Fat Studies and Arts-Based Approaches: Positioning the Need for “Movement”

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Abstract

Fat studies is a field of study that provides critiques and disrupts western biomedical assumptions about fatness. Various methodologies are taken up within the field of fat studies; however, arts-based methods offer unique and distinct methodological insights to the field. Addressing these important intersections, this methodological paper illuminates three broad arts-based research methods used in fat studies and how these methods highlight important themes of disruption, space, and temporalities. In particular, the importance of temporalities and time captured paper through arts-based methods covered are noteworthy. In the space of fat temporality, we end with a critical invitation for fat studies and arts-based scholars to innovate work using the method of performance art, specifically how performance can facilitate unique insights to create new knowledge at the intersection of fat studies and arts-based research.

Keywords

arts-based methods, social justice, performance based methods, methods in qualitative inquiry, critical theory

Introduction

The field of fat studies is a well-grounded body of scholarship that disrupts ideas about fatness, explores intersectionalities, troubles obesity discourses, and situates the need for a critical perspective of fatness (Pausé & Taylor, 2021). Although fat studies are taken up utilizing a broad range of methodologies, there is room for additional exploration using arts-based approaches. As fat studies continue as a critical field, a close examination of the importance of performative and movement-based methods is critical. In this article, we explore arts-based approaches taken up by fat activists, academics, and artists. It is imperative to explore both topics and methods used in fat studies to understand the ways in which the field is moving within the realm of arts-based approaches. We end this article with suggested innovations for the field of fat studies within arts-based research and how to continue the work at these important intersections.

Brief History of Fat Studies

Fat studies diverges from other fields of study and discourses that explore fatness. Cooper (2010) highlights that fat studies differs from biomedical dominant obesity discourses as it expands beyond narrowing fatness thorough the confines of medicalization, rather it incorporates a critical social model that moves away from fatness as pathology. Fat studies largely rejects that Body Mass Index represents the function of bodies and rather defines fat as subjective, fluid, shared experience amongst those in fat bodies (Cooper, 2010). In other words, where medical obesity discourses position fatness as a threat, fat studies expand beyond to focus on the political, social, cultural, and historical ways fatness and fat people are treated. We use the word “fat” as a neutral descriptor within the realm of fat studies, similar to the use of the word “thin” to describe small bodies.

In fat studies, the role of fatness in scholars and is an important consideration for our writing in this piece. Manokaran, Pausé, Roßmöller, and Vilhjálmssdóttir argue that “fat epistemology recognizes that the best knowers about fatness are fat people” (p. 2, 2020). At the same time, there is a call for allies outside of fat people to create new theoretical and empirical knowledge about

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fatness (Manokaran et al., 2020). I (CAH) live in a fat body which informs my passion for fat studies and commitment to theorizing outside a biomedical model of fatness. My (KCS) relationship to the topic is informed by a social model lens, two decades of work in critical disability studies and my commitment to different forms of knowing.

Fat studies sits within a critical paradigm and is related to other fields such as Feminist/Gender Studies, Mad studies, Queer studies, Aging Studies, and Disability Studies (Rinaldi et al., 2020). Scholarship within fat studies also explores intersections of power relations within the realm of fatness. For example, colonialism (Robinson, 2020), black fat activism (Farrell, 2020), heteronormativity (Pendleton Jiménez, 2020), and disability (Bahra & Overboe, 2020). There are various debates within fat studies about the exploration of other power relations (Rinaldi et al., 2020), but at times there are critiques of centering primarily privileged identities within the field, while ignoring experiences and power outside of fatness. However, fat studies is a field that employs a variety of methodologies to capture the experiences of fatness. The distinct position outside a biomedical understanding of fat creates a unique discipline to tell stories and re-story fatness in relation to both personal and structural issues. Given the critical and transformative nature of fat studies, we chose to review articles that utilize arts-based methods to highlight the distinct experiences at the intersection of fatness and the arts.

**Arts-Based Methods**

Arts-based research is an approach to creating knowledge that combines the creative arts within research (Leavy, 2018). Methods used in arts-based research can include a/r/tography, performance, poetic inquiry, visual methods, multimedia, and more. Arts-based research and methods are particularly relevant for exploring and theorizing about connections between individuals and the larger systems that impact their lives (Leavy, 2018). Given that fat studies interrogate the social, political, and historical constructs of fatness, arts-based methods are well-suited to explore connections between micro and macro structures that capture historical and contemporary stories about fatness.

There are various aspects of arts-based methods that can advance the field of fat studies. For example, arts-based methods provide new insights, capture complex social life, can be emotionally and politically evocative, unsettle stereotypes, and value multiple ways of knowing and experiencing (Leavy, 2018). Arts-based methods may offer unique insights to highlighting the hate, stigma, and pathology that is directed at and experienced by fat bodies. Given the connections between arts-based research and fat studies, scholars and artists have utilized methods to explore, capture, and theorize various personal, political, and structural elements that create environments where anti-fatness and fat hatred thrive (Dark, 2019; Douglas et al., 2020; Gurrieri, 2013; Lupton, 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Pratt, 2018; Snider, 2012; Sweet, 2014). It is vital to explore works by those who use arts-based methods in the field of fat studies to examine how methods capture important insights within the field both methodologically and topically.

**Arts-Based Methods Within Fat Studies**

The articles we explore in this paper were found using databases and hand-searching. We first used databases EBSCO and PSYCYNO. These databases were used due to the relevant disciplines and journals indexed. We used the following key words in our search “fat studies,” “anti-fatness,” “fat—acceptance,” “arts-based research,” “arts-research,” “arts,” and “arts-based methods.” We included a temporal timeline from January 1, 2000 to April 30, 2021. After the initial search, we went specifically to the journal of Fat Studies to see if our search through the databases missed any seminal articles because it is the only dedicated journal for the field of fat studies. After, we hand searched for articles through reference lists as well as formative authors within fat studies. We include the articles below as they offer unique insights to the field of fat studies using arts-based methods. As much as the insights from each article is noteworthy, the importance of each method is critical to the intersection of arts-based research and fat studies.

The three broad arts-based methods described in this paper have been used and implemented by a variety of activists, fat activists, and scholars. These methods use various artistic expression to capture insights within the field of fat studies. The methods explored in this paper are included for several reasons. For some methods, they have been taken up by various fat activists and scholars and are more common within the field (Dark, 2019; Douglas et al., 2020; Gurrieri, 2013; Lupton, 2017; Snider, 2012). We also chose to include methods that may be less common within the field of fat studies; however, they are incorporated because they bring forward a distinct perspective (Mitchell, 2018; Pratt, 2018; Sweet, 2014). Prior to discussing each arts-based method, we discuss temporalities as our guiding theoretical framework for this piece. As we highlight below, the focus on temporalities is key to consider at the important junction of fatness and arts-based research.

**Temporalities, Fatness, and Arts-Based Research**

Fat time and temporalities is discussed by various activists and scholars who posit the question of who has a desirable future and the relationship between fat and the social construction of time (Tidgwell et al., 2018). In our theorizing, we consider how fat people are captured by mainstream depictions because fatness is often presented as an undesirable present and nonexistent future through discourse, images, and societal beliefs. In the western contemporary context, fat bodies are rarely given space to move; the expectation is to be static, taking up the least space as possible and existing as a cautionary tale through many conventional visuals. A common example how fat bodies are presented visually since the onset of the “obesity epidemic” is the headless fatty. The headless fatty is usually a
picture of a fat person, from the neck down, with a focus on their torso, arms, legs, and ankles (Cooper, 2010). These visuals are used in ways to educate about the dangers of “obesity” and are often taken of people without their consent. The headless fatty is part of the symbolic annihilation that works to suppress the existence and realities of fat people (Pratt, 2018). The fat body as altered to the headless fatty is an attempt to represent fatness without a desirable present or future. Similarly fat temporaliies through the “before and after” photo highlight the non-existent future given to fat bodies, because the fat body is the before. As fat bodies are positioned as a before, undesirable, with the expectation of change, there are limited futures represented by mainstream depictions. Furthermore, bodies that do not align with a valued future are discarded. Within many portrayals of fatness exists a limited future that is desirable for fat bodies because they are located to the past. In addition to fat studies, our theorizing on temporaliies and fat bodies is highly drawn from queer theory, particularly Muñoz (2009) who argues that we must imagine and vision new futures and new worlds outside of the current quagmire.

Temporalities and fat time are considerably noteworthy with our exploration of arts-based research and fat studies. It is our hope that illustrating fat time captured through arts-based research creates ideas and innovations for scholars to consider in future research. In what follows is our examination and theorizing of each arts-based method taken up in fat studies and how each method captures fat time. We begin by discussing the method, how it has been taken up within fat studies, and what these methods can tell us broadly about the intersection between fat studies and arts-based research. We start first with performance art, then transition to visual methodologies, and finish with crafting which all capture fat time in distinct ways.

Performance Art
Performance art in research is challenging to define. Gergen and Gergen (2018) characterize the artform by the ways it calls attention to how arts are performed, serves in a way to change worlds, and how researchers carry out their inquiry. Although performance art can take varied forms in the field of fat studies, a few distinct pieces provide insight to the method. Artist, Cindy Baker uses multiple methods of performance art that intersect fat studies. For example, Cindy Baker has organized fat fashion shows that challenge the audience to think about a fat body in relation to fashion, which is often described as societies rules and standards about appearance (Snider, 2012). Cindy Baker has also performed in a soft cloth and foam mascot while she frequents festivals and other events (Snider, 2012). Although wearing this mascot and engaging in performance art, she is not repulsive to the audience, rather she is embraced (Snider, 2012). It is important to capture this time where the public embraces fatness with happiness, because elsewhere fatness is generally marked with fear and disgust. In Baker’s performance, when she takes away the human aspect of fat, onlookers seem comfortable and perhaps comforted by inhuman fatness. The audience does not see the flesh, rolls, and marks, rather they see a smooth and digestible costume that is universally lovable because it represents a non-human character, rather than what it means to be fat.

Performance art in the form of plays also provides insight to fat time and fat studies more broadly. Dark explores how the function of performance art through movement, such as plays is essential because “the fat body in movement is seen as a travesty” (p. 304, 2019). In her play “Things I learned from fat people on planes,” Dark (2019) provides prominent examples of the site of discrimination of fatness, rather than body size more generally. Dark provides a concrete example of difference in treatment of her fat body and a tall overtly muscular man and traces how he is both perceived and treated differently (2019). Dark remarks how this man’s seatmate is not disturbed by him outgrowing the space, nor do the flight attendants react, rather he is admired for the way his muscular frame takes up space. Although of course both bodies exist and bump up against space and time designed for thinness, there is marked difference in perception and treatment. The observation of health and fitness is attached to the muscular man where assumed inactivity, poor health status, and gendered assumptions are placed on Dark as a fat woman. In this example, only certain bodies are allowed to take up the space. Movement in this play through performance art in this example by Dark (2019) disrupts enforced stillness, which is often required of fat people to not draw attention to the ways fat bodies take up space.

There are often expectations for fat people when navigating spaces to become still and unmoving, both in ways to try and minimize their fatness but also not to take up space or disrupt the comfort of others (Dark, 2019; Rinaldi et al., 2019). The expectation of enforced stillness (Dark, 2019) is a requirement of fat people, because to move and exist with flesh is not desirable. Rather, there are expectations of assumed immobility and undesired flesh that is attached to the movement of fat bodies. Therefore, there is an invitation to focus on movement in fat studies by disrupting enforced stillness and assumed immobility. Performance art offers a method for capturing and telling stories in a way that the method itself is moving and disrupting ideas of fatness and temporality that regulates fat bodies to the past.

Visual Methodologies
Arts-based visual methodologies encompass a wide variety of methods including photographs, cartoons, maps, videos, films, symbols, and more (Holm et al., 2018). Visuals are important arts-based methods to capture fat time, temporalities, and bodies that do not conform to normative standards. Snider (2012) highlights various visual pieces, such as photographs of fat queer femmes, queer, fat families, and fat women wearing bold, fun, color-often highlighting that fatness and fashion are positioned as mutually exclusive. The photographs...
of queer fat families also provide a disruption of thin realities of exclusionary happiness and belonging in family. Along similar lines, Gurrieri argues visual representations and artwork of fat people are crucial (2013). For example, the stocky bodies virtual library has everyday photos, but from the experience of fat people, walking, shopping, and engaging in the world. The experience of everyday activities is taken away from fat people in the media with images, such as the headless fatty (Cooper, 2010) that are unrelatable as they are not marked as human, rather a piece of flesh. Using visuals, fat bodies are taken out of the margins and upheld as bodies that count (Gurrieri, 2013).

Lupton traces how changes in digital media have shifted the visuals produced and engaged in the realm of fat embodiment (2017). Changes in digital media have allowed people of various bodies to consume media and produce it. The visual content produced in digital media can be deconstructed to understand how it reproduces norms, moral values, and assumptions about body weight, shape, and size. Lupton (2017) highlights the variety of spaces online within different social media platforms that represent fat bodies as desirable and desired. Fat bodies are becoming and already part of this sphere and there is power in the movement to be able to produce and consume positive, affirming images of fat bodies in digital spaces.

Using multimedia storytelling, Douglas et al. (2020) highlights that to live in ways that are embodying fatness or illness while resisting medical intervention is often categorized as undesirable. Douglas et al. describe their use of multimedia storytelling to include a variety of visual media forms that emphasize the raw experience of participants who craft their stories (2020). In their article, the use of multimedia storytelling illustrates how beliefs about resistance against a biomedical intervention while embodying fatness implores that the intervention itself is reliant on diminishing body size (Douglas et al., 2020). Reliance on medical interventions for investment in a successful or worthy future inevitably aims to reduce or ameliorate fatness which sets up the fat body without a desired present or future. The use of multimedia storytelling captures various experiences and invites audience to “re-embody theory through body becoming” (Douglas et al., 2020, p. 407). In other words, multimedia storytelling invites the audience to experience alternative discourses about bodies and how they become through time.

**Historical Visuals**

The analysis of historical visuals and archives offer a unique temporality to explore fatness. Analyzing historical images as a visual method is beneficial as it can explore how famous historical artworks and archives help shape discourse (Stafford et al., 1989) in this case about fatness and fat. For example, Sweet argues that positioning and analyzing historical images, such as the “Rubenesque” body as a normative acceptable esthetic of a fat body displaces the possibility of a desired present by focusing on past works that offer a narrow view of fat bodies (2014). Analyzing historical images, like Rubens’s art privileges fantasies about past values of fat people, over contemporary reality which limits nuanced conversations about how fatness intersects with race, gender, and ability. Further, focusing on nostalgic historical images may not support imagining a fat future, rather centers a narrow acceptance of fat bodies in the past. This is echoed by Machado (2017) who suggests that fat histories are often removed from the contemporary and relegated to ancient histories, where the value of fat is unknown.

Examining historical images, such as the Rubenesque body relies on imagined pasts of fat bodies and fat acceptance which does little for a desired fat future. Along similar lines, historical archives as a method for highlighting fat pasts, current realities, and futures was utilized by Pratt (2018) who argues historical archives created by dominant groups can portray fat people in various cultural tropes. Rather, contemporary archives created by fat people can shape collective memory of the pasts instead of archivists deciding what is displayed. Furthermore, creating a contemporary archive is a form of memory justice where marginalized people can construct their stories about the past (Pratt, 2018).

Historical visuals and archives offer distinct insights to fat time. The focus on past visuals with misguided interpretations of acceptance has the potential to stall and limit future realities of fat. The reliance on past visuals to depict acceptance of fatness, like the Rubenesque body have the potential to transport the problematic assumption of a so-called desirable past. We include historically set visuals, archives, and associated analysis within broad visual methodologies because they have the potential to provide a snapshot, though limited into past depictions of bodies. However, much like Sweet (2014) we argue the focus on the past does little to create a desirable fat future, rather it destabilizes it.

**Crafting**

In their seminal piece, Mitchell (2018) explores and reveals how crafting as a form of research requires examination within the field of fat studies. Mitchell highlights how craft relies on the experiential as method and can investigate the temporalities of fat (2018). Further, craft resists what is put onto fat bodies, for example, the expected investment in diet culture, movement as a form of weight-loss, and overall wellness culture. The process of sitting, making, and crafting can be seen as a resistance against wellness culture as it is slow, opposing the demands of productivity and capitalism (Mitchell, 2018). Wellness culture demands the fat body cannot exist in the present or future and to be considered worthy, fatness must be ameliorated. The fat body is never desirable, nor has expectations of being as there is constant attempts to be removed from the present and future.

Mitchell uses craft as a resistance to wellness culture and capitalism, which exploit expectations that fat bodies are undesirable and under a constant state of threat (2018). Engaging in craft is slow, meaning making, and sits in temporality where...
the fat body can exist and thrive. More conversations are needed to situate craft as a method utilized within fat studies as it provides a method that counters discourses about expectations of movement to decrease fatness and a distinct way of knowing and creating.

Summary of Methods

The various arts-based methods taken up in fat studies reveal insights about the importance of visuals, movement, crafting, and history to move into a future of desired fatness. Importantly, the authors highlight a fat futurity where fat is accepted, desired, and can move through space. Themes of resistance, disruption, challenge, and futurity are meaningful captured by the arts-based pieces covered. Performance art was used as a mechanism to disrupt ideas about fashion, everyday experiences, family, and enforced stillness (Dark, 2019; Snider, 2012). Performance and movement interrupt expectations of fat, static, and still bodies, creating a medium where fat bodies exist in the present. Along similar lines, visual artwork is imperative as a method to disrupt thin ideals within and outside media, capture everyday life, and combat the cropped and headless photos that portray fat people as a threat. The archival and historical visuals can document desirable past, however, to rely on historical accounts of fat bodies destabilizes the possibility of fat futurity (Pratt, 2018; Sweet, 2014). Lastly, making art in the form of queer craft can serve as a resistance to wellness culture that is placed on fat people to engage with, but through the guise of erasing a fat future.

Discussion

The arts-based approaches we reviewed within fat studies offer implications for the future of this important intersection of work. However, we argue that methodologies that focus on movement such as performance art and performative inquiry are uniquely suited to capture fat time and temporalities in the field of fat studies. As we will outline below, we believe that movement-based methods are crucial for fat artists, activists, and scholars to consider for the future of fat studies.

Performance and movement have the potential to invigorate the field of fat studies in several noteworthy ways. Particularly, the concept of enforced stillness is implicated on fat bodies. Fat people are often forced or at least assumed to be still, both unable to move or fear if they are seen dancing, exercising, or existing in everyday activities (Dark, 2019). Performance as a method can tell stories within fat studies to disrupt enforced stillness. Movement through performance could take up various forms, either through dance, acting, or a combination of methods focused on moving the body. Moving the body as a method of telling stories creates fat time, where the body can move with flesh, hold on to space, and create temporalities where fatness is desired. Regardless of the content within fat studies, performance that involves movement as a methodology is an innovative method to disrupt the idea that fat bodies are still and unmoving.

Performance as a method can capture a desirable present and imagine a fat futurity. Methods such as analyzing historical archives or creating a contemporary archive are of relevance and important to highlight a proposed future that desires fatness. However, the static nature of such arts-based approaches may not capture a fat body in motion with the flesh which is often pathologized. Although it is important to document the present through methods like archives, photography, and craft, movement creates a temporality to emphasize the way a fat body moves, takes up space, while resisting wellness culture and interventions as an attempt to limit a fat future. Fat bodies that perform, move, and disrupt ideals of thinness, ability, and normative desires shift the expectation of reliance on pedagogies (Lind et al., 2018) to secure a respectable and desirable future. Moving and performing in a fat body is a refusal of reproducing wellness norms that situate health and wellbeing in direct relationship to thinness.

Fat bodies existing and performing also challenge ideas of desirability and how flesh takes up space. Particularly, performance and movement can destabilize tropes of what is portrayed as fat, notably the headless fatty in contemporary mainstream static visuals (Cooper, 2010). Visuals that are static and unmoving in nature can be edited and cropped to take away the human part of flesh. As Gurrieri notes in their image library, it is imperative to create images that “put the heads back on fat bodies and show their entirety in full length shots to negate this dehumanization” (pg. 204, 2013). With the focus on performance as a method, fat temporalities are transported, held in the present where fatness is moved through a full body with flesh in ways that combat headless portrayals of fatness that attempt to destabilize a fat future.

The method of performance considers the importance of who is the audience, what responses are hoped to achieve, why responses are important, and what audiences may be excluded (Gergen & Gergen, 2018). Performance as a method within and outside fat studies invites the audience to shift perspective from what they are watching or consuming. In her play “Things I learned from fat people on planes,” Dark notes that the audience express remorse at their anti-fat bias through stories told in the play and the audience considers past and future ways of relating to fat people (2019). Performance can be a bold and profound method to convey important stories and nuances within fat studies to move both the field and the audiences who observe this work.

As well, the method of performance is closely tied to social justice and addressing structural issues. Performative methods are well aligned to highlight issues of inequities and injustices (Gergen & Gergen, 2018) as stories of people often held in margins can be told. Furthermore, performance can be used as form of initial social action. Fat studies and performance are well aligned for social action as fat studies aims to shift attention to structural and political forces that create harm for fat bodies. It has been argued that bodies within performance are...
inherently political, and bodies know how power functions, explores, and exposes it, while welcoming the opportunity to subvert or topple power to work towards social justice (Pelias, 2008). The body and movement in performance recognize and subvert power both to see the body in motion and recognize the body as a site of active resistance against powers that render fat bodies without a desired future. The orientation of performance also carries a crucial factor to consider in the realm of fat studies. Performance asks the audience to suspend their beliefs, imagine different current realities and futures (Gergen & Gergen, 2018) to create alternative and desirable ways of embodiment and living and move past the visual static.

Performance art as a method is particularly relevant for moving the field of fat studies when we imagine fat temporalities. A ponderance within fat studies that remains is who is considered to have a futurity, one that holds fatness as desired, rather than held as a place of fear or relegation to the margins (Tidgwell et al., 2018). Looking to the past representations of fatness, while relevant does not hold the prospect of future in the present, rather it destabilizes the opportunity for fat time and temporalities. Performance art as a method may create invitations to imagine fat futurity and simultaneously hold present fat time as desirable. Without movement focused methods like performance, fatness may be relegated to the past.

**Conclusion**

Tracing various fat studies articles that utilize arts-based research, we covered a variety of methods relevant within the field of fat studies. The focus on temporality provides insights to the field of fat studies and the powers of arts-based methods to tell stories of fat time. By exploring how various arts-based methods including performance art, visual methodologies, and crafting, it is apparent that these methods work well for various topics within fat studies and concomitantly have key methodological insights.

Although we largely argue the importance of fat studies within arts-based research, our insights also have implications for qualitative research broadly. As Leavy (2018) argues, qualitative and arts-based research are similar as both employ the researcher as the instrument, they can be viewed as crafts, and both practices involve deep reflection and creativity in the research process. Our summary of arts-based methods may initiate innovation from qualitative researchers who are also artists or who are interested to use these approaches to convey different implications not possible within strictly qualitative research. In addition, some qualitative researchers may be interested in using methods such as performance art as a powerful method of dissemination in their qualitative studies to invoke new meanings of their results and transport them to a new space imagined through the arts.

However, there are several limitations within our summary and articulations. Many of the pieces covered are from predominately western lenses and not all consider pre-colonial understandings of fatness. As well, our perspective focuses on the fat body, and we do not explore the intersection other identities. To expand on this work, it is imperative to explore and identify other intersections of power outside of fat and the importance for the performative method. Yet, as we argue, performance and movement focused methods can bring important insights to the field of fat studies by imagining desired futures, disrupting enforced stillness, and desiring present realities.

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