).

While the memoirs of the body positive advocates I have analysed here are not directly 'anti-weight loss', many of them are anti-diet. These advocates include Harding and Kirby, who state, '[i]f you are engaging in an activity predicated on the idea that you shouldn't like your body, then body acceptance is, frankly, a goal beyond your reach for as long as you are on that ride' (Harding and Kirby 2009, 4).

However, there have been fat people within body positivity who have lost weight and been treated as traitors of the movement. In 2016 Corrissa Enneking (2016) posted a video to her YouTube channel titled 'Dear Body Positive Bloggers: That's Not Body Positive' where she argues that you cannot simultaneously be on a diet in a bid to change your appearance and be body positive. In 2017, Gabourey Sidibe, during the release for her new book where she, in part, describes her struggle with type 2 diabetes told *People* magazine that she had recently received bariatric surgery in a bid to lose weight (Nelson 2017). Two months after the publication of that article *Project Runway* winner Ashley Nell Tipton again told *People* magazine that she too had recently received weight loss surgery (Olya 2017). In response to Tipton's article a reader of Virgie Tovar's (2017) column sent a letter asking Tovar how fat femmes like herself can try to remain positive when 'once fat-positive heroes' are undergoing drastic surgeries to lose weight. Tovar (2017) responds by telling her reader that we should not be positive and should, in fact, be 'fucking pissed off', Tovar accuses Tipton of using gaslighting techniques in the *People* article and 'co-opting' the language of fat activists, just to 'throw fat people under the bus'. Tovar's reputation within fat activist circles is mixed but she is not alone in her feelings about fat women who choose to lose weight. There is a narrative of betrayal among fat body positive communities when a person decides to lose weight and their 'morality' is called into question. People like Tipton, Sidibe and me become moral failures not of mainstream culture's expectation to strive for perfect health and weight loss, but of body positivity's expectation to be proud of and love your body in spite of the often overwhelming societal pressures not to.

It is betrayal, not willpower that categorises the fat people who become moral failures of body positivity. Having an anti-weight loss surgery position within a movement for people who are socially marginalized Throsby (2008, 85) argues, risks 'casting those undergoing surgery as complicit with fat-hating ideologies and therefore perpetrators of fat-phobia'. Weight loss surgery, Throsby explains, is regarded as not just violence against the self but violence against other people with fat bodies too. Reactions like Tovar's represent the treatment of fat or body positive advocates who do choose to lose weight, regardless of whether it is

through elective weight loss surgery. These aggressive stances can mean that people who have or are currently losing weight avoid groups with size acceptance attitudes (Throsby 2008, 95) or, sometimes, fat people who could potentially benefit from a mobilised anti-fat movement are alienated completely. Roxane Gay (2017, 1290-1295) who also has written about weight loss and bariatric surgery writes in *Hunger,*

> I don't know where I fit in with communities of fat people. I'm aware of and regularly read about the Health at Every Size movement and other fat acceptance communities. I admire their work and their messages, find that work a necessary corrective to our culture's toxic attitudes toward women's bodies and fat bodies. I want to be embraced by these communities and their positivity. I want to know how they do it, how they find peace and self-acceptance.

The mounting pressure to love your fat body as is, without intended modification, is rampant in the body positivity movement and is something I discuss in detail in the seventh chapter of my thesis. But the rhetoric that has come from HAES, that you must love your body and you are somehow on the 'outside' of fat activism and body positivity if you do not, has the potential to be extremely alienating.

What anti-weight loss advocates fail to consider is that not all fat bodies are the 'same'; in a vein similar to Bacon suggesting that all fat bodies can exercise and get access to 'healthy' food in the same way, each individual experience of 'fat' is different. At my heaviest weight I found it extremely difficult to move around which meant my motivation for everything from teaching to going on holiday was very low. In Throsby's (2008, 93) study she reports many of her participants experienced similar problems:

> …the humiliation of breaking chairs; the problems of negotiating a path through a crowded restaurant to get to the toilets; the inability to purchase comfortable, fashionable clothing; the embarrassment of having to buy two

> airline seats or request a seat-belt extension. I was also regaled with stories of workplace discrimination, sexual harassment and humiliating encounters with medical professionals; they talked about the trauma of being pointed at in public spaces, of name-calling, and of a stream of unsolicited weight loss advice.

A seasoned, anti-weight loss activist may suggest that the fat body is not the problem, moving through a world designed for the use of thin bodies is what we should be mobilising to address rather than individually changing our bodies. That is not an argument I can necessarily disagree with but as Gay (2017, 229-233) confesses, '[t]his world and its unwillingness to accept and accommodate me are the problem. But I suspect it is more likely that I can change before this culture and its attitudes toward fat people change. In addition to fighting the "good fight" about body positivity, I also need to think about the quality'. Demanding people live their lives in bodies that are causing them emotional and physical pain but could be changed, regardless of whether those methods are violent or not, is perhaps more than the body positivity movement can promise to support. An individual's actions in pursuing weight loss may be harming the political process of a movement in some ways – especially if the person is a celebrity or well-known for their anti-fatphobia position – but, as Gay suggests, individuals do need to consider their own quality of life before fighting for a movement that may not be able to change the widespread fatphobic attitudes in their life time.

Murray, who has written eloquently on the topic of her own bariatric surgery, questions the single identity that is expected of fat positive advocates. Talking specifically about the fat activist movement, Murray (Cooper and Murray 2012, 130) acknowledges that weight loss surgeries are problematic in the ways they are perceived as both drastic and dangerous, but fat activists who get weight loss surgery and conversations around them need to be welcomed into the movement. She maintains that being a fat activist or fat studies scholar does not make for one singular identity and fat activism should not demand absolutes from its proponents. While Murray (2012, 130) agrees that a promotion of weight-loss surgery should

not exist within fat activism, she does argue that her own weight-loss surgery was a choice she made in an absence of choice, she then goes on to suggest that by not including commentary and discussions from people who are not 'perfect' fat activists, the fat activist community is 'limiting its own political and ethical potential'. In ignoring the embodied fatphobic experiences of people who are excluded from fat and body positive movements the narratives are always stunted —with fat body positivity specifically the discourse of 'pride' and 'self-love' rarely falls under the umbrella of weight-loss surgery. When Tovar refers to Tipton's gaslighting, it is in response to Tipton's stance that 'I'm not telling anyone to get this surgery, I'm just telling you to love yourself enough to know what's best for you and your health' (quoted in Olya 2017). Yes, there is evidence of the well-known 'self-love' rhetoric adopted from the fat body positive movement in this statement but there is truth in what Tipton is suggesting too, and at least from my perspective as a fat woman who has lost over 100lbs, a sincerity. It is important to acknowledge that not every experience of a fat woman is universal and it is insincere to suggest that fat body positive advocates should strive for health but only in ways that are approved and celebrated by the movement.

Fat activism and body positivity are not the same, but they do have similarities; as the panic around the obesity epidemic increases, so do the appropriative self-love narratives taken from fat and body positivity. I have outlined two separate phenomena here, the first tells fat people that it is not their duty to be healthy whilst simultaneously using shame narratives and traditional weight-loss advice to get them to a point of 'acceptable' health. The second takes umbrage with fat body positive advocates who electively decide to lose weight, even if they do believe it is for their health. The results of two separate models and approaches to body positivity have the same impact, there are people and conversations alienated and removed from collective movements that could strengthen and mobilise the political momentum. Body positivity is not perceived as 'radical' in the way that fat activism is, but it is well-popularised and understood by mainstream society than traditional fat-exclusive narratives. Expecting an individual to constantly be the perfect representation of health or the perfect activist reduces their identity to

something singular which can be difficult to relate to or understand. Mainstream society is fatphobic and there is a 'need' for culture to change, but if we cannot change ourselves as individuals or live our lives to do the least harm without disappointing the rest of our community, then there is little scope to change, all we do instead is organise new, unattainable standards for perfection that very few people, fat or otherwise, can meet.

7. ‘Learn to Love It!’: Choosing to Positively Love Your Body in a Fatphobic Culture

Concepts of self-love and self-acceptance are difficult for me to write about. Self-love, within the context of body positivity, suggests to me that a person is happy with their body and makes choices day-to-day to do ‘good’ things for themselves. Self-acceptance, on the other hand – and this could be because I come from a background of fat positivity rather than body positivity – seems to be more about making ‘peace’ with your body, accepting it for what it is at that time and learning to move through the world regardless of how difficult your body and the way society reacts to your body may make it for you.

I cannot talk with authority on what the experiences of self-love or self-acceptance are like as I am not sure I have felt either. However, I have felt an exclusion from these concepts and therefore a detachment from body positive narratives. Fatshionista had a big impact on me and gave me methods to go out into the world in clothing I loved and was excited about, but I am not sure my Fatshionista-inspired practice and reading about the empowerment of other fat women improved my self-love or self-acceptance. Instead, I think I just started to love clothes and the way they looked on my body. But as I became unwell and more financially responsible for myself, I didn’t have the energy to enjoy getting dressed and I didn’t have the money to buy lots of new clothing. As I felt that aspect of my identity slip away from me, I began to feel more actively dissatisfied with my body than I had pre-Fatshionista.

My experience of self-love and self-acceptance has been jaded by my job. I worked in retail at a plus-size clothing store for several years to fund my studies and in that time, I was constantly caught in what felt like a direct opposition between my working life and my academic life. The shop I worked in pushed its staff really hard to sell their self-love narratives to customers; we had to tell customers they deserved the clothes we had in stores and build them up when they were in the

changing rooms. I also remember undergoing training with other colleagues where we had to sign contracts promising to look 'inspirational' every day. Our hair had to be neat and our make-up carefully applied but most importantly we had to look fashionable. Despite often spending my entire shift unloading deliveries in an unventilated, dark stock room, I did work hard at this aspect of my job. But the further I delved into my PhD research the more often I felt uncomfortable when I was working; on my days off I read about harmful beauty practices and the toxicity of the fashion industry but at work I had to sell the idea that self-love is fashion orientated, despite no longer believing in that notion personally.

I have come to believe that all fat women should do what they can to survive in a world that is inherently fatphobic, and loving fatshion is what helped me to survive for a few years. But, when fatshion became unattainable to me, I felt guilty because I couldn't pretend to love my body anymore and I couldn't even accept it. I started to fall out of love with body positivity as it became popular, which meant that while I was constantly being sent articles, books and photographs about fat body positive advocates becoming successful in mainstream media, I could not find a way to connect with them. It seemed that everyone around me was embracing the euphoric happiness that I had felt on Fatshionista, but I didn't have the means to join them anymore.

My research suffered and I became unsure of where I should take my PhD. At first, I had wanted to further explore how fatshion – and yes, body positivity – inspired empowerment and self-love in fat women, but around 18 months into my research it felt as though a switch flicked and I no longer believed these movements were radical. Then, in 2016, Charlotte Cooper released Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement *(2016) and in it she suggests that as a proxy of fat activism, body positivity seems to have much in common with the positive psychology movement. That was the beginning of things starting to click again for me, I realised that body positivity isn't perfect, and its older cousin fat activism isn't either. There are multiple ways to do body-related activism and not all of them have to revolve*

around the concept of positivity and its related concepts of self-love and self-acceptance.

Body positivity will always be important to me – I did write an entire thesis on it! But when people ask me what I think of the movement, I ask them to question how positivity and feelings of self-love and acceptance might improve the marginalisation of fat bodies. So, while I don't begrudge people positive feelings about their bodies, I do try in my life, and specifically in this chapter, to interrogate what that positivity is and how it operates.

In 2016, Cooper's *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* changed the way I approached body positivity. She suggests that body positivity is not all that fat activism is and rather, thanks to the influence of fat activists like Marilyn Wann, has become a proxy of fat activism. Cooper (2016, 12) states that within works like Wann's, 'body positivity, self-acceptance and self-love are presented as fundaments of fat activism', which are achieved through, 'self-help regimes, the work of personal growth and development, self-knowledge and reflection, the enjoyment and appreciation of other fat people'. And, although mainstream representations increasingly seem to forget fat positivity, the fundaments of this fat activist proxy are evident in the contemporary fat body positivity movement. These three tenets of the proxy, body positivity, self-acceptance and self-love, are difficult to untangle from each other and are sometimes used interchangeably to represent approaches to feeling comfortable or happy in your own body (Davidson 2019; N. Lee 2018; Linker 2016). These three concepts are often substituted for each other based on two main factors; first, they are linked by the methods through which people may accomplish them, for example: positive thinking, wellness and personal transformation. These methods are then each connected by their emphasis on individual improvement rather than societal change. Secondly, within the context of body positivity the tenets are connected by focus on the body and can be categorised under 'body-love'. In this chapter I focus on these concepts of 'body-love' within the individualised ideas and practices of body positivity. As a starting description, I see this body-love as akin to what I believed I was supposed to feel

using Fatshionista. Body-love focuses on remedying feelings of hatred or discomfort associated with your own body and sometimes, but not always, relies on narratives of 'beauty'. The body positive mantra I often associate with body-love is the classic 'all bodies are good bodies'. This concept, rather than focusing on aspects of a person's personality, uses methods of 'positivity' to repair a person's relationship with their body. This notion of positivity is hard to grasp; it feels purposefully unclear and, much like the terms 'inclusive' and 'diverse'[41], is left to individual interpretation. The concept is also left to individual responsibility: in a fatphobic society, the idea encourages a fat person to harmonise with a body that is bombarded with negative attention.

Self-love is deemed an individual choice, and yet for many of us, self-love and even the milder notion of self-acceptance are not choices we are able to make, and the expectation that we can is grounded in popularised narratives of choice. While fat people are being undermined by well-meaning healthcare professionals, friends, family and colleagues, there is now an added expectation that we must endure this with a smile and manage to love our bodies. In this chapter, I explore the idea of 'body-love' in order to investigate the meanings of 'positivity' within the body positivity movement. I ask how fat activists and body-positive advocates achieve empowerment and what are the limits of this individualised stance? I then conclude this chapter by taking some of the threads of these arguments, and offering a tentative, and possibly more achievable perspective on living as a fat-bodied person.

Rewa Murphy and Sue Jackson (2011, 17) argue that by 2011 'love your body' discourses had become increasingly popular in women's magazines. Despite Murphy and Jackson's research taking place over four years before Tess Holliday would be the first plus-size supermodel signed to MILK management, the 'love your body' discourses have remained intact and, to an extent have also, evolved (I am not sure Tess Holliday would have been able to achieve all she has even a decade

[41] See chapter five.

prior). Mainstream women's magazines are beginning to understand that 'feel good' discourses sell and are thus more likely to put fat women on their front covers and offer articles that focus less on getting the 'perfect body' on the inside pages; yet body-love language and encouragement has existed in activist movements for much longer than the last decade. In 1998, in a section of *FAT!SO* where Wann (1998, 182) pretended to be an agony aunt answering questions around fat positivity, she wrote:

> dear aunt agony,
> how can I learn to forget about my body during sex and just enjoy it?
> -anxious when naked
>
> DEAR ANXIOUS: Forget about your body. My poor, anxious dear, sex is about your body. Learn to love it!

Ten years later Linda Bacon too suggests that 'loving' your body is the key to good health. Throughout *Health at Every Size* Bacon ([2008] 2010, 175) promotes a 'positive' attitude to one's body, suggesting that when a person is content with themselves they 'make better choices' and also argues that the 'single most powerful act available to you is to own your body' (191). For her, key elements of body-positivity are 'contentment' and 'owning your body', both rather abstract concepts which none-the-less are understood as individual practices. Yet these acts can become a kind of interaction as we 'buy back' our bodies from beauty and 'health' organisations, and Bacon (191) calls this kind of 'positive' self-love a revolutionary act that has the ability to disempower industries that prey upon 'us'. Murray ([2008], 2016 107) criticises assertions like these which put the onus for change on the individual, and specifically takes on the ideas of Wann who, she suggests, encourages fat women to decide that negative readings of 'fatness' should and could be discarded for their self-empowerment. Murray (89) argues that narratives that encourage a person change their mind about their own body in order to create social change are limited by the fact that bodies are not self-authoring and exist as part of a system. This exchange means we are understood

within the context of others and this can complicate the identities of fat people who are seeking to rewrite the 'wider social script about "fat" bodies'. However, Cooper (2016, 15) argues that Murray is part of a group of people – also including Shelley Bovey, Kira Cochrane, Ann Cahill and Susanne Brandheim – who feel as though fat activism has failed them as they cannot achieve the body positive ideal of body-love. Cooper (2016) continues to argue that body positivity is only a proxy of fat activism which in addition to a narrative of body-love also includes more radical and even micro activism. The critiques that Murray ([2008] 2016) makes about fat activism have become increasingly relevant as body positivity progresses and moves away from its political fat activist roots. So, while she may have only been critiquing a fragment of fat activism rather than a whole, I suggest that body positivity more explicitly revolves around body-love narratives in an attempt to normalise and assimilate fat beauty.

While body-love is central to the body positivity movement, this phrase is used infrequently in comparison to self-love, self-acceptance or even the more generalised body positive. In some instances, I do think these phrases are being used interchangeably but in others, the use of acceptance rather than love is nuanced differently. Crystal Renn (2009, 212)[42] defines this latter term in her memoir:

> One fact is constant: Self-acceptance is a choice. You live in your body every day, and I live in mine. Some days it's difficult to live in my body, as I imagine it's difficult for you to live in yours. I used to hear a voice in my head every day telling me to obsess about my thighs. That voice is still there, but now it whispers instead screams. I told the voice I wouldn't listen to it anymore. I told the voice, *I refuse to let you win.* Sometimes I wake up and I feel ugly, or I don't like the way I look in a picture, or I have a fight with my husband, and the whisper of self-hate gets a little louder.

[42] It should be noted that Crystal Renn has lost a significant amount of weight and is now working as a straight-sized model.

Renn acknowledges that living in a fat body is difficult but describes the day-to-day difficulties as though the fight to overcome feelings of negativity and self-doubt is only with herself. The implication is that self-acceptance is a choice and can be achieved by opting to ignore defeatist feelings and thoughts about your own body – this notion is rampant in body positivity. For instance, in her memoir Thore (2016, 221) writes, '[f]ar from promoting obesity, being body-positive means you have committed yourself to loving and appreciating your body, whatever its current state may be'. Here, despite the use of the word 'loving', Thore suggests an idea of body positivity more in line with appreciating your body as it currently is. Both Renn and Thore suggest that accepting and appreciating your body is a choice, albeit one that needs to be worked on. However, as I have discussed in chapters two and five, Tess Holliday (2017, 2), despite asserting she was 'born to stand out' is more easily associated with all the ways she 'fits in' and both Thore and Renn embody many of the aspects of Holliday's aesthetic that allow her to assimilate into mainstream culture. So, advocation for commitment and choice could just be encouragement to conform to popularised notions of beauty ideals disguised as self-acceptance.

When fat women are celebrated in mainstream media, they are largely white, cis, young, feminine and able-bodied women and look very similar to Holliday, Thore and Renn. So, for a body positivity that focuses first on body-love and secondly on representation, it transpires that it may be easier to love your body if you are seeing bodies like yours associated with fashionable, beauty-focused publications. In chapter five I discussed the burden of multiple marginalised identities, it seems, that to become a popularised body positive celebrity, there is a limit to how many marginalised identities you can have. So, while Holliday is fat and working class, Thore is fat and suffers with PCOS[43] and Renn was a slightly too fat industry model, they are all connected by their privileged identities that are celebrated in mainstream press which allows them to assume self-acceptance is based on the concept of choice and commitment.

[43] A condition often associated with weight gain.

Assertions of commitment are not limited to narratives around self-acceptance but are included in broader and more frequently used narratives of self-love. In June 2018, Tess Holliday's front cover of *Self* magazine went viral and the accompanying article discussed how Holliday's health was no one's business but her own. Mirroring Bacon's ([2008] 2010) statements around self-love Holliday (quoted in Ford 2018) asserts, 'I've realized that through loving yourself, at least for me personally, that means I take care of myself more'. Holliday then explains that what taking care of herself looks like is 'no one's business but her own' and suggests that she can go to Disneyland and eat fried chicken if she wants to as that is her choice. These ambiguous ideas around 'taking care of yourself' or 'loving yourself' make body positivity appear to be accessible. Yet Disneyland and fried chicken at will are beyond many people's economic capabilities, and accounts of self-care that are connected to self-love and rely on spending money inadvertently alienate people who cannot do these things for themselves – even if they want to. And, perhaps it is unfair to analyse the words of a media interview too closely like this, but Holliday also falls back on this idea of 'choice' without recognising that her lifestyle is not universal, nor accessible for everybody. If self-love and self-acceptance are inherently tied with going to Disneyland and making a 'choice' to love your body then there are going to be large amounts of people, including myself, who feel as though they have failed in their commitment to body positivity.

So far, I have focused on the meanings accrued by the terms 'self-love', 'self-acceptance' 'body positivity' (as a verb, not a noun), and 'body-love'. I would now like to turn to the concept underlying, and to some extent, uniting these meanings: the notion of wellness. Wellness, much like body positivity, is having a cultural moment and, like body positivity, as its scope extends and it becomes a 'buzz word', it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine its meaning. In a book review of Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body is not an Apology,* John C. Chrisler (2018, 299) discusses how he first came across Taylor's website a few years previously. He signed up for the website's 30 day body positive affirmations and found that although, in his words, the advice was not 'earthshattering', that sometimes the

best advice is the most obvious and we are all worthy of love, compassion and adventure regardless of who we are or how we look. These kinds of affirmations are closely associated with popularised wellness. While they may seem a better (less commercialised) way of accessing self-love and acceptance than via trips to Disneyland, they do also rely on significant commitment from the individual. Affirmations are usually statements of positivity that are designed to help overcome intrusive or negative thoughts and, in the case of Taylor's affirmations email list, can be used to promote the idea of 'radical self-love' – indeed, the tagline of Taylor's website is 'Radical Self-Love for Everybody and Every Body'. Taylor, unlike the more consumer-based body positivity focuses her website on 'mental, physical and emotional wellness, empowerment and radical self love' (The Body is Not an Apology n.d.).

So, what is this 'wellness'? A literature search will identify articles associated with 'medical' wellness relating to the freedom of disease, psychological wellness relating to mental health, holistic wellness relating to 'alternative' methods to western medicine and, increasingly, workplace wellness. Anna Kirkland (2014, 957-8) suggests that wellness has become a slogan, 'in typical buzzword fashion [and] the appeal of the term comes from its ability to float above the thorny and contested details and to mean different things to different stakeholders so that it becomes viewed as an uncontroverted good'. Words become catchphrases, Kirkland explains, when something noticeable about a culture at a specific moment in time comes to 'stand in for wide agreement about how something should be characterized' (959). From my own reading, the notion of wellness within body positivity is categorised by a lack of negative feeling towards the body.

Wellness within psychology is understood as a positive moral valence and, like health, 'wellness' in terms of physical and mental health can become what Peter Conrad (1994, 387) calls 'wellness as virtue'. In a study of university-aged participants, Conrad reports that common wellness activities included exercise, dieting and nutrition. It was also stated that 'overwhelmingly' respondents did not smoke, drank alcohol moderately and used drugs rarely, and by his own

evaluation, Conrad's participants were 'health conscious and relatively healthy' (390). The wellness as virtue that Conrad describes is when pursuit of health becomes 'good' in itself. Participating in activities such as exercise and nutrition become measures of virtue when the respondents felt good about themselves for simply participating. The wellness of virtue, in this instance, is very similar to the ideas of healthism and 'moral failure' I discussed in chapter six. Body positive wellness in this instance, is another way for 'good fatties' to separate themselves from fat people who do not participate in what are perceived to be healthful activities.

Workplace wellness is increasingly becoming a concern among corporations and as explained by Kirkland, there is consensus that health should be more than just the absence of disease and health promotion should be a government priority in the United States (Kirkland 2014, 957). In her introduction to a special issue on wellness, she explains that the contributing authors of the journal argue that workplace wellness, although more narrow and 'powerful' than holistic wellness has become more dominant because of its clear connection to economic interests (Kirkland 2014, 958). Just as Woolley (2017) suggests the term desirable has been exchanged for the term 'healthy'; 'healthy' has been exchanged for wellness in body positivity perhaps in a bid to detract from healthist narratives that peppered fat activism previously. The corporate use of wellness is becoming so transparent that even the famous weight-loss company Weight Watchers are co-opting the term for their own brand. Weight Watchers, who have been rebranded as WW, now assert that they are taking on a new and improved direction towards wellness and their website boasts:

> Today, wellness has become a social phenomenon. Even though people are thinking in healthier ways, they aren't getting healthier. Worldwide obesity has nearly tripled since 1975. We can help solve that paradox (Weight Watchers n.d.).

A company that has for decades equated thinness with happiness (Gay 2017), employed leaders that perpetuated the idea that weight loss is gendered (Boero 2012, 70) and sponsored celebrity after celebrity (Jessica Simpson, Oprah Winfrey, Jennifer Hudson to name a few) to sell their plan is now asserting that wellness is the key to successful weight loss. Yet emotional wellness could be influenced by social reactions to the body; therefore, people may be struggling with their feelings of wellness due to the rampant (and encouraged) fatphobia in westernised societies. As I discussed in chapter six, many body positive advocates are anti-diet but the increased use of wellness to mean nothing in particular, means that this diet programme and body positivity actually both have something significant in common. While body positive advocates encourage people to make a choice to love their bodies and assimilate into mainstream culture through the use of fashion, health and self-acceptance, Weight Watchers encourages its users to make a choice to love their bodies through dieting and to assimilate into mainstream culture by making their bodies smaller. Both concepts rely on the individual to make a choice about their own body while ignoring the impact that factors outside of the individual can have on a person's emotional wellbeing. While I do think it is far-fetched to suggest that Weight Watchers are truly invested in individual wellbeing, the over-use and lack of definition of the notion of wellness has allowed many companies, not just Weight Watchers, to use a heavily popularised term to promote their products.

In February 2019 Protein Revolution Limited paid for a sponsored post from reality television star Georgia Harrison to promote weight loss 'gummies' which included the hashtags #dieting and #BodyPositive (Sherman 2019). Similarly, in 2017 reality television star Louise Thompson released a fitness and food book that was originally titled *Body Positive.* However, prior to its release it received significant backlash from body positive advocates who believed the title was misrepresenting the movement (Gill 2017; Hinde 2017; S. Young 2017) and the book was subsequently renamed *Live Well with Louise: Fitness & Food to Feel Strong & Happy* (2018). The use of the term 'body positive' to mean something akin to wellness within the context of physical health is becoming increasingly common but that will always be

the case when a movement that claims to be political is built on the idea of individual choice. Thompson's (2018) book in particular focuses on approaches to fitness and food that can lead to strength and, more importantly, happiness. The lack of definition surrounding what the 'positivity' in body positivity means has led to a fallacy not unlike the concept of wellness. The use of the term may change in different contexts but when it is used uncritically, especially by advocates of the movement, it is left up to interpretation and unfortunately the strongest interpretation in mainstream culture is that body positivity means feelings of happiness associated with the body.

Nevertheless, the concept of using positivity to improve emotional wellbeing was not created by body positive advocates. Cooper (2016, 14) asserts that the body positivity movement reminds her of the positive psychology movement and contends that critics of positive psychology argue that the movement is 'banal or superficial'. Positive psychology, a lot like body positivity, suggests that failure should be regarded as a result of not trying hard enough to succeed which means methods of positive psychology can be used to 'further marginalise people who are already struggling' (14). This notion of individual responsibility is a key aspect of self-love and acceptance which is promoted by body positive advocates. Holliday (2017, 288) offers a benign version of this:

> Imagine what would happen if we all started to love ourselves a little bit more and worried less about what others thought? What would that look like? My message is about loving yourself in your current form. Life is so much more beautiful and complex than a number on a scale.

While this is quite gentle encouragement from Holliday to love yourself, as the person who has made the most success out of the body positivity movement, her words hold significant weight in the context of the mainstream movement. Moreover, use of the term self-love rather than body-love speaks volumes to the popularised aims of the body positivity movement. Despite consistently referring to concepts of loving yourself and self-love, Holliday's book largely focuses on how she

learnt to love her body rather than how she learnt to love herself as a whole. This suggests that the barrier to self-acceptance for Holliday was how she perceived her body. It can be difficult to 'choose' self-love in a world that treats people with marginalised bodies badly, but it can be difficult still to love yourself if the feelings of hatred or disdain you have about yourself are not exclusively linked to the way your body looks. However, the body positivity movement, much like the positive psychology movement, still suggests choosing optimistic strategies to change your mind about yourself and many proponents struggle to understand the multiple complexities that may prevent individuals from making this 'choice'.

Psychologists Emory L. Cowen and Ryan P. Kilmer (2002, 450) assert that there are three main proactive methods to build good health: primary prevention, wellness enhancement and positive psychology. In this instance, I am not sure what primary prevention may mean in the case of body positivity, perhaps weight loss or 'perfect health', but wellness and positive psychology are linked by being alternative avenues to 'good health'. If wellness is a feeling of well-being that goes beyond the absence of disease, or even taking part in acts of wellness, then positive psychology in psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions (Gable and Haidt 2005, 104). Psychology, according to Shelley L. Gable and Johnathan Haidt (2005, 102), learnt a lot about 'depression, racism, violence, self-esteem management, irrationality, and growing up under adversity' in the second half of the 20th century but had more to learn about 'character strengths, virtues, and the conditions' that lead to high levels of happiness. They use the analogy of psychology understanding how to bring people from negative eight on a scale to zero, but struggle to help people rise from zero to positive eight. Benefits of positive psychology, according to Cowen and Kilmer (2002, 451) are that it is aware of the limitations of the medical model, its focus on productive outcomes and the understanding that achievement of those positive outcomes may be a more pragmatic way of addressing long-term issues.

An example of how positive psychology may work in prevention of eating disorders is provided by Erin L. Steck, Laura M. Abrams and LeAdelle Phelps (2004, 112) who focus on the three main pillars of positive psychology: subjective well-being which is an assessment of an individual's own life and may indicate their 'happiness', constructive individual traits which search for personal qualities such as 'optimism, happiness, perseverance, high self-esteem and effective coping strategies under stress, and finally, positive institutions which in this case, is specifically relevant to family and schooling. The researchers decided that the recommended treatment for school-age children would be a focus on subjective well-being and personal qualities. Therefore, Phelps et al. (2009) carried out six school-based sessions which focused on the children's resilience and risk factors. The sessions included focus on reducing the internalization of sociocultural pressures, specifically focusing on the omnipresent idea that thinness equates to beauty, increasing self-esteem by providing feedback on 'positive' physical attributes, personal competence, self-determination and the 'cultivating of better coping skills', reducing body dissatisfaction, exploring 'appropriate' methods of weight control and a question and answer session with a person who has recovered from an eating disorder. While Steck, Abrams and Phelps do argue that institutions such as education and family are important in the prevention of eating disorders there are fewer suggestions on how the problematics and complexities of those institutions may be tackled effectively. For the most part, there is a large emphasis on individual healing and prevention and while that may be effective in some cases, the waters are muddied when a fat person, such as myself, is praised for behaviours that are in-line with those of someone with an active eating disorder.

Body positivity encourages fat women to feel happy with our bodies in the hope that we will 'take better care' of ourselves but weight stigma exists outside of our own 'positivity' bubbles. Rebecca Puhl and Kelly Brownell (2006, 1812) report that multiple participants from their study on weight-stigma had experienced 'negative assumptions from others, […] negative comments from children, encountering physical barriers to and obstacles, and […] inappropriate comments from doctors and family members'. Body dissatisfaction and binge related eating disorders also

increase in likelihood with higher weight; social messaging that fat reflects personal failure is so strong and constant that body dissatisfaction increases with a person's weight. While contemporary thought suggests that being fat is likely to make a person unwell physically, a person can become unwell through psychological distress and experience a decline in their quality of life as a result (Schwartz and Brownell 2003, 53). Additionally, Marlene B. Schwartz and Kelly D. Brownell (2003, 44) report that when people encounter individuals who belong to a stigmatised group, that stigma is assessed, if this stigma can be assigned blame or is seen to be under personal control, then the discrimination that person receives may be 'justified'. Even Jes Baker (2006, 1812), who has previously championed a self-love approach to body dissatisfaction writes in her memoir,

> By living in a world that constantly tries to squash our self-esteem, all the while telling us to rise up and defeat the odds, we're put in a position that severely impacts our mental health. This takes a SIGNIFICANT toll on our self-esteem and mental coping skills.

The problem with this particular brand of positive psychology and the optimism that is related to the body positivity movement is that despite the very real experiences of discrimination and stigma, the responsibility for productive interaction and quality of life is pressed onto the individual. There have been suggestions, notably by Stephen Schueller (2009), that positive psychology may be more effective if it was combined with the concept of 'community' psychology. Schueller's ideology rests on the idea that 'wellness' in a person means that they must both be living well and doing well. He argues that when resources increase individuals constantly compare themselves to the higher standards of others, therefore an equal distribution of resources could increase wellness among individuals. While Schueller is focusing on economic equality, comparisons can be made to the treatment of fat people and those in 'non-normative' bodies. If what is 'desirable', 'healthy' or even 'normalised' could be made more diverse, then perhaps positive psychology arguments could hold more weight. However, that would require the genuine and sincere commitment of multiple institutions whose

primary goal is perhaps not always the emotional wellness of their consumers or users.

While some people may be able to cultivate a comfortable relationship with their bodies through methods of positive psychology or the body positivity movement; for others, there may be social, political and even personal barriers that prevent them from engaging in body-love. For me, my ability to think about my body in any kind of optimistic way dissolved when my ability to buy and wear fashionable clothing became limited. I also became less excited about the concept of loving my body as I mine began to change and I started to see fewer people who looked like me in mainstream media. When I first found Fatshionista I had been able to identify with women like Holliday and see parts of myself in them but as I started to struggle with my own identity I only began to see the differences between us and eventually started to feel guilt for not being able to love my body like they did.

As I began to reflect on those feelings of exclusion for the purpose of writing this PhD, body positivity began receiving criticism online from former advocates that suggested fat women were being erased from the movement they helped create (Chavarria 2019; Coles 2018; Dionne 2017; Feldman 2017; Rutter 2017). I recognised many of the frustrations in these articles as being similar to some of my own a few years previously, but with the privilege of hindsight began to see the limitations of their suggestions too. Body positivity as a movement is often claimed by women who are not fat and have normative bodies. However, this is not necessarily a new matter; fat activism too has had to think carefully about who should be included in activist events and campaigns. Shelley Bovey (1989, 94) recalls the first national conference of the London Fat Women's Group in March 1989 where discontentment arose around people who were 'clearly not fat' wanting to attend the conference. As Bovey describes, there had been problems with journalists infiltrating the conference and 400 fat women had been turned away due to the popularity of the event. Bovey explains that the situation was sensitive as the thin women who were in attendance identified as fat but, according to Bovey, did not 'belong.' These debates which are plentiful and continue to be a

topic of discussion amongst size activists have been carried over into the fat body positivity movement. 'Small fats', 'infinifats', inbetweenies and people in normative bodies all have the option to use the umbrella of body positivity to express their dissatisfaction with the elevation of narrow beauty ideals. And so, many brands have realised that they do not have to embrace 'infinifats' to be regarded as body positive. In September 2015 to promote their 'Style Has No Size' campaign (which I briefly touched on in chapter five) UK plus-size brand Evans which sells clothing up to a UK size 32, staged a publicity event where they walked five rather homogenous plus-size models down Oxford Street in London wearing vests with # Style Has No Size written on them. Despite the women being plus-size by fashion industry standards, all five women were classically beautiful, tall and evenly proportioned and although the t-shirts the women are wearing declare that style has no size, the models' bodies suggest that there is a limit to stylish size.

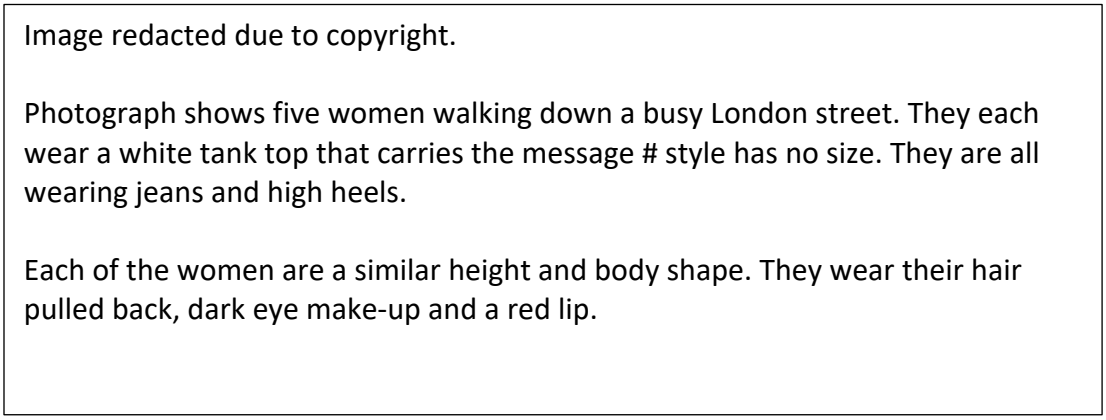
Image redacted due to copyright.

Photograph shows five women walking down a busy London street. They each wear a white tank top that carries the message # style has no size. They are all wearing jeans and high heels.

Each of the women are a similar height and body shape. They wear their hair pulled back, dark eye make-up and a red lip.

Fig. 13, Independent, *The Plus-Size Community Shouldn't Be Let Down By Its Own Brands*, Photograph, 2015, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-plus-size-community-shouldnt-be-let-down-by-its-own-brands-10488634.html.

However, Evans are not the only brand guilty of using models who wear clothing sizes much smaller than the largest size they sell. Holliday, who wears a UK 26 and a US 22, recalls her first time entering Torrid's online modelling competition and, despite being significantly larger than the women pictured in fig. 13, was surprised to log onto the competition website and find critical rather than celebratory feedback from Torrid shoppers. After scrolling through the comments, she realised

that the anger was not necessarily directed at her but towards Torrid who the commenters believed should have picked bigger models. This incident happened several years before the publication of Holliday's memoir which left her time for reflection but Holliday stands by her comment response which reads, '[b]ut we're all plus sized and curvy' and seems to believe the moral of this particular story is that you can 'try your best but you can't please everyone' (Holliday 2017, 206). To an extent, Holliday is right, it would be impossible to please everyone but the rhetoric of inclusion that body positivity touts suggests otherwise. Torrid stocks clothing sizes up to a US size 30 but they often choose models much smaller than Holliday to represent their brand. In chapter five I discussed the problem of racial diversity in the body positivity movement, but the limitations of inclusivity do not stop there. While many people who have to shop at a plus-size clothing store are indeed 'curvy', fat women are not a homogenous group with a one-size-fits-all mentality and many women are much fatter, older and differently abled to Holliday. So, while she may represent *some* fat women, she cannot and should not expect to represent *all* fat women. Holliday's conclusion that she can try her best but cannot please everyone speaks volumes to the ignorance of the body positivity movement as a whole. There is a contradiction between the inclusivity narratives that are verbally expressed and the expectation that all fat women should try to see themselves in fat, white, young, able-bodied women like Holliday and, if they do not, then they are the ones who have failed and they need to commit harder to their journey of self-love.

As advertising evolves from print and television media into the fairly new realm of social media through YouTube, Instagram and Facebook there has been an increase in the use of 'influencers' who are deployed by branded companies for advertising. An 'influencer' is a new term for an old idea: influencers are essentially 'tastemakers' that are used to affect specific market trends. Brands reach out to influencers and invite them to press days for releases of new products or lines, they may also 'gift' clothing to influencers or even pay them to advertise their brand (Abidin 2018). Holliday is an influencer due to her strong ties with plus-size clothing

brands and extensive social media presence[44]. She, and many other influencers embody many aspects of hegemonic beauty standards. The influencers that get picked up by brands are not dissimilar in terms of their appearance from the Evans models, while these influencers may be fatter, wearing up to a size 24 or 26 like Holliday, they are still the typically white, young, cis, able-bodied and feminine women. As body positivity has reached buzzword status, many influencers engage with rhetoric that resembles narratives of the movement and much like loving yourself is a choice, participating (or not) in plus-size fashion is choice too. For example, Holliday (2017, 23) excitedly proclaims,

> Fashion doesn't have to be serious!
> Don't be afraid to express yourself.

And former plus-size model Renn (2009, 214), suggests,

> Here's what I love about fashion: It's art we can all be a part of. Not many of us can own a Picasso but we can all treat ourselves to clothing that turns the human body into a work of art. And this absolutely does not have to cost a ton of money. I love vintage and cast-off finds as well as designer stuff. Someone can spend three thousand dollars on an outfit and look silly, and someone else can put together a masterpiece at Goodwill.

To fat, but wealthy, women like Holliday and (much) smaller fat women like Renn, fashion does not have to be serious. Holliday has the financial capital to shop in any plus-size shop she desires; she also has the option to have clothes made for her if she cannot find something that reflects her personal style. Renn, on the other hand, has been a plus-size model but was only just recognisable as a 'smaller fat', even at her 'heaviest' weight, Renn had many more options available to her than someone larger – even shopping at Goodwill is likely to yield more success when you are a

[44] Chapter two discusses the specific aesthetic and persona that has elevated Holliday to influencer and microcelebrity status.

smaller fat person. While fashion can be playful for Holliday and a work of art for Renn, a lack of clothing options, not just fashionable options, can quickly turn serious when access is limited. The two clothing stores I have already mentioned, Evans and Torrid, do not currently sell clothing over a UK 32 or US 30 suggesting that perhaps women over these sizes do not exist and if they do, they are not in need of fashionable or even everyday clothing. While I cannot be sure how Renn or Holliday have found body-love, I know that for me being able to dress in clothing I loved significantly helped with my body image. Suggesting that fashion should be fun only further alienates women who cannot find or afford clothing in their size. As influencers increasingly use body positive language to sell products to consumers, the ability to use body positivity to achieve any form of body-love is further complicated. Now, you do not just have to be lucky enough to genetically look similar to Holliday or Renn, you have to work hard at cultivating an aesthetic that 'expresses' who you are, like a work of art.

Fashion is difficult enough for smaller fat women to find but some fat women struggle to find simple, everyday clothing – even in stores that are dedicated to their size range. Lesley Kinzel (2012, 30-31) apprises how difficult it is to buy clothing online as a plus-size woman, identifying the inconsistency of sizing. As her body-size is translated into any size between a US 22 or 28, depending on the store, when shopping online she has to buy several pieces of identical clothing in different sizes. To buy a piece of fashionable clothing Kinzel estimates she shops at four different online clothing stores, has to pay close attention to the sizing charts and how 'roomy' the sleeves are, place an order with each store, and pay postage costs for each on top of her purchase. The clothing arrives over a range of days to weeks. By the end of the ordeal, there may be one or two items that fit but the rest have to be returned, by which stage Kinzel has lost a significant amount of money in postage and returns costs. Kinzel (2016), who was part of the original Fatshionista community, is someone who gets excited about fatshion; in a more recent article she recalls the excitement she felt around the release of Beth Ditto's first collection for Evans. She acknowledges the significant gamble of purchasing plus-size clothing and having it shipped from the UK to US at the cost of $100, especially considering

the history of poorly made and ill-fitting plus-size clothing. The reality, Kinzel argues, of buying expensive clothing that is often poor quality and easily disposable, first suggests that fat bodies do not 'deserve' to wear 'cool' and exciting clothing. And secondly, that just like the poorly made clothing, fat bodies are temporary; as garments do not need to be made to last as weight loss is expected and therefore the fat body becomes disposable too. Kinzel speaks eloquently on fat fashion and has done for over a decade, however, she reports that her clothing size, at its largest, is a US 28, meaning that she can shop in most plus-size clothing shops and size 'up' or 'down' depending on what is necessary. While 'straight-sized' clothing stores are likely out of the question, Kinzel can always find clothing, even if it is at a cost and even if her choice is limited or she is pushed into online shopping.

The lack of fashionable clothing options and representation of super-fat bodies within the fat fashion focused body positivity movement inspired *The Fat Lip* podcaster Ash to organise a mini-campaign on Instagram during Fatshion February. In chapter three, I outlined the importance of Fatshion February to many femme fatshionistas, however, like many fat body positive campaigns that become extremely popular, there are several groups of people who were excluded from the feminised styles and popularity of the event. In February of 2019 Ash posted a picture of her 500lb body on Instagram as many days in February as she was able. While the Fatshion February that the body positivity movement is more familiar with promotes the femme styles of 'fatshionistas', Ash wanted to show how difficult it is to find clothing in her size and what that meant for her 'dress' every day. She posted pictures of her with leggings with holes in (@fatlippodcast, Friday Night Chaise Life, Instagram, 16 February, 2019a), clothes that were 'old' (@fatlippodcast, Decided to Try #Infinifatshonfebruary in One Shot Today, Instagram, 5 February 2019b), t-shirts that did not fit over her stomach (@fatlippodcast, Hot Fashion Tip, Instagram, 20 February, 2019c), and a few outfits that were more traditionally in line with Fatshion February. In her representation of the struggle to find clothing as a super-fat woman, Ash uploaded photographs of clothing that had a lot of stretch and that did not fit in the way intended in order to showcase the inaccessibility to clothing, even from plus-size clothing stores.

Although Ash may have the financial freedom to buy plus-size clothing, off-the-peg garments are not being made in her size and so she is excluded from fatshion orientated body positivity.

So, while it can be tempting to talk about fat women as a homogenous group that have more things in common than things we do not, when it comes to buying clothes and therefore access to perceived normalisation by mainstream culture, what is achievable varies depending on the specific circumstances of individuals. High-street stores that cater to fat women over a size 16 are sparse and smaller stores like Evans are expected to cater for fat women of different individual styles, ages, shapes, heights and abilities. So while body positive messaging like that from Renn, promotes the idea of turning a body into a 'work of art' the result of limited financial resources and physically limited clothing stores means that many fat women are excluded from the joy of that art. Entwistle (2000, 1) argues that fashion influences much of how we dress but it is not the only factor, we must also consider sex, class, income and tradition and Kinzel (2012, 25) acknowledges that as much as fatshion choices mean to an individual, they represent much more in the public discourse. She argues adherence to fashionable styles can help 'mitigate' many of the negative assumptions people will inevitably make about that fat person, as though conforming through clothing can compensate for the radical unruliness of fat bodies. Ash's super-fat body and lack of access to fashionable clothing mean that her body is marginalised in mainstream culture but also in body positivity too. Ash falls outside the perimeters of 'acceptable' fatness and she cannot easily, even if she wanted to, pull together the highly stylised feminine fatshion aesthetics of other body positive advocates. Perhaps, just like my 'unhealthy' body, Ash's 'undressable' body is an inconvenience to a body positivity movement that desperately wants to show fat people can be just like thin people. Fat women like Ash and I complicate what it means to be body positive and therefore, by association, put in jeopardy the assimilationist prospects of good fatties who 'take care of themselves' both in terms of their health and their aesthetic. Therefore, while self-love is more appropriate for some body positive advocates, women who do not neatly fit into the newly defined standards for

feminine beauty should be satisfied with the inclusion of smaller, more palatable fat women into mainstream media and work on self-improvement (towards a more palatable fat) rather than self-love.

What Laura Downing Peters (2013) calls the 'old wave' of fat activism has been critical of the self-love and fatshion proxies of fat activism for some time; according to Peters, there is concern that the 'activism' has never been sufficiently radical and is susceptible to over-commercialisation. While those concerns have been a kind of prophecy for what was to come from body positivity, there is an acknowledgment, even among advocates for fat body positivity, that there is a possibility that women coming to body positivity from a background of self-deprecation may begin to feel negative feelings around their ability to build on their 'self-love'. Brittany Gibbons (2017, 131) assures her reader, '[l]isten, it's totally cool if you hate your body today. I just want to take that pressure off you right from the start. I'd like to say, "Hey, me too!', while Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby (2009, 211-12) assert,

> Trust us, the last thing we want is for people to shift from "I'm a failure because I'm not thin and gorgeous like Gisele Bundchen" to "I'm a failure because I'm not self-confident like Katie and Marianne." If you take away only one thing from this book, let it be this: Be kind to yourself. That means not bagging on yourself for being fat or bagging on yourself for still succumbing to deep-seated insecurities. We all have them, and we all have lousy days. All we can do is try to recognize the negative thoughts for the bullshit they are, before they have a chance to take hold.

While these assurances may be comforting to some readers, they do little to instruct how one may go about putting aside or working through these complicated feelings. One of Cooper's interviewees, Verity (quoted in Cooper 2016, 161), draws on similar feelings of discontent within popular fat activism when she comments on the ever-changing processes that bodies go through. Verity asserts, you can love your body, but five minutes later it may be different 'and then it's over'. Learning to love or even accept your body in a culture that expects you first and foremost to

want to change becomes even more difficult when your body actually changes – especially for the worse. Not only do you feel the disconnect from the body that a few months ago you thought you loved, but also the failure of not committing enough to body-love. Perhaps, at least in my case, too much emphasis is placed on the desire to look and dress like thin people and when that was taken from me, I was unsure how to navigate my relationship with my new body.

Discussing her creation of the website *The Body is Not an Apology* Taylor (quoted in King-Miller 2014) argues that reclaiming beauty is a radical act, and that she intends to 'take beauty out of the box' as she sees beauty as 'the natural inheritance of every person and argues against imposing limits upon it'. While the success of body positivity does suggest that, in many ways, 'reclaiming beauty' can *feel* empowering to people whose features have culturally been recognised as 'ugly', there are significant critiques of this notion. Lindsay King-Miller (2014) argues that while she is in favour of encouraging women to feel confident and happy, the current iteration of the body positivity movement focuses too much on affirming beauty and 'not enough on deconstructing its necessity'. Similarly, Lisa Kaplin (n.d) asserts 'the message is clear, you can be fat or thin but the focus is still on how you look' and suggests that the constant conversation about the appearance of women is keeping them from living full and complex lives. Kaplin calls for us to 'drop the body talk' and focus on things other than the appearance of women. The necessity, as King-Miller calls it, and the focus on beauty within body positivity, whether it is radical or not, is still calling for women to be heavily invested in their appearance.

As body positivity has grown in popularity, these beauty-focused discourses have been allowed to take root in mainstream culture and the result, according to many critics, is that the movement has shifted from a focus on fat women to 'curvy', thinner women (Baker 2015; Kinzel 2018). Although body positivity began as a proxy of the sometimes more radical fat activism, the easily digestible notions of self-love are now the persistent messages of what has become its own individual phenomenon. The mistakes that were made within the formation of fat activism are the gaping voids in body positivity. While there are continually

acknowledgments that there is a difference between radical body positivity and what has now become a marketing tool (Chavvaria 2019; Chrisler 2018; Dionne 2017; Feldman 2017; Tschinkel 2018), it is the legacy of Marilyn Wann and proponents of self-love that are forcing former fat body positivists to reconsider their involvement in the rise of body positivity.

I have drawn on Lesley Kinzel a lot throughout my thesis, largely because I find her work so eloquent and articulate but also because her experiences mirror mine in our experiences of the 'birth' of Fatshionista and the subsequent rise and inevitable dissatisfaction with popular body positivity. In a post to her blog in February 2016, Kinzel (2016) writes in detail how she 'lost her appetite for fat politics', calling fatshion a 'radicalized cause' which was comprised of unapologetic fat women demanding visibility, she suggests that it is easier to be radical when you are facing a 'total lack of representation' but it is much harder when even *Sports Illustrated* is putting a reluctantly termed plus-size model on the cover[45]. She asks whether, as fat women, we were so desperate for inclusivity and access to the opportunities and clothing thin women had that we failed to acknowledge whether those inclusions would come at the cost of losing control over how we are seen. She argues that, what she calls the more radical fat positivity, has given way to a 'toothless' body positivity that treats all bodies equally and is a movement that recognises the difficulties of a conventionally attractive, twenty year old in exactly the same way as a 'middle-aged size 28 woman who dares go to the beach in a bikini' (Kinzel 2016). Kinzel makes the arguments that many former body positive advocates reiterate and suggests that the fat positivity that she championed has been co-opted and depoliticised.

Similarly, Kirsty Fife (2016), wrote on her blog in June 2016 that she would not be blogging about fatshion anymore as she is uncomfortable with what has happened over the last 5-6 years. She describes beginning her blog because she loved that

[45] Kinzel is referring to Ashley Graham's infamous 2016 *Sport's Illustrated* cover and her dissatisfaction with being referred to as 'plus-size'.

fatshion was not centred around a culture of 'buying' and since she had no money and was working-class, she assumed there must be people like her wanting to participate in fatshion too. Fife also started her fatshion journey on Fatshionista and describes how she blogged there for many years before starting her own blog and enjoyed the visibility that Fatshionista gave queer femmes, working class women and women of colour. However, Fife (2016) explains that those women were not who were 'picked up' and made successful within the commercial world of body positivity. Like Kinzel, Fife is concerned about the assimilation of fatshion with 'brand culture' and reports she can 'count on one hand' the number of bloggers she has seen show signs of radical politics. Fatshion, Fife asserts, celebrated 'bad outfits', 'rainbow socks, tutus and age inappropriate clothing' but contemporary plus-size fashion is more associated with the sanitised body positivity and concerned with pristine and polished representations of fat.

These two accounts of how two well-known Fatshionista users, one American, one British, fell out of love with fatshion show how the movement has shifted and changed within the last decade. No longer is body positive fatshion a place for fun explorations, it is now a space to, as Kinzel (2012) suggests, 'make up' for being fat and to show that it is possible to embrace 'normalised' femininity despite having a larger body. While, it seems that Kinzel and Fife are leaving fat politics behind (at least in terms of fatshion), discussions around the 'transformation' of body positivity have been happening elsewhere. In her book which was published in 2015, Jes Baker (2015) appears to be advocating for the beauty centred body positivity that King-Miller (2014) and Kaplin (n.d.) criticise,

> **You are fucking beautiful.** I'm saying this with a straight face and seriously meaningful look where I maintain eye contact for an uncomfortable amount of time. I know you may not feel like you fit into the category of gorgeous that our world has created. I know that it's hard. I know that it's a daily battle. But fuck their fascist beauty standards. The second you stop looking for someone else in your mirror and start looking at YOU is the second you will start to appreciate what you are. Stop looking for flaws. Stop looking for

> differences. You are perfect. You are more than enough. You are the best thing that has ever happened to you. And you are fucking beautiful (Baker 2015, 222).

However, in 2018, Baker (2018) wrote on her blog that she is choosing body liberation over body love. While she admits that, in theory, body-love is a 'lovely' thought, asking someone to 'achieve' body love can quickly become an 'unattainable prerequisite'. Not unlike the arguments made by Kaplin (n.d.), Baker suggests that when there is an intense focus on 'loving your body' and that there is a danger that some people may replace obsessive hatred for obsessive love. Baker (2018) is also concerned that the body positivity she originally supported has shifted into, what she terms, 'a strain of rainbow-coloured body empowerment, covered in sparkles, which is purposefully vague so that it ignores body issues like racism, ableism, and the inaccurate equation of fat equalling unhealthy'. Baker (2018) then decides to choose body liberation over body positivity which she defines as 'freedom from *all* outside expectations, even our own' and 'recognizing the systemic issues that surround us and acknowledging that perhaps we're not able to fix them all on our own'. The arguments Baker is making are not new and can be traced back as far as The Fat Underground's *Fat Liberation Manifesto* (Fishman 1998); but former body positive and body love advocates using what is essentially fat liberation to counter an idea they helped create – but now struggle to control – is a new phenomenon. In a video for *Nylon,* Virgie Tovar (2018, n.p.) discusses the differences between body positivity and fat activism; she argues that body positivity is not a political resource and that it does not have a vision or plans for the future, she asserts that as body positivity eclipsed fat activism, the question of the movement shifted from 'how do we create more rights and a life free from discrimination of all sizes to how do I love my body?' Body positivity focuses on changes that an individual can make to survive in a culture that is both fatphobic and obsessive about women's bodies, whereas there are aspects of fat liberation that includes strategies for political and social change that would improve the day-to-day life of fat people. As Murray ([2008] 2016) and Cooper (2016) have argued, albeit from different perspectives, fat activism is not unified and is not easily

definable, it is a multitude of strands (or proxies) that all fall under the umbrella term 'fat activism'. However, unlike body positivity, fat activism includes clear social justice goals based within the context of liberation. If fat activism was indeed depoliticised by body positive advocates then it is Baker's (2018) suggestion that only a liberation based approach to bodies can pull the 'rainbow-coloured' body empowerment back to an activism that is based more on cultural and social breakdowns of discrimination against non-normative bodies.

A promising way to reframe and reconsider body positivity is via the concept of body neutrality. This idea made some inroads as a fringe movement of body positivity and has now been the focus of several articles in mainstream British broadsheets (Hosie 2018; Kessel 2018) and well-circulated online magazines (Harveston 2019; Meltzer 2018; Sharkey 2019; Weingus 2018). The discontentment around body positivity focuses on the some of the problems I have outlined in this thesis: loving your body is difficult and unattainable for some people (Hosie 2018), there is too much focus on the way women look (Meltzer 2018) and women of colour, women with disabilities, women who are not 'acceptably' fat and trans women are pushed from the spotlight as the movement increases in popularity (Kessel 2018). Body neutrality appears, from these articles, to have several goals such as: casting beauty ideals aside in favour of simply 'accepting' your body, encouraging women to spend less time concerned about their appearance and focusing on what your body can do rather than its appearance (Hosie 2018). Body neutrality is supposedly an antidote to all the pressures that can be implicated by a 'movement' that suggests fat women feel 'positively' about their bodies. Similarly to body positivity the general thesis is appealing and seems logical; and Rebekah Taussig (quoted in Kessel 2018) suggests that while body positivity does not put people with disabilities and other marginalised bodies into the foreground, body neutrality has the power to be really useful to people with disabilities and chronic pain who feel as though they have been 'betrayed' by their body. Body neutrality supposedly provides relief for people who feel they cannot achieve a state of body-love that many body positive advocates promote. The movement largely focuses on feelings of impartiality about the body although as nutritionist Laura Thomas

(quoted in Kessel 2018) suggests many of her patients term it 'body respect', a term tinged with elements of 'positivity'. Advocates promote the idea that you do not have to love every part of your body but rather you can exist in unison with your body and be freed of the guilt that can come with a pressure to 'love yourself'. However, a closer reading of body neutrality suggests many of the same assumptions of body positivity. If body neutrality is focused on what bodies 'can do' and is primarily useful for people with disabilities or chronic illnesses, I am concerned there may be pressure to feel 'neutral' about a body that lets you down daily. Removing 'positivity' and replacing it with 'neutrality' will not absolve the frustration of people who feel betrayed by their bodies and overlooked complications like these, as has happened with body positivity, can quickly lead to the celebration of a phenomenon that can very quickly go on to marginalise the people it was developed to assist.

In Kessel's (2018) article on body neutrality she reports that one of her interviewees, Stephanie Yeboah, is embracing a 'new approach: "fat acceptance"'. Yeboah, commenting on body positivity, asserts, 'If this movement had been called fat acceptance in the first place, none of these people would have jumped on it because it's got the word 'fat' in it. Fat is still associated with ugly' (quoted in Kessel 2018). While I am not sure if this is ignorance of the journalist or what Yeboah believes, the way this article is written seems to suggest that fat acceptance is a new idea and, further, that ideas around body neutrality have not been explored by size activists before. They have, of course, the concepts are just known by different names; just as fat positivity became body positivity, fat ambivalence and fat acceptance became body neutrality.

Body acceptance, according to Tracy L. Tylka and Nichole L. Wood-Barclow (2015), is expressing love and comfort with one's body, even if there are changes you would like to make to that body as an individual. They are careful to point out that body acceptance is not based within the sociocultural ideal of appearance and focuses on what the body can do and its connection to others. Yet 'acceptance' is not without its critiques and Lonie McMichael (2013, 24) argues that the word

'acceptance' makes her feel as though she has to compromise her value. Instead of positivity and feeling 'good', acceptance connotes an air of defeat which seems to suggest a person must admit to themselves that their bodies may be undesirable in mainstream culture, but they can work to feel comfortable with themselves.

Fat ambivalence though has more in common with the body neutrality discussed in Kessel's (2018) article and has a well-established history in both fat activism and fat studies (Gruys 2012; Hardin 2015; Kyrölä and Harjunen 2017; Owen 2015; Puhakka 2019; White 2014). Lesleigh Owen (2015, 3) defines ambivalence as 'a personal feeling stemming from cultural forces; it is a place where individuals can question and rework anti-fat rhetorics'. In 2000 Shelley Bovey and Janice Bhend made a case for an approach that resembles body neutrality and fat ambivalence,

> Paradoxically, being free to be honest, to say 'Actually, I'm not wildly ecstatic being this fat but there's little I can do about it because diets don't work', has been the key to freedom. I have more true acceptance of my self than when I was glibly agreeing that I was happy to be fat and wondering why such confident sounding words didn't *feel* right deep inside. I have learned to live in my body rather than to exist in it, to dwell in it with my mind and soul and not to strain against it as though it were some kind of incarceration (Bovey 2000b, 130).

> All the time we were pushing boundaries out, little by little, towards size acceptance. In order not to 'frighten the horses' I felt the best way forward was to make people think and present them with reasonable argument for change. We never subscribed to the Fat and Proud movement, believing instead that size in an ideal world, should be quite simply irrelevant, although to try and achieve that goal we did have to bang on about it quite a lot! (Bhend 2000, 169).

While Bovey (2000b) details how she has learned to live in her body without fighting against it, Bhend suggests that weight and size should be irrelevant, that

being ‘Fat and Proud’ should not be necessary. Both of these arguments are very similar to the body neutrality arguments that have been appearing in mainstream newspapers over the last two years which suggests all that may be ‘new’ about the movement is its name. However, the ‘ambivalence’ that Bhend and Bovey are displaying does seem to be in reaction to a phenomenon that has certain aspects in common with body positivity – particularly the focus on feeling ‘happy’ and ‘proud’. Owen (2015, 11) suggests that ambivalence, has potential to allow the coexistence of opposites, where entire groups of people can represent two conflicting discourses which may allow conversation and dialogue between the two sides and could be the ‘key’ to navigating space between or around them. Therefore, while body neutrality, at least in the representation it is receiving from mainstream newspapers and magazines, is in danger of repeating the same mistakes as body positivity if it does not find political and firm purpose; fat ambivalence has the power to use the popularisation of body positivity and give fat activism opportunity for space, discussion and growth.

This chapter has critiqued the body-love narratives and the methods of achieving them within body positivity and fat activism. I argue that discussions around the relevance of self-love have been part of fat activist thinking for decades and the arguments that are taking place as part of the discourse of body positivity mirror these older ideas almost exactly. While I respect that many people have found happiness following protocols of body positivity and have found a way to embrace the kind of self-love that is celebrated by Wann and more contemporary body positive advocates, I contend that the further marginalisation of bodies that are already discriminated against should be addressed in a more ferocious way. Positivity is difficult to achieve if people with marginalised bodies are constantly receiving negative attention and disruption to their daily lives and I am not sure that feeling positively about your own body is a particularly useful political resource. If wider society is to blame for negativity then the individual cannot be expected to counteract their own oppression with positive thinking and self-love. If body positivity is to continue to survive and be the radical movement that many of us hoped it would be, then political goals and values need to be held more central

and the end game for body positivity cannot be palatable fat people more regularly featuring on the cover of *Vogue*. Perhaps, the newly named body neutrality is a way for more radical liberation narratives to enter mainstream consciousness, but the mistakes of body positive advocates cannot be repeated with this movement – the same methods of self-transformation will only replicate the same problems. Body positivity has forgotten its history before and the debates and arguments that have existed for decades exist to be learnt from, however, a highly popular broadsheet (Kessel 2018) has already called fat acceptance a new concept and the beginnings of ableism are peaking through the neutrality narratives. I have argued that expecting body-love and body liberation to be radical in a society with such reliance on brand-centred media is not possible: while the ideas may offer individuals moments of 'feeling' empowering body-love, branding and body-positivity have moved closer, occupying a middle, acceptably self-loving space of feminine, relatively controlled and only slightly fat bodies. Perhaps fat ambivalence is the next remedy for a culture obsessed with body-love. I do not know if I will ever truly love a body that lets me down daily, even if I could afford and fit into beautiful designer clothing, but maybe if the pressure to love myself and the guilt I feel when I cannot is alleviated, I can get to a place where my body does not matter as much as my whole self.

8. Tying Up Loose Threads: Assimilationist Activism in Body Positivity

I am completing this PhD in August 2019 as new and sophisticated critiques of body positivity are being written and uploaded daily. Some suggest we need to decolonise the body positivity movement (Hart 2019), others argue it has failed the people who it was designed to help (S. Brown 2019; Conason 2019) and increasingly people are switching their politics from body positivity to fat acceptance (Greenall 2019; Jan 2019; Severson 2019). Body positivity appears to have peaked in popular feminist discourse and is now on a steady decline and, therefore, documenting a specific cultural moment that embraced and celebrated body positivity seems more important now than when I originally started this research in 2014.

The purpose of this research was to trace the emphasis of fat activism on body positivity using my own situated knowledge and the memoirs, blogs and articles of self-identified body positive advocates and fat activists – to ask what is the relationship between body positivity and fat activism? What kind of fat body positivity has developed because of fat activist practices? And, what bodies (and people) does fat body positivity celebrate? I intended to document the history of fat body positivity whilst simultaneously addressing the accusations of dilution and depoliticisation the movement has received. While researching, I noticed there was a trend of assimilationist activism in body positivity that LeBesco (2004) and Murray ([2008] 2010) have eloquently analysed in the fat activist movement previously. I was then able to make a connection between this body-love focused activism that sought to make fatness palatable with a proxy in the fat activist movement that Cooper (2016) has previously identified and linked with work like that of Wann (1998). Using LeBesco, Murray and Cooper as a theoretical framework for examining popularised fat body positivity I was able to identify five main themes of assimilation and exemplify what that assimilation may look like on the body of a fat body positive advocate.

To really analyse and help people understand body positivity, I knew I had to present a 'typical' or, at least extremely popular representation of the movement. Tess Holliday's rise to fame in 2015 as the world's first plus-size supermodel inspired this whole project and after seeing her name (and often pictures) appear in my core material repeatedly, I knew her specific aesthetic and approach to body positivity needed significant space in my thesis. I was interested in what made her aesthetic so appealing and palatable enough to be celebrated by mainstream media. I found that Holliday embraced a pin-up style of dress that simultaneously was able to connote transgression and conformity to traditional femininity. Additionally, she is white, young, feminine and able-bodied and wears many of these privileges on her body. Holliday's body coupled with her chosen aesthetic make her the perfect representation for body positive assimilation; she is just radical enough to embrace activist messaging around size whilst conforming to traditional standards and practices of beauty in every other way apart from her fat body. Therefore, Holliday's success is more likely to be attributed to all the way she conforms to socially acceptable beauty rather than in the one way she rejects it.

Having focused so significantly on Tess Holliday I wanted to investigate further one of the most recognisable aspects of her aesthetic – her clothing. Clothing and fashion have clear and traceable histories in body positivity and I knew that I wanted to analyse what those iconic fat femme styles meant originally and what happened when they later drifted over into fat body positivity. Fatshionista, where many of these styles were easily found in the mid-late 2000s, was a forum on LiveJournal that fat people could use to document their, often femme-focused, fashion. Fatshionista originally encouraged its users to think critically about their access to clothing and other social justice issues which, in turn, created a political spirit at Fatshionista that appears to be absent from contemporary representations of fat fashion on social media. This chapter also analyses the use of 'femme' as a political identity in fat activism and explores the danger of presenting femme styles out of a political context. With the introduction of microblogging sites such as Twitter and Tumblr that focused heavily on sharing images rather than longer blogposts, the femme aesthetic of fatshionistas could be shared easily, and quickly,

without the messaging of activism. I suggest that it is the quick sharing of photos and outfit posts that ultimately led to the depoliticisation of fat femme identity in the body positivity movement and gave way to a new standard for fat beauty that emphasised and expected a cultivated feminine aesthetic.

Separating fashion identity from sexuality can sometimes be quite difficult but when I found out that fat activism can clearly be traced back to the social events at NAAFA in the 1960s, I realised I wanted to examine the role of heterosexuality in the body positivity movement more thoroughly. Many of the most popular body positive advocates have an implicit heterosexuality that I wanted to investigate within the history of fat activism. When I first started researching fat activism, I had assumed it was an inherently feminist endeavour, so was surprised to find that NAAFA (who are often credited as being the first organised fat activist group in North America) was founded by the husbands of two fat women who self-identified as fat admirers. Body positive advocates, and some fat activists, appear to reject the notion that fat fetishism is anything but exploitative. However, fat admirers appear to be engaging in some behaviours that appear to be fetishist while publicly admonishing people who do identify with fat fetish. I suggest that the purpose of this rejection is connected with the deeply ingrained assimilation that is part of the body positive proxy of fat activism. Using the term fat admirer allows men who fetishize fat women to put distance between them and a sexual preference that is culturally regarded as deviant, while fat women who obtain heterosexual boyfriends (even if they are fat admirers) can engage in heteronormative practices which helps to further construct a normative identity in spite of their fat bodies. NAAFA's emphasis on heteronormativity in fat activism early on in the movement set a precedent for the assimilationist activism in fat body positivity that connects validation from heterosexual men with the perceived liberation of fat women from fatphobic culture.

Many of the themes in my thesis exist because they are often visibly discussed by body positive advocates or people who write about the movement. However, whiteness is often more implicit and is more clearly recognised by its unspoken

abundance. Writing about whiteness was difficult for me as I had to recognise how I had previously been a part of racist practices that sought to exclude women of colour from body positivity and later attempt to 'include' them in a system built for white women. In my thesis I examine the increased use and focus on inclusivity and 'intersectionality' in body positivity to ask what is really meant by these terms that have acquired an almost buzzword status. I had previously made many assumptions that fat activism was significantly more radical than body positivity and therefore likely to be more critical of race. What I found, however, is that while some fat activists, like some feminists, are able to think about race radically, others perpetuate white centrality. My focus on whiteness in this thesis traces the oversights made by second-wave feminists that were often mirrored in the fat activist movement and concludes that although fat body positivity lacks racial diversity, it is not fixable through the simple 'inclusion' of women of colour. Further, rather than fat body positivity removing the radical racial politics of fat activism, there has been an implicit focus on whiteness in fat politics since at least the 1970s. Although I look most closely at the body positivity proxy of fat activism, I argue that white centrality has been implicit in fat activism, and even fat studies, prior to the popularisation of body positivity. Therefore, while body positivity may focus on some of the more diluted radical politics of fat activism, it appears that contemporary body positivity movement is true to the lack of critical thinking around race in both fat activism and feminism in the 1960s, 1970s and beyond.

In stark contrast to whiteness, health is perhaps the most discussed theme that appeared continuously throughout my research. As body positivity gained in popularity it became more likely to hear advocates claiming that it was possible to be both fat and healthy. These ideas are mainly taken from an ideology often termed Health at Every Size (or HAES). HAES started as an activist approach to health but is now trademarked, and health professionals such as Linda Bacon are often regarded as experts. As I was writing my PhD my health seriously deteriorated, so while I started the process believing HAES to be a necessary and healthy concept to counter-intuitive medicalised fatphobia, I am ending my time as a postgraduate student with a rather different opinion. The more I read about HAES

from health professionals the more I noticed similarities between HAES and traditional diet culture. Although HAES is not promoted as a method for weight loss, there are many insinuations made, especially though Bacon's ([2008] 2010) text, that following a HAES approach will result in weight loss. Further, the emphasis on HAES by fat body positivity advocates communicates perfect health as a necessity – which is something not many of us, including myself, can achieve. The way HAES is constructed and evoked in body positivity suggests that it is being employed as a tool to further the assimilation of fat people into normative society. To counter negative press around the 'obesity epidemic', body positive advocates have taken to insisting that they are healthy despite their weight and that health should be determined based on health markers other than BMI. This has led to a culture of 'accepting' fat people providing they are performing the duties of a 'good fatty'. However, this stance is complicated by fat people who choose to lose weight or undergo weight loss surgery. These people are then seen as traitors of the movement as they abandon their former fat bodies and the cause of fat assimilation. It seems, I argue, that body positivity only embraces assimilation if a person remains 'true' to their fat body, a stance which creates new and largely unachievable standards for perfection, health and happiness that very few, if any, people can meet.

Body positivity has become synonymous with body- and self-love and is perhaps, along with health, where I am most obviously an outsider to the body positivity movement. As my body began to fail me, I experienced detachment from feelings of the body-love that is so common in the body positivity movement; rather than body positivity helping me feel better and more confident in the world, I began to feel guilt for not trying hard enough to love and accept my body. Cooper (2016, 14) compares body positivity to the positive psychology movement where there is a great emphasis on the individual to improve themselves rather than looking at the broader (often cultural) cause of dissatisfaction or depression. Therefore, just like 'good' health, achieving body-love has been set up as an obligation for fat people who want to embrace body positivity. However, there are many people who feel as though they cannot achieve body-love and this has resulted in some counter-

movements gaining traction in the mainstream. Body neutrality embraces fat activist ideas of fat assimilation in an effort to decentralise the body or physical beauty as the most significant thing about a person. Body neutrality advocates suggest that people focus on what their body can do rather than what it looks like. Yet, I am concerned that these demands for people to change the way they perceive their body may, in time, provoke some of the same difficulties as body positivity. As Murray ([2008] 2016) has so thoroughly examined, 'loving' yourself in a culture that does not love you back can be difficult, if not impossible and therefore, I surmise she would have similar reservations around a movement that encourages a person to feel 'neutral' about their body in a world that makes them feel anything but neutral. I am not sure whether it is possible to feel entirely neutral about your own body and again, as Murray ([2008] 2016) has suggested of 'love yourself' activism, there is a possibility that pressure will be applied to an individual and the responsibility of reaching neutrality will again lie with the person with the non-normative body. The methods of both body positivity and body neutrality movements are similar and largely focus on the actions an individual can take to change their own situation. However, purposeful body liberation is not possible from individual action alone. For fat women to be liberated there must be a refocus of what has become mainstream 'body' activism and our value can no longer rest on how 'acceptable' or 'useful' our bodies are.

The findings of my research are broadly in harmony with the work of LeBesco, Murray and Cooper (who I termed my Holy Trinity in the Introduction of my thesis). While I was in the process of analysing my core material I thought I may argue that body positivity is its own movement with its own proxies. However, what I have found is that contemporary body positivity is a continuation and popularisation of the body positive proxy in fat activism. So, when body positivity is accused of diluting the fat activist movement, that is not quite the case. Rather, the mainstream media and body positive advocates such as Tess Holliday have chosen to pick up the more palatable parts of fat activism in order to continue what can be defined as an assimilationist approach to fat activism.

However, that is not to say that body positivity has not undergone a significant transformation as it emerged into the mainstream. As it has increased in fame, new celebrity advocates of the movement have been able to develop their own body positive rhetoric and alter the meaning based on varying contexts. While the movement is a source of empowerment for some, it can be a marketing tool or method to body-love and fat activism for others. As body positivity moves away from its fat focus in mainstream media, the connections between it and fat activism are more difficult to trace. However, using the concepts of fat assimilationist activism (LeBesco 2004), fat activist proxies (Cooper 2016) and critiques of empowerment activism (Murray [2008] 2016) there is, I suggest, a clear connection between the body-love centred proxy of fat activism and body positivity. I argue that body positivity is substantially focused on encouraging mainstream media and society to 'accept' fat women in the way that thin women who conform to normative stances on femininity, heterosexuality and health are accepted. So, rather than being a method for body liberation that would encourage people to stop making connections between their body and their value as a person, body positivity works to 'allow' fat women to be responsible for how their bodies are treated in mainstream culture.

Contemporary body positivity has not been depoliticised because there was an absence of political direction when it originally manifested as a proxy of fat activism. For example, NAAFA began as a group to advocate for the rights of fat people but as the social events grew in popularity, as Goode (2002) reports, it largely became a social club for fat women and fat admirers who could explore their sexual interests in a space that both celebrated an interest in fat women's bodies and encouraged normative behaviours associated with heterosexuality. While fat pool parties and social events do not represent all that NAAFA is, they are important aspects of the organisation that encourage a sense of normalisation for fat women and men who are attracted to them. Similarly, normalisation is exemplified in portrayals of white femininity that do not critique or have knowledge of the value placed on women who present as feminine which communicates a conformity to traditional beauty norms rather than a challenge. Like an adherence

to ‘good fatty’ tropes that represent a fat woman’s ability (and often responsibility) to be both healthy and fat, these assimilationist methods of body positivity largely rely on the individual to transform either the way their body looks (through dress), the way they behave (through sexuality, pool parties and fashion shows) or the way they feel about themselves (through vague methods of self-acceptance and self-love). As there has been a consistent emphasis on individualisation in the body positive proxy of fat activism, I am not convinced it is possible to argue that it ever had political motivations for cultural change.

If body positivity is a proxy of fat activism, which I agree with Cooper (2016) that it is, then although it was not necessarily termed body positivity when Wann (1998) wrote *Fat!So?,* the movement has always lacked political context and the depoliticisation of a more radical activist movement is not a new concept. While Murray ([2008] 2010) was critiquing fat activism rather than body positivity, many of the critiques she made that focused on individualisation of fat politics hold true to newly popular concepts of fat body positivity. Contemporary body positivity requires personal transformation and an adherence to culturally accepted norms of what it means to be a woman. The popularisation of the movement has communicated to many fat women that their weight is not their problem and if they work on improving their feminine appearance, their engagement in heterosexual relationships, their health and body-love while preaching ‘inclusivity’ then any fat woman can be regarded as ‘acceptable’ in mainstream press and culture.

However, perhaps one of the most important conclusions I have come to about both body positivity and fat activism lies within what LeBesco (2004) categorises as either ‘liberatory’ or ‘assimilationist’ activism. Although LeBesco’s (2004) work has been crucial to my analysis of the ‘threads’ of body positivity that run through fat activism, I have become to be somewhat troubled by these binary definitions as movements, on the whole, are often more complex. It seems, that critics of body positivity could easily dismiss the movement as ‘assimilationist’ and therefore unimportant to the liberation of fat women. Yet, although, finding sexual pleasure

through heterosexual relationships, wearing clothes that express who a person is and using, often quite healthist, narratives around HAES may not encourage the world to change their perception on fat people, it can change an individual's perception on the world, and sometimes, as can be demonstrated by the success of the body positivity movement, this can happen to many individuals at the same time. In my experience of grassroots feminist and fat activism, there is often, a temptation to focus on the issues that are the most 'serious' or 'important'. Fashion, for example, can be seen as very frivolous but, as I have discussed, exaggerated femininity can also be used as an activist tool to resist against negative stereotypes that are often associated with fatness. What I have come to learn as I draw nearer to the end of this thesis is that context matters. Spending six years researching a movement that is never quite sure if it wants to include you can make a person extremely jaded, but even I cannot pretend that I did not recognise some sort of success when I saw Tess Holliday's meteoric rise to fame. No, she does not represent all fat women, she does not even represent fat women that look 'like' her, but categorising those who are excited about the changes and moves towards a slightly more 'positive' view of fat women in mainstream culture as assimilationist and therefore unimportant is not particularly useful to the liberation of fat women overall. Body positivity and movements that can be regarded as 'more palatable' than their original iteration are often described as a 'step' in the right direction and while I am not sure I wholly agree that body positivity alone can take those extra steps to fat liberation, there has to be some acknowledgment of what has been achieved. Organising activism into two categories would be convenient for scholars but the reality, as I know as both academic and (sometimes) activist, is significantly more muddled than that. Body positivity, then, while perhaps promoting acts and people that could be seen as 'assimilationist' is not necessarily and simply an assimilationist movement, rather, it is a complicated proxy of the fat activist movement, which always saw itself as liberatory but on further inspection may have more of those assimilationist factors than we previously recognised.

My findings and impression of body positivity however are impacted by the way I conducted my research and my personal experiences of the movement. In my

introduction I outlined the ways in which I drew on Hennegan's (1988, 166) concept of following the 'pricking of my thumbs'. This, of course, led me to texts written by people who have similar backgrounds and impressions of body positivity to myself. So, while this thesis focuses on westernised readings of body positivity, it is also (and to some extent consequently) white, middle-class, fat and informed by my age and experiences of finding communities on the Internet. My racialised identity as a white woman has been particularly difficult to unpick throughout the writing of this thesis, and as I mentioned in my introduction and chapter five, there have been strong assertions more recently that body positivity was created and popularised by Black women. That is not what I found when writing this thesis, although I am sure there are connections to be made between the Black is Beautiful Movement, the Natural Hair Movement and body positivity – and this is scope for further research. I do understand, however, that these are aspects of body positivity that I could have missed when I decided to focus on communities that I am familiar with and popular memoirs (of which most were written by fat white women). This particular method of scavenging though does show how deep the (often ignorant) threads of inclusivity run through body positivity and popularised feminist movements. Even when I search for information on the Black women who founded body positivity, I cannot find it. The body positivity that succeeded in mainstream celebration takes parts of the movement that are palatable enough to be marketable and helps people believe that fat people are worthy of mainstream 'acceptance'. The advocates that are embraced look like Tess Holliday, approach health the same way as Jes Baker, Marilyn Wann and Whitney Way Thore and are in heterosexual relationships like Brittany Gibbons and Lindy West, and perhaps what is implicit throughout this thesis is that I fit into many of these 'acceptable' categories too.

This thesis has limitations, but its methodological weaknesses are also its strengths. In my introduction I discussed being both 'insider' and 'outsider' in popularised body positivity and I argue that shift is what allowed me to give a complex yet deepened analysis. If I did not have that experienced knowledge of the body positivity movement, I would have continued with my (now abandoned) project that focused on mainstream readings of body positivity and 'missed' so much more

that, perhaps only an 'insider' could gain access to. Additionally, as my body began to change, so did my status within the body positivity movement, although that transition was painful, it did stimulate me to begin thinking about body positivity and fat activism in different ways. This thesis, in some ways, provides two readings of body positivity, a before and an after, which has allowed for a sometimes sticky and often complex but hopefully nuanced reading of a contemporary movement with a rich cultural history.

When I began this project I aimed to trace the threads of fat activism that helped cultivate a popular fat-focused body positivity and I witnessed many of these threads gain traction in mainstream media. It is people who look like and have similar backgrounds to me that popularised body positivity celebrates, therefore it is people like me who are most easily able to delve into the history of these communities and outline where mistakes were made. The decision to follow the 'pricking of my thumbs' (Hennegan 1988) and scavenge for data was a difficult one to come to and means this thesis likely does not encapsulate all the threads that make up what body positivity is today. However, what it does do is mark and document a specific moment in time in relation to a specific group of people that resulted in significant mainstreaming of what previously had only been an 'empowering' outlet for groups of marginalised women.

This thesis is written during a time when body positivity is constantly evolving. My original contribution to knowledge is to document the evolution of fat body positivity through the lens of the fat activist movement. I start, roughly, in 1969 (NAAFA) and end in 2019. Having been a part of and a witness to many of the aspects that helped fat body positivity develop into its current cultural phenomenon, I offer a unique perspective on the ideas, values, practices, and representations that make up the threads of this broad movement. Body positivity is quickly acquiring new meanings in different contexts, and this thesis was written as body positivity grew in mainstream popularity, which gave me the opportunity to document specific incidents, publications and trends as they happened. I have identified and located aspects of the dilution of radical fat activism and body

positivity and how they connect with each other. Although these connections are often inferred and have been explored by Cooper (2016), I have identified distinct tropes of assimilation and shown how they may look on the 'perfect' body positive advocate.

Possible future research could explore the emergence of many thinner people using body positivity to voice their dissatisfaction with their own bodies – although I assume one reason is connected to the individualised stance of many body positive advocates, I cannot be sure without further research. Additionally, if interest in the body neutrality movement persists, research that documents its history in relation to previously established notions of body positivity should be explored to understand the trend of body related movements that focus heavily on personal transformation of the mind. Moreover, this thesis lacks a close reading of the function of neoliberalism in body positivity as I was concerned that this would narrow my research and lead me to concentrate on marketing and brands rather than the historical fat activism that helped create body positivity and this is a possible avenue for research too.

The most important issues, I would argue, are those addressed several times throughout this thesis as a lack. I focus on women I have similarities with, women who are white, cis, feminine, young and able-bodied. I did this partially because I could provide better insight into a group of people I identified with but also because this is the group of people who were celebrated by mainstream media when body positivity reached the mainstream. To have a more-rounded understanding of how body positivity functioned before and after its popularisation, a wider, perhaps more scattered focus is necessary, for instance on how people who are fat and trans and/or fat and disabled understand body positivity. Yet, it is the white centrality of body positivity that has raised the most questions for me while writing this thesis; if body positivity was even partially popularised and created by Black women as suggested by Yeboah (quoted in Kessel 2018) and many other women on social media, then it is of great importance to document these stories and events too. This thesis focused on the parts of body

positivity that became popular but further research should concentrate on threads that received less mainstream attention.

I started this PhD thesis hoping to write about the emergence of a movement that would have the power to drastically improve the day-to-day lives of fat women. I also hoped I would never have to talk about my own experiences of body positivity; leaving myself out of the narrative to protect my 'integrity' as a researcher but also in an effort to not look too closely at my naivety in supporting an imperfect movement. Writing about yourself and your experiences is knotty and scary, but it is important to document these moments in time – even if they reflect badly on our past selves. The writing of this research ran parallel to the popularisation of body positivity but also a significant period of self-discovery in my own life. So, while what many people around me saw as a new and exciting movement was gaining traction, I was struggling to keep up the required body-love to be part of it. That doubt in the movement though helped me think more critically about body positivity in general, so through periods of personal difficulty, I would increasingly have research-related epiphanies in the middle of the night or whilst teaching an undergraduate seminar that had little to do with my research. These moments of clarity started coming so quickly through my last year of writing-up that I started to write large portions of my thesis on the notes app on my phone. I offer my autobiographic story as an important part of this research because it is vital to acknowledge these moments of complication and to never pretend as though we already have the answers. Looking back at this PhD in five, ten, or fifty years, I am sure I will have more to say and maybe I will even disagree with what I have written here. But through the experience of doing this research I have learnt that it is important to share stories regardless of whether they are happy, embarrassing or difficult. Stories are how we learn; they are how we do better and how we understand each other. The mistakes made during the depoliticisation of body positivity are unlikely to be undone but in exchanging stories that are challenging to both hear and to tell, perhaps it is possible to reach a place of new understanding where movements like body positivity and even fat activism are no longer necessary.

Appendix One

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