

On the Plus Side: Understanding My Fatness

In late September I was shopping at a plus-size clothing store and because they were in the midst of spreading the word about their upcoming plus size model search, they gave me a flyer and urged me to apply. Initially, I was flattered and excited at the prospect of being a plus size model. I did not follow through with applying, though I watched the model search closely. I noticed that some of the online conversations around the models' appearance were incredibly offensive. One comment that was particularly off-putting (which is something I have faced for most of my plus-sized life) was the "what-a-shame-she-has-such-a-pretty-face" statement. What this statement implies is that a woman would be beautiful, but only if she weren't plus sized.

Ideal feminine beauty is a construct that we are taught to do whatever we can to fit into. One of the ways we see this is that in order for many people to see plus sized women as beautiful, there must be an aesthetically pleasing physical quality that allows them to look past the fat. Many people have the tendency of only accepting one difference at a time. For example if a woman is white, "beautiful," and fat it is easier to look past her fat, almost excusing it, because she fits into dominant categories of normality and only has one quality that deviates from the norm. However, if a woman is white, "beautiful," fat, and queer, it is far more difficult for people to neatly categorize both deviations. As a queer, fat woman I have experienced society's inability to understand and classify my body. I have been told that I am queer because I am fat and that I am fat because I am queer. There is the implication that my fatness and queerness are under my control and that I have the ability to change one or the other, or even both,

to better fit into the structures of normalcy. But I'm not queer because I am fat, and I am not fat because I am queer. I seek to trouble the cultural assumption that some fat women choose to be queer because they do not fulfill heterosexual standards of beauty, and therefore are unattractive to heterosexual men.

To challenge these social constructs and cultural assumptions, I like to define queer as the revolution of the non-normative. I use this definition to help me better understand how different non-normative elements of my person impact and influence one another. For me, queer is a revolution – it is my avenue to evoke change and challenge multiple oppressive structures such as the ideal of heterosexual feminine beauty in the context of body size. Therefore my fat is not considered normal, my fat is queer.

Being fat is not new for me. I have been fat my whole life. I used to say that I “struggled” with my weight, much like I “struggled” with my sexuality, which is the exact language that revolves around these non-normative topics. It was through understanding my queerness that I understand my fatness. I had to first “accept” my non-normative sexual orientation to then feel comfortable with a non-normative body type. Instead of using language that implies a negative outlook on my lived experience as a fat person, I now use language that celebrates and embraces my differences. It is so common to hear negative implications, guised insults or outright abuses when we talk about fatness. We avoid using the word “fat,” skirting around it by using words like plus size, curvy, voluptuous, and even the more clinical of terms: overweight and obese. These words aren't always in poor choice, but by avoiding the usage of “fat” we are not challenging the power the word has as an insult. We are not reclaiming it.

Throughout my life I have progressively gained weight. This was another aspect of my fatness that made me uncomfortable before understanding that my body is something to be celebrated. Of course gaining weight can come as something that may take adjustment, especially if you have never experienced fatness before. That struggle or adjustment should come as no surprise, because of the way that society has constructed feminine ideals of beauty. Many of us have not been equipped to handle changes in our bodies because those changes typically represent the negative.

The only tools we are often given are to diet, workout, and ultimately do this to abolish the fat. This rhetoric problematically serves to further construct unattainable ideals of feminine beauty, and continues to enforce the idea of fatness as undesirable and something that should provoke disgust and shame. Here shame is a strategic tool used for social control, wherein media, diet and exercise companies, and the fashion industry profit from convincing women that they should continuously strive for the ideal body.

Reflecting on the model search, I didn't reject the request to apply because of the above-mentioned reasons. Instead the model search forced me to think critically about how my non-normative body fits into society. For some seeing images of plus-size women in media may help some move away from feeling of shame and work toward body acceptance. However, others who have more than one quality that deviates from the normative ideal of feminine beauty may be subjected to question how our bodies fit in to societal expectations. I would argue that fitting in is not what we should be striving for. Instead we should be questioning these systems that oppress our bodies and seek to find ways in which we can challenge these systems. A friend of mine recently asked me: How, as a "bigger" female do I embody confidence and what are some tips for embracing

her new bigger body? I told her that it is important to understand that society makes fat women feel terrible about our bodies. So we should do our best to not allow that negativity to pile up, or dictate our self worth and how we live our lives. And we certainly should not have to excuse or apologize for our fatness or any other non-normative aspects of ourselves.