



# EVERYONE SHOULD BE FATACTIVISTS OR FAT-ALLIES

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## ABSTRACT

FATPHOBIA IS UBIQUITOUS. FATPHOBIA IS A STRUCTURE IN SOCIETY. AND IT AFFECTS THE LIVES OF FAT PEOPLE IN WAYS THAT ARE DAMAGING TO THEIR HEALTH AND CAN CAUSE MAJOR INEQUITIES. THIS ARTICLE MAPS OUT FATPHOBIA AS EVER PRESENT THROUGH THE HISTORY OF WESTERN CULTURE – NO TIME PERIOD EXCEPTIONS – AND IT EXAMINES A VERY IMPORTANT REPORT FROM THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) CONCERNING THE HEALTH HAZARD AND SOCIAL INEQUITIES CAUSED BY FATPHOBIA. SHAKESPEARE’S FATJOKES AND THE EVER PRESENCE OF SHAPEWEAR AND ALL THE PORTRAITS OF JESUS AS A THIN, WHITE MAN SHOW US 5,000 YEARS OF CULTIVATED FATMISIA. THAT IS WHY WHO HAS WRITTEN A REPORT URGING DOCTORS AND OTHER HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS TO TREAT FAT PATIENTS WITH EMPATHY AND SENSITIVITY LIKE THEY WOULD THIN PATIENTS. IN MAPPING OUT A STRUCTURE THAT DEHUMANISES PEOPLE OF SIZE, I BRING IN A FEW EXAMPLES FROM MY OWN LIFE AS A FAT PERSON AND AS A FATACTIVIST. EXISTING WHILE FAT IN A WORLD THAT HATES FATNESS IS HARD WORK.

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**DINA AMLUND** IS A FATACTIVIST AND CULTURAL HISTORIAN. HER FOCUS IS ON THE FATPHOBIC STRUCTURE, ON UNDERSTANDING HOW DEEP IT RUNS, HOW IT AFFECTS LANGUAGE, SCIENCE AND CULTURAL PRODUCTS. SHE WRITES FEATURE ARTICLES FOR MAINSTREAM NEWSPAPERS AND (SOMETIMES) PARTICIPATES IN RADIO AND TV SHOWS. SHE TAKES PART IN AS MANY FEMINIST FESTIVALS, DEMONSTRATIONS AND FAT (STUDIES AND/OR ACTIVIST) CONFERENCES AS POSSIBLE AND TEACHES AT VARIOUS EDUCATIONAL LEVELS.



My name is Dina. I am a human being who happens to be fat. I have a name, I have experiences, memories, preferences and dislikes. I am not just part of national and international statistics counting how many fat humans inhabit the earth. I have a head and a face. Even though the media prefer to show us headless and faceless in the fearmongering news, telling the world over and over that fat people exist and that the existence of fat people is one of the greater tragedies of our time.

Before I start mapping out fatphobia as a structure in society, I must explain the most basic words in fat liberation. Fat is a neutral word. There is nothing wrong with the word fat because there is nothing wrong with being fat. It is a neutral state of being. The word "overweight" on the other hand is not a neutral word for the same reason "normal weight" is not a neutral term. Slender, slim, fit and so on are also very loaded words. Thin is a neutral word. There is nothing wrong with being thin. Being thin means a person has thin-privilege because our world favours thin over fat. Thin and skinny are not the same words. Skinny can be loaded in different positive and negative ways. But this article is not about skinny – it is about fat: Fat, fatness, fatphobia and fatactivism – and therefore implicitly about thin-privilege.

I refer to a book titled *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. That is the title. The author and publisher have chosen to write fatphobia as two words. When fatphobia is divided into two words it becomes a phobia of fat/fatness/fat tissue. It becomes an emotion or state within the individual/individuals. Fatphobia as one word is the name of a structure in society like homophobia, xenophobia etc. It is not a misspelling on my part when I write fatphobia as one word. I also choose to write both fatactivist and fatactivism as one word. There are ongoing discussions about fatactivism being one or two words. Fatphobia as one word is not up for discussion. That is the word fatactivists use and it could call for critique that a non-fat author chooses to divide it into two.

## Words Are Important

There was an article in the Danish newspaper *Weekendavisen* in January 2020. The title was *Throw away the scales* (Vestergård, 2020) and it was shared by fatactivists and other fat positive profiles on social media. It was probably the title and a paragraph about how damaging fatphobia is to the health that tricked people into thinking it was a good, fat-friendly text.

The article had a pretty extreme use of war rhetoric. The very first word: "Defeat." Followed by "We have lost the war on obesity." It called for an "obesity alliance". The message was that sustainable weight loss is an illusion. Fat people who lose weight will gain it all back and more so. Most fat people can lose weight – but only very, very few will stay not-fat. Or straight-sized, as we call it in the fat community. Fat people have norm-breaking bodies. And that pisses people off. An article declaring that we've lost the war on obesity will probably not reduce the hate crimes that fat people face in public spaces, for instance shouting at us, spitting at us or throwing food at us.

The article did not stray from the cultural consensus that fatness is a problem. It simply just surrendered to the idea that fat people exist, even though we have tried really hard to eliminate them. With its let's-make-the-best-of-a-lost-war-vibes, this article was probably one of the most fat positive there has ever been written in Danish mainstream media. Not counting various Danish newspapers' debate sections in which I and a few others have claimed there is nothing wrong with being fat – it is simply a variation of the human body, like tall, short, thin and so on.

My feature articles in different newspapers have brought on a lot of hatred. For instance in the very same newspaper which now has officially declared that we have lost the war, someone wrote in November 2019 about how horrible it was to look at fat people in the streets (Munck, 2019). An angry thin man claimed we simply do not shame fat people enough. We make it too easy for them to simply just be fat. In Japan, he stated, they know how to shame fat people properly. If you are an employer, you have to pay fines if your employees' waistlines exceed a certain number of inches. That makes the problem of fat people go away.

Maybe he thought that being excluded from the job market makes fat people skinny in Japan. Or maybe he had realised that fat people do not become thin by being shamed, they just hide away from the hatred. He just wanted to be free to walk the streets of Europe and not see fat people. I guess it does not matter whether they all lose weight or just hide from his eyesight. And then he claimed it is unhealthy to be fat. That is the weapon most commonly used against fat people.

## Fatphobia Is A Health Hazard

The title of his feature article as well as several of his sentences referred knowingly to me and my work. But the newspaper did not let me respond to his fatphobia. I wrote one, but they chose not to publish it. My response was about how bad fatphobia is for fat people's health. So, if the angry thin man really cared about fatness and health, he should read a report from WHO (2017) called *Weight Bias and Obesity Stigma: Considerations for the European Region*.

WHO (2017) uses the words weight bias and obesity stigma. In the report they make a distinction between these two terms: "Weight bias is negative attitudes towards, and beliefs about, others because of their weight. These negative attitudes are manifested by stereotypes and/or prejudice towards people with overweight and obesity. Weight bias can lead to obesity stigma, which is the social sign or label affixed to an individual who is the victim of prejudice. Obesity stigma involves actions against people with obesity that can cause exclusion and marginalization, and lead to inequities – for example, when people with obesity do not receive adequate health care or when they are discriminated against in the workplace or in educational settings" (p. 1).

I do not use the words weight bias, weight stigma or obesity stigma. I use the word fatphobia. Fatphobia is the name of the structure and the social hierarchy that place people of size beneath slender people. I do not use the words obese or overweight, I use the term people of size or fat people. And instead of obesity I use the word fatness. Because I try to step as far away from fatphobic language as I can. So, when I refer to passages in this report, I will say people of size or fat people, while this report says people with obesity or overweight. I find it extremely fatphobic to make a distinction between a fat person and their fatness. It is the absolute contrary of de-stigmatisation to say "people with obesity" or "a person with overweight". Fat people are fat. Only fatphobes have a problem with that.

Fat and fatness are the neutral words when talking about fat people. People of size will do nicely, too. There has been a lot of creativity in an attempt to avoid saying fat: voluptuous, voluminous, curvy, big... I do not mind any of those words. They are just not very accurate because they can mean very many things. And since there is nothing wrong with being fat – why not just say the f-word? Obesity is pathologising. That word is way too loaded and it turns fat people into an epidemic. The word overweight only exists as a polar opposite to normal weight. Just like the term plus sized was the opposite of normal sized, until clever fatactivists came up with the term straight sized.

Let us go through the report from WHO because it acknowledges the harm of stigmatising language – and maybe we should just pretend the report does not use stigmatising language.

## Fatphobia Is Everywhere – All The Time

The report says "obesity stigma is ubiquitous." It says so on the second page, where it also states that multinational studies of this subject are generally lacking. But it also states that studies involving the US, Canada, Iceland and Australia show that fatphobia is similar across countries. And it refers to different studies from Europe and the US other than the studies comparing the aforementioned countries. WHO has enough material for this very important report about fatphobia.

People of size experience fatphobia from educators, employers, health professionals, the media, and from friends and family. The report is not interested in shaming from random strangers in public spaces. Fatphobia is prevalent in work spaces, educational settings, media of various kinds and in social settings and that is what this report is about with a main focus on the healthcare system.

The report digs into the popular narratives around fatness and why people are fat as well as the idea that weight can easily be lost and that weight loss is a sustainable result – and it exemplifies this popular narrative with the cliché that people often repeat "eat less, be more active". The report states that this narrative is creating unrealistic expectations of weight loss, and the report underlines that this narrative focuses on the individual instead of biological, social and other factors.

The media have a big responsibility in this narrative. The media often perpetuate stereotypical portrayals of fat people and thereby reinforce the social acceptance of fatphobia. The report states that:

- US studies show that 72% of media images and 77% of videos stigmatise people of size.
- European studies show that media framing of fatness places great emphasis on individual responsibility which contributes to a culture of fatphobia.
- Shaming, harassing or criticising people about their size is often used in media to motivate fat people to lose weight – but research shows that the effect of fat-shaming is stress which leads to people avoiding physical activity (WHO, 2017, p. 2).

If the media wanted to, they could play a big part in dismantling fatphobia. *Weekendavisen* could choose to print my response and not just the opinion of an angry thin man. The media could take the advice from this report. Journalists could ask themselves if they are simplifying bodies in general and fat bodies in particular. They could choose to avoid photos and videos showing fat people's bodies while not showing their heads. It is listed on page 3 that this particular type of footage is stigmatising. I know from experience that there are many journalists who are interested in different views on fatness and who are interested in giving fat people a voice. And I most certainly also know from experience that there are journalists who wish to stick to the fatphobic paradigm and devote way too much effort into going after me and my work with what seems to be a way too personal vendetta. It would make a huge difference if the media would turn their critical investigation onto the fatphobic structure which allows for the stigmatisation described in the report by WHO to take place rather than feeding the fatphobic structure by tearing down fat people in the media and portraying them in ways that reproduce what this report is seeking to end.

What are the consequences of fatphobia? The report lists many consequences and I will quote a few of them: "Stigma is a fundamental cause of health inequalities." "Not unlike other forms of stigmatization (on the grounds of race, class, ability, gender, sexual orientation etc.), obesity stigma is associated with significant physiological and psychological consequences, including increased depression and anxiety, disordered eating, and decreased self-esteem." "Obesity stigma can also affect the quality of care for patients with obesity, ultimately leading to poor health outcomes and increasing risk of mortality" (WHO, 2017, p. 2).

What can be done to address fatphobia? There is a list for healthcare professionals to follow. First on the list is to avoid stigmatising language. Fourth on the list is a point about the patients' experiences and this point includes sub-points like these two:

- Consider that patients may have had negative experiences with health professionals, and approach patients with sensitivity and empathy.
- Explore all possible causes of a presenting problem, and avoid assuming it is a result of an individual's weight status (WHO, 2017, p. 4).

## #NotAllDoctors

The report urges healthcare professionals to approach fat patients with sensitivity and empathy (WHO, 2017, p. 4). The reason WHO had to put this in the report is that many healthcare professionals do not approach patients of size with the sensitivity and empathy they would slender patients. The report also says that they must "explore all possible causes of a presenting problem, and avoid assuming it is a result of an individual's weight status." The reason WHO had to put this in the report is that many fat patients are being rejected, not having their symptoms properly examined, because they just get told to lose weight. People of size have died because they were turned away from doctors with nothing but an order to lose weight. Maybe the most famous case of a person who fell victim to this is Ellen Maud Bennett who passed away in 2018. She had felt ill for years but was rejected several times with nothing but an order to lose weight. After a long battle of not being taken seriously, she

was diagnosed with cancer and passed away shortly after leaving behind a wish that fat people be treated better within the healthcare system in the future.

The rest of the report regards children. The report urges health professionals to promote body positivity and confidence in children and young people of size, because children of size suffer due to fatphobia. There is a case example in the report showing that almost half of all girls of size and more than one third of boys of size are victimised by their own family members. When children and young people are bullied or victimised because of their weight by peers, family and friends, it triggers feelings of shame and can lead to depression, low self-esteem, poor body image and suicide. Shame and depression can lead children to avoid exercising or eating in public for fear of humiliation. Children and young people of size experience teasing, verbal threats and physical assaults. They can also experience social isolation by being excluded from school and social activities or being ignored by classmates (WHO, 2017, p. 4).

I will quote the rest of the case example: "Weight-biased attitudes on the part of teachers can lead them to form lower expectation of students, which can lead to lower educational outcomes for children and young people with obesity. This in turn can affect children's life chances and opportunities, and ultimately lead to social and health inequities. It is important to be aware of our own weight-biased attitude and cautious when talking to children and young people about their weight. Parents can also advocate for their children with teachers and principals by expressing concerns and promoting awareness of weight bias in schools. Policies are needed to prevent weight-victimization in schools" (WHO, 2017, p. 4).

## Stop Hating On Fat People

We need to take action against fatphobia. That is what the report says. The report doesn't say anywhere that fat people must lose weight. In fact it argues that health professionals must focus on health gain. As opposed to weight loss. And it advises health professionals to encourage body positivity with children, young people and adults of size. It can be argued that it does say the sentence "handling obesity" which given that it is from WHO probably means losing weight. But in the context of the report itself it can also simply mean handling the life of a fat person in a fatphobic society. WHO is still trying to fight and reduce fatness, which is of course fuel on the fatphobic fire – but the good news is WHO now states that fatphobia in itself is a health hazard and is associated with morbidity. You can very easily find a lot of literature about fatness being a problem. You can also find literature that states that health is not a matter of size but about eating well, being active and taking care of your mental health. If you want to read about that, I suggest the books *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Your Weight* by Dr. Lindo Bacon from 2008 and *Body Respect: What Conventional Health Books Get Wrong, Leave Out, and Plain Fail to Understand about Weight* from 2014 by Lindo Bacon and Lucy Aphramor. If you want to see articles that discuss whether or not weight loss is possible or whether weight loss makes any difference or not, you can easily find that, too. There is also research regarding stress and how that affects health in ways that are often attributed to fatness. There are plenty of opinions and lots of different scientific researchers out there.

This report from WHO is very polite as it really does not want to step on any doctors' toes. It carefully suggests that things must get a little better for fat people. If this report had been written in all caps with lots of exclamation points, it would not have been too much. The report states that fatphobia is damaging to health and is associated with morbidity. Fatphobia is pestering our lives and it kills us! Fat people are pretty amazing for enduring this. Fatphobia forced us into a hierarchy where we are inferior to slender people. Fatphobia made us fear our own bodies. Fatphobia made other people hate us. And fatphobia gave us and our fatness the responsibility for this mistreatment by individuals and by society at large. This is absolutely atrocious. And this report is a huge step in the right direction. The core message here is this: Fat people everywhere, you are as worthy and deserving of well-being and equal healthcare just as everyone should be. And WHO is trying to reduce fatphobia and ensure equality in the healthcare system and in society in general. And if I may add, not a minute too soon.

But the debate section in *Weekendavisen* did not care for this report and it did not find it relevant enough to let me respond to the angry thin man. It is not that I have not had anything accepted in the national newspapers. I have. I have worked really hard to get feature articles accepted and they mostly have been. I wrote quite a lot about fatsuiting in 2019, which resulted in many invitations to participate in radio and TV shows. Some of which I accepted. I must get better at weeding out the extremely

hateful ones. In 2020 I have not yet wanted to participate in anything on the radio or on TV. Some of them were too harsh last year. And even though most of the radio and TV experiences were absolutely fine – the hate reactions following were extreme. It takes time to recover from that. And that seems to take away too much time from my busy fatactivism! But after having written and spoken about fatsuits and how extremely fatphobic they are, I was contacted by the director of one of the films I had criticised. He was so empathetic and ready to listen. We met in December – in the middle of a hate tornado circling my social media – and that meeting really made my fatactivist year! He promised to never use fatsuiting again!

## Fatsuiting Needs To Stop

I have not participated in any radio or TV shows this year, but I probably will soon. So far, I have wanted to focus on my own writing instead. I want to write feature articles where I get my message out. I also want to go on the good radio shows. The ones that are about learning, not about hating what we do not understand or what we think we understand but have gotten wrong. I feel like, if I wanted to, I could just do the exact same media tour of Fatsuits from Autumn 2019 again. The same feature articles and the same radio and TV shows and the same hatred.

My anti-fatsuiting-tour 2019 started late August when I had a feature article in a very conservative newspaper, *Berlingske Tidende*, about *The Loudest Voice* on HBO (Amlund, 2019). Russell Crowe in fatsuit playing Roger Ailes, the media mogul with no conscience. He built and ran Fox News with verbal and even physical violence and sexual harassment. And he was fat. Russell Crowe and his brand as Mr. Fit & Slender Dreamboat hopped in a fatsuit and every single scene reminded us that Roger Ailes is fat. Much more than a fat actor playing Roger Ailes would. The fatsuit will always have that effect, reminding everyone that here is fatness. The artificial double chin and belly were the focus of many shots. Especially the scenes with sexual harassment. Sexual violence is simply worse when committed by a fat person towards a slender, beautiful person. Just like the scenes where he was eating. Eating is a crime when committed by a fat person. Fatsuits are often comedic. Like Monica in *Friends*, for instance. In the 38<sup>th</sup> episode the gang looks back at their high school prom stories (amongst several other storylines and episodes with Monica in fatsuit). Fat people are laughable. And it is funny when thin people are dressed as fat people. The temporary degradation of the thin person is always funny in a fatphobic society. But fatsuiting is also simply a way of emphasising the fatness. We are never not aware of the fat because here is Russell Crowe dressed as a fat person.

I wrote a feature article about fatsuiting in August last year because I had just watched *The Loudest Voice*. But there were also plenty of comedies on Netflix I could have written about. I went to the theatre six times during Autumn 2019 and three of the plays featured fatsuits. One of the plays, *Kafka's America* at Nørrebro Teater, used fatsuiting to a degree I did not think I would see in this day and age. It was a positively fatsuit bearing play. In the first act there were two fat capitalists with no conscience. Their clothes were too tight and they were tugging and pulling on them all the time in case the audience should forget about the fatsuits for a split second. One of the fatsuit-capitalists placed a plate on the artificial belly and ate from it. In the second act there was a fatsuit-woman dressed in the same red velvet as the red velvet couch she was sitting on and she became more furniture than person. The entire theatre roared with laughter when two thin men found her attractive and in a long and hard-to-watch scene penetrated her from different angles. I wrote about that play. And I wrote about the Danish film *Harpiks* starring Sofie Gråbøl in fatsuit. And I wrote about how frequently fatsuiting appears and how fatsuiting is not only a matter of low expectations of fat actors, but also high expectations of thin actors. Though that is the fatphobic argument we constantly hear: "who else could have played the role Sofie Gråbøl played? Certainly not a fat person! Sofie Gråbøl is very, very talented!" Fatsuiting in and of itself is a manifestation of fatphobia; it is a tool to exhibit fatness for comedic or other reasons. And we get to look at fatness without really having to see it.

## Fatness Is Such An Easy Symbol Of Everything Bad

And now, while 2020 is still new and fresh, a new film has premiered: *Bombshell*. It is the very same story of Roger Ailes and his predatory behaviour at FOX News. This time it is John Lithgow in fatsuit. Of course, we are all interested in the story of FOX

News creator Roger Ailes and his rise and fall. Was he a bad man for what he did? Yes, yes he was. Was he even worse for being fat while doing it? Absolutely! All fat people are guilty. We are a threat to society. We are an epidemic. We are personifications of everything bad. A fat crook is very easy to hate.

A fatphobic society fosters such high levels of fear, hatred and disgust of fat people that fatness can always be used to symbolise what we hate. And what we want others to hate with us.

No matter your message, your point of view, your politics – you can use fatness when you want to criticise your opponent. On the left wing we have the Fat Capitalist. Their fatness has always been used to vilify them. This stereotype is still used all the time in memes made by every generation including millennials and gen-Zs. And it will probably continue with the next generations. But if they look at the covers of Forbes to see capitalists being worshipped, they will mostly see thin, muscular people. Once in a while someone fat will enter – and their fatness will be used against them, like with Roger Ailes. Or Donald Trump who has become a little fat with age. There are so many sides to Trump that are way beyond problematic, yet my Facebook feed was flooded with images of his double chin, his abdomen and hips – as well as his hair, hand size and spray tan colour, up to, during and after the election in 2016. The man is a raging racist, misogynist, ableist and so on – but his fatness is what people seek to focus on when they need to express their disdain.

What was also interesting about the presidential election and campaigning of 2016 was that in the midst of all the fatjokes and fatphobic claims about his health and eating habits, Donald Trump was usually the most fatphobic joker in any debate. Chris Christie, republican senator in New Jersey, is fat and Trump made that an argument not to vote for Christie and made him the butt of way too many jokes. On the right-wing, fatness is as frequently used to symbolise what we don't like as it is on the left wing. Just think of the derogatory term "welfare queen" which was coined in 1974 about women who misused and excessively collected welfare payment through fraud and manipulation. The "welfare queen" is usually a black single mother – and she is fat.

Back to Denmark, where you will also see the fat stereotypes in political satire and illustrations in newspapers. Not just the fat capitalists and the fat welfare leaches. No matter the subject, fatness is often the tool to show it. It can be about anything. For instance, criticising the church for being out of date or judgemental – then a drawing of a fat priest and a slender congregation is very useful. Or if the critique is that society expects too much from priests who are only human – then a slender priest with a look of despair in front of a congregation of fat and demanding people would come in handy. If you want a debate about children and young people – if the point is that children nowadays are impossible and do not listen, a drawing of fat children being lazy will do. Or if the debate is about the parents or other adults being the problem – then they would be drawn fat and the children thin. If you are against Copenhagen Pride Week every year in August – whether from a homophobic perspective that claims sexuality should be a private matter or an anti-capitalist perspective that goes against pink washing and other types of commercialisation of freedom fighting – any article could easily be accompanied by a few fat people participating in the Pride Parade.

## Fatness In The Not So Good Old Days

We have grown up with fatness being equally hated from all sides in the media and elsewhere. It is a neutral position to be fatphobic. Fatness is bad. And we have contradictive narratives about fatness that can only exist because of fatphobia. We are constantly told that fat people are a contemporary burden. That in the old days – before the world went astray – there were no fat people. Fatness is a modern tragedy. Fatness is something angry thin men have to look at in the streets because something has gone wrong.

We are also constantly told that everyone loved fat people in the old times. Back in the day when they did not know any better. When draining blood was the cure for everything and they believed in elves and they had poor hygiene – back then they loved fat people.

Fatness is used in two ways to talk about history, society and evolution. When we want to look back at a better time – there were no fat people and fatness becomes a new phenomenon in a faulty culture. When we want to look back and see how far we have come – fatness did exist in the old days and we ought to be without it today because fatness has nothing to do with contemporary culture.

I cannot count how many times I have heard that fatness was acceptable in the old days. That at times when food was scarce and most people worked really hard in the fields, being fat was the ideal way to have a body. A symbol of status for men, and a symbol of beauty and fertility for women. I apologise for the gender-binary language. I had a teacher when I was a teenager who made everyone in class laugh very loudly by almost shouting that in the 1600s the idea of beauty was a woman with an arse as wide as a house. I was the only fat pupil in the class.

## Thinness Is An Ideal As Old As Western Culture Itself

I want to recommend a wonderful body positive and somewhat fatactivist documentary called *Fattitude the Movie*. We had a showing of the film in Denmark in 2017 arranged by a fatactivist group, FedFront. It went as it usually goes: The film claimed that fatness was OK and even celebrated “in the old days” and then a few minutes later into the film, they actually showed some very harsh caricature drawings from – also – the old days. And afterwards we sat in a circle discussing the film and someone mentioned “the fact” that it was ok to be fat in the good old days. And there seemed to be a general consensus that fatphobia is a relatively new phenomenon. Even though we saw fatphobic caricatures from the very same unspecified “old days”.

For years I have been digging out examples of fatphobia and the worshipping of thinness throughout Western history. Thinness with slightly different size variations from very skinny to slender with a hint of softness has reigned the claim of aesthetics, health, intelligence, morality, and worthiness in the entire history of Western culture. No time period exceptions. Let me just run through history from Ancient Greece till today looking at cultural products. And I promise to dwell on the Baroque and Peter Paul Rubens whose name is the origin of the term “Rubenesque”.

In Ancient Greece, where we say Western Culture or Western Civilisation began 5,000 years ago (depending on the definition, Western Culture will sometimes be defined as younger than 5,000 years), and in Ancient Rome they wore shapewear to look as thin as possible. I sometimes hear people use the words “full figured” when talking about Classic statues. I urge those people to google for instance Venus de Milo or any statue of Venus/Aphrodite or any of the other gods and goddesses. The Minoans who lived on Crete were very concerned about waistlines. They wore shapewear consisting of something a lot like a vest and belt to tighten in the waistline as much as possible. They also put formfitting belts on their children. The oldest shape-wear recorded is found on Crete and dates back to somewhere between 1600 and 1100 BCE. Shapewear is referred to in the literary work by Homer and we know they used bandages in Ancient Rome to tighten in the body.

During medieval times, running from approximately 500 to 1500 CE (some historians will argue it began somewhat earlier than 500 CE, and depending on where in Europe it would begin later; Denmark did not join medieval and Western culture until around the year 1050 CE), the body was considered very sinful. It was to be hidden away under loosely fitted outer garments. The undergarments, however, functioned both as undergarments and shapewear. Shapewear in itself was most likely frowned upon but the combination of undergarments and shapewear was common. They would sew brass wire or slats made from wood or bone into the garments, to help tighten the torso and make it thinner. From around 1200, the dresses became tighter and new inventions with bandages and buttons made it easier to tighten in the body. During this period Anorexia Mirabilis became highly fashionable. Nuns and other religious women would starve themselves to become closer to God. The Anorexics Mirabilis or the Holy Anorexics were worshipped for their explicit thinness and ability to deny their body food. The thinner they could become, the more beautiful in the eyes of the Lord. Though Anorexia Mirabilis was very popular during the high and late medieval periods, it remained a popular practice in some religious circles in the centuries to follow.

## The Renaissance And The Baroque

The constant repetition of “fat in the old days” is considered by some people to mean all periods prior to our own, but mostly understood more specifically to mean the Baroque Period which is defined as beginning in 1600 and ending in 1740 or 1750. And when talking about fatness, it is especially the various Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish styles, mainly the Flemish Baroque that will be referred to when arguing that fat was ideal. Peter Paul Rubens was one of the most influential painters of the Flemish

Baroque and his name is the origin of the term Rubenesque – a term I have frequently heard used about myself and other fat people, especially fat women.

The Renaissance period overlaps the Late Middle Ages and is often said to be from 1300 to 1600. The Renaissance marks a new beginning where the body was allowed to be naked in art and it was viewed with curiosity and fascination. That did not mean, however, that the body was not forced into shapewear. It most definitely was. The nudity on display was the well-functioning machine: just think of the famous drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, *the Vitruvian Man*, who is placed inside a circle and a square, with perfect proportions, tall, muscular and slender. Just like the Classic statues of the Olympic gods, and the body ideals of the fascist ideologies and most portraits of Jesus. I will get back to Jesus.

I am not sure how many times I have heard someone say “but Botticelli painted voluptuous women” to prove me wrong and insist that fatness was celebrated in the Renaissance. I have asked them all to google an image of Sandro Boticelli, or if they want a title of a specific painting, what about the famous 1486 painting *The Birth of Venus*. She is very far from being fat. I may start carrying prints of these paintings and drawings around. These paintings have to be looked at again. It takes a bit of practice to see that the models are not fat because we have always been told that they are.

We have portraits from the Baroque era of fat people. That does not prove that fatness was ideal – only that fat people existed. Rubens and Jesus tell us what we need to know about beauty in the Baroque. And we only have to look at the caricatures in paintings and writings of fat people during the Renaissance and the Baroque to know that fat people were the butt of the joke back then, too.

From the very first novel, *Don Quixote* written by Cervantes and published in 1605, with the second half published in 1615, we see the very structure of the novel being fatphobia: Don Quixote has lost his mind and is followed by Sancho Panza, a fat and ill-smelling person who believes everything Quixote says and when he does start to suspect Quixote’s loss of mind, he does so in a laughable way. For example when Quixote wants to fight windmills. It takes a fat person to fill that role of the unpleasant, unintelligent force that brings the story where it goes. And it takes a person who lost his mind to want to travel with a disgusting and gullible fat person.

Shakespeare is also full of fatphobia. Fatness is used as comic relief in his tragedies and will fill significantly big parts of the fun in his comedies. An example of fatphobia used as comic relief in a tragedy is in *King Henry the IV* from 1597: Falstaff says “There live not three good men unchanged in England: and one of them is fat” (*King Henry the IV*, Act II, scene IIII). What Falstaff is saying is that there are fewer than three, so two, and the fat man is not really a man or a person. There is only one good man unchanged in England. A sad fact that needed to be wrapped in a joke. And it’s funny when someone is fat. The character Falstaff, who said this, is himself fat and uses fatphobic jokes, which is like watching the few fat characters in Hollywood films today constantly demeaning themselves. Falstaff was a fan favourite and made it into three of Shakespeare’s tragedies and the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Fatness was as much a joke, an abomination and a wrong way of being human during these times as it was and is in the periods before and after. The extremes of shapewear during the Renaissance were uncanny. The infamous Tudor corset was made of iron and was expected to be worn by everyone in the nobility in the UK. In France a particularly fatphobic queen, Catherine de Medici, banned fat waists at court during in 1550s. Having a noble pedigree did not get you access to the French court if your belly was big and round.

## Jesus Is Always Thin And Aphrodite Cannot Be Fat

While the original Rubenesque women are not fat, like the Rubenesque women in contemporary language are, I will recognise that they are slightly softer looking than the thin women – and everyone else – of the centuries to follow and leading up to the Baroque. I also believe it is this tiny amount of body fat in Rubens’ and other paintings of this time that has played a part in the name of the Baroque Period. Baroque meaning strange, weird, and not named by the philosophical and cultural leaders of the time, but given as a mock name in later times who found The Baroque Period wrong and ugly. And I do realise the extreme fatphobia in these specific dynamics. And that does prove fatphobia was ever so slightly less tightened around the Baroque

era but absolutely still very much present.

When I encourage sceptics to google paintings to prove my point, I usually pick two paintings by Rubens. It takes some adjustment to look at Rubens and not see fat people. It can be difficult to unlearn something that has been repeated over and over again.

The first painting is *The Judgement of Paris* from 1638. The famous story of Prince Paris who was to give an apple to the most desirable of the three most desirable goddesses: Aphrodite, Athena and Hera. Prince Paris is holding the apple towards the three goddesses. Next to Paris is Hermes. The two men are loosely draped in small pieces of fabric and the three women are draped in see-through fabric only covering their genitals. They are all slender, the men are quite muscular. Just like the Ancient statues. Rubens did not portray them as fat because fat was not the ideal. The goddesses look like Drew Barrymore and Kate Winslet. Not as thin as Kiera Knightly. But definitely not fat.

The other painting, I suggest looking up is *The Raising of the Cross* from 1610. It is an altar piece depicting Jesus on the cross. It is worth noting that the concept of women as the fairer sex is only 300 years old. In the 1600s, the woman was still only the weaker sex. Man was the most beautiful of all God's creations and mankind was the most beautiful gender. And most beautiful of all men was of course Jesus because he was both man and God. So, when you look at Jesus, you look at the height of beauty and what is ideal. The ideal is white, muscular, tall and definitely not fat. If it had truly meant status to be fat, all painters would have made Jesus fat. There are a lot of men in this painting. They all look white, slender, muscular and tall. And whitest and thinnest is Jesus.

You may never have seen a fat Jesus. And if you have, his fatness has been used as a statement. Most likely his fatness meant to ridicule Christianity. Like contemporary artist Fernando Botero's paintings of fat Jesus, fat Mona Lisa and fat people in general. He paints fatness to do both political satire and humour. Other than statements like these which are mostly fatphobic but can perhaps also be fat positive in some cases – Jesus is always depicted as thin. And so is Aphrodite throughout the entire Western history. They cannot be fat because thinness was always ideal.

## Racism, Fatphobia And Science

In 1863 William Banting described how fat people are being mocked and ridiculed in social gatherings. He therefore encouraged all fat people to lose weight to gain more social status. It really is no new phenomenon that society discriminates against fat people for various reasons. His name, banting, since became a verb synonymous with dieting. During the 1700s, 1800s and 1900s various diets were invented.

For years I have been digging out fatphobia from several different cultural products and tendencies in the West. And while many people have been extremely sceptical, I usually get to turn their ideas around in settings where I can show slides and get to present my prepared arguments uninterrupted. I have only experienced denial on very few occasions in these situations. At least denial that was said out loud. But if it comes up in conversations here and there that everyone loved fat people back in some kind of olden days – then it is really hard work to try to make these points. Sometimes I just leave the conversation because I cannot listen to it anymore. Other times I try with the help of Google Images. But still, there is quite a lot of fatphobic scepticism.

I come across fat people who are body positive or do fatactivism and they have a time-travelling fantasy which I disrupt with my well-researched arguments. When they talk about a time before the world went astray, they mean a time of freedom for bodies. They like the idea that fatphobia is a new phenomenon. On the surface I see how it is a nice idea. But in reality, reproducing the narrative that everyone loved fat people in olden days is just as damaging from a romanticising point of view. In this context the work of decoding fatphobia as a structure in society is diminished. And the grasp that fatphobia has on us all is not recognised to the point that it should be.

In 2019 a very important book was published by Dr Sabrina Strings who has done important research on the history of racialisation. She tells us that racism and fatphobia are very closely linked. She wrote a book about it and I have cited it many, many times. It is called *Fearing the Black Body: the Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. I am very happy to have this book to refer to.

At the same time, there are problems that need addressing.

The book digs deep into the science of the 1700s, 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s. The division of human beings into high and low places in a hierarchy is mostly what science was all about during the so called Years of Enlightenment. And that is what our science today is originally built on.

One of the theories was that an excess of black bile in the body causes the skin to be dark. An excess of black bile also meant excess fat. And those two theories were combined by French anthropologist and naturalist Julien-Joseph Virey who claimed skin colour and fatness were directly linked.

It seems all scientists who were busy dividing humans into categories used fatness, skin colour, lack of intelligence, lack of morals, excess appetite and sexuality as arguments all leaning towards each other and to be used interchangeably.

White people were described as thin and beautiful. Thinness and whiteness became linked. And white people were later divided into subcategories where thinness and fatness played big parts.

Variations of this kind continued well into the 20th century. Mixing race, fatness and disease until they became different sides of the same argument was not uncommon. Sabrina Strings introduces these examples from the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) in the 1920s in her book: "Friedman had argued that Jews exhibited poor muscular development, which he claimed was a sign of excess fatty tissue. And Dr. Elliott Joslin, the same physician who had praised the standards of the fashion plate, wrote in 1924, "the Jew, in my opinion, is not prone to diabetes because he is a Jew, but rather because he is fat. Jews are fat; though shameful to relate" (Strings, 2019, p. 196). Even in his 1921 article in JAMA, Joslin claimed, "One has only to visit the Jewish quarter of a large Jewish city to be impressed with the frequency of obesity." He offered this explanation: "Overfeeding begins in childhood and lasts to old age. Very likely with the increasing affluence of the Jewish race in this country, permitting indulgence of their well-known fondness for style, obesity will tend to diminish along with diabetes" (Strings, 2019, p. 196).

## Fatphobia Is Still Ubiquitous

It is beyond amazing to have a book that maps out how closely linked racism and fatphobia are. It is a wonderful piece of evidence to bring up in the meetings with sceptics.

Unfortunately, the book and even the title seem to erase all of the fatphobia leading up to the horrific science which our science is based on. Strings also turns to Rubens and other painters from the Flemish Baroque as proof that fatphobia did not exist. And because doctors in the 19th and 20th centuries worried about Anorexia Nervosa, it seems to become an argument that there was less fatphobia during those times. Strings uses Kellogg, for instance, who invented the world-famous cornflakes. He worried about women being too thin. But since he also worried a great deal about women and men being fat, I would hardly say that indicates any kind of fat positivity.

Nonetheless, *Fearing the Black Body: the Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* is the book I have cited most times in 2019. Before that it was *Health At Every Size: the Surprising Truth About Your Size* by Dr. Lindo Bacon who is a physiologist with a great deal of research into fatness and health, books, articles and a huge community behind her. And both Dr. Strings and Dr. Bacon are not at all fat which makes it easier for people to listen to them.

Coming back to the article *Throw away the scales* in the Danish newspaper. The medical and psychology experts interviewed do try to acquit fat people to a large extent. The horrible crimes fat people have committed up through 5,000 years of Western history – the crime of existing – seem to be partly acquitted in articles like this one.

Even though the damaging rhetoric of this recent piece got to me, I am generally very positive when it comes to fatactivism in particular and other types of freedom fighting in general. I believe in looking critically at language, changing what is wrong with the words, terms and sayings and explaining to as many people as possible why these adjustments need to happen. I translated the words fatactivism/fatactivist and fatphobia into Danish 3 years ago. And last year fatactivist made it onto the official list of new words in the Danish language. That is a win.

Having had enough feature articles in the national newspapers using that word made that happen. It also made angry thin

men react very strongly. Their frustration that fat people are not being shamed thoroughly enough is kind of a win, too, really.

And so is an article that declares defeat. "We have lost the war on obesity" – under different circumstances I may get to enjoy this sentence changed into "we have won over fatphobia". We are far from that day yet. WHO is still officially at war with fatness. But there are obviously strong forces within the health organisation that have come out with such an important report that try hard to humanise fat people after millennia of dehumanisation.

It is a long and winding road sometimes – but we are on the right track. Join us!

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