

Representing Fat Female Bodies: A Fat Studies Analysis of Selected Literary Texts

Jessica Murray

Summary

The representation of fat female bodies is a highly contested and fundamentally political activity through which a number of gendered discourses are inscribed on and perpetuated through the construction of fat female corporeality. Fat still tends to be regarded as an aberrational deviation from the “normal” female body with fat women being relegated to the margins of critiques of how women are represented in popular culture discourses. Yet the fear of fat works as effectively in disciplining women as actual fat does. Far from being a niche area of women’s lived experience, fat phobia works to shape the reality of all women in ways that are profoundly gendered. This article will utilise the theoretical rubric of Fat Studies to explore selected literary texts that offer very positive representations of fat female bodies. If all representation is inherently political, the positive representation of fat women, unfortunately, still continues to constitute a radical political act. I will show how, even as these authors portray fat women in a positive light, they always situate their bodies within socio-cultural spaces in which systemic fat phobia prevails. This article will thus demonstrate both the possibility of positive representation and the ubiquitous nature of the forces that challenge such representations. The novels I will explore are *Big Bones* by Laura Dockrill (2018), *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* by Mona Awad (2016) and *Dietland* by Sarai Walker (2015).

Opsomming

Die uitbeelding van vet vroulike lywe is ’n hoogs omstrede en fundamenteel politiese aktiwiteit waardeur verskeie gendered diskoerse ingeprent word op en in stand gehou word deur die konstruksie van vet vroulike lyflikheid. Vet word steeds beskou as ’n afwyking van die “normale” vroulike lyf en vet vroue word uitgeskuif tot die kantlyne van kritiek oor hoe vroue uitgebeeld word in gewilde kulturele diskoerse. Tog werk die vrees vir vet so effektief om vroue te dissiplineer soos werklike vet. Hierdie is nie ’n nishoekie van vroue se daaglikse lewenservarings nie. VETFobie vorm die werklikheid van alle vroue op maniere wat dieppliggend gendered is. Hierdie artikel sal die teoretiese raamwerk van Fat Studies gebruik om geselekteerde literêre tekste wat positiewe uitbeeldings van vet vroue bied, te ondersoek. Indien alle uitbeeldings inherent polities is, bly die positiewe uitbeelding van vroue, helaas, ’n radikale politiese aksie. Ek sal wys dat, selfs terwyl hierdie skrywers vet vroue op ’n positiewe wyse uitbeeld, hulle altyd hulle lywe plaas in sosio-kulturele ruimtes waar sistemiese vETFobie hoogty vier. Hierdie artikel sal dus beide die moontlikheid van positiewe

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uitbeeldings as die alomteenwoordige magte wat sulke uitbeeldings betwis demonstreer. Die romans wat ek sal ondersoek is *Big Bones* deur Laura Dockrill (2018), *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* deur Mona Awad (2016) en *Dietland* deur Sarai Walker (2015).

The representation of fat female bodies is a highly contested and fundamentally political activity through which a number of gendered discourses are inscribed on and perpetuated through the construction of fat female corporeality. Feminist literary scholars have long argued that representation is never neutral and that it never occurs in a vacuum. There is general consensus that representation matters a great deal. Although gender has become a well-established category of analysis and researchers pay close attention to the intricate ways in which gender intersects with other markers of difference, such as race, class, sexual orientation and ability, fat has often been neglected in explorations of textual representations. Fat still tends to be regarded as an aberrational deviation from the “normal” female body with fat women being relegated to the margins of critiques of how women are represented in popular culture discourses. Yet the fear of fat works as effectively in disciplining women as actual fat does. Far from being a niche area of women’s lived experience, fat phobia works to shape the reality of all women in ways that are profoundly gendered (see, for example, Cooper 2016; Rothblum & Solovay 2009). When feminist scholars gloss over denigratory representations of fat women, we are thus doing a disservice to all women and to the larger social justice mandate of placing gender equality front and centre in our feminist praxis. A number of familiar avoidance tactics can be observed in engagement with fat women and these include shaming and blaming the victims of discrimination.

Fat is still widely regarded as a symptom of a shamefully failed femininity and, despite mounting medical research evidence, fat women are blamed for their own victimisation (Chrisler 2012). The fat female body is such an obviously deviant body that social disciplining practices zone in on such bodies with unrelenting toxicity (Gailey 2014). The same feminists who would rush to the defence of women whose bodies are policed because of, for instance, their race or sexual expression, often fall silent in the face of this onslaught of abuse and even exacerbate it with inane references to health concerns and gluttony. This article maintains that women in general and fat women in particular deserve better and I argue that feminist literary scholars are certainly capable of doing better. By utilising the theoretical rubrics of fat studies, I will offer a close reading of the representation of fat female bodies in selected literary texts. I have selected texts where the authors identify either as fat women themselves or as fat allies and I will demonstrate how they construct their fat female characters to expose and challenge prevailing fat phobic stereotypes. Fat female characters, like fat women, need to enjoy the same analytical scrutiny that is afforded other female characters and this article seeks to contribute to such a larger project where fat activism and

academic fat studies collaborate to render the experiences of all women visible and to treat these experiences as valuable. Representation matters and fat women matter and this article will explore how representations of fat women can shed light on the ways in which the fear of fat is marshalled in the continuing discursive war on all women. In their introduction to one of the first and still most important anthologies of Fat Studies essays, *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel (2001: 1) offer the following articulation of the goal of their work, which I quote at length because it aligns so closely with this article's *raison d'être*:

One of our objectives, then, is unmasking the fat body, rendering it visible and present, rather than invisible and absent: seen, rather than unsightly. Clearly, this first objective demands a second: the unravelling of the discourses that have most intransigently defined and fixed fat bodies, nearly preventing the further interpretive analysis of and epistemological inquiry into corpulence and corpulent bodies.

According to the well-known fat activist, Jes Baker (2015: 55), the presentation of fat bodies in popular culture is severely limited and “[w]hen fat bodies *do* appear (significantly less often than slender bodies do) in television shows, movies, political comics, literature, and animation, they are consciously presented in highly curated ways, all of which are meant to initiate knee-jerk reactions”. She continues to argue that these constructions [of fat bodies] offer a limited way of processing fat people and none of the presentations are particularly positive” (Baker 2015: 55). Although even the most cursory glance at mainstream cultural products is enough to convince one that Baker’s arguments mostly continue to hold true, the reality is no longer as absolute as she suggests. This article will explore selected literary texts that do, in fact, offer very positive representations of fat female bodies. If all representation is inherently political, the positive representation of fat women, unfortunately, still continues to constitute a radical political act. I will show how, even as these authors portray fat women in a positive light, they always situate their bodies within socio-cultural spaces in which systemic fat phobia prevails. This article will thus demonstrate both the possibility of positive representation and the ubiquitous nature of the forces that challenge such representations. The novels I will explore, are *Big Bones* by Laura Dockrill (2018), *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* by Mona Awad (2016) and *Dietland* by Sarai Walker (2015).

In all three selected novels, the paratextual elements offer rich insight into the authors’ activist, and fundamentally gendered, imperative for writing. Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean (1991: 261) note that a text “rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions ... like an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations”. Genette uses the term “paratext” to describe such textual

additions, which can include dedications, epigraphs and acknowledgments. In the acknowledgements of *Big Bones*, Dockrill dedicates an entire paragraph to thanking a list of her favourite foods before ending with the following “And to little chubby teenage me: sorry I put you through hell. There was no need for that really” (Dockrill 2018: 392). This paratextual manoeuvre accomplishes a few things. First, it challenges prevailing notions of what is acceptable food for women in general and fat women in particular. By including items like “croissants ... chips, chocolate bread, cake ... pasta [and] cheese”, Dockrill signals her unambiguous rejection of diet culture. Second, her description of “Mum’s fish pie” and “Dad’s shepherd’s pie” (Dockrill 2018: 392) reveal that food is about much more than mere sustenance and that it plays an important role in socio-cultural relations and identity. Third, by referring to herself as a “chubby teenager”, she outs herself as fat and, finally, her reference to the “hell” she endured, makes it clear that the stakes are incredibly high for her. Sarai Walker (2015) dedicates *Dietland* to her “foremothers who didn’t always have a voice” and, in the acknowledgments, she notes that “[t]his book owes a debt to second-wave feminists, those women who changed the world in such a profound way” (310). Awad (2016) in turn, opts to precede her novel with the following epigraph from Margaret Atwood: “There was always that shadowy twin, thin when I was fat, fat when I was thin, myself in silvery negative, with dark teeth and shining white pupils glowing in the black sunlight of that other world”. These paratextual elements all signal that, for these authors, their literary explorations of fat go to the very heart of how they see themselves as woman and how they negotiate their places in the world.

In *Big Bones*, we encounter a teenage narrator, Bluebell or BB, who is told by a doctor to keep a food diary as an intervention to manage her weight. BB turns this into much more than a list of the foods she eats and offers wide ranging insight into and critique of the fat phobic stereotypes that seek to keep her small. Sandra Lee Bartky (1997: 95) makes the following point about the contingent and gendered pressure on women to contain the size of their bodies:

Styles of the female figure vary over time and across cultures: they reflect cultural obsessions and preoccupations in ways that are still poorly understood. Today, massiveness, power, or abundance in a woman’s body is met with distaste. The current body of fashion is taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation; it is a silhouette that seems more appropriate to an adolescent boy or newly pubescent girl than to an adult woman. Since ordinary women have normally quite different dimensions, they must of course diet.

When their mother makes an appointment for BB to see a doctor, the discussion she has with her younger sister, Dove, indicates that both young girls are already familiar enough with the medicalisation and concomitant

pathologisation of fat female bodies to know what is coming. BB says that “Dr Humphrey is going to tell me I’m fat” (2) but Dove quickly corrects her terminology by saying: “*Overweight*. They don’t say *fat* at the doctor’s”. In keeping with the tendency in contemporary fat activist movements, I will use the term “fat” in the rest of this article. I do so as part of a larger attempt to re-appropriate the word as a simple descriptive term without the negative connotations that have been heaped upon it by fat phobic social pressures. In another rejection of terms such as “obese” or “overweight” in favour of “fat”, Cecilia Hartley (2001: 71) provides works that “argue that the word *fat* should be reclaimed until pejorative connotations have been removed and the word no longer has wince-value”. BB and Dove then go on to offer quite an insightful critique of the much vaunted BMI chart which has become the standard for judging so-called healthy weight ranges in doctors’ offices around the world. Dove refers to it as “that stupid chart thing” while BB talks about “those nonsense BMI chart things”. Medical discourse is one of the most prominent and popularly persuasive of all the “discourses that have most intransigently defined and fixed fat bodies” (LeBresco & Braziel 2001: 1). This can be traced back to a number of factors, including some very basic misunderstandings of science, particularly of the difference between correlation and causation, as well as the economic power of pharmaceutical companies who have a vested interest in the medical vilification of fat. A closer look at the way in which supposed health concerns function to oppress fat people reveal intricate intersections of gendered, classed and racialised assumptions about women’s bodies. While it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the wealth of research critiquing the so-called “obesity epidemic”, suffice to say that “fat is by no means the universally unhealthy condition that it is usually represented to be” (Huff 2001: 47).

After dismissing the BMI chart as an indicator of her health, BB swiftly moves on to dismantle another commonly held stereotype about fat women, namely that they are infused with shame and thus eager to perpetuate their own oppression. When the nurse notes that “[m]ost girls normally hate getting on the scales”, BB reacts as follows: “I roll my eyes. No. I don’t mind getting on the scales because I’ve got nothing to hide, nothing to be embarrassed of and nothing to take me by surprise. I have a pair of eyes; I know my body” (4). This statement that BB offers with such apparent nonchalance is, in fact, radically subversive. She unambiguously rejects the avoidance and hiding that are associated with shame and she will not allow attempts to shame her or to alienate her from her body. Rather than abnegating power over her body to a medical professional, she firmly claims her right to this power with the assertion that she knows her own body. BB is well aware that she is the exception to the rule as she refuses to allow her mother to apologise for her fatness and proclaims “there’s nothing to be sorry for, I like food and I like how I look; that’s actually pretty rare for a girl my age” (7). BB rejects both the hysterical medical pathologisation of fat (that manifests in the public panic

over the growing “obesity epidemic”) and the “trope of the symptomatic fat body” (LeBesco & Braziel 2001: 3). According to this latter trope, the body is conceptualised “as a blank slate onto which the psyche’s contents are transcribed or written” (LeBesco & Braziel 2001: 4) and a large appetite and love of food are “interpreted as corporeal, exterior displacements of incorporeal, interior disorders” (3). In other words, it is assumed that someone is fat because they are eating to cope with their internal pain or they are using food to deal with unresolved food trauma. The notion that a woman can unapologetically own her appetite and her fat body seems to be too far-fetched to contemplate. Yet BB insists on just this. Her body is neither an epidemic nor a symptom. It is not a compromise or an issue that deserves limitless emotional energy to remedy. She thus begins the medically prescribed food diary as follows:

Yes, before you ask, I am fat.
Yes. I just called myself fat and that’s allowed.
And ...
I’m not greedy.
I just love food.
AND I’m not unhappy.
I just love food.
NO BIG DEAL.

The short sentences, single line paragraphs, italics, capitalisation and repetition all serve to emphasise her points. She is addressing both the doctor who she presumes will read this diary in an attempt to diagnose the medical problem of which her fat body is the symptom and the larger society that holds these fat phobic, and wholly inaccurate, beliefs as self-evident common knowledge.

The confidence with which BB embraces food and her body from the start of the novel is something that the main character in *Dietland*, Plum, needs to develop. When the reader first encounters her, she is infused with shame and she actively perpetuates her own oppression as she appears to have internalised fat phobia. She is a repeat customer of a weight loss group and she has scheduled weight loss surgery. According to Bartky (1997: 100),

[t]he disciplinary project of femininity is a “set-up”: it requires such radical and extensive measures of bodily transformation that virtually every woman who gives herself to it is destined in some degree to fail. Thus, a measure of shame is added to a woman’s sense that the body she inhabits is deficient: she ought to take better care of herself; she might after all have jogged that last mile.

Fat phobia plays neatly into this gendered shame and effectively convinces women that fat makes their already unacceptable bodies even more “deficient” and that this is their own fault because they have not tried hard

enough to lose weight. This vortex of shame occupies so much of a fat woman's emotional energy, in addition to time and financial resources, that she barely has a moment to step back and reflect on the extent to which she is being encouraged to participate actively in her own oppression and dehumanisation. The disciplinary power of fat shaming as a structuring force in Plum's life is apparent from the very first pages of the novel as she describes how she was "used to being stared at ... by people who looked at [her] with disgust as [she] went about [her] business in the neighbourhood" (Walker 2015: 4). She notes that she was "an object of ridicule" and that [p]eople stared at [her] wherever [she] went" (3). She constantly feels under surveillance and Walker explicitly uses the word "shame" to refer to Plum's experiences of negotiating her world in a fat female body. When Plum recalls a flight, she feared that the airline would not be able to accommodate her body and that she would "have to disembark in shame" (107) and Plum visualises her fear that her fat makes her unlovable as a "big black cloud of shame" (108).

Shame researchers have done a great deal of work in terms of exploring the gendered dynamics of shame and there is general consensus that shame functions to disempower, silence and isolate women (Norberg 2012; Mitchell 2012; Bouson 2009). In a scene that Plum observes in a café, Walker offers a particularly poignant representation of the ways in which shame causes women to shrink, turn away and thus effectively impedes the type of collective organising that is necessary to effect real political change. Plum observes a teenage girl who asks her mother whether she looks fat in a pair of shorts. The mother's reaction offers a wealth of insight into just why fat phobia remains such an ubiquitous instrument of social oppression: "You look fine, the mother reassured her. The mother was as fat as I was. When she saw me looking at her, she turned away" (126). The woman's reassurance to her daughter does nothing to challenge the prevailing social myth that a woman must, above all else, avoid looking fat. Rather, her assurance that the girl looks "fine" simply perpetuates the fat phobic stereotype that she is acceptable precisely because she does not look fat. Since her instinctive reaction is to turn away, shame prevents her from gaining strength from the gaze of a potential ally, Plum. When Plum "turned again to steal a glance at the girl's mother" the woman "was looking down at her hands, as if ashamed" (127).

In *Dietland*, the reader accompanies Plum as the fat phobic blinders finally come off and she realises that she can actually be an agent that defines and directs her own body and experiences. She realises that she is not doomed to keep playing a game of which the rules are ineluctably rigged against her. With this realisation comes profound insight into the misogynist nature of diet culture and fat shaming. In a series of footnotes detailing memoranda between the founder and managers of a weight loss company, Walker reveals both the manipulative nature of the diet industry and how it revolves around intense hostility to women. Women constitute its largest customer base yet women in

general and feminists in particular are regarded as its greatest enemy. One memorandum from a senior vice president of the company reads as follows:

Pursuant to our last meeting, those fat feminist cunts in Michigan with their “Love Your Body” bullshit are still chanting outside our clinic in Ann Arbor. This movement cannot be allowed to spread. We’ll counter them with our health jargon They won’t be able to refute our death stats with their feel-good crap. We might want to get a couple MD-for-hire types on the payroll to farm out to the media.

(Walker 2015: 57-58)

As fat activists have long been insisting, diet culture cares nothing about women’s health and health and wellness discourses have simply been co-opted by a deeply harmful industry to make their selling points more convincing. In a carefully researched monograph, Linda Bacon (2008: 125) succinctly exposes the intersection of fat phobia and popular understandings of health when she argues that “[n]o obesity myth is more potent than the one that says obesity kills. It gives us permission to call our fear of fat a health concern, rather than naming it as the cultural oppression it is”. The quality of women’s life experiences is no more important to them as they dismiss feeling good as “crap” that needs to be nipped in the bud before it adversely affects programme enrolment figure and thus profits.

At this stage of the novel, though, Plum still believes that the programme is her only hope for becoming thin and living a life of any value. When her weight loss group is unexpectedly closed down, she and the other members are distraught. She notices how the other “women milled around on the sidewalk, gaunt and dejected, probably on the verge of meltdowns but too weak for histrionics” (59). This description evokes a frightening image of women who are completely devoid of agency and are almost zombie like in their hunger for both food and something that will save them from the fat they seem to fear above all else. These women embody Naomi Wolf’s (1991: 187) argument that “[d]ieting is the most potent political sedative in history; a quietly mad population is a tractable one”. Wolf (1991: 187) is also clear about the patriarchal imperative that drives the diet industry when she notes that a “cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience”. Virgie Tovar (2018: 69) makes a similar point when she argues that “it’s not thinness that is being eroticized. What is being eroticized is the submission thinness represents in our culture. Thinness is a secondary characteristic. The true commodity is the willingness of women to acquiesce to cultural control”.

Walker’s (2015) characters offer reflections that reveal their understanding of these dynamics and the vested interest that patriarchal culture has in valorising thinness and equating it with beauty and desirability. One of Plums’s new friends, Marlowe, articulates this as follows: “A fuckable woman does not take up space. Fuckable women are controlled Fat women

are not controlled. They are defiant, so they are unfuckable” (Walker 205: 144). Plum knows intuitively that her efforts at weight loss are loaded and that “this wasn’t just a *diet*, that everything in [her] future ... depended on it” and amongst these very concrete consequences was her chances of finding a romantic partner: “If I was fat, no one would want to marry me” (53). These social pressures help one to understand why a character who is obviously as smart and competent as Plum would spend so much of her life willingly submitting to what effectively constitutes her own dehumanisation. It is clear that her diet group, which is emblematic of diet culture at large, operates by infantilising and disempowering women. One memorandum makes this strategy explicit: “I cannot empathize enough the importance of using moral terms when talking about dieting to our clients and the media When [women] lose weight, they’re ‘good’, when they stray from the plan, they’re ‘bad’” (53). Early in the novel, Plum is so deeply enmeshed in this way of thinking that she ignores the most blatant signals from her body, as when she recalls that her “hands were still slightly trembly from hunger, but [she] would be good and not eat anything more” (16). Even when Plum is “too weak to even speak” (51), sleeps a disproportionate amount of time because she finds that “being awake was torturous” (53) and sees her “drain filled with clumps of [her] hair”, she regards herself as doing well because she “was good for a whole month and lost twenty-nine pounds” (53).

When Plum finally starts seeing the diet industry and fat phobic society for what it is, she goes through a type of detoxification and anti-brainwashing programme that enables her to redirect blame and her anger. During an earlier weigh in at her weight loss group, Plum reacts to the inevitable regaining of the weight by angrily blaming herself and the stakes could not be higher: “All the suffering I’d endured was for nothing and the new life I’d envisioned was slipping away, all because I was a pig. I resolved to do better [by sticking to her diet]” (58). In the footnotes detailing the internal company memoranda, however, it is clear that this is exactly how the diet programme is supposed to work. The note from the senior vice president makes it clear that a “diet that produces slow and steady weight loss will not hook consumers” and that the aim should be a ridiculously low daily calorie intake which will result in people losing a “significant amount of weight in the first few weeks [sic] and becom[ing] addicted to the high of dropping pounds. When they fail to keep up this momentum, they’ll only blame themselves” (51). The group of women who eventually help Plum to escape this toxic involvement with diet culture encourages her to “direct [her] anger where it belongs, not at [her]self” (197). The appropriate target for her anger is a fat phobic and the profoundly misogynist society that spawned the diet industry in the first place.

In *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*, the main character, Lizzie, starts the novel quite unable to negotiate the gendered pressure to be beautiful (read thin) and what it means to have a meaningful life as a woman and her anger, while simmering in the background of her mind, remains undirected. She

reflects: “Later on I’m going to be really fucking beautiful. I’m going to grow into that nose and develop an eating disorder. I’ll be hungry and angry all my life but I’ll also have one hell of a time” (Awad 2016: 7). In her conversations with her best friend, Mel, Lizzie reveals extensive internalisation of the stereotypes about fat women and she regards being fat as the worst fate that could possibly befall a woman. The fat girl is desperate, lonely and an object of pity. The repeated use of the phrase “the fat girl” is meaningful here since it suggests how this is a construction that is devoid of agency and differentiation. The “fat girl” has been dehumanised and dismissed to such an extent that she is an example of some grotesque monolith rather than an individual. They note that the “fat girl is always home” and she is always “ridiculously happy to hear from you” (12), since, presumably she has no social life and is grateful for any recognition of her existence. Awad’s representation of the casually cruel and callous way in which Mel and Lizzie articulate these fat phobic assumptions set the scene for the rest of the novel and help the reader to understand why, for Lizzie, no price seems too high to pay to attain thinness.

Lizzie’s fat phobia shapes all her relationships in the novel, ranging from those with romantic partners to her fraught interactions with her mother. At the beginning of the novel, she starts chatting to a man on the internet but she is terrified of sending him a photograph of herself because she does not want him to see that she is fat. Her connection with her mother is shaped by her contempt for her mother’s fat body. When she looks at her mother, she “sees a fat, middle-aged woman with a heart condition ...” (34) who is lonely because, in Lizzie’s mind, her romantic options are limited because she is fat. The most profoundly compromised relationship, however, is the one Lizzie has with her own body and she admits: “I never look at my body if I can help it” (34). Even Lizzie’s most basic choices are structured around being a “good” fat girl or, in other words, one that does not draw attention to her aberrant body and is very visibly actively attempting to change it. The limitations imposed by being a semi acceptable fat body in public spaces range from something as seemingly banal as what she can eat (“[n]ever the doughnuts because we agree that a fat girl with a doughnut is too sad a thing” 41-42), what she can wear (sweaters that “no self-respecting fat woman would ever purchase” 62) to how much of any particular food she can eat (this is subject to the most stringent control and, for instance, she allows herself “fifteen raw, unsalted almonds” 73). At the heart of all these choices there lurks the type of shame that also emerged in a close reading of Plum’s experiences. Here Awad seems to buy into the fat phobic assumptions that she is trying to expose as she perpetuates the myth that the fat body is a symptom of some unresolved trauma, usually from childhood. Lizzie describes a photograph of herself as a young girl as follows: “... the ones taken before he [her father] left and before I grew up heavy like my mother, I’m looking right

at the camera. It might have been the last time I looked right into a lens and smiled with no reservation, with no shame” (Awad 2016: 86).

BB, Plum and Lizzie are never allowed to forget that their fat female bodies constitute an unacceptable offense in a society where gendered fat phobia is both structural and systemic. While BB represents the closest approximation of an individual who embraces her fat body, she is under no illusion that there is a price to pay and it exacts considerable emotional resources. Her sister tells her that she “talks about fatness quite a lot for somebody that doesn’t care about being fat” (Dockrill 2018: 67) but BB is quick to explain how little choice she has in the matter. She tells her sister that her career options are severely curtailed because “people don’t like putting a fat person in a position of power” (68) and she compares fatness to other vices like gambling, smoking or cheating. Those things, however, give one more room to manoeuvre because “you don’t have to wear it on your body, but as far as the world’s concerned, I *wear* my addiction, my vulnerability. I’m decorated in my weakness ...” (68). Unlike Plum and Lizzie, BB always seems aware that the problem lies not with her but with a society that constructs fat female bodies as deviant and inferior. It is only towards the end of the novel that Plum becomes able to embrace her fat body and the process of getting to this point was torturous and traumatic. She expresses gratitude for the “expanse of flesh” (289) that is her stomach. For Lizzie, much of the novel is dedicated to her search for “a solution to the problem of [her] flesh” (91) and she describes how her “wide slash of bared stomach feels like an emergency no one is attending to ...” (92). She and the other female characters spend the bulk of their emotional, financial and time resources engaging in various diets and exercise programmes in an attempt to “triumph over the ineptitudes of the flesh” (189). So-called success is closely aligned with an adversarial relationship with the body, from which women remain alienated as long as they prioritise weight loss efforts and perpetuate the misogynist, fat phobic assumptions about female bodies that they are taught. A friend of Lizzie’s encapsulates this corporeal engagement with the body when she explains that a successful exercise regime is dependent on the following: “Your body needs to be surprised. Attacked. Always. You’ve got to shock your system constantly” (210-211).

This article has explored how three contemporary novels represent the pressures that fat female bodies face in a fat phobic society that shames and denigrates them to such an extent that extreme measures to discipline and contain their fat bodies appear to be viable, reasonable options. I argue that literature has the capacity to open up imaginative spaces where we can confront and challenge oppressive social dynamics as a first and crucial step towards imagining a different, more just reality. Fat phobia is a particularly pernicious form of bigotry and oppression and it has remained under-scrutinised for far too long. Feminist scholars cannot be allowed to assume that they are working towards gender justice when they willingly overlook the

fat phobic dynamics that function to keep all women afraid of and alienated from their own bodies and its appetites. When women are weak from hunger, spending their time counting out almonds and saving their money for dangerous weight loss surgery, we cannot possibly believe that the stereotypes and assumptions, facilitating an environment where these activities are considered to be normal, commonplace examples of women's lived experience, are neutral. Rather, they are part of a larger, gendered agenda to keep women small, shamed and silenced. Fat activists and scholars are leading the way in exposing this latest weapon in the ongoing war against women.

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Jessica Murray
Unisa
murray@unisa.ac.za