

FA(T)SHION RHETORICS: BUILDING A BODY  
POSITIVE METHODOLOGY

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Rhetoric and Writing—Doctor of Philosophy

2015

## **ABSTRACT**

### **FA(T)SHION RHETORICS: BUILDING A BODY POSITIVE METHODOLOGY**

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This dissertation combines feminist and queer issues of embodiment, fat, and clothing by investigating how fat fashion bloggers make meaning through their dress practices in ways that are rhetorical, material, and embodied. In this project I argue for a methodology of “ethical reading” where a viewer must acknowledge their own positionality, and engage with bodies both materially and rhetorically. I enact this methodology by interviewing three self-identified fat fashion bloggers in three different countries. My research participants demonstrate how meaning can be made through clothing and the fat body itself in order to embody “fat” in diverse ways, including radical, queer, traditional, and heteronormative. This work contributes to notions of material and visual rhetoric by drawing from theories of dress that include body fat and clothing and extends work from fat studies, dress studies, and gender studies by engaging them in rhetorical analysis.

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To the Jeff and Katie from 2009—and all the other Jeffs  
and Katies out there.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my collaborators for the "Embodiment" key concept *Peitho* piece: Maureen, Daisy, and Maria. Working on this article with you enabled me to finally articulate what I meant by "ethical reading."

Thank you to Brendan, for teaching me how to love: myself, you, and life. I never understood what it meant to be happy until you showed me. This story is your story, too.

Thank you to my committee: Danielle, for her eternal optimism, Dr. T. For her patience and willingness to work with me in liminality, Malea, for pushing me and making me realize how strong I really am, and Trixie, for everything--I consider myself lucky to have you as my mentor and friend; thank you for being you.

Thank you to my parents: to me, you will always be the original "Dr. Mantheys".

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to create and employ a body positive rhetorical methodology, with a focus on self identified fat fashion bloggers and their dress practices<sup>1</sup>. In order to talk about what that means, though, I first want to begin this dissertation with a poem. It's best seen and heard ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7IKPdh\\_y-8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7IKPdh_y-8)), but you can read the transcript if you don't have access to the internet<sup>2</sup>. I've included the transcript in full here, as opposed to an appendix, because I want to emphasize the poem's importance—and its ability to *take up space*.

The body is not an apology.  
Let it not be forget-me-not fixed to mattress when night threatens to leave the room empty as the belly of a crow.  
The body is not an apology. Present it not as disassembled rifle when he has yet to prove himself more than common intruder. The body is not an apology.  
Let it not be common as oil, ash, or toilet.  
Let it not be small as gravel, stain, or teeth. Let it not be mountain when it is sand.  
Let it not be ocean when it is grass.  
Let it not be shaken, flattened, or razed in contrition.  
The body is not an apology. Do not give it as confession,  
communion. Do not ask for it to be pardoned as criminal. The  
body is not a crime; is not a gun.  
The body is not a spill to be contained. It is not a lost set of keys, a wrong number dialed. It is not the orange burst of blood to shame white dresses.  
The body is not an apology. It is not the unintended granules of  
bone beneath wheel. The body is not kill.

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss this in depth in Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> This dissertation engages with complex issues of how meaning is made from, through, and with bodies, and because of this I ask that you watch the video links whenever possible.

It is not unkempt car.  
It is not a forgotten appointment. Do  
not speak it vulgar.  
The body is not soiled. Is not filth to be forgiven.  
The body is not an apology. It is not father's back hand;  
is not  
mother's dinner late again wrecked jaw howl.  
It is not the drunken sorcery of contorting steel round  
tree.  
It is not calamity. The body is not a math test. The body  
is not a wrong  
answer.  
The body is not a failed class. You  
are not failing.  
The body is not a cavity; is not hole to be filled, to be  
yanked out.  
It is not a broken thing to be mended, be tossed. The  
body  
is not prison; is not sentence to be served. It is not  
pavement; is not prayer.  
The body is not an apology.  
Do not give the body as gift. Only receive it as such.  
The  
body is not to be prayed for; is to be prayed to. So, for  
the evermore tortile tenth grade nose, Hallelujah.  
For the shower song throat that crackles like a  
grandfather's Victrola,  
Hallelujah.  
For the spine that never healed; for the lambent heart  
that didn't either,  
Hallelujah.  
For the sloping pulp of back, hip, belly,  
Hosanna.  
For the errant hairs that rove the face like a pack  
displaced of wolvdes.  
Hosanna,  
for the parts we have endeavored to excise.  
Blessed be  
the cancer, the palsy, the womb that opens like a trap  
door. Praise the

body in its black jack magic, even in this.  
For the razor wire mouth.  
For the sweet god ribbon within it. Praise.  
For the mistake that never was. Praise.  
For the bend, twist, fall, and rise again, fall  
and rise again.  
For the raising like an obstinate Christ.  
For the salvation of a body that bends like a baptismal  
bowl. For  
those who will worship at the lip of this sanctuary.  
Praise the body for the body is not an apology.  
The body is deity. The body is God. The body is God;  
the  
only righteous love that will never need to say sorry.  
For the razor wire mouth.  
For the sweet god ribbon within it. Praise.  
For the mistake that never was. Praise.  
For the bend, twist, fall, and rise again, fall  
and rise again.  
For the raising like an obstinate Christ.  
For the salvation of a body that bends like a baptismal bowl. For  
those who will worship at the lip of this sanctuary.  
Praise the body for the body is not an apology.  
The body is deity. The body is God. The body is God;  
the only righteous love that will never need to say sorry.

I start with a performance from Sonya Taylor because this is also one of *my* beginnings: finding *The Body is Not an Apology* was part of my personal journey to being a body positive activist. This poem frames my own experiences, and I want it to frame your experience of this dissertation. My hope is that this dissertation will be a way that I can give back to the communities that have brought me to this point.

As I sit here in April of 2015 to write this introduction, there is a conversation going on in my community about whether or not the word “plus” should be kept in relation to women’s clothing. At the forefront of this conversation are plus size models, clothing companies, and

marketers. Lane Bryant recently started their #ImNoAngel campaign, and once again we are talking with each other (and sometimes the company) about the lack of representation of diverse bodies in advertising, the aggressive language of the campaign that reinforces the idea that there can only be one kind of “acceptable” female body, and the fact that the most heated conversations happen in relation to consumer practices.

The idea that we should stop calling our clothing (and ourselves, by extension) “plus” is troubling to me. On the one hand, the idea that we don’t need divisive language in terms of bodies seems like a glorious thing. On the other hand, I’m part of a community that has worked to reclaim the word “fat”—and by extension, take the sting out of words used to describe large bodies like “plus” “curvy” “full figured” etc. Taking away the “plus” is taking away the chance for some of us to proudly claim part of our identities.

I tell you this to give you insight into the cultural moment that this dissertation comes from—but also to point out right away in the start of this project, that *words matter*. The power of language has been discussed extensively in rhetoric and composition. For example, scholars have worked to advocate for students’ right to their own language (Smitherman, Elbow, Gilyard), discussed grammar and style instruction (Anson, Bishop, Glenn), and taken up what it means to work with culture in the writing classroom (Cushman, Flower, Heath, Lu).

While rhetoric and composition has a history of discussing language, one place where the discipline has been lacking is in relation to talking about bodies. I say this, and things immediately come to my mind that, at first, seem contradictory to this statement—medical rhetorics (Jordan, the editors of *Body Talk*), visual rhetorics (Pajaczkowska, Hill and Helmers, Kress and Van Leeuwen). Both of these examples take up areas of rhetorical study that often

engage bodies. But, it often becomes the case that bodies are *talked about* (for example, the body as an image to be seen, or the body as medical subject) instead of being *talked to*.

But I want to make the distinction between how rhetoric and composition talks about bodies, and how it talks about bodies as people. The first, the discipline does fairly well; the second needs work. I believe that rhetoric and composition has a lot of the tools it needs to be able to talk about bodies as people—and my hope is that this dissertation expands on those tools.

As I mentioned earlier, this dissertation builds and employs a body positive approach to rhetorically analyzing bodies. Let me break that down. I want to start with the end of that sentence: what does it mean to rhetorically analyze bodies? I’ve already shown you a glimpse into the current conversation in rhetoric and composition. I would like to add to this conversations from decolonial, feminist, and queer theories to create a body positive methodology. This “bringing together” is part of what Halberstam calls a “scavenger methodology.” Halberstam explains that this approach “uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior” which “attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence” (Female Masculinities, 13). Part of the risk in using a scavenger methodology is that none of the parts get represented “enough”—I will do my best to indicate places where I have only skimmed the surface of an argument or area of study, and try to bring them all together in my final chapter.

I would now like to address the first part of my statement: “The goal of this dissertation is to build and employ a body positive approach to rhetorically analyzing bodies”. What does it

mean to be “body positive”?

In her 2014 article titled “Toward a Radical Body Positive,” Alexandra Sastre paints a bleak academic picture, “there is no current scholarship specifically investigating the body positive movement” (931). Indeed, in my own search I found only her article, and a master’s thesis about body positivity on Tumblr. However, “body acceptance” is talked in academic circles, mostly in reference to eating disorders and recovery (Svaldi and Naumann, Stewart, Schoenefeld and Webb, McKing).

I think part of this lack of scholarship is because “body positivity” isn’t a set thing—it’s defined differently by different groups at different times. In order to establish my own working definition of body positivity, I offer what I see as articulations of this idea in three of the community spaces that I work in:

1. [“The Body is Not an Apology”](#)

This website, started by Sonya Taylor, uses the term “radical self-love” in its mission to be (what I think is ultimately) body positive. The website states that

We believe that self-love is the root or origin of our relationship to ourselves...we believe that we need an extreme form of self-love to counter the constant barrage of shame, discrimination, and body terrorism that are enacted against us every single day. We believe that our society needs a drastic political, economic, and social reformation in the way in which we deal with bodies and body difference.

We believe that radical self-love is the foundation for radical human love.

TBINAA values intersectionality and has sections of its site dedicated to dis/ability,

age, race, and sexuality.

## 2. “Virgie Tovar”

Virgie Tovar is an activist and lecturer on fat discrimination and body image. Her blog features links to resources and interviews. One interview speaks to a rather explicit discussion of what it means to practice body positivity<sup>3</sup>. In this interview with TaMeicka Clear, a self identified “big bodied Black dyke from Texas,” Clear explains what it means to be a body positive advocate:

[It] is kind of like a mix of spiritual and life coaching with an emphasis on your relationship to your body. It involves getting honest and ok with your current relationship to your body and improving upon that in ways that feel good, loving, empowering, and liberating. Love of self is similar to love of anyone else. It is very important to have acceptance, communication, trust, and honesty at the foundation... This kind of work allows you to stand in your power, for deep, sincere self acceptance and love are powerful beyond measure... Social issues are not just issues to be discussed and theorized about. They are everyday life and not separate from the life of those affected by social inequality, systemic oppression, and inaccessibility.

This discussion emphasizes being present and in the moment with self acceptance and love and with understanding how everyday life is connected to social systems of power.

## 3. “Fuck Yeah Body Positivity”

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<sup>3</sup> The discussion is in the context of "body positive coaching," but the theoretical idea is the same

This Tumblr is hosted by Katie, who identifies as “a 22 year old, white, cis, queer, femme woman” who loves “all things pink, sparkly, and feminine.” The site “focuses on helping you develop a better relationship with your body, celebrate yourself, and cope with mental illness.” The mission statement of the site states:

This blog is dedicated to body positivity. This is more than a blog about weight; it is about reclaiming all aspects of our bodies which society has deemed unacceptable. Whether you are skinny or curvy, short or tall, light or dark skinned, clear-skinned or pimpled, you are beautiful and this is a blog for you.

This approach encompasses all aspects of the body that can be seen— something this perhaps not quite as nuanced as the previous two definitions, but an important idea which I will discuss at length in Chapter 2.

One thing I want to address that combines both the academic and activist conversations about body positivity is the connection/grounding in the fat acceptance movement. Similar to the body positivity movement, the fat acceptance movement is a rather nebulous thing, although in the last decade it has started to solidify in academic spaces (with a peer reviewed journal started in 2012), professional organizations (such as The Association for Size, Diversity, and Health) and conferences (NAAFTA, NOLOSE). The current work being done around fat studies as an academic and activist pursuit is “marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body” and “requires approaching the construction of fat and fatness with a critical methodology—the same sort of progressive, systematic academic rigor with which we approach negative attitudes and stereotypes about women, queer people, and racial groups” (Solovany and Rothblum 550). In many ways, the history of fat acceptance is tied to the colonial history of the United States.



Fraser explains that, “thinness is, at its heart, a peculiarly American preoccupation” (950). Here, “American” means western, white, and hetero-patriarchial. Fraser goes on to explain that, “a cultural obsession with weight became firmly established in the United States when several disparate factors that favored a desire for thinness— economic status symbols, morality, medicine, modernity, changing women’s roles, and consumerism—all collided at once” in the 1900s (950). Specifically, size has long been tied to socioeconomic status. Fraser explains that in times when food was scarce, having body fat was a visible sign of wealth and “when it became possible for people of modest means to become plump, being fat no longer was a sign of prestige” (913).

There has been some sort of organized resistance toward size discrimination in the U.S. since the 1960s. During the civil rights movement, Senator Hubert Humphrey remarked during the congressional debates that “[If] we started to treat Americans as Americans, not as fat ones, thin ones, short ones, tall ones, brown ones, green ones, yellow ones, or white ones, but as Americans...we would not need to worry about discrimination” (746). It was at this time (1969) that the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Americans (NAAFA) was established. NAAFA continues to “be a major source of fat advocacy” having established a Declaration of Health Rights for Fat People, publishing a regular newsletter, and holding a yearly convention.

In the 1970s, an activist group called The Fat Underground began in Los Angeles. Solovany and Rothblum explain that, “The Fat Underground group asserted that fat women are powerful, take up space, and are feared for their strength and sensuality...they viewed the effort to eradicate fat people via weight loss as a form of genocide perpetrated by the medical profession” (755). They go on to explain that

The Fat Underground was influenced both by feminism and by radical therapy, a type of treatment that put the focus of change on society, not on individuals. In the words of Gudrun Fonfa, ‘By refuting the dogma of the diet industry and rejecting the aesthetics of the patriarchal culture, [we made] activists out of each individual fat woman who liberated herself from a lifetime of humiliation’.

(755)

This focus from blaming the individual to looking more critically at larger systems of power is something I see as a fundamental part of body positivity. Body positivity focuses on radical self love—but works from the premise that that is only possible through understanding how an individual reacts to being part of a complex system of power<sup>4</sup>. I understand body positivity to come out of the fat acceptance movement(s), but to ultimately be something that stands apart; while size acceptance is mostly concerned with one identity category (size), body positivity is about the entire person—it engages the intersectionality of human identity<sup>5</sup>.

To end this chapter, I want to return to “the” academic article on body positivity. Sastre’s article looks at visual representations/performances of bodies in digital spaces and she ends her article by asking what would happen if “body positivity could...be premised not on particular visual and discursive formations, but on a critical and conscientious engagement with the ways we are expected to understand, perform, and be our bodies...” (941). This is where I want to start: body positivity isn’t a “thing” that can be studied as much as it is a mindset and, in this

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<sup>4</sup> Which I discuss at length in Chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> With that said, I would like to note that this dissertation will circle back and focus on size as the main identity category of the participants, because this is how I personally came to the project, which I will discuss at length in Chapter 2. Part of the difficulty in doing body positive work is working with multiple identity categories at once. In this dissertation I have tried my best to let the participants speak in their own way about how their identities are complex and always in flux.

dissertation, a methodological approach to reading bodies rhetorically through what I call “ethical reading<sup>6</sup>.”

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<sup>6</sup> I will discuss this at length in Chapter 2.

## **CHAPTER 2: SITUATING BODY POSITIVITY**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 1 introduced the purpose of this dissertation: “to create and employ a body positive rhetorical methodology with a focus on self identified fat fashion bloggers and their dress practices.” If body positivity is “premised on a critical and conscientious engagement with the ways we are expected to understand, perform, and be our bodies” (Sastre 941), then I want to take time in this chapter to explain my own orientation and positionality in regards to this work. I see this move as part of a body positive methodology; me telling you my story is a way that I help you to participate in what I call “ethical reading.” In this chapter I will first explain what I mean by “ethical reading.” Next, I will further situate this project’s focus on size as an embodied orientation in the context of body positivity and end with theorizing the experiences that led me to become a body positive activist through story.

### **Ethical Reading**

Contemporary western popular culture is saturated with practices of reading bodies. By “reading” I mean visually looking at a person and drawing conclusions about them based on their appearance. Making snap judgments about people based on their appearance is something that all humans with sight do naturally—and it is usually done without being aware that it is happening. It is how we process the world (Mitchell, Elkins, Hall). Consumer popular culture

thrives on this practice, though, usually in order to discipline bodies. For example, television shows like *The Fashion Police* are focused around critiquing the appearance of celebrities. The show is self-aware of the fact that they are critiquing—by calling themselves the “police” of fashionable dress, the hosts act as the arbiters of “right” and “wrong” dress practices. On a more “everyday” level, shows like the (now canceled) *What Not to Wear* also positions itself as a judge of what “everyday” people should wear—both personally and professionally.

Lifestyle shows like these are, admittedly, a little mean, but viewers seem to enjoy them and they are immensely popular. Martin Roberts, the author of “The Fashion Police: Governing the Self in *What Not to Wear*,” explains that,

Lifestyle television transforms consumption *into* a form of citizenship, a duty that we are all, as responsible citizens, required to perform for the general good. Correspondingly... a sizable proportion of lifestyle television is devoted to the stigmatization of those who are laggardly or recalcitrant in their fulfillment of this duty and, through a combination of public shaming and financial incentives, to inducing them to become fully participant, consuming subjects in the neoliberal economy. (228)

Clearly, there are differences between the two examples of shows that I have discussed: in one case, celebrities, who are often the product of a team of stylists, are scrutinized while the other show focuses on non-celebrities who are nominated in secret by close friends and family for their “inappropriate” appearance. The underlying act of the viewer, though, is the same: the television viewer is invited to look at the subject of the show (a celebrity or frumpy looking “normal person”) and find fault. We are invited to critique and to express pleasure in the transformations of the people (in the case of *What Not to Wear*) or the un/acceptably dressed

bodies (in *The Fashion Police*), thus creating “fully participant, consuming subjects in the neoliberal economy” (Roberts).

While this act of judging, or “people watching” has had (and continues to have) success on cable TV, the majority of these types of shows deal with people who are either very wealthy (in the case of *The Fashion Police*) or middle class (*What Not to Wear*). To be clear: this act of judging bodies cuts across socioeconomic status; all bodies are potential sites of public rhetoric. Popular sites like PeopleofWalmart.com focus on people who shop at the discount chain store, often associated with a low socio-economic status. People of Walmart (PoW) is based on the idea that people who shop at Walmart stores, known for their discounted prices, are often odd looking. While the website requires that all pictures are submitted with the consent of the people being photographed, often the images are taken from discreet angles or leave the person’s face out of the picture—the intended use of the image is to display someone or something that isn’t “normal”. In the FAQ, the website explains that, “If you think the person would be classified as ‘a Walmart shopper’ then chances are good it works. Funny looking people, crazy outfits, the creepiest of the creepy, and the ugliest of the ugly will do.” While the website asks for consent, I think it is unlikely that the majority of people featured on the site know that they have been photographed. The fact that there is a “type” and that that type is “funny looking,” “creepy” and “ugly” shows that it promotes images of bodies to be ridiculed, similar to what Roberts describes as “the stigmatization of those who are laggardly or recalcitrant in their fulfillment of [their] duty” to look a certain way (228).

Clearly, critiquing bodies cuts across class. The practice of reacting/judging based on appearance is something that I call “unethical reading”. To further explain the theory behind the notion of reading bodies un/ethically, I will draw on the work of dress studies scholarship, which

reveals how body modifications are tied to culture, and rhetorical theory around material rhetorics and queer phenomenology.

The idea that a body can be read is rooted in dress studies scholarship. According to Joanne Eicher, dress<sup>7</sup> is a uniquely human practice that includes “actions undertaken to modify and supplement the body in order to address physical needs in order to meet social and cultural expectations about how individuals should look” (4). This definition of dress extends the practices it encompasses to include any body modification or supplement, including actions that effect all five senses and range from clothing choices, to washing hair, to putting on or taking off body fat. Eicher’s definition of dress ties dress practices to culture and assumes that culture carries expectations for its participants and that people will care about these expectations and (because they will feel the pressure) will try to adhere to them. In the examples noted above of popular culture’s reading of bodies, it can be argued that what is really being looked at/critiqued/judged are dress practices—the hair, clothes, body fat, make up, piercings, etc.—not the actual person (or the person’s individual reasons for making the dress choices that they did). This difference is usually glossed over, though, in a moment of judgment. If dress practices carry meaning in a society made up of other people who participate in culture, then dress becomes something that can be examined as rhetorical action. Examining dress as rhetorical action provides an opportunity to see how bodies are constituted through ideology and potential moments of tactics and manipulations of this discourse. In order to examine dress practices as rhetorical action, I will introduce the work of Barbra Dickson and her definition of material rhetoric, and put this into conversation with Sara Ahmed’s notion of embodiment in the context

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<sup>7</sup> I want to make the distinction between "dress" and "dress practices." The idea of "dress practices" is inherently rhetorical, but that is not necessarily how the idea is always discussed in dress studies scholarship. In this dissertation, I purposefully use "dress practices" to tie back to the rhetorical act of performing dress (which I discuss further in Chapter 5).

of queer phenomenology.

Dickson and Ahmed both talk about how objects have meaning, but in different ways. For Dickson, material rhetoric is “a mode of interpretation that takes as its object of study the significations of material things and corporal entities—objects that signify not through language but through their spatial organization, mobility, mass, utility, orality, and tactility” (298). She goes on to say that “...of primary interest to material rhetoric are material objects that represent the human body, because of the way these representations are then taken up by and inscribed on corporal bodies” (298). Dickson is interested in the ways that objects that “represent the human body” as well as the human body itself makes meaning. In the case of dress practices, the objects that are used for body modifications such as make up, deodorant, clothing, etc. “represent the human body” and the whole body itself is also an object that can be seen rhetorically. Dickson goes on to state that,

Material rhetoric, as a mode of interpretation, reads for the ways persons inscribe on their corporal bodies the culture that produces them and that they mutually produce. It seeks invention in the improvisations of the bodily writings; agency, in the ways these improvisations resist hegemonic structurings of the body and so change the relationships between these corporal bodies and the structures they inhabit. (298)

Ahmed also talks about objects and orientation. She states that, “the object is not just material, although it is material: the object is matter given some form or another where the form ‘intends’ toward something...yet objects do not only do what we intend them to do” (46-47). In the case of dress practices, this could mean that there are multiple ways to read. To further



explain what I mean, I will use an example of a weight loss advertisement in order to show how the body fat of the model pictured in the advertisement can be read in multiple ways.

In March of 2014, the advertisement in Figure 1 was circulating around Facebook.



**Figure 1: Rachele's picture in a Facebook advertisement**

Advertisements like this are very popular and very successful in contemporary consumer popular culture; adults in the United States spend more than \$30 billion each year on weight loss related products and services (Cleland et al.). At first glance, this ad might not seem like anything out of the ordinary: it shows a young, fat, white woman wearing a two-piece swimsuit that displays her stomach and upper body. She is smirking in the picture—which, taken with the text which states "CUT down your body FAT!" can make it seem like she knows her body needs to change. The message is that the woman in the photo is undesirable, and that if the reader wants to not look like her, they should buy the diet product. In a society where making assumptions about bodies based on appearance is a common practice, there are multiple conclusions that we could draw from this advertisement: that the woman in the photo is unhappy with her body, that she thinks she looks ridiculous, and that she knows that she is being used as a “before” photo.

This would be an example of unethical reading: reading the picture of a body without knowing anything about the person in it. This advertisement is especially important because the girl in the photo isn’t a “before” picture: she’s a person. Her name is Rachele, and her picture was used without her consent.

Rachele explains that she found out about the photo when “A coworker I barely know, came up to me in my cubicle and said that she saw me on Facebook...It was a terrible, crawl in a hole feeling and I realized that this ad is everywhere and being seen by lots and lots of people” (165). An image of this woman’s body was used to convey a message about acceptable body size. Rachele’s picture wasn’t just used without her consent, though—it was taken out of its original context, which was a post about body positivity on her blog, “The Nearsighted Owl”. In a blog post Rachele explains that, “I took my body and put it on a beach and voila! Beach body! Wearing a bikini as a fat woman is an act of rebellion. I felt glorious and glamorous all at the

same time. I wore my stretch marks as ribbons of honor and let the sun kiss my lumpy thighs and arms without a care in the world” (156). Rachele is a fat activist, and her message of body acceptance is completely at odds with the message of the advertisement. Again, on her blog she reflects on her reaction to the advertisement:

This disgusting, terrible fucking diet company is making money off my body...Facebook is making money off my body. The body I photographed in a bikini that I feel good about and posted on the internet to encourage other women. They used it to show women what they shouldn't look like and avoid at all financial and health costs. They used my over the sunglasses expression to say, "Hey, don't be a fat fuck like me!" which was really supposed to say, "I am a fat confident lady that feels awesome in this bikini.” (165)

As this example shows, Rachele’s dress practices—being fat, wearing a bikini, wearing glasses, and wearing a smirk—are all material objects that can be “read” in multiple ways. These competing ways, in this case as a message that her body is unacceptable or as an act of resistance to a body shaming culture, are all part of a larger colonial matrix of power (Mignolo). The goal of ethical reading isn’t to stop reading, but to provide a moment of catching—a moment of what Mignolo calls “delinking”. Ethical reading is keeping present in one’s mind that the people that we come into contact with each day are more than their appearance—they are people with experiences and embodied orientations to the world that we simply can’t “read” just by looking at them.

While there are many identity categories that can be “read” (including age, gender, race, etc.), this dissertation is especially interested in size as an embodied orientation in service of a

body positive methodology. It is important to note that all of these identity categories always already intersect; while other approaches (queer rhetorics, cultural rhetorics, decolonial rhetorics, disability rhetorics) do similar work, a “fat rhetorics<sup>8</sup>” is different because it brings attention to body size as a specific identity category, and raises issues that are size specific (certain types of discrimination, medical care, fashion, perceived intelligence, etc.). Fat people are commonly seen as unattractive, or worse: as fundamentally “bad” people. Citing Puhl and Brownell, Lonie McMichael explains that, “negative stereotypes include perceptions that obese people are mean, stupid, ugly, unhappy, less competent, sloppy, lazy, socially isolated, and lacking in self-discipline, motivations, and personal control” (340). Marilyn Wann offers some frightening statistics about fat-related discrimination, including discrimination in the workplace, doctor’s office, socially, and while looking for housing. She states that, ‘even doctors and researchers who specialize in “obesity” harbor stereotypes of fat people as lazy, stupid, and worthless’ (2009, 464-5). At the same time, size is typically seen as something that is an individual’s fault—reinforcing the idea that fat people are lazy, too poor to afford “healthy” food, and/or not educated enough to know how to take care of their bodies. In the context of ethical reading, fat bodies are often read unethically, both in the instance of institutions and people on the street.

This dissertation interrupts this way of thinking—this way of unethically reading bodies based on appearance, especially with a focus on size—by exploring different ways that self-identified fat women embody their orientations to fat. Approaching bodies and appearance this way means asking people who might otherwise be treated like Rachele to explain who they are and why they choose to look like they do; clearly, this isn’t something that you can do with just anyone. If you don’t have the chance to ask someone about their dress practices (in a kind way)

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<sup>8</sup> Always in service of a body positive methodology

then you should reserve judgment about that person's intelligence, personality, income, etc. Fat rhetorics takes up the idea that size can be an embodied orientation; there is no one way to "be fat", as I will show in this dissertation. Instead, fat rhetorics is purposefully plural.

### **Fat Rhetorics: Building a Body Positive Methodology**

I would like to take a moment to explain what I mean when I say that *fat is an embodied orientation*. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed describes orientation as the way an ideology gets perpetuated until it seems "normal" or "the way things have always been" by discussing the phrase "a path well trodden". She explains that,

A path is made by the repetition of the event of the ground 'being trodden' upon.

We can see the path as a trace of past journeys. The path is made out of footprints—traces of feet that 'tread' and that in 'treading' create a line on the ground. When people stop treading the path may disappear. And when we see the line of the path before us, we tend to walk upon it, as a path 'clears' the way.

**So we walk on the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon...Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created.** (16, emphasis added)

This means that "orientations" are simply a position—and the lines are the result of practice (similar to how power is dispersed according to Foucault) and there is no inherent moral value to "the way things are". In fact, according to Michael Warner, "culture requires common references and norms" (7), and Gloria Anzaldua explains that, "culture is made by those in power" (38). Ahmed explains that orientation is dependent on "the bodily inhabitation of that space" (6), similar to the idea of perspective, but which is also concerned with the materiality of

the lived existence of the body. In the case of body size, there is a dominant orientation toward “thin” as acceptable—which often gets conflated with discourses about health.

This orientation toward health is a powerful one in contemporary western consumer culture. Who, though, is really the “expert” of acceptable body size? As fat activist Marilyn Wann points out, there are many “experts”:

In the United States, any number of self-appointed authorities are eager to designate who is fat and who is not. The federal government, health insurers, medical doctors, school nurses, popular media, advertising, the fashion industry, strangers, acquaintances, friends, family members, romantic partners, and, of course, the bathroom scale—each alleged authority draws its own line between fat and thin, does so at different weights, and may redraw the line at any time. (301)

There are many orientating “lines” here—and they all form the same path toward acceptable bodies being thin and unacceptable bodies being large. Ultimately, the fat body is both produced and abnegated through capitalism (Lebesco 6). These external forces are not all exactly the same in the orientating lines that they create, but the overall repetition of the idea that thin is good and fat is bad creates a dominant ideology. Ahmed would call these external forces “institutions”, which “become given as an effect of the repetition of decisions made over time” (133). Ahmed further explains that, “the body provides us with a perspective: the body is ‘here’ as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds, as being both more and less over there. The ‘here’ of the body does not simply refer to the body, but to ‘where’ the body dwells” (8).

This idea of the “where” is a critical part of embodiment: similar to standpoint theory

(Hill Collins, Smith) and feminist notions of positionality (Alcoff, Gunn Allen), it means that everyone sees the world from their own set of complicated perspectives. This is also why it is important to acknowledge one's biases/position when reading bodies in order to do it ethically.

So, fat as an embodied orientation means that one can “be fat” as a conscious, ontological choice. This requires “coming out” or self-identifying as fat. Sedgwick refers to this as the “closet of size” and fat studies scholars have investigated the intersections of fat and queer identity in relation to the notion of “coming out” (Saguy and Ward, Gurrieri and Cherrier). The term “fat” has been something that fat activists who are “out” have worked to “take back.” As Marilyn Wann explains,

In fat studies, there is respect for the political project of reclaiming the word *fat*...as the preferred term of political identity. There is nothing negative or rude about the word *fat* unless someone makes the effort to put it there; using the word *fat* as a descriptor (not a discriminator) can help dispel prejudice. (Kindle location 255)

As I mentioned earlier, there isn't just one way to be orientated toward fat as an embodied subjectivity; many people find themselves somewhere between resisting/rejecting “being fat” and fully embracing body acceptance—sometimes at the same time. In what follows, I will explain how ethical reading and fat rhetorics work by focusing on the story of how I came to this project. This story encompasses parts of all three turns that lead to embodying fat as an orientation:

1. recognizing external forces that make meaning,
2. internalizing these forces, and
3. reacting to dis/orientation.

## **Part I: External Forces & Orientating Lines**

In this section I first want to explain how, in my own life, I came to see fat as a bad thing. It is important to note that fat, as a substance, is neutral—it's neither good nor bad. Different cultures at different times assign it different meanings/values, though, especially in relation to where it exists on a body. In this section I will talk first about how “external forces” or orientation create meaning by drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and then discuss what this means for embodiment. I will end this section by giving examples of how orientations are created and maintained by telling part of my story about how I came to embody fat as an orientation.

My story starts in 2001, when I started dating my now ex-husband. From the beginning, having a “hot wife” who “wasn't fat” was critically important to him. I remember him telling me that if I ever gained enough weight to be more than 200 pounds, he wouldn't love me anymore. I remember laughing at him—could anyone really be that shallow? We were young, and we were building our own ideas—our own orientating lines together about acceptable bodies, gender, and beauty. According to Ahmed, we were creating “lines” and our resulting orientations were simply a position—there was no inherent moral value, although we associated it with “rightness”; for my ex and I, thin equaled beautiful for women.

Even though this was what he preferred (his orientation toward beauty), I remember thinking that, for me, the worst thing a woman could be was ugly—not necessarily fat. For example, he had cousins who were large. He was mortified by them, and didn't like to be seen in public with them—but I remember thinking that they were beautiful because they always looked really “put together”—they had really nice hair, flattering makeup, and trendy clothes. Even at



this early stage in our relationship, we had **two different orientating lines; this was a place where our ideology fissured and eventually became something that drove us apart.**

One of our hobbies as a young couple was people watching—people judging, really. We liked websites like [peopleofwalmart.com](http://peopleofwalmart.com) and while out in public together would point out people that we thought were particularly ugly: people who were fat, people who were wearing outdated clothes, people who didn't conform to the beauty norms that we subscribed to. "Check out that ug-o,"<sup>9</sup> we would say to each other. Then, together, we would cringe. It was how we bonded.

These judgments were based on quick glances at strangers' bodies: we didn't know who they were, what their stories were, and how their bodies had changed over time. We didn't know how much they weighed. We didn't know how they felt about their appearance. But we would judge anyway. We were experiencing our orientation toward acceptable bodies from our own bodies.

Ahmed explains that orientation is dependent on "the bodily inhabitation of that space" (6), similar to the idea of perspective, but which is also concerned with the materiality of the lived existence of the body. For example, my ex and I were "thin", and had always been relatively thin. We were people who (tried to) monitor what we ate and were physically active—for the purpose of looking "attractive".

This was how our bodies "inhabited space" (Ahmed). In the specific context of size, this means that when you see a fat body, you realize that you don't know how healthy they are, or how happy, or how intelligent. The only thing you can know by looking at a fat body is how prejudiced you are towards people of size. We, or at least I, experienced embodiment as a

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<sup>9</sup> This was our term for an exceptionally ugly person. Pronounced "ugh-o."

woman with a body that was unstable—that was always on the verge of getting too big or too hairy or too smelly. Looking at bodies of people who had “let themselves go” was a way for us to remind ourselves of what we didn’t want to become—because on some level, we were always afraid that we would end up being the bodies we were disgusted by.

Imagine the horror I brought to our relationship when I did just that: I got fat.

## **Part II: Internal Forces & Dis/Orientations**

The second part to embodying fat happens by internalizing the dominant orientation. A person has to believe that they are fat to really be/embody “fat” which requires self-identification. Other people might see them a certain way, but if they themselves don’t acknowledge it, then they don’t *embody* it. In chapter 4, I will show multiple ways of embodying fat through interviews of fat fashion bloggers. In this section, however, I will discuss how I came to acknowledge that I was fat, and move on to talk about how I reacted to that—through both reluctant embodiment and ultimately acceptance.

There were many reasons why I didn’t stay thin. There is probably a strong genetic component (most of my extended family are short and round), hormones as my body went from being 17 to 27 and my metabolism changed, and an emotionally abusive relationship, from which I found solace in food. Over the course of our relationship I gained almost 100 pounds.

I was always aware of my size—even when my ex and I met in high school. At the time I was 135 pounds, and I remember my ex telling me that if lost 10 pounds I could be a porn star. The first time he saw me naked he almost cried. My body was a prize—it was something that he, a chubby military brat with a mustache and poor social skills—didn’t think he would ever be able to *have*.

This sense of possession permeated our relationship. I never lost the ten pounds. I didn't think "looking like a porn star" was a compliment. I remember that he took me to the store Spenser's at the mall in the town where we lived and made me look at all the dirty cards and sex toys—I hated it and never wanted to go. I had been raised very conservatively, and while part of me liked that he was the opposite of everything my parents wanted for me in a partner, another part of me was never really comfortable with him.

I never lost the ten pounds. Instead, when we got married three years later, I was 150—too big, according to him, but still "sort of pretty". The warning about "wanting a thin wife" and the idea that "no woman over 200 pounds could be pretty" stayed in my head, but it didn't stop me from slowly gaining a substantial amount of weight. A few years later I was 215 and we almost got divorced—the first time.

During this time—the time from 150 pounds to 215—we still judged the bodies of strangers. We actually did it more than we had when I was 135. The difference is that when we looked at other people's bodies there was always a sharp moment of internalization for me—sometimes subtle and sometimes overt. For example, sometimes he would look at me with a sidelong glance, a subtle message of "don't you dare get like that". Other times, if a girl who was attractive (meaning: short, brunette, and thin with big boobs) walked by, my ex would often turn to me and say "I would totally have sex with her;" this was almost always followed by him trying to ameliorate the situation by saying to me: "well, you could look like that if you tried." What had started as a lack of concern for the person inhabiting the body we were critiquing opened space for us to turn this against each other. Realizing that I wasn't "the hot girl" anymore was a moment of what Ahmed would call "disorientation". Ahmed describes disorientation as "bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground.

Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that take a life feel livable" (157). The disorientation was especially sharp, because I thought that I was still pretty—I always tried to look "put together". I started reading "What I Wore Today" (WIWT) blogs—spaces online where women posted their daily outfits, discussed their everyday lives, and often included information about where to purchase the clothing that they were wearing. All of the people that I followed were thin, white, and young. I was basically looking for people who would help reinforce the beauty ideal that my ex and I clung to. I was looking for fitspiration<sup>10</sup>. I was looking for ways to dress thin.

Ultimately, shame was the way that I came to reluctantly embody being fat. My ex told me that he was embarrassed by how big I was and that he didn't want to bring me along when we hung out with his friends—all of whom, according to him, had "hot wives".

At one point, toward the end of our relationship, I asked him: what if I'm never able to be "high school size" again?" and he said:

- J: then thats you not loving me and theres nothing i can do about it. if u trully loved me you would put everything you had into it. if you still dont get there at least i know you tried and thats good enough for me. up until now  
you've never tried so dont know what your capable of. idk if it can be "fixed" but i know how to better handle it
- K: which is for me to get skinny?

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<sup>10</sup> Fitspiration, or "fitspo," are images of perfect looking bodies, often working out, to encourage the viewer to want to be like them. Sometimes fat bodies are used to encourage "fitpisation" by showing "before" photos in the context of weight loss "before and after" images.

- J: yeah
- K: and if i never do?
- J: i dont know. i guess you cant ever expect me to be completely happy then
- K: would you ever leave me?
- J: youd have to get pretty fat, and by that point there be something a lot worse wrong with us

### **Part III: Reaction & Embodiment**

The reaction to the internalization of external forces, for me, happened in two parts. In the first stage I was resistant to “being fat” and, for years, pretended to do everything I could to change it. I had a series of personal trainers and counted every calorie that I put into my body. I joined Weight Watchers, and then Jenny Craig. I read *Women’s Health*. I hated myself. I also kept eating in secret. I remember one time when he was supposed to be gone for a weekend. I ordered my favorite kind of pizza—Papa Murphy’s Chicago style with the delicious two layers of dough. I have always loved carbs. I remember that I had left it on the stove after I took it out of the oven. It was a Saturday. I had planned to eat it over the weekend, and relish the experience. My ex came home unexpectedly, though, and when he saw the pizza he got really upset. “I thought you loved me,” he told me. We both knew how he wanted my body to be, and he found it disrespectful that I would do something like that when I knew how important my weight loss was to him. I threw away the pizza and he left. I kept binge eating, though, often in secret. I felt intense shame, especially when my ex would ask my why I wasn’t willing to lose weight for him. He would say, “can’t you just do this one thing for me?”

The way that I approached “being fat” changed when we finally divorced.

As a last chance effort to save our marriage, I successfully lost 40 pounds in 6 months; our relationship still ended, though. I stopped dieting and counting calories. I also stopped exercising—movement wasn’t joyful for me. Around this time, I took a course in queer rhetorics and started acquiring a critical vocabulary for understanding “fat” as an (often marginalized) orientation. I read Halberstam, Rhodes, Jagose, and found Sonya Taylor; I started to wonder what would happen if I stopped resisting my body—my body that is naturally short, soft, and very round in places. With the start of this reorientation I began looking for other people like me; I stopped following the WIWT bloggers who were thin, and started looking for blogs from people who looked like me: fat fashion bloggers.

And that’s one of those moments when everything changed.

Suddenly, I had found women who weren’t thin, but that I thought were beautiful: they were the mythical creatures, the “unicorns,” that I had told my ex existed. I found a community of people who helped me learn how to fully embody my size. Their daily posts functioned as instruction manuals that helped me see how my fat body might continue to be styled in a way that (I found) attractive. The community that I found gave me more than clothing tips, though: it also gave me body positive inspiration and tips for dealing with trolls (both online and in the physical world). There was an undercurrent of activism in this community, and I found a place where I felt like I could let out my breath—and embrace my anger. I started posting my own pictures to Facebook and eventually Instagram and Tumblr. Clothing became a way that I could take ownership of my body and feel pride in both my body and myself. I made sure that I wore clothes that *I* liked— not things that my ex partner had said were okay, or even that society said

my fat body should wear. I lived in leggings. I wore shorts. I even (occasionally) showed my bare arms. I felt like I was embodying resistance in a way that came naturally. I started to wonder if the other bloggers felt this way too-- did other fat girls go through shitty relationships first? Were they born this confident? What else could they teach me? How could I help support them?

I want to take a moment here and say something: I am incredibly fortunate to have a (paying) outlet for answering the questions that I feel personally driven to answer—this is the work that I *can't not do*. Part of the joy in finding the unicorns was realizing that I wasn't the only person who has decided to make the most out of being fully in the body that I have at this moment—i.e., fully embodying “being fat”. This sense of community was something that I was thirsty for, and as a result, felt compelled to get to know the people who were critical in my reorientation: sharing pictures of your fat body online is intimate, but at times it also feels isolating. There is no person-to-person contact—sometimes there is no direct dialogue. This research project is driven by the desire to talk with other people who have had similar experiences. My central research question, then, is<sup>11</sup> to know:

- *How did the bloggers come to be (self identified) fat fashion bloggers?* Since I am a trained cultural rhetorician studying dress practices, I also wonder
- *How do fat fashion bloggers make meaning through their dress practices in ways that are rhetorical, material, and embodied?*
- *How does looking at size as an embodied orientation work towards building a body positive methodology?*

These questions are important to me for personal reasons (as I've mentioned above) and

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<sup>11</sup> The verb tense in these three bullets is intentionally present tense—I still wonder these things. This dissertation is not a **final** answer, but an exercise, a beginning, a space.

also professionally: I feel that rhetoric and composition as a discipline largely ignores or erases bodies. When bodies do get talked about it is in ways that erase the person—bodies are “race,” bodies are “class,” bodies are “gender.” But bodies are *people*, and people are complex. Therefore, my goal with this dissertation is to begin to produce a body of scholarship (pun intended, of course) that draws attention to the ways that identity categories (race, class, gender, etc) are *embodied through the lens of body positivity*. I believe that one way this can be done that hasn’t been done before is by looking at the materiality of the dress practices of people combined with actually talking to them—and this extends beyond fat fashion bloggers to the writing classroom, to people on the street, to romantic partners. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, dress practices are rhetorical, and as a result, they are tied to the ways that people embody their identities. In the rest of this dissertation I will illustrate what I mean using stories from three self-identified fat fashion bloggers. I will introduce them in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 3: INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOGGERS

### Introduction

In Chapter 2 I explained how I became part of this project, tracing my own experiences from internalizing the ideology that being fat was bad to becoming reoriented to the idea of body positivity and becoming a fat fashion blogger all in the service of creating and employing a body positive methodology through ethical reading. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the three bloggers that I interviewed in order to start answering my three burning questions:

1. *How did the bloggers come to be (self identified) fat fashion bloggers?*
2. *How do fat fashion bloggers make meaning through their dress practices in ways that are rhetorical, material, and embodied?*
3. *How does looking at size as an embodied orientation work towards building a body positive methodology?*

Before I do that, though, I want to take a moment to further situate fat fashion bloggers within the larger blogging community/scholarship in order to illustrate ways that this work is new and important. Next, I will describe how I found the three bloggers that I interviewed for this project. Finally, I will give profiles of the bloggers based both on their blogs and the information that they told me in the interviews.

## Part I: Situating Fat Fashion Bloggers

### *Introduction*

This part of Chapter 3 will give context to fat fashion blogging, specifically by discussing fashion blogging broadly as a digital community of practice. Next, I will focus on how fat fashion blogging came to be (relatively) popular and identify how it is different than mainstream/straight fashion blogging. I do all of this so that when I introduce the bloggers you will understand the larger communities that they are already a part of (and also to reveal places for further work).

### *Fashion Blogging*

McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips explain that a fashion blog is an online site where a blogger posts “iterated displays of aesthetic discrimination applied to the selection and combination of clothing” (136). Simply put, fashion blogs are online spaces where individuals can post outfits and share tips for shopping. Fashion blogging started in the late 1990s and since then have grown from 50 in 1999 to 184 million in 2008 (Rocamora 92). Fashion blogs, for the most part, exist in opposition to the fashion industry “insiders.” Rocamora explains,

Indeed, where until recently the sole influential fashion media intermediaries were those fashion journalists, stylists and photographers linked to established titles such as *Vogue*, *Harpers*, or *Elle* and avant-garde niche magazines such as *Purple* or *Pop*, the rise of the fashion blogosphere has resulted in the coming to prominence and the growing influence of individuals who had no institutional affiliation to the field of fashion when they started their blog.

(100)

This has drawn the ire of some insiders. For example, associate editor of *GQ* said bloggers, “‘don’t have the critical faculties to know what’s good and what’s not’” (100). But Rocamora argues that fashion bloggers have their own kind of ethos. She explains, “bloggers often generate new, alternative content” (98) and work to give visibility to “designers whose lack of economic capital has excluded them from the media, a space crucial to success in the field of fashion” (99). The rise and use of fashion blogs created by people outside of the fashion industry has opened space for clothing bloggers who are often left out of traditional fashion lines—fat people, queer people, people of color, etc. Next, I will discuss fat fashion blogs in relation to fashion blogs in order to better introduce the three bloggers that I interviewed for this project.

### *Fat Fashion Blogging*

According to Gurrieri and Cherrier, a fat fashion blogger (FFB) is “a fat female<sup>12</sup> who disrupts normalized understandings of beauty and its social categories via active participation in cultural fields of beauty” (278) specifically by having an online identity and participating in “a loosely interconnected network of online resources aimed at creating a safe space where individuals can counter fat prejudice, resist misconceptions of fat, engage in communal experiences and promote positive understandings of fat” (279) called the “fatosphere”.

Fat fashion blogging can be a subversive act, especially in relation to mainstream fashion blogging. Connell explains why the internet is especially useful for fashion bloggers—particularly those whose bodies are left out of hegemonic fashion. She states that,

The increased ability of former fashion ‘outsiders’ to participate in the production of fashion discourse through the medium of the Internet has...the

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<sup>12</sup> This is their wording, and I would argue that we need to interrogate all gender terms, especially in a body positive context. The bloggers that I interview all self identify as female.

possibility of disrupting normative fashion discourse through online fashion projects. (210)

The “disrupting” that Connell references is similar to the way that “normal” or “straight” sized fashion blogs intervene in traditional fashion advertising: everyday people are able to become advocates for certain brands and combinations of clothing. When this happens with bodies that are often left out of mainstream fashion because of their size, not only does the visibility of different body types increase, but the visibility of brands that fit larger bodies increases, which often leads to increased demand for the products. This connection between visibility (which I see as a type of grassroots activism) and advertising (which ultimately feeds back into a capitalist system) is a tension that runs through fat fashion communities and I will talk about this more in Chapter 6.

With all of this in mind, I now want to tell you how I found the three bloggers that I interviewed for this project. I hope by giving you some information about the larger context of the fat fashion bloggers you will keep in mind that these three women do not speak for all self identified fat fashion bloggers, and that their identities as FFBs is not stable (and that that is okay).

## **Part II: How I Found Three Interviewees**

The approach that I took to finding participants, talking with them, and reflecting on their stories all comes out of a cultural rhetorical approach. I would like to take a moment and explain what I mean here. In their collaborative article, “Our Story Starts Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics,” the authors draw on the work of decolonial and feminist scholars to make the argument that cultural rhetorical work is grounded in relationships. Quoting Tuhiwai Smith, they explain:

To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages, and social practices—all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope.

They go on to explain that

In the place between resistance and making, we see a location for the practice of cultural rhetoric—a practice that creates a decolonial space inside rhetoric studies. It is here, we believe, where we can forge necessary relations inside and outside of the university. This relationship allows us to make scholarship—to develop frameworks—reliant on growth and sustainability, instead of negation and destruction. And [Tuhiwai] Smith reminds us of something we often forget within academe: research is about people. It affects people. It can save and destroy lives.

(2-3)

These relationships and the subsequent coding of the interview data was done using grounded theory in the context of a cultural rhetorical framework. As I mentioned, I have been following fat fashion bloggers through social media for the last few years. In order to find participants to interview, I first reflected on who was already in my circle of everyday digital practice and thought about how I interacted with them. I made a list of hashtags and bloggers that I was currently following on Tumblr, Instagram, and blogs. From this initial list, I sent out a call for participants over Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram<sup>13</sup>. I also sent individual messages (through email or private message) to the people that I have been following.

I used hashtags including:

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<sup>13</sup> This document can be found in Appendix I.

- Twitter:
  - #fatacceptance #fatshion #fatfashion #honormycurves, #psbloggers #plussize #plussizefashion #oodt #selfie
- Tumblr:
  - #Fatacceptance #Fatshion #Fatfeminist #Fatfashion #Ootd #Honormycurves #Effyourbeautystandards #Haes #Bodypositive #Thebodyisnotanapology #Plussize #Fashion #Curvy #Selfie #Fatspo #Plus #Plussizeoutfit #Whatiwore #whatiworetoday #Chubbybunny #Plussizeblogger #psblogger
- Instagram:
  - #Fatfashion #Fatacceptance #Fatshion #Ootd #Honormycurves #Effyourbeautystandards #Selfie #Psbloggers #Plussize #Bodypositive #Curvy

I received about twenty responses over three months and conducted three interviews using Skype and Call Recorder. I also interviewed two people through email. For this dissertation, though, I have decided to only use the data from the Skype interviews because they allowed for a richer conversation<sup>14</sup>. I hope to continue interviewing people—especially the people I talked to through email— and use the follow up information for the book project that will follow this dissertation.

I prepared for each interview by taking about an hour before hand to thoroughly go through their online spaces and take notes—this was sometimes reflected in the questions I asked

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<sup>14</sup> Here I am keeping with oral history methods.

(for example, one of the bloggers, Mary, listed “personal stylist” as her profession, so I asked her about that in the interview).

During the interviews I asked questions from the list<sup>15</sup> I sent ahead of time, but let the conversation just naturally happen—we jumped around. The interviews were conducted using Skype plus Call Recorder, which captures both audio and video. I took notes on a piece of paper while we were talking and marked times in the conversation that there is something really interesting—something I thought might be a good quote or topic to write more about. After the interviews, most of which were about an hour long, I would sit down and free write about what had happened. I summarized the main/interesting/surprising points of the interview and started to put this into conversation with previous interviews. I then sat down with my handwritten notes from the interview and typed them up, using the times as references, and started to put them into categories based on the similar answers. During this coding<sup>16</sup>, I realized that each blogger would have different categories (at least initially) and kept myself open to seeing what arose from all the participants’ interviews.

Because conducting interviews where the participants can express themselves through sound and image (meaning, they can use their bodies as a way to convey their answers) is so central to my methodology, I am including access to the audio and video from the interviews in this dissertation whenever possible. For all of the participant text I have included the start times of the video clips. When you see a quote with a time stamp, I encourage you to go to the video and watch the blogger tell her story<sup>17</sup>. Right now, this is a rather cumbersome way to watch the

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<sup>15</sup> Available in Appendix II.

<sup>16</sup> This type of data analysis is grounded theory.

<sup>17</sup> The full, unedited interview videos can also be viewed in their entirety [on my website](#).

videos; if you choose to view it this way you need to be cognizant of when the video has gone past the transcription. There are also instance when the transcription has ellipses (...) to indicate that I am leaving some of the conversation out, usually because of repetition, pauses, or information that I felt wasn't immediately relevant to the point I was making with the participant's story. This also potentially makes the videos confusing to watch.

For passages long enough to be a block quote<sup>18</sup> (4 lines or longer) I have tried to embed the video into this document<sup>19</sup>. Due to formatting issues, the embedded videos don't work in the text right now, but if you click on the image (or the link above it) it will take you to the short clip on YouTube.

It is my hope that I will be able to create separate videos that can be embedded in the text in the next iteration of this work (book manuscript, journal article, etc). Right now, creating these small videos for each piece of participant story is beyond the scope of what I am able to do<sup>20</sup>. My hope with this is to be as transparent as possible with both my data and my methods, and also to have the videos serve as a reminder that the participants in this dissertation are actual people—not disembodied “data.” How you choose to engage with the text is ultimately up to you.

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<sup>18</sup> With the exception of some passages in Chapter 3, because I want you to be able to see and interact with the bloggers right away.

<sup>19</sup> To watch the video you need to double click on it; the document must be a .doc or .docx file.

<sup>20</sup> There is also the issue of how this will be a readable document for the university.



### PART III: BLOGGER PROFILES

*Lolly: [Lolly Likes Fatshion](#)*



**Figure 2: *Lolly Likes Fatshion* Website Image**

Lolly is a blogger from the UK. She is stay at home mom in her 30s. On her blog she lists her occupation as “plus sized model” and self identifies as a “rad fatty” and is a member of a vibrant rad fat community in the UK. Lolly has been blogging since March 2012 and uses hashtags to track her posts including “radfat” and “plus size” (two of the most popular). On her blog, she goes beyond “what I wore today” posts and has nude photos, and the results of a 3D body scan. On the sidebar of her blog is the hashtag #effyourhealthstandards.

Lolly discussed her signature style, saying that, “I tend to like more retro, girlie things” which you can see in her favorite outfit, a [poppy dress](#).

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vh8\\_gAPkNG4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vh8_gAPkNG4))

“I think it’s from Simply Be...which I blogged twice, I think. I wore it at Christmas and I wore it a few months before that...I wouldn’t say it’s too fancy to wear every day. I just think that it’s so nice that I don’t want to wreck it by wearing it all the time (laughter)”. While Lolly’s self-described style is “girlie”, she makes a point to not wear things because they are flattering. I had been following Lolly’s blog for a few months prior to our interview.

Mary: Mary's Big Closet



*My name is Mary and I love, love, love all about fashion and beauty! So after thinking about it for a while, I decided to start this blog to show the world my looks, choices and style! Hoping that with it plus size girls become more sure of themselves and show everybody that fashion and style have no size!*

*There are too many voices telling us to deny the acceptance of our curves! But why? These voices may defeat us and drag us to depression that will lead to non acceptance of our body and who we are.*

*So let's stop hiding and show everybody that we may be curvy but still be stylish and trendy. And if this blog inspires someone to get out of the shadow and show themselves then my mission has been accomplished.*

*I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoy writing and posting it!!;) Thank you and Be curvy!! ;)*

**Figure 3: Screenshot from *Mary's Big Closet***

Mary is a manager for the Special Olympics in Portugal. She currently lives in Lisbon, and writes her blog in both Portuguese and English to reach a large audience<sup>21</sup>. She has been blogging since December of 2012. Mary described herself as “a kind of casual chic person” who gets her inspiration from “fashion blogs and magazines...also, I like to just sit down on the street, in the cafe and look to people, you know, just see them walking by and I got my ideas from them” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FujuT53nE4>, 11:35).

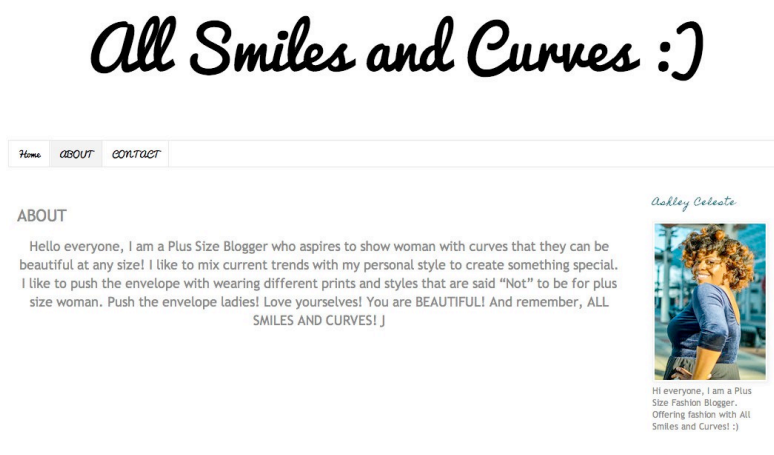
Mary loves accessories and her favorite outfit is always the most recent thing she's posted on her blog. She explained, “I love all my outfits...I love my dresses...my skirts, my pants. I only post outfits that I love” (9). She carefully curates her online identity. “I always post the looks that I like...because you can see I'm always smiling in the pictures. And so I have to be

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<sup>21</sup> English is Mary's second language, and her interview transcript has a lot of moments of pause and grammatical structures that have been edited for readability.

happy with the clothes I’m wearing” (10). “For instance, I never showed an image in bra and panties because I don’t think it’s appropriate and you know, I’m like a shy person too so I don’t think I would like to see myself in it but I show pictures in bathing suits and all that stuff” (26). I had been following Mary’s blog for a few months prior to our interview.

Ashley: *All Smiles and Curves*



**Figure 4: Screenshot from *All Smiles and Curves***

Ashley is graduate student with a BA in music. Blogging is a hobby for her, but she would like to get in to modeling. While her blog is new—February of 2014—she has been posting her daily outfits on Instagram for over a year. On her blog she encourages women to “push the envelope” and wear things that are off limits to plus size women. She described her style as (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZqcsprlsME>) “a combination of so many things. I just like things that look nice on me, but it could be anything...sometimes I like preppy, sometimes I like street style, hip- hop, and then you know maybe things that are really feminine. I like it all. Just whatever I feel looks nice on me” (14:50-15:26).

Ashley aims to come across as professional through her site. She explained that, “I want to keep up the professional look of it [the blog] with the pictures... I do like to look, you know,

neat, and wear things that are flattering to my body. I don't just want to wear trends just because they're trendy. I want to wear things that are going to look really nice and really flatter me" (5).

For Ashley, "looking nice" is the key to an outfit. She went on to tell me,

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1AGATTO-Bg>)

I used to always watch What Not to Wear" with Stacy and Clinton (laughs).

They would always say, you know, your clothes say something about you.

When you take the time to really care about what you're wearing, then other people will take you seriously. So I believe that dressing nice and dressing in clothes that are flattering to me would really say how I care about myself. And I feel like that's what my clothes say. (13:53-14:39)

Her favorite outfit is a reinterpretation of a dress that Kerry Washington wore on the red carpet. I actually started following Ashley as a result of my call for participants—I have been following her since our interview, but she stopped posting in March of 2014 (almost immediately after our interview).

## **Conclusion**

The bloggers that I talked to for this project were all very different—they lived in different parts of the world, were different sizes, spoke different languages, shopped at different stores. But despite these differences, they all exist in a larger context of fashion—and fat fashion—blogging. The ways that they each embody their orientations toward their size through their dress practices are different, and I will show this in the next two chapters, which focus on sharing their stories in order to show how size can be an embodied orientation (Chapter 4) and how dress practices are rhetorical (Chapter 5).

## CHAPTER 4: FAT AS EMBODIED DIS/ORIENTATION

### Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss how the three people I interviewed came to embody fat as an orientation, in order to answer the first of my three research questions:

*How did the bloggers come to be (self identified) fat fashion bloggers?* First I would like to take a moment to summarize what I discussed in Chapter 2 in order to explain what I mean when I say that *fat is an embodied orientation*. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed describes orientation as the way an ideology gets perpetuated until it seems “normal” or “the way things have always been” by discussing the phrase “a path well trodden”. She explains that,

A path is made by the repetition of the event of the ground ‘being trodden’ upon. We can see the path as a trace of past journeys. The path is made out of footprints—traces of feet that ‘tread’ and that in ‘treading’ create a line on the ground. When people stop treading the path may disappear. And when we see the line of the path before us, we tend to walk upon it, as a path ‘clears’ the way. **So we walk on the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon...Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created.** (16, emphasis added)

This means that “orientations” are simply a position—and the lines are the result of practice (similar to how power is dispersed according to Foucault) and there is no inherent moral value to “the way things are”. Warner says something similar, when he explains that, “culture requires common references and norms” (7).

These “norms” and “references” are similar to Ahmed’s orientating lines. Gloria

Anzaldua reminds us that “culture is made by those in power,” meaning that the dominant orientating lines are often made by those who already have the most power (38). Ahmed explains that orientation is dependent on “the bodily inhabitation of that space” (6), similar to the idea of perspective, but which is also concerned with the materiality of the lived existence of the body. In the case of body size, there is a dominant orientation toward “thin” as acceptable in contemporary western consumer popular culture—which often gets conflated with discourses about health.

This orientation toward health is a powerful one in contemporary western consumer culture. Who, though, is really the “expert” of acceptable body size, or even health? As fat activist Marilyn Wann points out, there are many “experts”:

In the United States, any number of self-appointed authorities are eager to designate who is fat and who is not. The federal government, health insurers, medical doctors, school nurses, popular media, advertising, the fashion industry, strangers, acquaintances, friends, family members, romantic partners, and, of course, the bathroom scale—each alleged authority draws its own line between fat and thin, does so at different weights, and may redraw the line at any time.

(301)

There are many orientating “lines” here—and they all form the same path toward acceptable bodies being thin and unacceptable bodies being large. Ultimately, the fat body is both produced and abnegated through capitalism, which I have discussed in Chapter 1. These external forces are not all exactly the same in the orientating lines that they create, but the overall repetition of the idea that thin is good and fat is bad creates a dominant ideology. Ahmed would

call these external forces “institutions”, which “become given as an effect of the repetition of decisions made over time” (133). Ahmed further explains that, “the body provides us with a perspective: the body is ‘here’ as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds, as being both more and less over there. The ‘here’ of the body does not simply refer to the body, but to ‘where’ the body dwells” (8).

This idea of the “where” is a critical part of embodiment: similar to standpoint theory (Hill Collins, Smith) and feminist notions of positionality (Alcoff, Gunn Allen), it means that everyone sees the world from their own set of complicated perspectives. This is also why it is important to acknowledge one’s biases/position when reading bodies in order to do it ethically.

So, fat as an embodied orientation means that one can “be fat” as a conscious, ontological choice. This requires “coming out” or self-identifying as fat. Sedgwick refers to this as the “closet of size” and fat studies scholars have investigated the intersections of fat and queer identity in relation to the notion of “coming out” (Saguy and Ward, Gurrieri and Cherrier). The term “fat” has been something that fat activists who are “out” have worked to “take back.” As Marilyn Wann explains,

In fat studies, there is respect for the political project of reclaiming the word *fat*...as the preferred term of political identity. There is nothing negative or rude about the word *fat* unless someone makes the effort to put it there; using the word *fat* as a descriptor (not a discriminator) can help dispel prejudice. (Kindle location 255)

As I mentioned earlier, there isn’t just one way to be orientated toward fat as an embodied subjectivity; many people find themselves somewhere between resisting/rejecting

“being fat” and fully embracing body acceptance—sometimes at the same time.

In what follows, I will explain how ethical reading and a body positive rhetorical approach work by focusing on the experiences of the fat fashion bloggers that I interviewed. The three bloggers have had very different experiences, and as a result, the ways that they are orientated toward their size is very different; this is why body positive rhetorics is always plural—there is no one way to be in a body. In this chapter I use the participants’ stories (both video and text) to show parts of all three turns that lead to embodying fat as an orientation: 1) recognizing external forces that make meaning, 2) internalizing these forces, and 3) reacting to dis/orientation. In this first of two data chapters, I show how the participants came to know they were fat by being told by others, seeing pictures of themselves, and then reacting to the disorientating moment of realizing that they were “other”. I end this chapter by discussing how making the decision to become bloggers was a part of their reorientation toward their size.

## **Part I: Fat**

The three bloggers talked about how they came to know they were fat in different ways. Some talked about it in great detail (Lolly) while others didn’t say much (Ashley and Mary). Using the information that they gave me<sup>22</sup> as well as my own experiences, I hope to paint a picture of the many ways that a person can come to embody size as an orientation.

### **Lolly**

#### *Turn 1: Learning the Orientating Lines and Institutions*

Lolly came to know that fat was bad through interactions with multiple institutions: the medical industry and her family. Speaking about the medical industrial complex, she

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<sup>22</sup> This "piecing together" is part of my methodology, which I talk about at length in Chapters 2 and 3.



explained (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGPop7hROf8>)

You can go to the doctor's with a sore foot, and they'll say it's because you're fat...but if you're not fat and you go to the doctor's with a sore foot, and you smoke, they'll say it's because you smoke. And it's just like, it has no bearing on anything. And you can't tell somebody's health from looking at them. I mean, you could be a size 24 or a size 12, and then that size 24 person can run a marathon. The size 12 can't, because they smoke or whatever, then...you can't tell health from looking at someone. (53:06-53:38)

Lolly's discussion of the medical community's approach to treating and (mis)diagnosing fat is something that many fat activists and scholars are talking about.<sup>23</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, the institution of the medical industrial complex works within the colonial matrix of power to reinforce and reproduce labels for "good" and "bad" bodies.

### *Turn 2: Seeing the Self as "Other"*

The second turn in embodying fat as an orientation happens when a person realizes they don't have an "acceptable" body. For Lolly, this happened when she saw a picture of herself from behind. She explains that, ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAFXb\\_ms748](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAFXb_ms748))

My dad had this little video camera thing in the kitchen that was on the table. And it was like for CCTV type of thing. And I walked past it, and I saw my bum in jeans on the screen and I was like, 'Is that my bum?' Like, I had no context that that's what my bum looked like. Because you never see it from that

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<sup>23</sup> As discussed at length in Chapter 1; specifically the work of Ernsberger, Gaesser, Burgard, Wilson, LeBesco, Lyons, Aphramor.

angle. So I was like, ‘that’s what my bum looks like.’ And I thought, ‘well, what else...what do I look like from other angles? I have no idea.’ What you think you see in your mind and what your body actually looks like, are completely different. (19:22-20:01)

In these moments Lolly experienced what Ahmed calls “disorientation”. Ahmed describes disorientation as “bodily experiences that throw the world or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable” (157). Lolly realized that she “had no context” for what her body—her lived experience in her body—“looked like”. The realization that there were parts of her physical, material flesh that she had never “seen” (or seen from certain angles) made her question how she saw herself and what her body really looked like.

The way that she reacted to being disoriented to her own body illustrates one way that fat can be performed as an embodied orientation, which I will further explain in the next section.

### *Turn 3: Reaction*

The third turn in embodying fat happens after realizing that one’s body is “other”. Ahmed explains that being disorientated leads to action:

Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis. Or the feeling itself might pass as the ground returns or as we return to the ground. The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to stay an action. Or the hand might reach out and find nothing, and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of air. The body in losing its support

might then be lost, undone, thrown. (157)

Ahmed explains that disorientation can be a productive space, saying that it: “can offer us the hope of new directions” (158). These “new directions” can lead to powerful actions, as shown by Lolly, who went on to explain that after seeing the video and thinking about it, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swsMLNiva6s>)

So that’s when I decided, well, I’m going to take pictures of myself, flattering, unflattering, every angle possible to see what I actually look like. Because the feeling of not knowing...is worse than what the actual thing is, and that’s in anything...so I did that, and I mean obviously it’s not easy to look at pictures of yourself...and think, ‘I’m ugly, I’m fat, I’m horrible.’ But the more you see pictures of yourself, you desensitize yourself to your own body. I think the same goes for fat advertising. People never see fat people in advertisements unless it’s to ridicule them, or berate them in some way. And I think people seeing fat people on TV, in the movies, and like everything, it will desensitize them to it. It’s just the shock of not, I think, having seen it before. It’s like it’s not the normal, you know. There’s fat people everywhere. You see them every day. But you don’t see them on TV and in movies and in magazines, where everything’s perfect...so that’s how I came to like my body. (20:01-21:24)

Lolly’s discussion of seeing more fat bodies is in line of Ahmed’s idea of orientation—she discusses how a path of acceptable bodies is formed by only seeing a certain kind of body in the media. Even though there wasn’t a “well trodden path” for Lolly in terms of size acceptance, she chose to work to continually reorientate herself to body positivity and therefore came to

embody fat as an orientation.

Lolly went on to talk about the benefits to seeing *all* of her own body. She was so moved by her moment of disorientation that she decided to get a 3D body scan. Lolly explained:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWymUJpSDxs>)

That 3D scan thing; that was a really interesting thing. Because I mean, even though I'd seen what was on myself all the way down, seeing it like that gray format, where there is no contrast...and like colored and things, you're just basically ashy and I just thought, 'wow...I wish everybody could do that, and see themselves. And like realize in proportion...to the rest of how you think things are. Because when you look in a mirror, you focus on your bad bits. And you'll look at a certain area. I mean, when I try clothes on, I don't look at myself in the mirror. I take a photo and just look at the photo. Because if you look at yourself in the mirror, you're only seeing from your eye height. And when you take a photo from eye...from up here...at yourself...it's completely different from here, and down below. But every photo I take is from right in the middle because any photographer that takes photos, takes photos from the middle. Because that gives you like the equal distance from top to the middle and from the bottom to the middle, basically. So you're getting a more...a better perspective of the whole, rather than a birds' eye view, or a grand view of something...so it's all perspective...I mean...if you can see yourself from all these different angles, then when you do see it, it's not a shock. And it's like, 'Oh yeah, that's me from that angle, and that's me from that angle, and

that's me from that angle.' But all-encompassing, **you're all of these things, to everybody. Like, the world sees you from all these different angles, you know, and you are all these different shapes.** But again...if you're happy with that...with the body that you've got...then it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. (emphasis added) (1:00:36-1:03:18)

Lolly's comment about "how the world sees you versus what you think you look like" means that a person is always already the way they look in pictures/videos/mirrors, but they are *also* the person they imagine or see in their minds. What Lolly is talking about here is finding a way to reconcile the multiple versions of oneself—in this case by seeing all the different versions that exist.

Lolly provides an example of the use of disorientation as a productive space. Since her experiences of being disorientated to her own fat body, she has come to self-identify as a radical fat woman or "rad fatty". Lolly embodies fat as an orientation, which means that the majority of the time she is orientated to her size in a positive manner. This doesn't have to be stable—and it's definitely not the only way to perform embodiment, as I will show in the next section where I will discuss how Mary embodies size as an orientation.

## **Mary**

### *Turn 1: Learning the Orientating Lines and Institutions*

Mary came to know she was fat mostly through interactions with her family as an institution; other institutions that influenced her orientation toward size were the fashion industry and friends. Mary mentioned that her family, especially her parents, were more "open" than the norm, specifically in relation to size. She explained that

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAPTQ9OF9y8>)

I was born in Holland and my parents were there for like 25 years so they are a little bit more open minded than the rest of the Portuguese people. And I think that made a big influence in the way that me and my brother think, you know, and the human beings that we became. They always taught us to be what we are and to love each other as we are. (34:27-35:00)

When she says that her parents are “more open” she is referencing the “norm”— the dominant line for accepting differences and acknowledging that there are these dominant lines, her parents deviate from them. Later she discusses heteronormativity and dominant lines, explaining that, “you know, my brother is plus size and he never had problems with girls...he’s married. He has like 3 sons and the 4<sup>th</sup> on the way. So (laughs)” (49). Here Mary is saying that while her family was more accepting of things outside of traditional “norms”, she recognizes that there is a gendered difference when it comes to size acceptance—what is “normal” or “acceptable” for a man is often labeled as “plus size” or “unacceptable” for a woman, as I discuss next.

### *Turn 2: Seeing the Self as “Other”*

Mary talked about knowing that she was bigger when she was younger. She explained that, “when I was younger, you know, you always heard those comments...boys will always see me as the fat girlfriend (laughs) that they will never date” (32). Here Mary recognizes that her own body exists outside of dominant lines. Later in life, when she started blogging as a self-identified plus size woman, Mary said that she received pushback from other women who “said comments like ‘you’re not truly a plus size’...” (30). She went on to explain that “and I say no, really? And I wish I could believe that because then I could go into a store and fit anything that I would like! (Laughs)” (33).

Mary was also keenly aware of how her own experiences with size were potentially different than those of people larger than herself—she seemed very aware of her body privilege. She explained that, “I know that there were a lot of people that suffered a lot more than me” (32). She went on later to say that, “I know some girls have been through [worse things] but I can’t say that, for instance, I couldn’t get a job because I’m fat. That hasn’t happened to me yet” (34).

### *Turn 3: Reaction*

Mary’s reaction to being both too fat and not fat enough was the same: she explains that, “you know, I just don’t care. I don’t care...I like what I am, I like the way I look. Of course you know I have some extra pounds. I know there are people that are fatter than me, that there are people thinner than me...so I just don’t give a damn” (33). At one point I asked Mary, “Have you always been this confident?” To which she replied, “Yeah...I have always been fat all, all, all my life” (34). Mary went on to explain how being a larger size is a highly gendered thing. She said that (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHKu3zM5pMQ>)

I think, you know, confidence is more of a girl’s problem and I think girls just have to accept the way that they are you know that they have to love the way that they look no matter what size and just have to be a good person. The most important thing in life for me, it’s to be happy and to be a good person and I know there are a lot of bitches out there and so I just don’t give a damn about it, you know...just be happy...and take care of ourselves and try to be a better person each day. (48:42-49:28)

For Mary, embodying size as an orientation means choosing her own labels and not letting other people’s categories and opinions change her.

## **Ashley**

### *Turn 1: Learning the Orientating Lines and Institutions*

Ashley's understanding of fat happened mainly through interactions with two institutions: the popular media and her friends. Ashley told me that, for her, the term "fat" has had a negative connotation both inside and outside of the fashion community. We talked about her childhood and her life previous to blogging, and she said that, "I feel like the word 'fat' has been used negatively" (17). Here, it's as though Ashley is going down one of Ahmed's "paths": in this case she acknowledges the dominant way of seeing/thinking about the term "fat" (as Wann explained earlier in this chapter) and stays on a course where this is something that she wants to stay away from. However, she is "looking around" at the other paths—she sees "plus size" as a better term, but doesn't necessarily think that *being* plus size is a negative thing. Is this complicated? Yes. Ashley is a complex person, and, like most people, sometimes she is contradictory. I will discuss this more in Turn 2 and Turn 3.

### *Turn 2: Seeing the Self as "Other"*

Ashley told me that she has always been larger than normal. She told me that "I've always been a plus size girl" (4) and went on later to say that, "growing up, I did have a lot of issues about being plus size. It definitely did effect my confidence" (20). Ashley explained that she experienced "growing up, feeling that I wasn't good enough [compared to] a girl that was normal size" (21). Ashley saw herself as the "other" in relation to the dominant orientation to thin as acceptable/beautiful for women.

### *Turn 3: Reaction*

As a result of being "other", Ashley told me that,  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p51IKUPT9Js>)



I always just felt that because of [my size], I had to, you know, work twice as hard as a woman that...has a nice figure. I felt like I had to make up for that by dressing fashionable...I felt that, you know, if I always dressed nice that I would get more compliments that way...to make up for me being overweight I guess (laughs). (3:41- 4:30)

Ashley internalized the dominant orientation and reacted by playing by the rules of the “norm”: trying to “look nice” through clothes, make up, and flattering photographs (which I will discuss in detail in chapter 5). While performing these normative practices, she told me that she realized that her size “should not lower my confidence. No matter what size I am, that doesn’t affect the kind of person that I am inside” (21). Here I see Ashley working through some internalization of fat phobia—similar to her rejection of the term fat, but her acceptance of *being* “plus size”. She is contradictory in her statement that size shouldn’t affect her self worth coupled with her expressed desire to always “look nice” because of her size; as I mentioned earlier, Ashley is complex. Her actions here, while seeming contradictory, are all examples of how body positive rhetorics—a rhetorical approach to looking at size as an embodied identity category—is always multiple. Even within one person there are competing ways to perform her orientation—an orientation that isn’t necessarily always stable. Her experiences of feeling the need to dress in order to “compensate” for her size are part of her motivation for her blog, which I will discuss in Part II.

The three bloggers became orientated toward size through different experiences; however, they all experienced the three “turns”: external influences, seeing the self as other, and then reacting and becoming reoriented to this internalization of information. Ultimately, they

embody fat in very different ways. For example, Lolly sees her marginalized status as something to be proud of and flaunt, while Ashley tries to fit in to the traditional idea of acceptable female bodies through her dress practices. In the second part of this chapter, I want to focus on one method of reorientation that all three bloggers had in common: after coming to self identify as fat women (or “plus size” in Ashley’s case), they all decided to start their own blogs.

## **Part II: Blogging as Community**

In this section, I will share the bloggers stories of how they made the decision to become fat fashion bloggers and talk about their motivations. By sharing their stories I will make the argument that one of the most important ways that the three women became reoriented toward size was by becoming bloggers. As bloggers they participate in building and sustaining the communities that they have been inspired by and thus became members of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger). Specifically, in the rest of this chapter I will discuss how the bloggers found community, worked to build that community by creating their own blogs, and then how they each work to continue to sustain their communities in the context of Lave and Wenger’s notion of communities of practice through Ahmed’s idea of reorientation.

### *Finding Community*

All three bloggers started out as fans of other blogs. Being readers of other fat fashion bloggers was a way for them to connect with a community of women who have chosen to make pictures of their (often taboo) bodies public. For example, when I asked Lolly about how she became a fashion blogger she replied by saying,  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cbuRf6c2Dk>)

It was probably Tumblr...discovering Tumblr, and getting addicted like most

people do, when they first discover Tumblr. And then like coming across fashion Tumblrs...fat fashion Tumblrs, and like basically being amazed that there was fat people putting pictures of themselves on the internet...in nice clothes And where did they get these clothes? And how do I get these clothes? (2:38-3:02)

The move from following fashion blogs to fat fashion blogs is something that Ashley and Mary talk about as well. For example, for Mary, her interest in blogging came about as a result of being interested in fashion. Mary said that, “I have always had a big crush on fashion, and I don’t know if you know Portugal but it’s not a big country and here the fashion world isn’t very developed—just a couple of big designers and a couple of stylists, so I love to search and see what the other ones outside were doing” (2). The internet let Mary have access to fashion beyond the borders of her country. She explained that, “a few years ago, I decided that it was time to know a little bit more. And so I started to search for fashion bloggers and plus size bloggers too” (3). Ashley discussed a need to see bodies like hers dressed fashionably. Ashley has “always been interested in fashion” and looks to other bloggers for guidance and inspiration. Ashley told me that “I started to look at bloggers’ blog sites and websites and I became very interested. They inspired me just from the message they were trying to get out...through their blogs and empowering women of plus size. It just inspired me and I felt that I could do something similar” (3). She talked about two specific bloggers who, together, were the impetus for her inspiration: Nadia Aboulhosn (who is also a successful professional model) and Kim, the blogger behind “Naturally Fashionable”. Ashley said that “Nadia...she’s one of the first ones I started to look at and I was just amazed at her pictures...her fashion sense and her being a model, it was really encouraging. I still look at her blog today” (5).

She went on to say of Kim “I like her because she has natural hair kind of like mine, and she’s doing fashion...so I like that combination. Yeah, so they really inspired me just by looking at their pages and the pictures that they put up along with tips for plus sized women...[it] encouraged me. I felt I could do the same” (6). Being able to see bodies that look like theirs was something that connected all three bloggers. This is in line with Lave and Wenger’s first criterion for a community of practice<sup>24</sup>—that members have “an identity defined by a shared domain of interest...and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes its members from other people.” In this case, the bloggers are all united by their size—specifically their orientation to their size as something that they don’t need to be ashamed of or hide (although, as I will show, they each perform this in very different ways).

The connection brought about by having a relationship with individual bloggers was important to both Lolly and Mary. Lolly told me that her biggest inspiration was Tess Munster, a famous plus size model. She explained that “I basically found her when she was just starting, so I actually got to like interact with her quite a lot...she’s...she’s just awesome” (6). For Lolly, being able to have a personal relationship with a blogger that she looked up to was important. Lolly also went on to list people in her blogging community that she called “body positivity” bloggers, including *The Nearsighted Owl*. She explained that “I mean, essentially I’m drawn to them because of what they’re wearing, but if they’ve got meaning behind it, and have something to say...that’s what keeps people going back, really” (9). What I hear Lolly saying here is that, for her, the need for community is about more than sharing clothing ideas. She explained that seeing posts from fat people in “nice clothes” led her to ask, “Where did they get these clothes?

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<sup>24</sup> This is just one way to talk about how communities are performed and constructed. For example, de Certeau discusses communities as formed through shared culture and practice; Royster and Kirsch discuss feminist constructions of community; queer theory comes out of grassroots community work.

And how do I get these clothes? And that was probably the start of that. And then finding that there were people, not just in America, but in the U.K., that were doing that, and why can't I do that?" (3).

Mary was also motivated by a need to connect with other people. She explains that her nightly ritual is usually: "after my favorite soap opera I grab my iPad and just read their posts and see what they had been doing lately...I like to follow up on what they are doing on Instagram and Facebook...because you know sometimes I feel kind of lonely. You know" (18). The second criterion for a community of practice, according to Lave and Wenger, is that members "build relationships that enable them to learn from each other." This need for community—for people with something in common, for closeness and personal relationships through digital spaces—is part of how fat fashion bloggers create and participate in a community of practice.

In Part I, I talked about how the bloggers internalized the dominant ideas of size and acceptable bodies and discussed the different ways that they each experienced disorientation. Part of becoming reoriented to size and their bodies was through finding others who looked like them, or looked like how they *wanted* to look. By finding community they were able to use the other bloggers as an anchor to help them reorient themselves to their size and bodies.

### *Building Community*

After finding community, all three of the bloggers were inspired to create their own blogs, thus working to build up the community that they had found. This meets the third and final criterion for Lave and Wenger's definition of a community of practice: the members of the community must be "practitioners" who develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice."

For example, in December of 2012 Mary started posting on her own blog. She explained that “I wanted to be a part of this world too so I created Mary’s Big Closet” (3). She goes on to state that, “here in Portugal it’s just me and two other girls that are plus size bloggers...I don’t know, we, we have lots of fat girls [in Portugal] who are awesome, but I think they are too ashamed to show themselves” (4). Mary also discussed how she is continuing to build community. She explained that (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AjJVxASz5E>)

Those two [other bloggers in Portugal], they don’t post quite often... but I, I take it a little bit serious because I try to post daily and all that stuff but they don’t do it on a regular basis. They are...they are not so interested in fashion as I am and so sometimes I kind of feel a bit lonely. And because I like to speak with persons and exchange ideas and you know, so that’s why I turn to the U.K. (18:38-19:17)

Part of the impetus of making her own blog came from UK bloggers that she found when she first started following fat fashion bloggers.

Ashley’s motivations for finding community are rooted in her desire to become a plus size model. Because of this, she uses her online presence to network and build her brand. Ashley started sharing her own fashion posts first through Instagram, and then added a blog after she had a large following on Instagram. She said ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41fS02sQ\\_wg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41fS02sQ_wg))

I felt that if I got a following on Instagram, that that would help me with getting a following for the blogs...And once I did start blogging, I had went from...cause right now I have about 440 followers and before I started to blog I

only had like 200. So it went from 200 to yeah...so...social media really helps.  
(6:56-7:37)

Ashley is also on Facebook and Twitter, but told me that, “I haven’t been using it (laughs). I need to start doing that too, and that would probably help me more also” (8).

Lolly created her own blog, but her method of building community went beyond the virtual world by getting involved in groups outside of the digital world. For example, through blogging Lolly became a member of a local activist group, the Yorkshire Rad Fat Collective. She explained that the group’s purpose was to bring fat people together and create a space of shared community. The Collective does things including, “plus-sized clothes swaps” and an event called “Big Boogie Prom,” for fat people who might not have felt comfortable attending formal functions when they were younger. This community, for Lolly, opened up an intersectional space. She explains that the group (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8njc1H8gUw>)

Started out just for fat people, but then we realized that not just fat people might have had negative experiences with proms. I mean...not that we have proms in this country, it’s more like an American thing, but just being excluded from something. So it basically became a thing for everybody. But with the attention being on if you were queer or trans or anything like that and just didn’t feel comfortable going to something like that [prom]...I think that’s what’s good about the group of people I’ve met through blogging, is that there is a lot of bi people, lesbian people, gay people, and then they’re open to...other things. They’re not closed off, and...it’s not just about fat. It’s about equality for everybody. And fat is just one of the things that gets picked on, but really, there

are a lot of minorities. And just need to stop all of it [hate]. (26:50-28:10)

Lolly's practice of ethical reading of her own body helped her come to embody her own orientation to fat, and enabled her to practice suspending judgment of other bodies as well. Her statement that "it's about equality for everybody" and her reflection that people with other embodied orientations might have had similar experiences dealing with pain and rejection opens a space for collaboration and intersectionality. Lolly practices ethical reading in her explanation that the feeling of not being comfortable or included cuts across identity categories, and as a result she and her group are open to including anyone who wants to join.

Lolly went on to say that (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1TMWi0sCAo>)

I'm quite happy that I got into blogging, just for the fact that I've met so many amazing people that are open minded...because when you don't have that outside interaction with people from all over, if you're just stuck with the people that you know and are in your group, then you're not getting to experience all that stuff...You are just closed off to the ideas of this group of people, who have maybe all experienced the same things...and never been outside of that bubble. So when you go outside of your comfort zones to other areas, and meet new people who have experienced other things, I think that's when you learn more, and grow. (28:13-29:01)

The three bloggers all had different reasons for joining the community of practice of fat fashion bloggers—but all three ultimately participated. In what follows I will further discuss the multiple ways that the bloggers act as "practitioners" in their communities by doing work to sustain their communities of practice.



### *Sustaining Community*

As members of the community of fat fashion bloggers, all three women mentioned feeling a desire to help other women become more confident in their bodies—because fat fashion blogs had been helpful for them in their processes of reorientation, they wanted to help create an institution that could potentially help others. For example, in addition to networking to become a professional model, Ashley says that, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LOH-9nXzis>)

One of my reasons for wanting to do [the blog] is because, you know, the growing up feeling that I wasn't good enough [compared to] a girl that was normal size. From doing this blog, I want women my size or larger, whatever, to know that they are just as beautiful and how beautiful they can be. To give them that confidence. Because, definitely, doing this blog has given me more confidence. (21:03-21:38)

Mary discussed the success of her blog, stating that, “I’m beginning to have some readers and it’s working pretty good because...some Portuguese ladies leave me comments and send me email and said that I’m a kind of inspiration for them” (5). She went on to explain that, “they don’t show themselves and don’t love themselves and I, I try to help them in the way I can” (5). One way that she tries to do this is through what she calls “image consulting” which she likens to being a stylist. Being an image consultant means that she is able to give other women advice on their appearance and on their lives—“I managed to help some of my readers, not just some special occasion but sometimes in their lives they were not that well and I think I managed to give them some strength to move forward” (6). Later she explained that, “men and women shouldn’t be ashamed of what size they are...great style has no size...and I think that’s the message I want to go with my blog” (41).

Lolly also talked about a desire to help inspire others. As a blogger she became connected to many different people doing body positive work, including professional photographers. After seeing the work of Yossi she said, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fjmu4GfcZbI>)

I was interested, and found him on Facebook and messaged him to say, “Wow, loved your pictures. Great thing you’re doing. Keep it up,” basically. And then he messaged me saying he was going to be in England in a few week’s time, and would I pose for him. And I... and I was like, “Would I do that?”... And I had to think about it. I was like, “Well, I love all the pictures he’s done.” I mean, if they inspired me ... Why wouldn’t I want to do that for someone else? And I mean, one of the things that made me like learn to love my body and um, was taking pictures of myself, naked, and looking at them. Because nobody likes to see themselves naked (laughs). (18:23-19:18)

## **Conclusion**

There are many ways to embody an orientation toward size, but all three bloggers reorientated themselves through actively participating in the communities that helped them with their own initial reorientations. While in line with Lave and Wenger’s idea of “communities of practice,” the ways that the bloggers reorientated themselves to their size was very different—and in the next chapter I will discuss how they continued to do this specifically through their dress practices.

## CHAPTER 5: FA(T)SHION

### Introduction

In this chapter I discuss how the bloggers embody fat through the materiality of their dress practices, specifically focusing on clothing and its relation to the fat body in order to answer my second research question:

2. *How do fat fashion bloggers make meaning through their dress practices in ways that are rhetorical, material, and embodied?*

In Part 1, I use the interviews with the bloggers to show how material objects can be used to embody fat and how dress practices are always already rhetorical action. My theoretical frame here builds off of Dickson's notion of material rhetoric and Eicher's definition of dress. Next, in Part 2, I discuss how the bloggers cultivated their wardrobe (their "letters of the alphabet" according to Deb Malkin) in order to further show how dress practices are rhetorical action in a more nuanced way; I make the argument that shopping is a form of rhetorical literacy and part of dressing the body, building on the notion of the "literate self" from Min-Zahn Lu. This chapter ends by reflecting on the multiple ways that fat rhetorics can be performed and further develops the notion of ethical reading.

### Part I: Signature Style

In this section I argue that signature style<sup>25</sup> is a material manifestation of identity—the clothing that the bloggers use in their favorite outfit posts are examples of what Dickson discusses in her definition of material rhetoric.

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<sup>25</sup> In this project, "signature style" is the same as "personal style"—how the bloggers saw themselves manifested through their dress practices.

Specifically, for the fat fashion bloggers, the material objects that made up their wardrobes (i.e. “clothes”) were an important tool that helped them express their identity and practice their embodied orientation toward their size. In this section I will show how the bloggers used dress practices as material rhetoric. Each blogger talked about this differently, and I will share what they told me using images, video, and text.

*Lolly*

Concerning her own signature style, Lolly told me that,

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fhpLpfN5ME>)

I would count myself as a rad fat, which is like basically doing what you want, and not really caring what anyone else says or thinks...So I don't buy clothes that I think are flattering. I buy clothes because I like them. And because I want to wear them, and not because they're fashionable. And just not putting up with the crap from anyone or anywhere...and just like dressing to be visible, and not dressing to blend in. (10:50-11:51)

Here Lolly is discussing how she uses material objects (i.e. clothing) to “resist the hegemonic structurings of the body and so change the relationships between these corporal bodies and the structures they inhabit” (Dickson 298). In this case, Lolly uses material objects through her dress practices to change/challenge the dominant culture by “not dressing to blend in.” Lolly further discusses how the material objects she uses in her dress practices help her challenge the dominant culture: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htUzwHW49RE>)

I think the things that you've always wanted and couldn't get, because of your size are the more precious things. Like I've worn anything with polka dots and

stripes [since becoming body positive]. Things that you're told are not flattering...well, stripes definitely... do not wear them if you're overweight. So I think when I first learned that I actually like my body, and was happy in whatever I wore, that was the thing that I got drawn to the most. It's like, how many stripes can I wear, and how obnoxious can I look, and feel fab? (laughter). (46:22-46:59)

Lolly's desire to look "obnoxious" by wearing things that are "off limits" to fat bodies is part of her identity performance as a "rad fat" person. Later she told me that in addition to being rad fat, she sees her style as, "retro" and "girlie." When I asked Lolly about a favorite outfit, she immediately told me, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uupqt4AuQ0Y>)

A poppy dress from Simply Be, which I blogged twice, I think. I wore it at Christmas and I wore it a few months before that. I got it before I was pregnant, [and] I couldn't actually wear it, because I was too big to fit in it, at the time. (laughter). And I thought, "Oh, I'll just keep it until the baby's born, and then it will fit." Then I was so ill with pregnancy that I lost so much weight, that it was too big. But I still wore it, because I loved it. And now I've put a bit more weight back on and I wore it for Christmas... but I mean, that's something that I will wear again, and again and again. I wouldn't say it's too fancy to wear every day. I just think it's so nice that I don't want to wreck it by wearing it all the time. (laughter). (44:15-45:04)

When I asked her what made the dress special, she said, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6K3Vl4OHsQ>)

I think the print of it. It's very *Mad Men*, with big poppies on it. And it's really good material. It's like a thick cotton, but with stretch material. So it's comfortable, the shape of it's really good, and it's got like a flare-out from under the bust, so like you can wear like a petticoat underneath it to like make it really fancy. I think it's just like, when I saw it I was just like, "Wow, that's like my ideal dress." Like, that's the dress I've been looking for and could never get in my size. And I just thought, "Wow." And it's ... and it was really expensive, and I did stalk it for ages. And some other sizes were going out of stock, it was like 2 left; I was like, "I've got to buy it, or I'm going to regret it forever." And then when I bought it, I was like... and I still can't even wear it, because I'm too big. (laughter) And then when I lost weight and it was too big I was like, "Oh, it's too big, but I'm still wearing it" (laughter). (45:11-46:16)

Lolly's comments that she immediately identified with the dress when she saw it show that she is able to express her identity through the materiality of clothing. The full expression of her identity, though, doesn't happen just by owning the object—it happens when she puts it on her body. This is similar to Dickson's notion that material objects be "taken up and inscribed on corporal bodies" (298); even though the dress wasn't a perfect "fit" when Lolly bought it she still wore it because it helped her embody her orientation toward her size.

*Ashley*

When I asked Ashley to describe her signature style, she said,  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ryu6JUKPUZU>)

I think I would be a combination of so many things. I just like things that look

nice on me, but it could be anything. I go to thrift stores, I find things in thrift stores...sometimes I like preppy, sometimes I like, you know, street style, hip-hop, or maybe things that are really feminine. I like it all. Just whatever I feel, you know, looks nice on me. (14:49-15:25)

This idea of “looking nice” was a foundation for Ashley’s dress practices. The goal, for her, was to use material objects to make meaning visible to the world about who she is. She went on to explain, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzWtf9t20M8>)

I used to always watch *What Not to Wear* with Stacy and Clinton (laughs)  
They would always say, you know, your clothes say something about you.  
When you take the time to really...care about what you're wearing, then other people will take you seriously. So I believe that dressing nice and dressing in clothes that are flattering to me would really say how I care about myself. And I feel like that's what my clothes say. (13:52-14:38)

Ashley uses clothing to make meaning through its “mass, utility...and tactility” (Dickson 298) on her body to perform a certain look—a look that, according to her, says “I care about myself.”

When I asked Ashley what her favorite outfit from her blog was, she told me about an outfit that she modeled after Kerry Washington. She told me that, “after I put [the outfit] together and saw the pictures side by side, I was like, I really like this. I was happy with that” (8). It’s interesting that Ashley modeled her favorite look after a (thin) celebrity. As someone who is deeply interested in the latest trends, it makes sense that she would draw inspiration from current popular culture icons. I believe that the act of reinterpreting Washington’s look for her own body

is rhetorical; Ashley found material objects that fit her body a certain way to try to emulate the celebrity's red carpet look. While Ashley's motivations for dressing are different from Lolly's, her use of clothing to portray a certain constructed image is similar: both bloggers purposefully manipulate their bodies through clothing to make meaning and express identity.

### *Mary*

When describing her personal style, Mary told me that, "So, I, I think I'm a kind of casual chic person" (11-ish) and explained that, "I'm not a person of big, bold colors. I like to wear them once in a while but not eh, my daily style" (13).

She went on to tell me that her favorite outfit from her blog is, "My last one. I don't know. Always my last one...I love all my outfits, I love my dresses. I love my skirts, my pants. I think I only post outfits that I love" (14). She went on to say that

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwrZ\\_CZ83cE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwrZ_CZ83cE))

I love accessories. I know everything that has to do with statement necklace and earrings and rings... you know, sometimes my look is quite basic but then I throw up a big statement necklace and I think it makes all the difference.

(15:01-15:18)

Here Mary is discussing how specific accessories, placed in specific areas on her body, make meaning that is tied to her identity expression. Later, Mary explained her personal style choices to me in the context of fat fashion and told me that,

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRxzO3WXna4>)

I don't think that we [fat women] have to [have] a specific kind of fashion... okay, so you're fat, you're not allowed to wear horizontal stripes or big patterns



or [whatever] ... I don't wear them because it's not my style...And you know as I told you, I'm like a casual chic. I like more basic pieces and but, I don't not wear them [other styles] because I'm fat. I don't wear them because it's not my style, you know. I don't think that what those big designers said that people that have extra pounds can't wear [certain things]... No, I think we make our own fashion. (20:34-21:34)

This echoes Lolly's discussion of how she uses material objects in her dress practices to challenge dominant culture. In this case, Mary is saying that she acknowledges that there are "rules" around what fat women should and shouldn't wear, which are often manifested through clothing options and availability. Her choice to dress *in spite of* the rules shows one way that she uses clothing to enact body positivity.

The bloggers all have different "signature styles" and different motivations for looking the way that they do. Signature styles are created and performed with material objects through dress practices. I hope that it is clear how dress practices and material rhetoric are connected in the context of fat fashion bloggers.

Next, I want to discuss how the bloggers found the objects that they used to express their identities—arguing that shopping is a form of rhetorical literacy. As I mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Deb Malkin compares a fat girl's wardrobe to letters of the alphabet, claiming that,

Clothing is not just clothing. It's not just shit we put on our bodies so we're not walking around naked. It's the main way that we convey the message of who we are in the world. If fashion was like the alphabet and we used costuming to communicate who we are with the rest of the world, plus-size fashion and fat

girls have fewer letters in the alphabet to use to be able to say who we are.

(214)

In order to further talk about how the bloggers use individual items of clothing to rhetorically embody their orientation to size, I want to take some time to discuss how they came to have the items to work with.

## **Part II: Composing a Wardrobe**

If material rhetoric and dress practices are connected, then the creation/acquisition of objects to make meaning should be considered rhetorical action. Specifically, I will discuss shopping as a type of “rhetorical literacy.” In her 1999 article, “Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation,” Min-Zhan Lu explains that,

Defining literacy is thus a site of political struggle. Taking up such struggle, this paper poses a literate self in the interest of social justice. This ideal literate self uses reading and writing for the following goals: (1) To end oppression rather than to empower a particular form of self, group, or culture; (2) To grapple with one’s privileges as well as one’s experiences of exclusion; (3) To approach more respectfully and responsibly those histories and experiences which appear different from what one calls one’s own; and (4) To affirm a yearning for individual agency shared by individuals across social divisions without losing sight of the different material circumstances which shape this shared yearning and the different circumstances against which each of us must struggle when enacting such a yearning. (173)

While Lu focuses on “reading and writing” to act as a literate self, I posit that other

actions and approaches can be literacy too—specifically the act of “composing a wardrobe” in the case of fat fashion bloggers. In what follows, I will explain how the bloggers enact a rhetorical shopping literacy in order to obtain material objects that allow them to embody their orientations toward their size.

Before I share the stories of the bloggers, I first want to discuss some of the institutional similarities and differences of the bloggers.

Despite being from three different countries, the bloggers all live in capitalist societies (Portugal, England, the US) and purchase mass-produced clothing. All three bloggers self identify as middle class, and as a result, they are not able to afford couture clothing items or have their clothing custom fit or made. These points are important to note before continuing, because they show the larger system that the bloggers are acting within—they also point to areas of further study (for example, what is it like to dress a (fat) body in a place where clothing is predominantly tailor made? Where currency is different than the monetary systems used in current capitalist countries?). As I discussed in Part 1, all three bloggers don’t just buy things that fit—they buy things they like. This choice is a rhetorical choice—and I will show how the act of hunting for a look or even having the literacy of knowing where to shop is rhetorical.

*Ashley*

Ashley, a size 16/18, does most of her shopping in brick and mortar stores. She told me that, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCGb7C-psqM>)

I used to love Old Navy and I still do, but I don't shop there as much. My number one now is Forever 21 Plus. (laughs)...They really cater to having what's current in fashion for plus size women. Because a lot of plus size stores,

they don't cater to what's current in fashion. And, Forever 21 they definitely do. So that's my number one go to now...I love ASOS. They're also very current in fashion. They're just a little more expensive than Forever, you know. And, umm, I like Agoy.com...they have nice clothes. And then just regular stores you can go and find, you know, different items.

Doesn't necessarily have to be a plus size store. I could go into regular stores and find things like an extra large or something that would fit nice also. (11:28-12:46)

When Ashley comments that a lot of plus size stores don't cater to current trends, she is showing that she understands how different stores have different audiences/purposes with their customer base. It could be argued that these comments also show that she is aware of how stores privilege certain sizes; Ashley is able to shop at "regular" stores like Forever 21+ because of her size. Even in the world of plus size clothing, there are some sizes that are more privileged than others, and this manifests through access and availability of clothing. For example, most "plus size" stores sell clothing that fit sizes 12-28 (Lane Bryant, Torrid, Simply Be). Her choice to seek out "trendy" stores is an example of her shopping literacy, which enables her to act rhetorically when she shops, which is part of how she dresses and performs embodiment.

*Mary*

Mary, a UK size 18, told me that she does most of her shopping online. She explained that, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-5FMRmSDs>)

When I want to buy some clothes, I just go online because I got

tired of going to the shops and see things that I enjoy and they didn't fit me or they were too tight...the ladies in the store always look to me and says "how [are] you going to get in that?" So I just got tired and I think 90% of my things are bought online. I don't like shopping [on] site. (laughs). (24:20-24:50)

She told me that she currently shops from stores like Amango and Zara. She explained that the owner of Amango, "is plus size and like us, [and she] had a bit of a hard time finding clothes and convinced her uncle to make a plus size collection in their stores" (23). Mary went on to say that most plus size clothes aren't appealing to her. She said,

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQFcmEzzS6Y>)

I think most of the brands, and I have to say this, are kind of old- fashioned.

You know, plus size brands are kind of ...uh, you're plus size now. You have to look like a potato bag and so you don't like to, you know, [wear] things with great cuts or a little bit modern, no, you have to look like your grandma. No offense. (laughs)... [Fashion designers] just think "okay [plus size girls] need something to [wear] so just like get them dressed in something"... It's a smaller country so our reality it's a little bit more difficult than yours for instance. I think you have those big malls and warehouses where you get [clothes] more easily, you know, but here we don't...I think here in Portugal, the market is a little, it's changing and I think in the future nearby, brands will see that plus sizes girls are here. And they deserve to, to wear pretty clothes too. (25:25-26:53)

Here I hear Mary talking about how clothing retailers and designers have unchecked

privilege, which allows them to reproduce and continue a system of power that privileges smaller sizes and penalizes larger bodies (by making them look like “potato sacks”). She knows this though her own experiences living in her fat body and trying to find clothes that help her perform embodiment. Going back to Dickson, the clothes that Mary buys are part of how she “resists hegemonic structurings of the body” by not being content with wearing what most designers in Portugal think plus size women should wear (for example, her discussion of “looking like a potato bag”). Her shopping practices are part of how she “changes the relationships between corporal bodies and the structures they inhabit” (298). For example, Mary chooses to spend her money at stores that carry clothes that aren’t traditional plus size designs (i.e. “potato bag”-esque) which means she shops mostly online. By doing this, she is affecting the success of the brick and mortar stores—potentially they are losing revenue. Her literacy of shopping for clothes that enable her to perform her orientation to her size and identity are is an example of material rhetoric.

Mary said more about how she believed that good style shouldn’t be tied to size. While talking about Versace’s latest line of high fashion looks (made exclusively for sizes 10 and below<sup>26</sup>) she told me that “if they were a little bit smart, they would do fashion in all sizes...and they would earn a lot of money for it” (22).

Because of the lack of brick and mortar store options for plus size clothing in Portugal, one way that plus size women are finding stylish clothes is by going to a dress-maker and having them tailor made. Mary talked about the rising popularity of dress-makers in Portugal, saying, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQ45bdVupWs>)

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<sup>26</sup> Most high-end designers will only offer one size 10 per boutique. High-end fashion is not sold in mass market stores, so they are very difficult to find. Even mass market stores rarely carry sizes above a 12, even though size 14 is the average for women in America.

There's a, a big market for those kind of ladies that [make dresses] because plus sizes girls for instance have weddings or special occasions but they don't have a store where they can buy a pretty dress. So, most of them just go and buy the material and then she [the dress-maker] makes it. (27:27-27:50)

She went on to say that this practice has its drawbacks, "...it turns too expensive because you have to pay for the material, that pay for the job...you pay like 100 Euros" (28). For Mary, she chooses to forego the dress-maker and hunt online, having her mother make alterations if necessary, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dh6kzgBdXoo>)

I bought [my dresses] online and if it needs you know a little thing here, here and there, my mom just you know, fix it. I'm comfortable with buying online but some of my friends aren't and so they choose to go to buy the material and buy the [dress-maker] and you know, I buy like 3 dresses with the price of 1. Yeah. But, I understand. For some people, [the] internet, it's like ... because you have to feel [the fabric] and all that stuff but if I don't like it, I just send that back. (Laughs). (28:24-29:06)

Mary brings up an interesting point here—the personal preference between shopping online and not really knowing what you are going to get (being able to “feel” the fabric in the store). She makes an important distinction between being able to afford to have tangible clothing right away (dress-makers) versus being more “risky” with what you order online. Like she says, though: online clothes can always be sent back. The way Mary shops—her decisions to trust that what she sees on a website will be something that actually fits her well and her flexibility to send it back if it doesn't—is rhetorical action.

*Lolly*

While Ashley and Mary are both around a size 18, and therefore part of the traditional “plus sizes” that stores carry, Lolly is larger. Lolly told me about her past struggles finding clothes. She said that, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTpPEzQ0eks>)

When I was a teenager, there wasn't a lot available. I mean, you were lucky if you could get jeans to fit you, never mind a nice dress or like a ... a nice top or something. It was all very mumsy...for a teenager to wear, you know. There wasn't anything young and funky and cool. Um, so I mean, it has gotten a lot better. (10:25- 10:49)

She went on later to say that currently for her “it's easier to find things I like” (30- ish), explaining that there is more availability for plus size clothes, but that the brick and mortar stores are getting harder and harder to find. She said that, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikFGQRyl1rc>)

The problem now is that a lot of ... I mean, not that there's a lot of plus-sized brands anyway, but in your standard brands that do plus-sized sections... Now tend to be disappearing from High Street. Um, I would say most of High Street, if you go shop in plus size, you won't find anything to fit you. Um, you have to go to like the malls, where rent is cheaper, and plus-sized shops can be there, or they bought to stock the plus-sized sections...Um, so mostly, I do shop online, which is annoying, because postage prices [things back]. (32:30- 33:33)

The disappearance of brick and mortar stores and plus size options forces Lolly to



become literate in online shopping, similar to Mary. This isn't always easy, though, since there is a lack of standard sizing, especially with online retailers. Lolly explained that,

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKxCxMqX3mA>)

Sizes are completely different. ... And different fabrics. So, you usually have to send half the things back that you get. Um, I think that like ... companies like Simply Be and Yours Clothing tend to be opening shops now, rather than being on line shops, which is interesting, because they obviously see that there's potential in the plus-sized market to be opening stores like that. So, that's encouraging, that hopefully other places will follow...But their sizing tends to be crazy, so you have to like order like 3 different sizes. ... To try things on, and then send back. (33:36-34:44)

For Lolly, the issue with nonstandard sizes extends beyond just the annoyance of having to order multiples of a garment—it becomes more complicated when you consider the orientation of the designers. For example, Lolly talked about the dress she was wearing that day, by Clements Ribeiro, “they’re not plus-sized designers. They’re designer catwalk stuff, so it’s for skinny people. Yet, they’ve designed a range for Evans, which I love. And, their sizing and their materials maybe weren’t suited as well for plus-sized people” (36). This distinction—this orientation toward the intended size of the customer—is important, and plays out in very physical, material ways. For example, Lolly explained that she bought one of the dresses from Evans, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cBJPrOJUJs>)

And like I know one of their dresses split the back on me, and a few other people I knew, because it just wasn’t material that stretched with the body, or

had any give at all. And for fat people, you know... .. Our body shape changes. Um, so ... (laughter) that really didn't work... because fat people...I think, need like different lengths of things, and we need different fits of things. Because, a skinny person, up-and-down body, yeah they might be size 12 or whatever, but some people have bigger hips and some people have bigger boobs. Yet, they do the size 12 that is for every size 12 out there. But when it's a size 20 or a 24 ... That is going to be completely different on every size 24. And ... and the amount of difference in that size, for someone with boobs and hips is massive. I mean, Simply Be started a range ... it's not a big range, but they did start a range for bigger busts and smaller busts, so you could get the same dress ... .. With like B cup to a D cup, or to a J cup. That's a lot of difference, because the same dress will fit all these different sized boobs. Um, and I think they started doing lengths as well in dresses. You can get like 3 different lengths. Because obviously, most things are made to fit 6-foot tall people. (laughter) So, if I buy something like that, being 5 foot 3, it's down to my ankles...So, if you're talking about more brands need to do stuff like that. They need to realize that ... We are all different. And just having that choice .. I mean just that little ... that little bit of choice, if they advertise it well enough, and people know they can get that, they will get the customers. Because fat people have money that they want to spend. (laughter) Just like everybody else. (35:52- 38:22)

Here Lolly is talking about a very keen body/material literacy—an insight into how clothing adapts (or doesn't adapt) to the individual bodies that it sits on. Her insight into the difference in sizes, materials, and companies all show her shopping literacy. Her comments that

designers should do more to cater to larger bodies shows that she is aware of the implicit privilege of people who fit into “straight” sizes. Part of her call for more sizes and better standardization of sizing, speaks to Lu’s call to use literacy to end oppression, and is also an example of Lolly’s “yearning for individual agency” (173).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed how fat fashion bloggers make meaning through their dress practices in ways that are rhetorical, material, and embodied. I showed this through sharing stories about how the bloggers express their signature style, and how they shop for clothes that allow them to do this. The way that the bloggers chose to dress themselves and express their orientations toward their size shows how they each practice body positivity differently—there is no “one way” to be body positive; instead it is about a conscious reorientation toward self love and acceptance. This is manifested in Mary’s choice not to wear stripes because she doesn’t like them (instead of because she’s “not supposed to” wear them) and in Lolly’s choice to “be as obnoxious as possible” in her stripes. Ashley also did this, by deciding that she wanted to portray a very specific message to the world about how she takes pride in herself. In the next chapter, I will discuss limitations of this project and future directions for this work.

## CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS AND AFTERWARD

By this point we have covered a lot of ground together:

- from setting up body positivity as a methodology in chapter 1,
- to sharing my personal experiences that have led to me understanding body positivity through my embodied orientation to my size in chapter 2,
- to introducing the bloggers in chapter 3,
- and having them tell their stories about how they became fat fashion bloggers in chapter 4
- and, finally, how they engage in rhetorical practices through their dress in chapter 5.

I posited three research questions in Chapter 2:

1. *How did the bloggers come to be (self identified) fat fashion bloggers?*
2. *How do fat fashion bloggers make meaning through their dress practices in ways that are rhetorical, material, and embodied?*
3. *How does looking at size as an embodied orientation work towards building a body positive methodology?*

While I feel that they have been addressed in the body of this dissertation, I would like to take some space here and discuss them explicitly.

1. *How did the bloggers come to be (self identified) fat fashion bloggers?*

Chapter 4 shared the stories of the bloggers and how they came to be fat fashion bloggers. This happened through three steps: realizing external ideologies (i.e., “fat is bad”), internalizing these ideologies (i.e., “I’m fat”), and then becoming reoriented to the ideologies (i.e., “I’m okay with being fat, even though the world tells me it’s bad”). This last step happened through participating in a community of practice of blogging; the three bloggers all used other fat fashion blogs to help them with their reorientation toward size, and eventually felt like they should

personally participate in the community by establishing their own blogs.

2. *How do fat fashion bloggers make meaning through their dress practices in ways that are rhetorical, material, and embodied?*

Chapter 5 discussed the ways that the bloggers used dress practices (specifically clothing and the manipulation/showing/hiding of body fat) to embody their orientations toward their size. Drawing on work from Dickson and Eicher, I used the bloggers' stories to show how they performed their signature styles using clothing. I also argued that the act of composing a wardrobe through shopping is a form of rhetorical literacy; the bloggers each found ways to acquire the material objects that helped them to perform their orientations toward their size.

3. *How does looking at size as an embodied orientation work towards building a body positive methodology?*

In the introduction to this project, I stated that my purpose in writing this dissertation is to create and employ a body positive rhetorical methodology that can be used by my community (body positive activists). I made the distinction in Chapter 1 that while body positivity comes from the fat acceptance movement, it has grown to be more than a social justice movement about size; body positivity is about intersecting identity categories. A body positive methodology, then, holds Sastre's notion of "a critical and conscientious engagement with the ways we are expected to understand, perform, and be our bodies" (941) at its core; it's about how an individual is re/orientated toward their own body in order to accept and love themselves. Focusing on size as one embodied orientation is simply one way to enter in to body positivity; it was how I found this

way of being re/orientated<sup>27</sup>.

In service of this methodology, I have tried to use “ethical reading.” I’ve engaged in ethical reading as a methodological approach throughout this dissertation by letting the participants tell their own stories as much as possible; this allows the reader to understand the reasons why they dress the way they do, and hopefully to have moments where, as a reader, you acknowledged your own biases about appearance. In the rest of this chapter I would like to reflect on limitations of this study, and highlight areas of future work. I will end by catching you up on my personal story since I started writing this dissertation.

## **Limitations**

There have been some limitations to this study. For example, I only included data from three participants. While this data proved to be nearly overwhelming, a more extensive group of bloggers might reveal further depths of how body positivity can be performed. For example, the three bloggers I talked to were all self-identified cis women and middle class. They were all relatively the same age (late 20s to early 30s) and were from western countries. I collected email data from a blogger in Singapore, and made contact with a blogger from

Iran who is currently modeling in Norway; including their stories would potentially offer more depth to the results<sup>28</sup>.

Another limitation of the study is tied to the methodological approach: in order to enact a body positive methodology, it was important to me to keep the bloggers involved in the project as much as possible. This means that I stayed in contact with them (by “liking” their Facebook and

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<sup>27</sup> Future work could look at how any other identity category (race, class, gender, age, etc. can lead to body positivity.

<sup>28</sup> I hope to be able to include this in the monograph that comes from this dissertation; first, I would have to conduct video interviews with them, though.

Instagram posts, engaging with them on Twitter, and emailing them with drafts of the dissertation and initial video recordings). While Lolly and Mary were responsive, I was not able to stay in contact with Ashley; she stopped blogging and posting to social media soon after our initial video interview. I was personally troubled that I couldn't engage Ashley in making sure she was being represented in this project in a way she was comfortable with.

A final limitation that I will discuss here is that the video clips that I have of the participants aren't great quality, and can't be seen directly this text (you have to go to the internet separate from this document). This disconnection between the video and the moment of the explanation in the dissertation potentially dissuades readers from engaging in the videos in the most full way possible. I would like to be able to have more professional quality videos, and to have them embedded in the document in order to really show the bloggers telling their own stories as much as possible.

## **Future Work**

There are multiple things that I touch on briefly in the dissertation that deserve more attention. Each of these things could be a separate dissertation— or journal article, conference presentation, or book. For example, this dissertation does interdisciplinary work, combining cultural rhetorics and dress studies.

However, this dissertation was written for an audience of rhetoric scholars first, and dress studies scholars second. There are places where my explanation and engagement with dress studies could be deeper—for example, Malcolm Barnard talks about material culture and this could be used with Dickson. When I adapt this project for a monograph, I plan to try to incorporate more work from dress studies whenever possible.

There are multiple threads from rhetoric and composition that I use in this dissertation that could be developed further. For example, in chapter 4 I introduce Lave and Wenger's idea of communities of practice. I used their idea in service of discussing how the bloggers used the blogging community to become reoriented toward embodying their size. While their theory of communities of practice was useful in that chapter, I think that their idea deserves more interrogation, especially in the context of body positivity and marginalized identity categories. For example, I use Ahmed and ideas from queer theories to frame orientation and embodiment; another project might explore Lave and Wenger plus Ahmed together to see how these ideas might extend the way we talk about communities. This extended work might also include feminist communities of practice, drawing on work by Royster and Kirsch, as well as de Certeau.

A related area that could be further investigated is the relationship of literacy to dress practices. In chapter 5 I talk explicitly about shopping as a form of rhetorical literacy, drawing on the work of Min-Zahn Lu. I also think that the idea of literacy could be applied to chapter 4 when I talk about blogging as a community of practice. The area of literacy studies is huge, and it was beyond the scope of this dissertation to really go into detail. A future project would look at the connection between literacy studies and communities of practice, specifically in the context of blogging.

A fourth area of future work that is mentioned in chapter 5 is the connection between composition and the body (for example, the title of the subheading for part 2 is "Composing a Wardrobe"). The places in chapter 5 where I talk about the connection between material rhetoric and dress practices could be extended to current conversations in rhetoric and composition about multimodal composition, specifically Selfe (arguing for aural communication, which I see as tied to the body) and Shipka (advocating for "textures, sounds, scents, and even tastes" to be included



in multimodal composition). Both of these pieces call for multimodal composition to include things that intersect with the five senses—and therefore, I think dress practices could be explored as multimodal composition<sup>29</sup>.

Finally, future work could focus on transnational feminist issues that are woven throughout this dissertation: “fast fashion” and the working conditions of the people who make the clothes that Ashley buys at Forever 21+. I would also like to be able to go more in depth in how clothing is advertised in the different countries that they bloggers live in—while they are all part of capitalist societies, there are complex cultural differences in their advertising and traditions around “acceptable” bodies, and this dissertation didn’t get to go into great detail. I’m sure that there are also other things that I haven’t even started to touch on that could come out from this project; my hope is that this intersectional space provides a lifetime of work.

I would like to end this project by returning to how I began; since this dissertation project began from my lived experiences in my body, I want to end with updates about how my body, my work, and my activist self have changed over the process of working on this project.

### **Afterward: Katie's Story—Updates**

Working on this dissertation gave me space to continue to think about my own everyday dress practices; after all, this project is grounded in my own experiences in becoming reoriented to my size in a body positive way. At the same time I have been working on this project, I have been on the job market. I have received a lot of advice (both implicit and explicit) about how I should dress myself—being told that spandex is never okay for an interview, given advice about

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<sup>29</sup> As part of the dissertation process, I actually wrote a short article about this for a special issue about multimodality in the *Journal of Global Literacies, Technologies, and Emerging Pedagogies*, which is currently under review.

how I should style my hair (curly hair gets read in a negative way for women), to being warned that women are going to judge me the most harshly if they know that I study fashion.

My response to these statements was always “*but the whole point of my work is that dress shouldn’t be read that way.*” What **should** matter are the ideas that I have, the work that I do, and my ability to bring these two things together in meaningful ways (in the classroom, in conference presentations, in publications). What do we really value: the idea, or the body that carries the idea? Can’t we honor both in a way that doesn’t reinforce problematic systems of power?

Shouldn’t academics know better<sup>30</sup>?

For me, the academic focus on appearance seems the most problematic in the context of writing. All of my ideas come out (in one way or another) through some sort of writing. This act usually happens when I am alone, often in my home office. When I write I usually don’t style my hair, put on make up, or wear a bra. Since writing is one of the main ways that I work as a professional academic, I started to really think about what it meant for me to “dress professionally”.

In order to procrastinate actually finishing this dissertation, I started a Tumblr site in January called [Dress Profesh](#). Originally, it was a space just for me to post pictures of what I wore when I was writing. I made it public so anyone could submit a photo<sup>31</sup> of how they perform “professional,” but didn’t really expect anyone to submit. The site quickly grew, though: people

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<sup>30</sup> Meaning: shouldn't academics be the most aware of how dress codes (even implicit ones) are inherently racist, classist, cissexist, ageist, ableist, etc.?

<sup>31</sup> People can submit a photo and as much or as little text as they want. I also state that I will take down anything they ask me to at any point in time.

that I didn't know started submitting pictures and sharing the site. Dress Profesh got reblogged<sup>32</sup> by [This Is Thin Privilege](#) and [Fat Girl Dangerous World](#) and suddenly the site went from 50 followers to over 1000. Today, there are over 13,000 followers and I have written about Dress Profesh in multiple outlets, including *Conditionally Accepted*, *The Body is Not An Apology*, and *Jezebel*.

I see Dress Profesh as a way to engage a public audience in the concepts of my work. Because the site states on the main page: “challenging notions of what it means to look ‘professional’; body positive; no hate allowed” it has become a space that asks people to think critically about how their dress practices make meaning in ways that are potentially resistant to both their employer’s dress code, and their own internalized dress code.

For example, I have IRB approval for Dress Profesh submissions and have been doing interviews with people who are interested in talking with me. One interview that stands out as an example of how Dress Profesh is tied to the work of this dissertation (and representative of future work that I plan to do) was with Laura, a self identified young, black, cis woman who works for a major tech company. This company<sup>33</sup> claims to have no dress code, and they use this as a selling point when recruiting new employees. Laura’s [original post](#) on Dress Profesh highlighted the intersectionality of her dress practices, and she talks about this at length in her interview.

In our interview, she told me how she felt pressure to dress down at work—even though this was something that she wasn’t comfortable doing. She quoted Papa Pope from the TV show

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<sup>32</sup> This is how most things on Tumblr get posted—people reblog.

<sup>33</sup> While Laura was comfortable using the name of this company in her interview, she told me in a later email that her friends might not want the name of the company publicly mentioned. I have decided to err on the side of safety here.

*Scandal*<sup>34</sup> to say that as a young black woman “you have to work twice as hard to be half as good” and went on to say that, “I think a lot of that applies to dress as well. You need to dress profesh if you want to be taken seriously.”

What Laura’s story brings to highlight is the way that dress practices are always already intersectional. Laura has put me in contact with other employees at the tech company, and I hope to conduct interviews and work more in depth about how a “non dress code” is still a dress code, in a way that is driven by the stories of the employees.

### **Ultimate Conclusion**

I originally thought that Dress Profesh was a way to procrastinate my dissertation, but I have realized that this site is actually an extension of this dissertation: the methodology is the same. Dress Profesh engages in ethical reading by asking participants to share stories of their work attire—often the context reveals things that someone wouldn’t be able to know just by looking at the image (for example, [dressing for chronic pain](#), dress as a way to work through [mental illness](#), etc.). The site also puts the stories (words and images) of the participants first—I usually don’t make any changes to what people give me to post. I see the act of reflecting on one’s dress practices in this way as a way of enacting a body positive methodology in everyday life: it puts the individual’s body at the center and gives them a space to articulate how they feel and why they dress the way that they do. I hope that this enactment of ethical reading is something that people use outside of Dress Profesh; I invite you to think reflexively about your own dress practices the next time you get dressed<sup>35</sup>.

This sort of multimodal action is rhetorical, and I would like to end by bringing this work

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<sup>34</sup> Which features a strong black female lead character.

<sup>35</sup> And submit a post to Dress Profesh, of course.

back to the discipline of rhetoric and composition. As I said in the first chapter of this dissertation, words matter. Language is power, and it is precisely because of this that scholars in rhetoric and composition need to pay more attention to the ways that the body, in all of its potential dress practices, is rhetorical. The potential power of the multimodal body lies in the ability of bodies to be seen and treated as people. This means that rhetoric and composition scholars need to be talking to bodies instead of about bodies. I have offered an extended example of what this sort of research might look like, by including audio and video of interviews with bloggers, as opposed to simply commenting on what they have posted in their online spaces. This difference is critical—the researcher/theorist/activist has the final power to represent someone, and as Powell et al explain, “research is about people. It affects people. It can save and destroy lives” (3). Ethical reading is part of ethical researching, writing, and living and rhetoric and composition scholars should be at the forefront of this work.

## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix I: Informed Consent Agreement**

Hi!

My name is Katie Manthey and I am a PhD candidate at Michigan State University, studying Rhetoric and Writing. I am currently working on a dissertation project that investigates how fat fashion bloggers make meaning through their dress practices, and I am looking for people to interview. In order to participate in this research, you must:

- be at least 18 years old,
- have an online space where you publically share images and text about what you wear,
- post at least once/week for the last six months, and
- write about your body from a weight-neutral stance (no weight loss or dieting recommendations).

Participation is completely voluntary—you are also free to change your mind and withdraw at anytime. Interviews will be done through Skype and recorded using Call Recorder (which records both audio and video) and should last no more than one hour. The questions will focus on your clothing choices, views on activism, and why you choose to share your everyday dress practices with the public. When we are done talking, the recordings will be stored on a password protected external drive in a locked office file cabinet for 5 years, after which point the data will be erased.

If you are interested in participating, you will have the option to choose a pseudonym (see below). If you choose a pseudonym your name will never appear in any write up or discussion of this work. I will also share the transcript of the interview with you so that you can help make sure that you are being represented in the way that you intend.

Every effort has been made by the researcher to eliminate the possibility of risk in this study.

If you are interested in participating in an interview, please fill out the section below and email it to [gunterka@msu.edu](mailto:gunterka@msu.edu).

Thanks!

Katie

### **Consent**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ Check here if you agree to participate in a 1-hour interview and to the researchers' use of the information you provide.

\_\_\_\_\_ Check here if you would like to use a pseudonym.

Please write the name you wish me to use for you:

Electronic Signature:

Date:

Print Your Name:

Phone Number: E-mail:

### **Contact Information for Questions & Concerns**

If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact Trixie Smith, director of the Michigan State University Writing Center, or Katie (Gunter) Manthey, Rhetoric & Writing, PhD Candidate at Michigan State University; Office: 5a Olds Hall; phone: 616- 795-5353; E-mails: [smit1254@msu.edu](mailto:smit1254@msu.edu), [gunterka@msu.edu](mailto:gunterka@msu.edu).

We would be happy to answer any questions you may have about this study and/or your participation in it. Please feel free to ask questions or express any concerns you may have at any time. Please keep the contact information provided below on hand for this purpose.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail [irb@msu.edu](mailto:irb@msu.edu) or regular mail at 408 W Circle Dr., Room 207, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.



## Appendix II: Interview Protocol and Questions

**A little bit about me (since I'm about to ask you a bunch of stuff about you)** In a previous part of my life I had a partner who thought that if a woman was “too big,” she could not be attractive. In the ten years that we were together, I gained almost 100 pounds. Within the context of our relationship, my ex would use shame as a motivator to get me to change my body and conform to his definition of beauty. While I internalized the shame, I didn't lose the weight: instead I started to look for ways to perform my definition of beauty. I started wearing neon pink tights and dresses even though showing my legs was taboo in our relationship. I started reading blogs where girls posted what they wore that day. I started posting my own pictures to Facebook and eventually Instagram and Tumblr. As my body got bigger, I started looking for blogs that reflected my own body and clothing became a way that I could take ownership of my body and feel pride in both my body and myself. I have been participating as a fat fashion blogger since 2011. As a PhD candidate in Rhetoric & Writing at Michigan State University, I have the opportunity to connect with other fat fashion bloggers for my dissertation research. I am interested in how fat fashion bloggers make meaning with their clothing in ways that are rhetorical, material, and embodied.

That's where you come in!

### Interview information and questions

Thanks again for being interested in participating in an interview. These interviews will take approximately one hour and will be conducted through Skype and recorded using Call Recorder (which records both video and audio). The file with the recording and eventual transcription) will be saved on a password-protected jump drive and locked in a file cabinet in my office. If you are interested, I would like to share the transcription of the interview with you before I use the data in my project to make sure that you are comfortable with the way that the information is presented.

#### Definitions

- *Plus size? Fat? Just blogger?*
- *Tell me about how you became a fat fashion blogger.*
- *Who are your favorite plus sized role models/bloggers? (Who inspires you?)*
- *What does fat fashion mean to you?*

#### What You Wear

- *Tell me about how you buy clothes (where do you go, what do you look for, etc)*
- *What do your clothes say about you?*
- *Let's discuss one outfit that you wrote about (do you have a favorite post)?*

### Blog Specific Questions

- *Have you experienced trolls/hate since becoming a fat fashion blogger? If so, how do you deal with this?*
- *Tell me about the risk involved in doing this sort of work*
- *Do you have any corporate sponsorship for your work? If so, how does this affect how you dress and how you represent yourself? If not, why not?*

### Ending Questions

- *Do you consider yourself an activist? Why or why not?*
- *Have you ever felt “fat shame”?*
- *What advice do you have for other fat women?*
- *Suggestions for other people I should talk to?*

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