

Weighty Speech: Addressing Body Size in the Classroom

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The politics of body size has been the topic of intriguing feminist work. Although in my view this issue is still undertheorized, I have long sought for a way to bring what *does* exist in the literature into my academic activities. The opportunity arose when, as a graduate student at the University of Michigan in 2001, I taught an undergraduate mini-course (seven weeks for two weekly hours) in the women's studies program, which I named *Weight as a Cultural Question*.

Weight norms and body-shaping practices were the focus of the class. My aim was to give students tools with which to question Western societies' ways of seeing (and evaluating) body size. In exploring the privileged status of slim and fit bodies, I sought to move away from the "purely aesthetic" or the "merely health-related" explanatory frameworks, toward explanations that included the role of ideology and of power relations in stratified societies. The syllabus included, for example, cultural and historically specific analyses of eating disorders, aimed at challenging trans-historical biological models (Brumberg 2000; MacSween 1993; Brown 1993; Malson 1998). We also examined the usefulness of such Foucauldian concepts as gaze, power, discipline, and resistance—and their use in (and to) feminist theory—as a way of understanding the meaning of fat in our culture (Bordo 1993). We analyzed weight norms and practices along the lines not only of gender—exploring male body norms as well (Gilmore 1994; Bordo

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2000)—but also of social class and market ideology (Ewen 1988; Peiss 1998), sexuality (Chulze 1997), age (Orenstein 1994; Brumberg 1997), and race (hooks 1992). Finally, we reviewed empirical data on the changing body size standards of mannequins, models, and beauty contestants, and discussed the manifestations of weight-based discrimination in Western society (Banner, 1983; Roehling 1999; Solovay 2000).

The course's listing drew considerable response. By the first day, the class was fully enrolled with a waiting list that went long beyond the thirty-student limit set by the college. I finally admitted thirty-five students from across the disciplines: there were freshmen and seniors, biology and psychology majors, and even one student from interior design. Most had never taken a women's studies class. The one male student in the class explained on the introductory questionnaire that his sister had suffered from eating disorders, and he sought some insights into her experience.

This essay discusses two pedagogical challenges I faced while teaching this class. Both questions deal with the extent to which it is productive to talk about one's own body in a class setting. One question concerns my search for ways to achieve a safe and enabling classroom environment—a space in which my students and I could comfortably discuss such a sensitive issue as body size. As I explain below, one of the ground rules for class discussion was that participants refrain from directly talking about their own body size or that of their classmates. At the time, this rule grew simply out of strong intuition. Here I attempt to work through the seeming contradiction between this rule and my main goals in this class: how to understand my impulse to silence any speech about the bodies present in the classroom in a course aimed at putting the body back in the center of political consciousness and cultural analysis. In trying to trace the reasons for this rule, I consider its function in curbing our tendency to turn to language as a medium through which to relate to our bodies. I contemplate the role of silence in enabling a less mediated access to the body.

The second question involves my own body as the body of the instructor of this class. In a class that seeks to politicize cultural perceptions of body weight, the instructor's own weight is inevitably present: it speaks. I had to face the fact that my body size had expressive force whether I liked it or not. I ask, therefore, what work did my size and shape do in relations to authority, credibility, and aspiration to teach from experience.

Finally, these two questions—that of not talking about the body in class and that of the expressive force of my own body—intersect in a current dilemma I have as an assistant professor, concerning whether to provide an account to my students about the reasons for my noticeable weight changes.

LETTING THE BODY BE: REMOVING THE DISCURSIVE SHIELD

In preparing the class, I thought frequently about the conditions for critical yet safe discussions of such topics as weight, diet, and surgery practices, and cultural images of normative bodies. How could I create a space that would protect both student and teacher? My intuition, which later proved correct, was that not many students would enroll in this class out of mere intellectual curiosity (if such a motivation, disconnected from one's situated experience, is at all conceivable). Rather, I assumed that the students who enrolled would have some sort of personal relationship with the topic—and often a complicated and burdened one, as many of us do in relation to our appearance. My expectation was supported by data that reaffirmed my sense of our weight-obsessed culture. Surveys reveal that young American girls “are more afraid of becoming fat than they are of nuclear war, cancer, or losing their parents” (Normandi and Roark 1999, 4). As Joan Jacobs Brumberg notes, “recent studies suggest that close to 80 percent of prepubescent girls—sometimes at ages as young as eight or nine—restrict their eating in the interest of not getting fat” (2000, 250). As her research demonstrates, body shape and size have become central arenas of selfhood: the body is a medium that shapes girls and women's sense of selves and self-worth (2000).

It was not surprising to me, then, that during the class students reported on their own and their friends' preoccupation with diets. Students were required to conduct a small field project for the class, in which they documented interactions relating to body size in their immediate social surroundings. One student worked at a local dairy's ice cream parlor. She kept a log of what patrons said when they moved toward the ice cream display. Most women approached the frozen yogurt rather than the ice cream. Even then, the student reported, women felt compelled to apologize or to provide a reason for their dessert-eating: “I just worked out for an hour at the gym;” “I haven't been in here in ages;” or “I got an A on an important exam today.” Interestingly, their comments were made

even when they came alone, so they must have been aimed at getting the tacit permission of the person behind the counter (and of the self).

To return to the challenge of creating a safe space in class, I feared that in a class that discusses diets and body size, students might become edgy or feel too exposed to contribute meaningfully. I thus decided to establish an uncommon rule (especially in the context of feminist methodology, which emphasizes the importance of learning from concrete subject positions and experiences) (Moya 2002; MacDonald and Sanchez-Casal 2002; Maher 2001). As noted earlier, I decided to ask students to refrain from talking in class about their own body size and body image, and also to avoid commenting on other participants' bodies. When introducing this rule on the first day of class, I explained that when it comes to talking about body shape, we often comment on our own body in a way that implies—even if unintentionally—our search for affirmation. For example, if a student says, "My fat thighs are the reason why..." and she doesn't receive a denying response from classmates (e.g. "Your thighs don't look fat to me!"), she may get hurt, feeling that her thighs are indeed awful-looking. I asked the class to refrain even from what might seem to be positive and reaffirming feedback. For example, "You are lucky because you are so thin, but I..." for such conversations can lead into similarly sensitive emotional domains.

Yet, reluctant to foreclose any resonance of personal experience with the class themes, I did allow students to include references to their own bodies in their response papers, which only I read. I also invited them to discuss personal issues during my office hours, if they felt compelled. I opened these invitations with some caution, for I am not a qualified practitioner of any therapeutic profession. Still, it seemed like a sensible balance to strike, because I felt that I could not and should not completely block all venues for students to express the relevance of class to their personal experience and knowledge.

In retrospect, I think this rule worked well as a facilitator of open and unperturbed discussion. But why? This rule, again, was not a trivial one to introduce in a feminist classroom, which normally aspires to challenge and politicize the boundaries of "the personal." What is special about body size that requires such silencing of the personal? After all, it is hard to imagine a class about sexuality or race that would not permit talking from personal experience—such

a rule would seem oppressive and contradicting pedagogical purposes. And yet, the thought of talking from experience about one's weight seems fantastically personal, overly intimate, and emotionally sensitive. What is it about the current cultural status of weight that renders it impossible to discuss—at least in the personal mode? Was this rule, in other words, really necessary? Could I not have conducted this class in a way that would have enabled participants to share their own embodied knowledge and experience? Why did I feel that the price of allowing for such accounts would be too high? After all, there is a curious contrast between one of the central goals of this class and the rule I introduced. On the one hand, my objective was to render the body present in a way that is not permitted by prevailing discursive practices; I intended to politicize and denaturalize our assignment of value to body size. On the other hand, there was my impulse to refrain from speaking about concrete, present, bodies; to silence our verbal commentary about the reflection on our own and our peers' weight.

The no-talking-of-present-bodies rule can be understood as a way of working against the “discursive protective shield” that we build around our bodies through speaking about them. In cultures such as the U.S., eating and exercising as well as dieting strategies, choices, and practices are constantly discussed. We talk about the shape of our noses and the contour of our butts in the pants we just bought. Such discursive practices vary along lines of gender, social class, and ethnicity, but I think it is not far-fetched to claim that frequency and specific patterns notwithstanding, such “body talk” is prevalent in many strata of Western or Westernized societies.

I propose that certain ways of talking about the body enable us to tame, or to tone down, the expressive work of the body itself: talking about one's body might permit one to push one's *actual* body away from the center, and take over through voice-over. With the distraction of the voice-over, we are less able (or prone) to contemplate the body itself; our attentions are rather deflected towards the discourse with which we coat the body. This discursive shield, this coating, is thus a way of deactivating or reducing the expressive force of the body and its textures: its appearance, its gestures, its size, its temperature, its odors, its sounds, and its complexion.

I suggest, then, that in talking about our dieting, thighs, and fitness practices, we surround our actual bodies with a shield of discourse, which perhaps protects us somewhat from the strong and embodied presence of the actual body, whose expressive strength

as is, unaccompanied by explanatory voiceover, might be hard for us to take. This is not to say that “discursing” about bodies completely undoes the force of actual embodiments—the sensory impressions that bodies leave on others—but rather that it mitigates those impressions somewhat and might numb us to our bodies in the process. As Robyn Longhurst observes:

Fatness and thinness are not binary terms but exist on a continuous spectrum. Even within a day people can *feel* different sizes and shapes depending on an array of factors such as clothing, feeling of well-being, the activity being undertaken, and interactions with people Understanding fat in this way does not mean ignoring the materiality or fleshiness of bodies but recognizing that bodies are always situated in multiple psychoanalytic, discursive and material spaces. (2005, 249–250)

I am led to conclude, then, that the no-talking-of-present-bodies rule enabled class participants to be present in class in their bodies and through their bodies. Talking about their own bodies might have reinforced the mind/body dualism that the class tried to challenge. In other words, not talking about the body was a way to enable the body to speak for itself; a way of making our bodies more present.

To clarify, I am not suggesting that we should (or could) aspire to a pre-discursive or a non-discursive understanding and experience of our body. I am outlining, however, a possibility of withdrawal, or suspense, of our dominant reliance on language to frame the body for the sake of making room to other venues of impression and experience. Such impression and experience would still not be free of language, of course, but space might be created for meaning that is produced alongside language. We might quiet our ongoing chatter about the body through language to permit the body to be present in less lingual ways.

DE-CLOSETING BODY SIZE

I would now like to consider the role of the teacher’s body shape and size, or, more accurately, the way it is perceived in our contemporary fat-phobic culture (Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; Miller, 1997) in establishing the teacher’s position in a class that rethinks fatness.

In the introduction to her seminal book, *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo boldly brings up the issue of her own weight as a teacher,

and the work it does in affirming or subverting her critique of diet-obsessed western culture: "In 1990 I lost some twenty-five pounds through a national weight-loss program, a choice that some of my colleagues viewed as inconsistent and even hypocritical, given my work" (1993, 30). But should one's feminist awareness of the reductive messages embedded in the cultural requirements that women lose weight imply that one should never go on a diet? Bordo articulates a complex approach, which avoids the trap of utopian defiance of the role of culture in constituting our identity, including our body image: "Feminist cultural criticism cannot magically lift us into a transcendent realm of immunity to cultural images, but it ought to help guard against the feeling of comfortable oneness with culture and to foster a healthy skepticism about the pleasures and powers it offers" (1993, 30-31).

Bordo realizes that her thinner body has an expressive force of its own, despite her best intentions and her acute critical consciousness. She knows that just as one cannot live in complete disconnect from cultural weight norms, one can also not prevent one's body size from expressing messages out of one's control or intention.

I know, for example, that although my weight loss has benefited me in a variety of ways, it has also diminished my efficacy as an alternative role model for my female students. I used to demonstrate the possibility of confidence, expressiveness, and success in a less than adequately normalized body. Today, my female students may be more likely to see me as a confirmation that success comes only from playing by the cultural rules. This may affirm some of them, but what about those who cannot play by the rules? A small but possibly important source of self-validation and encouragement has been taken from them. Even though my choice to diet was a conscious and "rational" response to the system of cultural meanings that surround me (not the blind submission of a "cultural dope"), I should not deceive myself into thinking that my own feeling of enhanced personal comfort and power means that I am not serving an oppressive system. (1993, 30-31)

What about the role of my own body as the teacher of this class, then? Before I talk about my own weight, I would like to propose an uncommon exercise, but one that only forefronts something we often do, albeit inexplicitly: namely, we assign bodies to the writers of texts that we read. We assign gender, perhaps race, and in the context of this paper, certainly also body size. I would like to ask you, the reader, to pause for a moment and reflect: What have

been your (explicit or implicit) assumptions about my body size? What have been your unarticulated assumptions about the weight of the person, like me, who teaches a class about weight and culture, and then writes about its pedagogy?

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduces the notion of a “fat closet” (1990, 72). The idea that fat people are closeted seems odd, initially: overweight bodies are apparent in a direct way, a way in which gay bodies are not. Yet, the notion of coming out of the closet as a fat woman is intelligible because according to prevailing code, fatness is such a taboo, such a painful position to occupy, that until a woman explicitly “comes out” to her social environment as an “overweight” person, the topic is untouchable: it could be recognized by everyone present, and yet remain unspoken. As with physical disability, it is only when the fat person indicates that she is aware of her weight (or rather, of the meaning and value assigned to her body-size in a diet-obsessed culture) that it is possible to render it present, and for her interlocutor to openly refer to it too.

At first sight, this contradicts my argument in the previous part of this essay: if earlier I suggested that by not talking about our weight, our bodies could be present in class, then how could I now argue that weight needs to be talked about in order to become present? I think there is no real contradiction here, because the fat closet is constituted by the very negative values associated with weight. In other words, had fatness not been a rejected identity, it would not have had a closet. It is therefore unclear whether coming out of the fat closet would be a liberating exercise, for it requires reliance on the same oppressive vocabulary, and thus acceptance of the cultural negation of fat.

Underlying my motivation to teach this class was the fact that as a teenager and a young woman, I suffered from eating disorders, and undertook extreme dieting. Having overcome these disorders (at least in their “clinically pathological” forms—most of us are busy to some extent with how we look and what we eat, and I do not expect that weight will ever be a non-issue for me), I have searched for teaching and writing venues within which to articulate my experience; I wanted to make that experience relevant to my life as a scholar by not confining it to the personal domain. But the decision to teach this class also entailed that I de-closet myself: that I appear as a person to whom weight is, or at least had been, an issue. Teaching this class required that I be strong enough to stand

in front of students and by virtue of standing there, embodied, to say "yes, this is an issue in my life, important enough to dedicate a course to." It also meant appearing to peers and future academic institutions with a class dealing with weight on my CV as one of the first classes I ever designed and taught.

I raised this issue with my students in the last class meeting: what would it mean for them to have a class about weight listed on their transcripts when they send out their curriculum vitae to potential employers? Would it not be an act of Sedgwick's de-closeting? That is, would it not mark them as overweight or as having some weight issues in the same way that a class about sexuality might mark its students as gay?

Back to my own body, I assume that you guessed that weight is an issue for me. It is hard, perhaps impossible, to give an account of one's own weight in the vocabulary available to us in a weight-obsessed culture. Joan Jacobs Brumberg reports that in writing her book, she "came to understand that, in talking about their bodies, women still struggle to find a vocabulary that does not rely on Victorian euphemisms, medical nomenclature, or misogynistic slang" (1997, xxxi). How does one use adjectives referring to body size without reaffirming the hierarchy of value that is expressed by those adjectives in our current vocabulary?

Let me try to do it as best I can by saying that my weight as I experience it is somewhere in the middle: I am certainly not perceived as thin but I am also not considered unmistakably overweight. This weight range is how *I* see my body size; what I feel I project outwardly. It is also my impression that this is usually how my social environment perceives me (although this varies according to context. For example, in Israeli culture, where I grew up, I am categorized as much bigger than in Midwestern U.S. culture. The parallel between thinness and femininity is stronger in the former society. But that is a topic for another essay.)

Interestingly, I felt that this was a convenient place from which to occupy the instructor position in this class. If a teacher's authority is inseparable from the way her students understand her personal experience and background, then the place my body size occupied on the weight spectrum felt productive in its ambiguity: while my body size reflected some struggle with weight, eating, and fitness, it demonstrated neither a complete defiance of slenderness norms nor an unreserved abidance by them. Mine was thus an intermediate position, and its instability was a productive place

from which to explore questions of weight. Had I been considered very slim, I might have alienated my students in the way Bordo describes: there would have been a troubling gap between my conformism with weight norms and the critique I invited my students to consider against fat aversion (1995). Had I been perceived as excessively overweight, I might have lost at least my initial standing with the students who might, like many in our culture (including myself at times, despite my best efforts) see fat “as a sign of moral and physical decay [and stereotype fat people] as undisciplined, self-indulgent, unhealthy, lazy, untrustworthy, unwilling and non-conforming” (Bell and Valentine 1997, 36). My students might also mistake my interest in the topic as personal—as a means for “justifying” my deviance.

In referring to the productiveness of my body size in teaching this class I do not mean to imply that instructors whose body-size is perceived as neither very thin nor very fat are best suited to teach about weight. I can imagine many other productive places from which to occupy the position of the instructor of such a class. Perhaps, for example, had I been seen as fatter, class participants would have been more productively challenged in interacting with an authority figure whose body size signals resistance to prevailing weight norms.

EPILOGUE: SPEAKING FOR THE BODY?

Does the rule that felt so right in the context of teaching the weight class—letting the body speak for itself without verbally “explaining it”—have limited validity? What is its scope? When should one let the body do its own expressive work, and when should one add “voice-over” to dub the body as one experiences it?

Today, four years later, I have just finished my first year as an assistant professor of law in Israel. Although it had been a satisfying year, it was also a stressful one. Like many first year faculty, I felt overworked. In the winter term, my stress became intense, and as a result my appetite decreased. I lost weight significantly: my clothes literally fell off. Suddenly two sizes slimmer, I had to buy new clothes for teaching. Conditioned like most women, I liked my new figure, but I was also ambivalent about it: my weight-loss did not result from the “right reasons.” When colleagues, friends, and relatives complimented me on my smaller figure, I was

reluctant about accepting their praise, knowing that my slimness wasn't an achievement: it was a result neither of self-discipline and willpower nor of a sudden embrace of physical activity, but rather a side effect of stress.

During that second term I taught an introduction to jurisprudence class. I could see that many students in the class noticed my weight loss. However, in a manner atypical to Israeli culture (in which everything is on the table and personal boundaries are minimal), nothing was said about my weight. Halfway through the term, I dedicated a few lectures to feminist critique of law. After these lectures, a group of female students who have not approached me or spoken publicly in class before, came to me with glowing eyes. They said that through the feminist framework they can finally relate to the material and see themselves in the legal profession, a sense they normally lacked in their law school experience (Guinier, 1997; Harrington 1995). They asked for further reading and for recommendations on other classes in gender and law.

At the end of the last class session of the year, a few students approached to thank me, among them the same group of students that spoke to me after the lectures on feminist jurisprudence. When our conversations ended and I started walking back to my office, three or four of the enthused female students walked along with me. One of them said: "Dr. Tirosch, I didn't want to say anything before the term ended, but now that it has, I want you to know that I admire you. What self-discipline! I wish I could lose weight like that. Well done." The other students nodded in agreement. I did not correct them. I did not say anything about the loss not being a result of willpower or a diet regime. I suspect that I refrained from saying anything more because I worried about the stigma attached to work anxiety. But I must leave room for the possibility that I might have relished their approval.

Now the summer has almost ended, and having had three months off, I am feeling much better. I am also back to my normal weight. School resumes in a few weeks, and in reviewing the enrollment list I noticed that some of my students from last year's introduction to jurisprudence class will be my students in this year's feminist jurisprudence class. These students noticed and complimented my weight loss. Now, just before class begins, I find myself preoccupied with the possibility that they might interpret my weight gain as a dieting failure. But why exactly am I concerned about their mistaken perception? Is it simply because it would

assign the wrong meaning to this weight gain—that it will be understood as signifying weakness or neglect rather than strength and well-being? Clearly, it is not only explanatory accuracy that concerns me. I am probably also unhappy that undesirable traits such as gluttony or lack of willpower would be ascribed to me.

And even if I do decide to clarify the reasons for my weight gain—what would such a clarifying gesture look like? Would it achieve its aim in challenging the conventions that ascribe negative value to gaining weight? And how would it be possible, if at all, in a class setting?

Suppose I say something to my class, aimed at defying the assumption that I must dislike my weight gain—something like “For those of you who studied with me last winter and might wonder, I lost weight due to emotional stress, and I am very happy I gained it back, since I feel well now.” Such a statement would probably not be effective on any level. I am doubtful that it will succeed in convincing my students that my account is candid, and that I indeed do not see this weight gain as a failure. Besides, even if they are convinced that *I* do not identify extra weight with defeat, would this prevent *them* from feeling that I still would have been better off without those twelve pounds? Such an explanatory attempt on my part is also unlikely to destabilize cultural weight norms. Even if my *message* is aimed at undermining the assumption that I must want to lose weight, my discursive gesture itself, the very fact that I will appear as feeling compelled to provide an explanation about my weight—even one that subverts cultural conventions—will in fact reaffirm them.

The most plausible option, it seems, is to let the body speak; to live with the pain of the gap between what is experienced as inner reality and what I project outwardly. Thou shalt not speak for the body.

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