

Where I Stand

Every breath that I take¹ in a society with other people who both share and (re)produce the culture I am swimming in is a moment of taking in the system I both participate in and critique, and breathing it back out and (re)producing it. I see everything (e.g. grocery shopping, dating, asking for fashion advice, watching TV, having random conversations with Marilee and Beth, walking my dog) as research. My positionality as a human and a researcher (two identities that I can't tease apart) is affected by everyone and everything I come into contact with. Therefore, I think it's critically important to have respect for other people, perspectives, positions, bodies, experiences, histories, stories, and pain. I try to live my life as someone who is reflexive, collaborative, compassionate, and curious.

As a researcher, I am aware of and concerned with positionality and how individuals exist within the matrix of domination and how discourses exist within the western code. Discourse exists within ideology and change as culture changes. While there are many different definitions of rhetoric, for me, rhetoric is about discourse. Rhetoric is about power. Rhetoric is about discourses of power. There is a powerful discourse in American culture right now about health, fat, and bodies and the time is ripe to look critically (meaning rhetorically) at how these things are being both discussed and (re)produced. I believe that it is the job of the rhetorician to analyze cultural discourses and find spaces where the web (how I see ideology) is weak. In the places where you can call bullshit on the ideology, it's our job to pick away until there is space to shout loud enough and rationally enough that people will hear you.

At my heaviest, I was 80 pounds overweight. Over the last year, my weight has fluctuated 30 pounds. This journey—this physical journey of putting on and getting rid of body mass—has influenced who I am as both a human being and a scholar more than perhaps anything else in my life. I am a woman who: lives in a visual-obsessed society; has had partners who have dictated how my body should be and used my size to determine my self-worth; who shops for all the clothes she owns; who gets up every morning and has to decide what is “flattering” instead of “comfortable”—this is the woman behind the researcher I am today. I have a deep-seated personal desire to understand why the world around me both condemns me for not looking like I could while at the same time making it difficult to attain my personal best.

I want to look at the culturally constructed notions of “good” and “bad” bodies and identify places where slippage happens—spaces where the discourse is weak/contradictory. It's in these spaces that I think we can start calling bullshit and rallying for change.

Am I young and naive? Yes.

Am I setting myself up for frustration in the future? Maybe.

Am I still going to continue down this path? Oh, fuck yes.

Some Research-y Questions

¹ Now that Sting is stuck in your head...

I know I need to narrow my scope if I want to be a scholar. One bite at a time, right?
Here are a few of the millions of questions I've been thinking about:

- Why and how should dress be studied rhetorically?
- What kind and how is ideology made and perpetuated through the construction of clothing?
- Where is the line between “beauty” and “health” in the discourses around obesity?
- How do normal people (not models or celebrities) make the best out of the imperfect bodies they have?
- How is ideology dealt with when clothing is consumed?
- How do wearers use clothing to hide “bad” parts of the body, and how is this a rhetorical act? (And why should we care?)

Where (Some of) This Work (Currently) Lives

At the moment, most of the work that investigates connections between fat, bodies, clothing, and identity comes out of sociology and apparel and textile design. This list is definitely not comprehensive, but here's a selection of what I've been reading:

- **Appadurai** (ed): *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*
- **Bordo**: *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*
- **Czerniawski**: *Disciplining Corpulence: The Case of Plus-Sized Fashion Models*
- **Davis**: *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery*
- **de Certeau**: *The Practice of Everyday Life*
- **Eicher**: *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society*
- **Foucault**: *Discipline and Punish*
- **Hartley**: “Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship”
- **Kristeva**: *The Powers of Horror*
- **Levy-Navarro**: “Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go From Here?”
- **Miller** (ed): *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*
- **Rothblum** (ed): *The Fat Studies Reader*
- **Shildrick and Price** (eds): *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*
- **Tuhiwai Smith**: *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*
- **Wolf**: *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*

My Questions and Concerns

- This work is clearly very personal and I'm afraid of getting lost/losing my positionality
- I am under the impression that I have to make a space for this work in rhetoric
 - Is this really as hard as it initially sounds?
- What if I approach my work as an extension of discourse analysis? Does it make more sense in rhetoric then?
- I don't want to write anything on to anyone's body. I am very afraid of making judgments/reproducing the harm that has been done to me.