

LeBesco, Kathleen.

Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity.

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Towards the end of *Revolting Bodies*, Kathleen LeBesco writes that “just because weight is immutable for some doesn’t mean they have an exclusive claim ticket on protection from discrimination. Even if one does bring on one’s own bodily state of fatness, that shouldn’t preclude one’s protection from discrimination, from the opportunity to live a happy and full life” (115). These sentences raise almost all the philosophical and political questions explored in this book. How far are we responsible for our own bodies? What are the limits of agency? How are beliefs about agency linked to discrimination? Although LeBesco’s book focuses on fatness (a word she wants to reclaim), it is relevant to the experiences of all who deviate from the white, slender, middle-class ideal – that is, to most of us. LeBesco explores a range of discursive constructions of bodies that fail to make the grade, and analyzes a number of the strategies that have been used to resist those constructions. Although she recognizes that words and images have practical and material consequences that shape people’s lives, her focus here is on the causes of prejudice rather than on its results. Her book is a call to alter the discourses that govern our lives, and her assumption is that once that is done our experiences of our bodies – even our bodies themselves, since they are real to us only through fantasy so much of the time – will be radically different: “The problem, then, with most fat assimilationists and liberationists alike within the context of beauty lies in their emphasis on tolerating or even loving themselves as beautiful *the way they are*, instead of recognizing the constructed nature of that very being” (52). This is an impatient, restless book: the reader can feel LeBesco’s exasperation both with the terms of contemporary culture, and with its recalcitrance. If this is merely representation, why is it so persistent?

One of the strengths of LeBesco’s book is her wide-ranging analysis of different narratives about fatness, and the ways in which they overlap with images of the disabled or of sexual and racial minorities. In a chapter on representations of fatness as disability, she discusses an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Homer Simpson puts on weight in order to qualify for disabled workers’ compensation, and the movie *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?* In both texts, LeBesco argues, obesity is represented as a disabling condition, although both challenge fat oppression to some degree. Fatness is associated with downward economic and social mobility, as well as with non-white bodies. There is some overlap between the stigmas surrounding gay identity, and those around fatness: “both queers and fat folk are understood as manifesting symptoms to mask a more difficult underlying problem” (86), and both are seen as sexually deviant. However, queer communities are not necessarily welcoming

to fat people, and it is not clear that LeBesco supports what she calls “queering fat politics,” partly for pragmatic reasons: “the civil liberties of queers are *not* fully protected, and ... their politics (as contrasted with gay or lesbian rights movements) are rarely assimilatory” (89). In other words, queer activists have been unsuccessful in securing legal protection for themselves, and they may in any case not welcome the arrival of a group of fat activists in their midst. Although LeBesco does seem to approve of the use of queer tactics in the fat acceptance movement, she calls for an acknowledgement of the psychological and social stress of the experience of fat oppression that she assumes runs counter to queer philosophy. Oddly, she never discusses in any detail the contribution of the feminist movement to fat activism, but if she had, she might have noted that feminist discourse simultaneously celebrates women’s difference, describes the negative effects of oppression on women’s public and private lives, and defiantly asserts the right of women to define themselves, surely a useful model for fat activism. But in the end, LeBesco believes that the fat acceptance movement needs to develop both its own methods and its own rhetoric, one which recognizes that the range of fat people’s responses to, and responsibility for, their own body weight is as broad as those of people of “normal” weight. In other words, this book argues both for and against what we might call “fat exceptionalism,” on the one hand, rejecting the methods of other activist movements, and on the other, demonstrating that “fat” is an ideological as much as a physical condition, and as amenable—or un-amenable—to change as any other ideological construction.

The difficulty that any study of this kind inevitably runs into is in making concrete suggestions for a better world. In part, what LeBesco is asking for is a shift in attitudes towards obesity, in contexts ranging from the medical to the social to the sexual. But, as all activist movements know, changing people’s consciousness—while it is always the first step to change of a more material kind—is extremely challenging. LeBesco sees Internet chat rooms and list serves as some of the most promising sites for change, arguing that “strategies mobilized on-line in the instances I have examined allow fat people to claim their subjectivity, while they slowly and unevenly rework the rules of what counts as healthy and beautiful” (109). “Fat-positive public discourse” (121) enables both these private re-negotiations, and public fights for recognition and rights.

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