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**Katariina Kyrölä & Hannele Harjunen**

## **Phantom/Liminal Fat and Feminist Theories of the Body**

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### **Abstract**

This article brings together two concepts, 'phantom fat' and 'liminal fat' which both aim to grasp how fat in contemporary culture becomes a kind of material immateriality, corporeality in suspension. Comparing the spheres of representation and experience, we examine the challenges and usefulness of these concepts, and feminist fat studies perspectives more broadly, to feminist scholarship on the body. We ask what connects and disconnects fat corporeality and fat studies from ways of theorizing other embodied differences, like gender, 'race,' disability, class, and sexuality, especially when thinking through their perceived mutability or removability, and assumptions about their relevance for subjectivity. While it is important to consider corporeality and selfhood as malleable and open to change in order to mobilize oppressive normativities around gendered bodies and selves, we argue that more attention should also be paid to the persistence of corporeality and a feeling of a relatively stable self, and the potential for empowerment in *not* engaging with or idealizing continuous transformation and becoming. Furthermore, we suggest that the concepts of the phantom of fat and liminal fat can help shed light on some problematic ways in which feminist studies have approached – or not approached – questions of fat corporeality in relation to politics of health and bodily appearance. Questions of weight, when critically interrogated together with other axes of difference, highlight how experiential and subjugated knowledges, as well as critical inquiry of internal prejudices, must remain of continued key importance to feminist projects.

**Keywords:** fat, feminist fat studies, feminist theory, body, self, experience, representation,

knowledge, liminality, body image

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During the last two decades, a growing body of scholarship termed feminist fat studies has emerged from the broader field of feminist studies of the body.<sup>1</sup> Feminist fat studies refers to a field which, in contrast to biomedical research on ‘obesity’, does not see fat first and foremost as a problem that needs solving or curing. Instead, it focuses on fat as a gendered, culturally produced and variable category and experience. Feminist fat studies draws on and contributes to gender, race/ethnicity, disability, class and queer studies in its commitment to unravel embodied normativities and imagine alternatives. It reclaims a traditionally disparaging term ‘fat’ in a similar manner as ‘queer’ has been remobilized (see e.g. Farrell, 2011: 21–22; Butler, 1993: 223–229) and shares also queer studies’ interest in undoing the very notion of ‘normalcy’.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we want to suggest some perspectives and contributions that feminist fat studies can offer to the broader field of feminist thought on the body and embodied differences (and vice versa), particularly through two concepts which we used in our respective research projects: *phantom fat* (Kyrölä) and *liminal fat* (Harjunen). We explore how these concepts address the specificity of fat marginalization but also connect it to questions about the boundaries of embodiment and subjectivity. Moreover, feminist fat studies perspectives highlight and remind of the importance of keeping experiential and subjugated knowledges in the center of feminist ethics and epistemology overall. Bypassing such knowledges can result in deeply problematic body politics. Examining scholarship on fat subordination in relation to other forms of marginalization, we interrogate how understandings of mutability and intentionality connect and separate questions of weight from gender, ‘race,’ disability, sexuality and class in terms of such body politics.

In our work here, the concept of ‘phantom fat’ derives from media analysis and autoethnographical methodology, while the concept of ‘liminal fat’ draws on empirical social research – both collate feminist theories of the body and feminist fat studies. Katariina Kyrölä’s research project addresses ways in which contemporary media images of fat bodies aim to

engage their viewers affectively and corporeally. Hannele Harjunen's research explores Finnish women's experiences of being fat and the social and gendered power relations that construct those experiences. Kyrölä's research material includes a wide variety of Anglo-American and Finnish media images from the early 1990s to the late 2000s, reaching from reality television to Hollywood movies, from sitcoms to documentaries, from print magazine and news media to online pornography, examining also autoethnographical accounts of reacting to and analyzing the material. Harjunen's research data includes thirty-five autobiographical writings and twelve thematic interviews with Finnish women aged between twenty-one and sixty-five years, collected in 2000.

While using different methodologies and departing from partly different disciplinary backgrounds, the findings of the projects intersect in interesting ways. Harjunen's female informants appear to have experienced fatness as a liminal state that cannot be considered a permanent, valuable and identifiable part of or a base for subjectivity. Instead, fat is experienced as temporary and unstable. Even those informants who had considered themselves fat for much or all of their lives insisted that their 'real' selves should occupy a normatively sized body. According to Kyrölä's study, the vast majority of mainstream media images of fat bodies make fat into a removable, threatening, continuously disappearing and reappearing, almost haunting entity. As such, these images produce an ideal viewer who is expected to fear and reject actual or potential 'fat' parts of their bodies, whether 'fat' exists in the concrete now or in the imagined future. Thus, the ideal viewer's body image contains fat as a phantom limb of sorts, resembling the way in which a lost body part can remain a part of a person's affective body and body image, feeling as-if-real, although not existing in the flesh (see e.g. Grosz, 1994: 70–79; Sobchack, 2004: 167–174). However, for those who experience their bodies as fat, the material reality of fat is made to appear unlivable, enforcing a phantomizing of their lived flesh as if it was not fully material. For those who do not currently live as fat, phantom fat still becomes a part of their body images as potentiality: threatening abstract flesh which can grab onto them materially anytime without continuous rejection and management. Therefore Kyrölä argues that images of fat are never only about fat. They play a key part in managing our relation to corporeal boundaries, openness and vulnerability overall.

As both approaches try to grasp experiences as well as representations of corporeality that simultaneously exist and do not exist in a fully fleshed or lived sense, they also point to questions about the relations between the body and the self, materiality and imagination. As such, these analyses relate to ongoing efforts in feminist theory to rethink corporeality beyond the visible or graspable (e.g. Salamon, 2010; Blackman, 2012; Solander, 2014) and as multiple, open potentialities (e.g. Weiss, 1999; Blackman, 2008). Our intention is not to summarize our respective research projects with their multifaceted materials in this article, but we use ‘phantom fat’ and ‘liminal fat’ as routes to make suggestions and raise questions in relation to wider feminist studies’ discussions. We ask: 1) what the two conceptualizations might suggest for understanding the relationship between or mutual constitution of experience and representation; 2) what connects and disconnects fat from other embodied differences, like gender and trans questions, ‘race’, disability and sexuality, especially when thinking through what qualities are seen as mutable or removable, and 3) how feminist studies could benefit from incorporating fat studies perspectives into its discussions concerning the body.

### **Conceptualizing Fat: Experience and Representation**

One of the most persistently discussed issues in feminist studies is the question of how representation and experience enmesh, and how culturally constructed norms relate to – or disconnect from – lived embodiment (Bray and Colebrook, 1998: 36–37; Thornham, 2000: 164). However in practice, empirical research on embodied experiences and analyses of cultural representations of bodies are often conducted apart from each other in feminist scholarship, even if the relationality between images and experiences is in the center of inquiry. Typical questions address the ways in which representations assume things about, position, or engage readers or viewers in embodied ways, or how subjects of empirical research make sense and feel about texts or images, but comparisons between experiences and representations are fewer and farther between (for notable exceptions, see e.g. Sobchack, 2004; Coleman, 2009; Skeggs and Wood, 2012). In our view, more comparative or multi-sited studies are needed. One possible and fruitful way to focus more intently on the relationality of experience and representation is through collaborative efforts across disciplinary lines, as is our aim. Our intention in bringing together ‘phantom fat’ as a structure of media representation which enables and limits viewers’ body

images, and ‘liminal fat’ as a structure of fat female experience as it is produced through cultural norms, is to examine the intertwining of representations of bodies and embodied experiences. Instead of assuming a process of ‘internalization,’ or prioritizing one dimension before the other (cf. Bray and Colebrook, 1998: 46–47), we want to juxtapose them and see what that process brings about.

‘Phantom fat’ and ‘liminal fat’ are not the first or only concepts in feminist fat studies to try and grapple with the difficult cultural structuring of fat as simultaneously disappearing and very much existing, both in terms of experience and cultural discourses. Samantha Murray (2005: 155), for example, terms this a process of ‘*unbecoming (out)*’: she notes that ‘the fat body [...], in order to be accorded personhood, is expected to engage in a continuous process of transformation, of becoming and, indeed, *unbecoming*.’ Murray draws on Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2001) article about coming out as a fat woman: unlike the gay body, the fat body is always already out, as in hypervisible. Thus coming out cannot mean revealing oneself as fat but, rather, willfully rejecting the imperative for transformation, and outing oneself as fat and proud. Murray however criticizes such politics of a simplistic understanding of subjectivity which assumes a fully volitional self who can simply change their mind about their body. Instead, she calls for politics of ambiguity that allow for contradicting feelings and actions around embodiment, and non-unitary subjectivities (161–162). On another note, Jeannine Gailey (2014) uses the concept of ‘hyper(in)visibility’ to tackle the paradox of how fat women become hypervisible as objects of concern within the ‘obesity epidemic’ discourse, while their subjectivities, experiences and bodies remain largely hyperinvisible. Gailey finds that in order to maintain a sense of valuable subjectivity, fat women often focus on their mental abilities and reject their bodies.

These conceptualizations offer support for our view of how the paradoxes of embodied subjectivity (and its suspension) that characterize fat experience happen across cultural divides and on many levels. Murray’s ‘*unbecoming*’ grasps the continuous demand for transformation and persistence of fat experience, and focuses on the volitional and inadvertent *actions and processes* that fat bodies take or are pushed into. Gailey’s ‘hyper(in)visibility’ focuses on *vision and seeing*, how fat female experiences are structured around ways of being and feeling seen or

not seen. Our conceptualizations of ‘liminal fat’ and ‘phantom fat’ are akin to Murray’s and Gailey’s ideas regarding the enmeshment of experience and representation. However, they tap more directly into questions of *temporality*, thus mapping somewhat different terrain. Significantly, all of these conceptualizations draw on theoretical and conceptual histories that attach them to scholarship about other forms of marginalization.

In Harjunen’s research on Finnish women’s experiences of fatness, the majority of informants saw the fat body as undesirable, and only a handful of women directly named themselves or otherwise appeared to identify as ‘fat.’ With a few exceptions, nearly all of the women seemed to consider their ‘real’ body size to be thin, or saw it as a self-evident goal, whereas fatness was experienced as a non-permanent and transitional condition. This applied even to those women who said they had been fat ‘all their lives’ or ‘since early childhood’ (29 out of 47). The informants understood fatness as an undesirable and *temporally* limited state, or a state in-between.. Hence, Harjunen began to consider how fat experience could be conceptualized through the notion of liminality.

As a concept, liminality originates from the work of social anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960/1909) who used it to analyze rites of passage. Liminality refers specifically to the transitional phase of the rite of passage that marks a move from one social status or identity to another. The concept has since been used also for investigations of marginalized experiences, social statuses and subjectivities that fall between classifications or are otherwise difficult to grasp or explain. Furthermore, it has been posited that the experience of liminality is not necessarily transient or temporally limited, and that it can continue even after its initial cause is not present any longer, like in the case of chronic illness (e.g. Little et al., 1998.) Understanding experiences of fat as liminal allowed asking what factors construct and support the idea of fatness as a temporary state even when it is not, and restrain people from thinking of fatness as a recognized part of their core selves and embodied subjectivities (cf. LeBesco, 2004: 25–28). Liminality, in this context, aims to capture the experience of bodily temporariness and the expectation of controlled bodily transformation, but also how this temporariness paradoxically becomes a long-term and fixed position, and can continue even if the body changes.

On a similar note as with ‘liminal fat,’ the aim of the concept of ‘phantom fat’ is to address the simultaneous rejection and persistence of fat corporeality. However, while ‘liminal fat’ conceptualizes experiential structures articulated by informants and shaped by their social surroundings, ‘phantom fat’ derives from thinking through how the expectation of particular bodily responses is construed through media images. For example, ‘anti-obesity’ campaigners habitually claim that fat has not been condemned strongly enough in the media, since people are not getting any slimmer statistically (Kyrölä, 2014: 32–33; Saguy and Riley, 2005). Such an argument seems ridiculous, however, in the light of our research projects, as Harjunen’s informants had understood the ‘message’ overwhelmingly well, and Kyrölä’s extensive research material from various media and genres shows wide-spread and increasing repetition and force. It is indeed rather obvious that the bulk of mainstream media imagery of fat bodies renders fatness visible just to demand its removal, like in the popular reality TV dieting shows, the news stories on the ‘obesity epidemic,’ or facilitate its status as ‘not-real’, like in Hollywood’s fat suit comedies (cf. Wykes, 2012).

‘Phantom fat’ thus offers a way of conceptualizing how media images have very concrete and corporeal effects, even though those effects might not be immediately visible or measurable in weight lost or gained: they can shape viewers’ body images, as in their possibilities of living, feeling and seeing their bodies in relation to others. However, to say that body images are shaped around ‘phantom fat’ is not to say that body images are ‘distorted.’ Indeed, as philosopher Gail Weiss (1999: 87–102) claims, body images cannot be distorted, since everyone needs a multiplicity of body images to function, to imagine themselves as multiple and to not simply lose themselves when their bodies change through life (see also Gatens, 1994: 39–41). In Kyrölä’s view, this necessary and fundamental multiplicity is greatly reduced when fat is culturally ‘amputated’ and personally experienced as an entity resembling a phantom limb. When bodily mutability and vulnerability are seen as repudiated qualities, belonging to and demanded of only some bodies instead of seeing them as potentially productive capacities of all corporeality, body images become homogenized: too singular instead of ‘distorted.’

Although resemblance between representational and experiential structures is rather easy to show, it is more difficult to actually study how – or whether – phantom fat becomes experienced



as liminal fat, or for whom; what is needed for something else to happen, or how to ‘isolate’ the impact of the media from other contexts. The women in Harjunen’s research who talked about their experiences of fatness did comment on what they saw as absence of relatable images of fat people in the media, and they compared their own bodies unfavorably to media images of thin women which they felt invariably dominate visual culture. However, the informants discussed other contexts in much more detail than media images, especially the spaces in everyday life where one’s body feels to be particularly on display, like at school, in clothing stores, at the doctor’s office, at the gym, while eating in public, and in looking for romantic and sexual partners.

In empirical research, there is never any way of telling where experiences ‘actually’ originate, or what the ‘innermost’ experiences of informants are – or whether they are simply using the most easily available language to talk about their experiences which, in this case, culminates in the rejection of fat. Thus, it is hard to say whether the lesser role given to media in the informants’ accounts means that media images do not play a very central part in their experience world, or whether the mechanics of media images’ impact are just so hard to grasp, notice, or put into words, especially when not specifically inquired about. In examining media images, it is also clear that they cannot solely determine anyone’s views on their own or others’ bodies, and viewers’ disposition, bodily histories and reading practices co-constitute their reactions to images. Therefore, the juxtaposition between empirical research and media research points to the limits and possibilities of knowledge produced through them.

However, the juxtaposition also underlines the importance of keeping experiential and subjugated knowledges (Foucault, 1975) at the forefront of feminist scholarship and cultural critique. The potential of experiential and alternative knowledges to contest and redefine how subjugated groups define themselves and are perceived – and what scientific knowledge means overall – have long been of key importance in feminist thought (e.g. Collins, 1991; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1993). Accounts and analyses of fat experiences from a feminist perspective have been produced and available for long (e.g. Schoenfelder and Wieser, eds, 1983), even if they have begun to emerge on a larger and more systemic academic scale more recently (e.g. Harjunen 2009; Owen, 2012; Gailey 2014). Next, we want to argue that much of the public (and

private) condemnation and inhumanization of ‘obesity’ is only enabled through bypassing and devaluing the experiential knowledge of those who live in – or in fear of – this so-called ‘obesity,’ and through a lack of understanding for how embodied subjects do not just internalize or reject cultural discourses but live, feel and process them in complex ways.

### **Feminist ethics and fat aversion**

It should come as no surprise that some feminists have also adopted the ‘anti-obesity’ stance which dominates public discourse, taking for granted the status of fat as a health threat. Next, we want to suggest that controversies in feminist scholarship on body norms and fat can usefully – and rather brutally – shed light on what happens when feminist scholars do not pay careful attention to experiential knowledge and to the living corporeality of subordinated subjects. Within the relatively recent upsurge of interest towards issues of gender, fat and ‘obesity,’ feminist scholars can be roughly divided into two broad groups. The first group is located in the field of fat studies and emphasizes the cultural meanings of fatness as well as its materiality (e.g. Braziel and LeBesco 2001; Cooper 2010; Rothblum and Solovay 2009), explores fat gendered experiences (as mentioned above), political aspects of ‘obesity’ discourses (e.g. Herndon, 2005; LeBesco, 2004; Murray, 2008), and morality and moralism around weight issues (e.g. Skeggs, 2005; Throsby, 2007). Representatives of this group challenge the medical calls to cure and protect from ‘obesity’ as often serving capitalist, sexist, classist and racist politics, and for many, a part of the solution is to detach health promotion from weight management through advocating Health at Every Size (HAES) policies (e.g. Bacon et al, 2005). This direction is evident, for instance, in the journal *Fat Studies* which was launched in 2012, and in several special issues on fat studies and feminism, for example in the journal *Social Semiotics* in 2005 and *Somatechnics* and *Feminism & Psychology* both in 2012.<sup>3</sup> The second group of feminist scholars, however, seems oblivious to the field of feminist fat studies and feminist critiques of medical knowledge production – when it comes to weight and health. For example, some representatives of this group often criticize bodily normativities but advocate weight-loss dieting at the same time without seeing the paradox in that (e.g. Bovey, 2002; Orbach, 1987; for more critical discussion of this approach, see Cooper, 1998: 2; Cooper, 2010: 1027–1028). Other arguments in this group can be critical of and sensitive to forms of gendered, racialized and/or class oppression *but* they

also maintain an implicit or explicit rejection of fat which they see as a structurally induced health problem (e.g. Berlant, 2007; Probyn, 2008; Yancey et al, 2006) – an environmental issue, as Anna Kirkland (2011) has termed it.

The feminist academic bypassing of the cultural construction of ‘fat’ and feminist fat studies can at times be interpreted as a result of the relative marginality of the field. General discussions and introductions to feminist and cultural theorizing on the body (e.g. Bordo, 2003; Blackman, 2008; Moore and Kosut, eds, 2010; Featherstone, 2010) may pay careful attention to gendered, racialized and sexualized body management culture through the slender, grooming, dieting, eating disordered or surgically modified body, but include little or no attention to questions of fat, despite fat’s status as a key site of anxieties over bodily excess and fluidity today. In this light, it is indeed interesting to ponder what are currently considered so-called ‘must’ areas of feminist thought on the body and ‘subtopics’ that can or cannot be ignored. How, why, and how long can fields such as feminist fat studies remain in the inclusion-optional category? While we do not wish to make any simplistic demands of ‘adding fat’, we propose that feminist thought on corporeality could benefit from engaging even more thoroughly with questions of fat. Such engagement could lead, for example, to consider the enmeshment of body size and gender legibility (White, 2014), or address the challenges that fat poses for overall ideals of individuality in its appearance as ‘too undifferentiated and undifferentiating’ (Solander, 2014).

The feminist scholars who engage with questions of fat out of concern for fat people’s health tend to adopt or accept a medical, problem-focused view on fatness. The problem with the medical view is that it is often narrow in scope: the aim is to ‘cure’ the fat body by medical means, and the social, cultural, political, and economic factors constructing and affecting the body are left unexplored. By labeling fat bodies as categorically risky, unhealthy or deadly, and narrowly defining normal and healthy bodies as only thin – but not too thin – bodies, the medical discourse has most significantly, even if partly inadvertently, contributed to fat marginalization and the production of fat as ‘liminal’ and ‘phantom’. This view characteristically makes scientific truth claims about what fat is, without asking how it is experienced or felt, defining and representing fat people from the outside.

A fitting example of the latter stance is an article called ‘Obesity at the crossroads: feminist and public health perspectives’ in the feminist journal *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* by Antronette K. Yancey, Joanne Leslie and Emily Abel (2006). The writers claim that feminists have been silent about the ‘obesity epidemic’ – incorrectly, since there were already several articles and book chapters of feminist critiques of the ‘obesity’ discourse circulating well before the article’s publication (e.g. Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; Cooper, 1998; Herndon, 2005; LeBesco, 2004; see also Kirkland, 2011: 469). According to Yancey, Leslie and Abel, feminists are therefore failing especially lower class women of color who are disproportionately affected by the said epidemic. The authors suggest that feminists should explore ways to eradicate ‘obesity’ and offer solutions to control it, rather than study the harmful effects of the thin ideal (2006: 436–7). The suggested goal for feminists is then to fight fat stigma and ‘obesity,’ as in the existence of fat, at the same time (437). As pointed out by Kirkland (2011: 468), the starting point of Yancey, Leslie and Abel is that the dominant public health account of the dangers of ‘obesity’ is the unquestionable truth.

This theoretical fat acceptance through concern for fat people’s well-being contradicts with the concern for the enduring existence of fat bodies. The authors disregard the experiences of fat, poor women of color while rendering them ‘others’ among women and objectifying them as targets of medical and/or psychological practices and feminist ‘help’, not equal participants in feminist struggles (cf. Haggis and Schech, 2000). Kirkland (2011: 465) stresses further that regardless of good intentions, the solutions proposed in this kind of accounts end up being moralizing, patronizing and punitive. Fat people are only acceptable subjects as potentially size-normative bodies of the future, just as in the structure of liminal fat. Yancey, Leslie and Abel’s discussion also follows the representational structure of phantom fat: fat is only brought up so its removal can be demanded, and this demand separates ‘fat’ as an abstract, unliving substance from the people actually living it. Fat bodies as bases for complex and valuable embodied subjectivities and collectivities, and indeed for feminist agency and activism, remain unthinkable for the authors.

The combination of societal criticism and adoption of the medical equation between fat and ill-health or death has also been incorporated into the writings of some famed feminist and

cultural theorists. One such case is Lauren Berlant's essay 'Slow death: sovereignty, obesity, lateral agency' (2007) which uses 'obesity' as an example of how contemporary capitalist culture pulls people into patterns, practices and bodily states that simultaneously sustain them and shatter them (759). This "self-medication through self-interruption (777) is an essential argument also in Berlant's broader, rich analysis of 'cruel optimism' as a condition of life under capitalism (2011). She thus reads 'objectively obese' bodies, defined from the outside, as self-evident signs of those bodies' desperate inner states and relations to the world (see also Kirkland, 2011: 469). She mentions but dismisses critical fat studies, instead presenting as a fact the medical scientific view of 'obesity' as disease, despite that this so-called fact is also a product of the capitalist culture she critiques (see e.g. Campos 2004).

Although Berlant does not demand the eradication of fat in the future, she does see fat (or 'globesity' in her terms) as a condition that signals 'deterioration' (754), life turning against itself. But in our view, this is not what fat *is* or ontologically does to bodies: rather, Berlant's text repeats the representational structure of phantom fat when she implicitly but clearly distinguishes between fat as inanimate flesh that slows down but just barely doesn't kill embodied agency, and the more animate, non-fat 'normal' body which does not lend itself as readily to deterioration. Experiential knowledge and the possibility of *not* experiencing fat as reduced embodied agency or a self-disruptive condition never enter the picture. Berlant's arguments, as Kirkland maintains (2011: 480–481), would be much more powerful without connecting human misery under capitalism so deterministically to specific kinds of bodies. As it is, these kinds of statements have very grave ethical implications: what does it mean to state as a fact that some bodies are dead weight, literally slow death, when people are in fact living those bodies permanently?

### **Splitting selves, malleable bodies**

Berlant's unfortunate use of fat as a metaphor for deterioration brings us to a question that can be seen to concern feminist studies much more broadly: what body parts or qualities are seen as inseparable from the whole (or coherent) 'self', the embodied subject, before that self becomes unlivable – or unrecognizable to themselves and to others? What bodily qualities and identity categories are seen fixed or transformable, and to what degrees?

One key strategy in ‘phantomizing’ fat is its separation from lived bodies as threatening matter, at once abstract and very material: fat thus becomes a fetish object. This happens particularly forcefully in news and documentary media that claim to be purely informative, neutral in terms of affective charge. In Sara Ahmed’s (2004: 92–94) discussion on the politics of fear, an object, body, or concept becomes a fetish object when it is distanced from the material contexts and histories which give it depth and complexity, and recycled as a simplified, condensed sign of threat. When fat is portrayed as a fetish object, it is separated from actual, living fat people and becomes a life-threatening quality that renders gender, ‘race’, class, ability and personal history as factors that have little to no impact on what fatness feels like or means. When fatness is attached to a person, it suddenly flattens their multifaceted corporeal existence into one denominator, deemed dangerous for not only the person but for others whose economic resources and aesthetic sensibilities are supposedly invaded by fat bodies. Fat also becomes flattened in itself into a substance that means the same regardless of where, for whom, how, when, to what degree and against what historical background it exists.

In a way that resonates with the fetishizing and ‘phantomizing’ of fat in the media, the respondents in Harjunen’s study also often saw fat as separate from their experience of the self. Lesleigh Owen, in her study of the spatial experience of fatness, identifies the same tendency and terms it a coping strategy of ‘disembodiment’ (2012: 300–302): a failure or refusal to recognize one’s fat body as one’s own to avoid being fully implicated in the negative connotations of fatness. Harjunen’s respondents frequently used phrases such as ‘inside the fat body there is a thin person trying to get out’ and its many variations to describe themselves, splitting themselves into inner ‘normal’ or ‘true’ selves, tied to the potential of slimness, and the ‘outer’ body characterized above all by fatness. Most of the informants wanted to be slimmer and had dieted repeatedly in the past or were actively trying to lose weight at the time of research. The splitting of bodies and selves appears to give reassurance (to oneself and others) that one’s body can never fully capture or even begin to reflect the inner world of the person. In effect, however, the constant challenging of the legitimacy of the fat body still ends up challenging the validity of the whole self.

This tendency in representing, discussing and experiencing fat can be compared to a form of humanism, where all people regardless of their differences are understood as being the ‘same’ underneath. This also forms a possible basis for demanding equality. One of the problems with such an approach is that the ‘same underneath’ tends to still be predicated on the norm of a male, white, western, affluent, heterosexual and able-bodied subject, and those outside that subject position must fight for their validity and inclusion. In the case of fat experience, a similar mechanism becomes strikingly visible, but with a twist. The authentic self living ‘underneath’ is visualized as slender, but perhaps because the idea that fat can and must be removed is so culturally normalized and pressing, fat rights, protection and equality have not (yet) become widely recognized issues. It is as if only when people are believed to be utterly unable to change their ‘difference’ that their existence in that difference becomes something of value.

We do not wish to make simple additive or alignment arguments here, that fat must be included more, or that fat should be seen in relation to slim as female in relation to male, or the like (cf. White, 2014: 86–87). Fat as well as slim people’s experiences and cultural representations are thoroughly shaped by their various gendered, sexual, ethnic and class positions, and no body’s complexity can or should be reduced to one quality. In an article that inspires also our approach, Francis Ray White (2014: 89–91) explores the ways in which fat and gender legibility are enmeshed in complex ways through experiences of trans people whose bodies’ recognizability as specifically gendered can be limited or enabled by fat, or others’ perception of them as fat or not fat can depend on whether they are seen as male or female. White’s study further points out how both trans and fat politics depend on the *malleability of the body*, but in somewhat different ways. Trans politics have embraced the possibilities opened up by myriad body molding technologies in today’s surgical, medical, cosmetic and workout culture to move bodies along the gender spectrum – while also recognizing that bodily materiality is always unpredictable. For fat politics, however, these molding possibilities are imperatives which not only possibly but most likely result in experiences of failure, as permanent weight-loss happens only very rarely (e.g. Kassirer & Angell, 1998; Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, 1999: 58, 63; Green, Larkin and Sullivan, 2009). When the option to transform becomes a demand, fatness as a valid and valuable corporeal position to exist in fades from view both culturally and personally. As Rebecca Coleman (2012) has suggested in relation to contemporary visual culture more broadly, the

‘imperative of transformation’ draws in bodies through aspirational temporality where a better future is the focus of attention. However, the bodies for which this investment in the future becomes an imperative are also those whose present is perceived to be difficult or unlivable as it is.

White, following Murray (2008), makes a call for fat politics which would not need to insist on the non-malleability of the body but could take the ambiguity and malleability of all bodies and selves as its starting point. In her study, Kyrölä came to a somewhat similar argument: that if instability was seen as a fundamental and valuable part of all corporeality, then some bodies, such as fat bodies, would not have to carry the weight of the fear that has to do with bodily vulnerability and uncontrollable change. However, changeability is currently connected to different bodily qualities in varying ways, with varying degrees of assumed self-control, and varying politics.

Keeping this in mind, even a very rough comparison between the ways in which malleability and intentionality relate to fat, gender, ‘race’, ability and class can highlight how these categories intertwine in complex ways. As feminist and trans scholarship has shown, gender is indeed a malleable category, although gender appearance and recognition is not simply something one can choose at will, and trans people regularly have to struggle with the idea that ‘true’ biological gender leaves a trace even through surgical modifications. To be seen as female or male or somewhere else on the gender spectrum depends both on the physicality and materiality of the body, including its movements, clothing and adornment, and on cultural ideas and representations of what gender means and looks like (see e.g. Salamon, 2010). Molding one’s body so that its gendered appearance thoroughly changes often requires time and effort, and the degree of success for reaching the desired results varies, but it is certainly possible and increasingly legally and medically supported in many parts of the world. Gender is, however, a category generally seen as essential for a sense of self, as it is for legal personhood, most identification documents requiring gender specification.

‘Race’, on the other hand, is seen much more permanent, even though the very idea is also a floating signifier (Hall, 1997) and its definitions relational and context-bound. Changing one’s



skin tone, or other bodily characteristics marked as racializing, is perceived as a politically suspect act, if not an outright condemnable sign of racism imposed on and internalized by subjects – while it is simultaneously physically possible and very popular in different parts of the world (see e.g. Davis, 2003). When it comes to ability, some forms of mental disability are considered changeable but most often not (solely) through one's own efforts, while physical disability is usually not seen as one's 'own fault': rather, it appears to compromise ideals of the autonomous subject, and malleability becomes more a question of one's environment and orientations in space than personal volition (see e.g. Shildrick, 2009). But disability is also heavy with the expectation to *want* to be able-bodied and to want to aspire towards able-bodied lives as fully as possible (e.g. simulate walking or sitting), even if the expectation of actually becoming able-bodied is not really there. In other words, the biomedical discourse on disability can be seen to perform 'compulsory able-bodiedness' (McRuer, 2006; see also Vaahtera, 2012).

In terms of perceived changeability and personal autonomy, fat comes perhaps closest to class. Upward class mobility is seen possible in the neoliberal imagination, and indeed almost necessarily achievable if enough effort is put into the task, much like with moving from fat to 'normal' size. Inability to change is regularly interpreted as lack of effort and a personal failure, with little regard to how material conditions, structures of inequality, or a sense of belonging and identity might hinder class mobility. Also, if another status is achieved, the danger of 'falling back' is continuously present, much like with fat and the constant 'danger' and likelihood of regaining weight after weight-loss dieting. However, fat and class legibility are also intimately connected in a partly similar vein as fat and gender legibility. Fatness may be statistically more common in lower socioeconomic groups, but it is not limited to any demographic. Still, in contemporary western popular culture, the fat body and particularly the fat female body has begun to signify low class or working class status (e.g. LeBesco, 2007; Skeggs, 2005).

Fat stigma is tightly connected to one bodily quality that has been culturally marked as hypervisible, but that does not make fatness stand apart from other differences. Fat's contemporary particularity lies in the most commonly presented 'solution' to improve fat people's lives in an oppressive environment: to remove the visible quality seen as the cause of the 'problem'. This solution is presented to be in the best interest not only of fat people but all

people who, according to the logic of the ‘phantom fat’, are also threatened by fat. If such a suggestion was made today about gender or ‘race’ – that the solution to racism was to bleach non-white people’s skins, or the solution to sexism was gender reassignment surgery – that suggestion would be considered unfathomable, outrageous, or simply a joke. In case of homosexuality, something similar has of course been attempted through the infamous sexual conversion therapy practices (e.g. Erzen, 2006), with no success and dire consequences to the mental health of participants. Still, these are not necessarily any more or less radical changes to the body, or to one’s self, than proposed by the fully normalized and widely accepted demands to eradicate fat.

The question of bodily transformations necessarily involves questions of body image also due to their temporal dimension, when body image is understood as ability to endure various bodily changes without losing the capacity to function in one’s body, and as the ability to imagine oneself in the past and future (Gatens, 1994: 31–37). Even when the body has not lost weight or changed shape yet, the promise of future full selfhood already moves the fat self towards the slim image that lingers ahead, instead of living and feeling with the body in the now. The fat body suspended in the ‘before’ of undoing itself, even if that ‘before’ is ‘now’, is denied as an image with a potential future, limiting the body image by limiting the potential to endure *not changing*. In this sense, not changing can feel as radical for one’s body image and sense of self as changing.

Thus we arrive back at the ‘phantom fat’ and ‘liminal fat’. Both concepts, arriving from different directions, try to capture the oppressiveness of an orientation towards the future that obscures the vast varieties of fully livable corporeality and potential pleasure of the now. It seems to us, then, that a sense of some core self can be much more sustainable in everyday experiences than a perception of the self as a forever on-going project of transmuting into something else entirely – transformation which easily becomes lived as an imperative (see Coleman, 2012). In queer and feminist criticism of identity politics, drawing for example on Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity (1990), it has become common to argue against core selves and stable identities as naturalized maintenance of gendered and sexed hierarchies. In so-called new materialist feminist writings, corporeality is seen as always multiple, porous, proliferating and becoming, and its malleability is usually welcomed rather than critically interrogated (e.g. Blackman, 2008). In line

with the latter direction, Tove Solander (2014) has convincingly argued for using fat as a key concept for ‘gut feminism’: fat can be understood as a substance that productively dismantles the integrity of the subject, simultaneously impersonal and densely sensual and visceral, connected to the feminine through the fear of incorporation. Indeed, perceiving the body as a perpetually continuing process, and fat as integrity-dismantling substance, could be empowering in terms of mobilizing bodies from fixation into limiting norms and categorizations – in theory. In practice, however, the problem is that the failure or refusal to engage in continuous and clearly visualizable bodily transformation comes at a high price, especially for fat persons. Fat subjectivity and corporeality as valid, valuable, and possibly permanent conditions, as well as corporeal potential of all bodies, are not recognized in the logics of endless malleability. We do not want to reinstate any idea of a stable core identity or ‘self’ that has to somehow visibly coincide with the body, as that would only repeat the structure of ‘thin person living inside’ and waiting for the body to coincide with that self. Nonetheless, we do wish to account for the temporal and material persistence of corporeality, the persistence and necessity of a feeling of a self that inhabits and lives the body in the present, in all its messiness and ambiguity.

### **Beyond Fat Specificity**

As we have highlighted, both liminal fat and phantom fat try to grasp the mechanisms which make possible the separation of fat from livable, ‘normal’ selves both in personal experiences and in cultural representations – even when the current body is felt and lived as fat. Both concepts, as we have used and developed them, thus focus primarily on conditions of marginalization and subordination. However, it is worth noting that liminal states and corporeal phantom experiences are also mundane parts of our lives as embodied beings and not unavoidably negative or limiting: many of us dwell, flourish as well as get stuck in between categories; some parts of our bodies or our bodily potential may feel permanently or fleetingly strange and ‘phantom’ to us. These aspects of liminal and phantom corporeality would indeed be worthy of more investigation, even though they fall outside the scope of this article. The problem is not that corporeality is a mixture of persistence and malleability, of material and immaterial forces, but that the boundary between ‘essential’ and ‘removable’ corporeality becomes too fixed and unrelentingly managed.

The expectation of removability, along with the understanding of fat as a question of personal choice and volition, connect fat to as well as distinguish it from other axes of difference. Population management and pathologization of groups based on ethnicity, 'race,' sexuality, ability, and gender are practices very much happening around us in everyday life and a target of keen inquiry and critique in feminist, queer and anti-racist studies and politics. These practices are also happening in the name of fat, intersecting with other axes of difference, and weight plays a notable role in estimations of whose lives are worthy of respect, sustenance and acknowledgement. Feminist studies has an ethical imperative to not accept or condone the practice of connecting groups of people, or forms of embodiment, to death and danger as if these groups stood as their signifiers. We feel that a key in answering the call of this ethical project is that feminist studies and theorizing on embodiment must remain based on a critical understanding of the limits of medical knowledge production in terms of health and body weight just as in questions of gender, sexuality, and 'race.' Feminist thought has a rich history of challenging hegemonic 'truths' about marginalized bodies, of "disobedience to social norms about health and appearance" (Kirkland, 2011: 480), and of interrogating prejudices and uncomfortable hierarchies within feminisms. That history should not be forgotten but utilized extensively also in matters of weight. We aim at mindful inspection of fat as an experience as well as a cultural concept with material consequences, not merely an abstraction or inanimate weight, in order to call for the relevance of feminist fat studies not only for those currently identifiable as fat but as a key issue in today's management of corporeality much more broadly speaking.

We have also briefly suggested and highlighted some ways in which the perspective of fat, and the contributions of feminist fat studies, can open up theoretical and analytical vistas for feminist scholarship on corporeality. Since what is categorically considered a normative body size is always subject to change, and the borders of the acceptable body are always shifting alongside other shifting power relations, discussions about fat have consequences and meanings that reach far beyond questions of fat specificity, as we have demonstrated. By phantomizing the fat body or condemning it to margins by positioning it as liminal, 'proper' boundaries of the body are being effectively pushed into shape in material although not always measurable or visible ways.

This concerns all bodies, not just the ones that are currently perceived as non-normative.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Cooper (1998), Braziel and LeBesco (eds, 2001), LeBesco (2004), Murray (2008), Rothblum and Solovay (eds, 2009), Farrell (2011), Gailey (2014), Pausé, Wykes and Murray (eds, 2014) etc.

<sup>2</sup> For further reading on how the term ‘fat’ rejects the pathology implied in the terms ‘overweight’ and ‘obese’, see e.g. Campos (2004), Saguy and Riley (2005), Murray (2008, 2–5).

<sup>3</sup> *Social Semiotics* Vol. 15, No 2 (August 2005), special issue ‘Thinking Fat’; *Somatechnics* Vol. 2, No 1 (2012), special issue ‘Fat Bodily Being’; *Feminism & Psychology* Vol. 22, No 3 (2012), special issue ‘Rethinking Fatness’.