Approaching Fatness – Fat Studies and Body Politics in Modern America

Spring 2016
Class Time: Mondays 6:00 to 8:30 p.m.

Instructor: Katherine Phelps, University of Massachusetts-Boston, Sociology
Email: Katherine.Phelps001@umb.edu
Office Hours: TBD

Course Overview:

What does it mean to be fat in the United States? And how do these meanings shape opportunity, life chances, privilege and oppression? Using theoretical lenses such as feminism, queer studies, and ethnicity studies, this course will explore social, cultural, and political considerations and constructions of fat bodies, and how lived experiences are mediated and informed by body size. We will consider fat bodies as sites of social and political practices and look at intersections of body size/fatness and gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and other social constructs. We will think critically about how representations of fatness in the media, medicine and health discourse and paradigms, and industries such as fashion and beauty, inform how we think about and approach fatness. We will think about fatness in contexts of history, industrialization, consumerism, deviance, morality, nationalism, visual culture, and activism, critiquing corporeal binaries of fat/thin and good/bad and learning to look beyond static and simplistic definitions of bodies and fatness.

Course Discussion Themes:

Historical Context
Privilege and Power
Oppression and Disadvantage
Social Inequality
Biography and the uses of experience
The language of fatness
Intersectionality
Identity/Body Politics
Critical Engagement
Moving beyond the fat/thin dichotomy
Social Movements, Activism, and Progress

Required Course Material:

All reading materials will be made available in PDF form as a course reader.

Learning Objectives:

At the completion of this course you will be able to:

- Critically analyze and provide concrete examples of how fatness is a social construction and
how the body is a site of social, political, and cultural meaning making and contention

- Articulate various theoretical frameworks as they relate to fatness and the body, and use them in application of concrete ideas

- Engage with constructions of fatness as they relate to social arenas such as science/medicine, law, labor, and media and be able to provide examples of how these arenas have constructed variations in gendered, racialized and sexualized fat bodies

- Think, observe, and write critically and analytically and engage thoughtfully in analytic (rather than simply opinionated) discussions

- Understand and engage in the process of conducting a literature review and complete a clear, well-organized and thoughtful academic research paper

**Assignments and Grading:**

*Participation (20% of overall grade):* In this class, participation is crucial if you want to do well. That means accessing course readings, completing assigned readings on time, and coming to class with questions and ideas related to the concept we are discussing that day. I do not have an attendance policy for this class, but bear in mind that participation is a substantial part of your final grade, thus, you will be required to participate during in-class discussions and activities. This is a discussion-based course; I want to hear what YOU have to say! There will be ample opportunities to participate, so come to class, do your reading, and raise your hand, even if the thought you have is half-formed. There is no right and wrong in class discussion.

*Media Literacy Responses (20% of overall grade):* Over the course of the term, you will submit two short papers that explore representations of fatness in popular media and analyze those representations in reference to the theories and frameworks we discuss in class. Each paper should focus on one or two representations (in film, television, music, print media, etc.) and provide critical analysis of how fatness is constructed in those spaces. What is the meaning being promoted? Is the message positive or negative? I encourage you to be creative in your selection of media for these papers! Each response must be between 3-4 pages double spaced, and must cite at least two readings from the course.

*Leading Discussion (15% of overall grade):* Each week, two or three students will lead discussion for a portion of the class. In addition to providing basic summary and synthesis of the readings for that class session, students leading discussion will be responsible for collaborating and conceptualizing discussion questions and activities, and finding and incorporating any relevant media or additional sources/experiences to aid in discussion. I very much encourage creativity here! Students must send a brief outline of their plan for leading discussion to me two days prior to the class so I can read it over and provide any feedback or suggestions. Sign up for leading discussion sessions will take place in the first week of class.

*Final Paper Presentation (10% of overall grade):* In the final two weeks of class, students will give 10 to 15 minute presentations on their final papers. Students should discuss the central topic/question, how they came to that topic, any relevant literature or theory that informs the
perspective, and any interesting findings or realizations. Students may use visual aids such as Powerpoint for presentations, or can take a more informal approach and foster a discussion about the topic among the class. These presentations are a chance for you to tell us about something that really interests you! Have fun with it! Students not presenting will be responsible for paying close attention to presentations and developing any follow up questions and constructive feedback for the presenter.

Final Term Paper (35% of overall grade): At the end of the term, you will submit a paper on the topic of your choosing. Perhaps you want to look at fatness in a context of the workplace, queer conceptualizations of fatness, fatness and narratives of health, fatness and performance or representation. The sky is the limit! But the paper must necessarily employ a Fat Studies lens: to be clear, you can use a Fat Studies lens to align with your findings, or you can challenge what you find, but the paper must use critical thinking and theoretical frameworks explored in class in analysis. You must use relevant readings from the class for your analysis, and additionally cite at least two external academic sources in your paper. Papers will be 8 to 10 pages, double-spaced, 1-inch margins, Times New Roman font.

Grading Scale:

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Policy on Late or Missed Assignments:

For every week that an assignment is late, you will incur a penalty of 10% off your total grade for that assignment. If you have a valid reason to turn in an assignment late or do a presentation at a different time, you must talk to me before the due date if that's possible.

A Note on Academic Dishonesty:

It’s simple: I will not tolerate plagiarism in this course. Any and all work that you do must be your work and yours alone. This means, if you use a quotation or an idea from a reading or another outside source, you must properly cite it and give credit where credit is due. We will go over citation expectations several times during this course. If you have questions about citing, or whether or not something is plagiarized, please, please, PLEASE ask me. I will never fault you for wanting clarity in pursuit of academic integrity. Learning the rules of citing and academic integrity now will be incredibly useful to you not only during the rest of your college career, but for the rest of your life. Take this seriously!
Check out the Purdue OWL website for great tips on references and citations!

You can review the Code of Student Conduct at Tufts at: http://students.tufts.edu/student-affairs/student-life-policies

**Important Miscellaneous:**

1. This syllabus is to act as a rough guide for the semester; it is not set in stone. The dates may shift a bit. Each group of students moves at a different pace and gets fascinated by certain topics. I will honor this and we will find ourselves spending more time on certain topics and less time on others. Having fun with this class requires flexibility! As such, by choosing to remain in this course, you agree to all of the above requirements and stipulations. *I reserve the right to alter this syllabus at any time, but with fair and appropriate warning.*

2. You may use laptops for note taking in class, but if these become a distraction or a problem, you will be asked to put it away. Phones are not allowed in this class. If you plan to take notes on your phone, please plan to use another device or get a notebook. If I see you answering your phone or text messaging, you will be asked to put it away. If it is a recurring problem, I will ask you to leave the classroom.

3. I will attempt to respond to student emails as promptly as I am able. I will generally check and respond to email between the hours of 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. I will always try to get you a response within 24 hours. Also, please send me emails from either your student email address, or another email address that readily identifies you.

**Resources for Student Support**
http://students.tufts.edu/student-accessibility-services

**Final Thoughts:**

This course is meant to be interactive, fun, and open. All of you bring your own unique perspectives and experiences to this material, and I absolutely encourage that. That said, many of the topics we will cover and explore can become very personal, and at times, difficult. You will never be required to share something you are not comfortable sharing. However, this does not mean you are exempt from participation. You must find ways to make your voice heard. I want you to feel safe in this classroom to discuss experiences and opinions on any and all topics we cover. Whatever is said or written in this class stays in this class. No one should feel oppressed or stifled because of gender, race, creed, class, ability, size, or sexual orientation. This class will be a community effort, and will operate as a safe space for everyone.
Class Schedule

Week 1: Monday 1/25
- Introductions
- Go over syllabus
- In-class writing exercise
- Viewing: The Fat Body (In)Visible

Week 2: Monday 2/1
Situating Fatness/Fatness in American History
Readings:

Week 3: Monday 2/8
Fatness and National Meanings – Constructing Obesity
Discussion Leaders:
Readings:

Week 4: Monday 2/15 – President’s Day, No classes – class will instead take place on Thursday 2/18
Fat Femininity/Fat Masculinity
Discussion Leaders:
Readings:

Week 5: Monday 2/22
Racialization of Fatness/Race and Representation

Discussion Leaders:
Readings:

Viewing: Real Women Have Curves

Week 6: Monday 2/29
Fat Sexualities/Queering Fatness (FIRST MEDIA LITERACY PAPER DUE)

Discussion Leaders:
Readings:

Viewing: Excerpts from My Mad Fat Diary and Bridesmaids

Week 7: Monday 3/7
Morality and Fatness

Discussion Leaders:
Readings:

Week 8: Monday 3/14
Fatness and Constructions of Health

Discussion Leaders:
Readings:

Additional Material: Health at Every Size website

Week 9: Monday 3/21 Spring Break! No Class

Week 10: Monday 3/28
Body and Beauty
Discussion Leaders:
Readings:

Week 11: Monday 4/4
Performing/Representing Fatness (SECOND MEDIA LITERACY PAPER DUE)
Discussion Leaders:
Readings:
• Rowe, Kathleen. 1995. “Pig Ladies, Big Ladies, and Ladies with Big Mouths: Feminism and the Carnivalesque” in The Unruly Woman. Austin: University of Texas Press.
Week 12: Monday 4/11
Fat Activism/Size Acceptance Movements

Discussion Leaders:

Readings:


Week 13: Monday 4/18 – Patriot’s Day! No Class

Week 14: Monday 4/25
Student Paper Presentations

Week 15: Monday 5/2
Student Paper Presentations
(Final papers due last day of class)