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Article:
Mehdi, N. and Frazier, C. (2021) Forgetting fatness: The violent co-optation of the body positivity movement. Debates in Aesthetics, 16 (1). pp. 13-28. ISSN: 2514-6637

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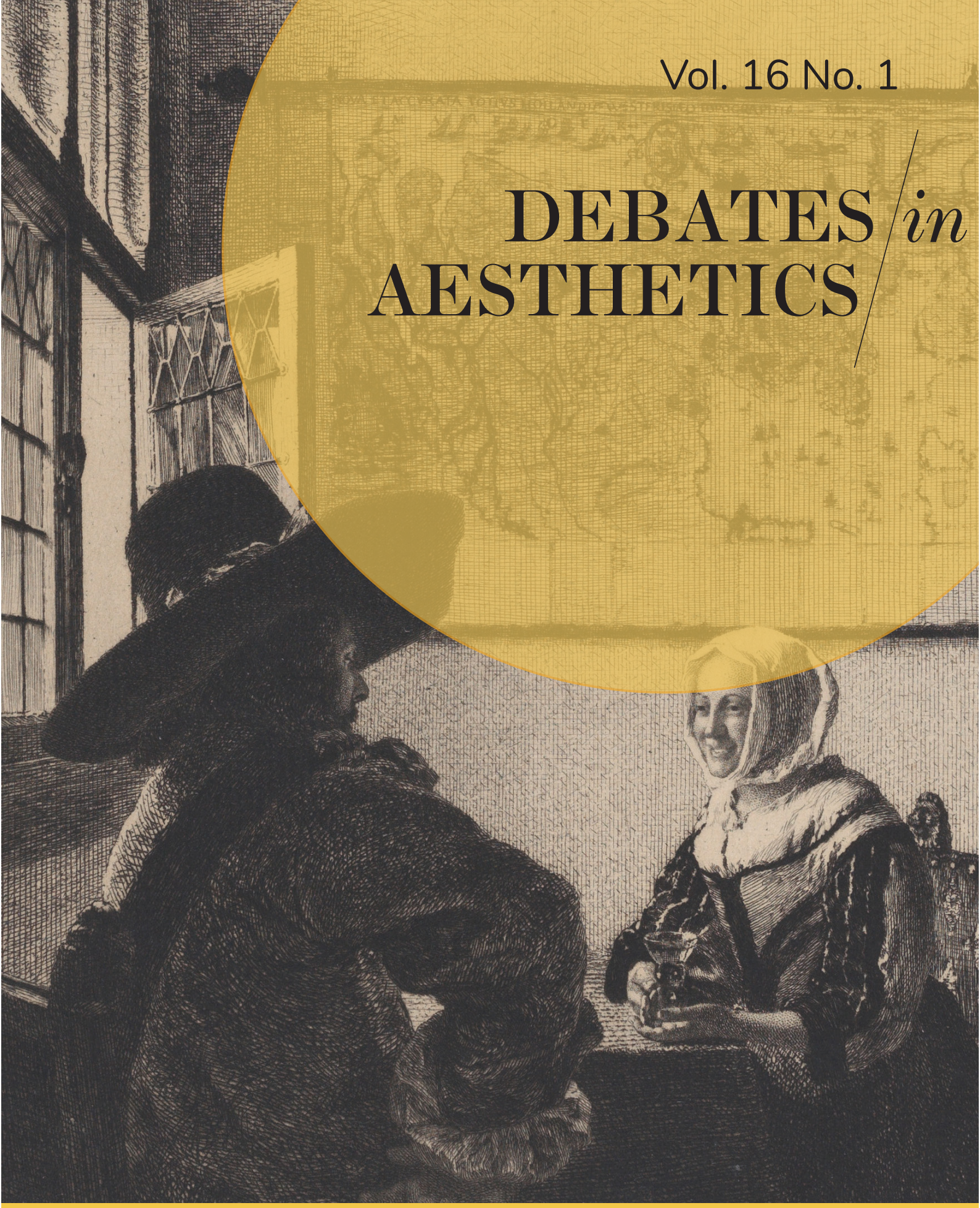
Vol. 16 No. 1

DEBATES in AESTHETICS



Debates in Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal for articles, interviews and book reviews. The journal's principal aim is to provide the philosophical community with a dedicated venue for debate in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

BSA BRITISH SOCIETY OF AESTHETICS

BSA BRITISH SOCIETY OF AESTHETICS

Vol. 16 No. 1
March 2021

Edited by
Claire Anscomb and Eleen M. Deprez

Published by
The British Society of Aesthetics

Typesetting
Claire Anscomb, Eleen M. Deprez and Sarah Kiernan

Proofreading
Sarah Kiernan

Typeface
The Brill, designed by John Hudson
Nunito, designed by Vernon Adams

Cover
Officer and Laughing Girl, after Vermeer (1866) by Jules-Ferdinand Jacquemart (image courtesy of The Met)

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ISSN 2514-6637

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FORGETTING FATNESS
THE VIOLENT CO-OPTATION OF THE BODY POSITIVITY MOVEMENT

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In this paper we track the 'body positivity' movement from its origins, promoting radical acceptance of marginalized bodies, to its co-optation as a push for self-love for all bodies, including those bodies belonging to socially dominant groups. We argue that the new focus on the 'body positivity' movement involves a single-minded emphasis on beauty and aesthetic adornment, and that this undermines the original focus of social and political equality, pandering instead to capitalism and failing to rectify unjust institutions and policies. As such, we argue that the 'body positivity' movement ultimately marginalises further the bodies for which it initially sought justice and acceptance.

1 Introduction

The 'body positivity' movement is a muddled, nebulous concept, the origins of which many pinpoint to 1960s anti-fatness activism in the United States. The movement was designed to promote the radical acceptance of marginalized bodies.[1] Proponents tried to shatter the perception that weight and health were conclusively linked and sought to remove the temptation to say that people needed to be healthy – and beautiful – to be worthy of dignity, respect and fair treatment.[2] In recent years, however, the 'body positivity' movement has strayed from its original aims and become a push for self-love for all bodies, including those bodies belonging to socially dominant groups.[3]

Fortunately, recent work in aesthetics on the marginalisation that people face in virtue of their bodies has laid the groundwork for us to assert that the appropriation of the 'body positivity' movement is at once a moral and aesthetic matter. In this paper, we explore the shift in focus of the 'body positivity' movement from dignity, respect, and fair treatment, to self-love and beauty. In particular, we focus on what is lost when fat bodies are no longer the focal point of the movement. We will argue that the most appropriate way to understand the changes in the movement is through the lens of co-optation, and that this co-optation is ethically problematic since it makes it more difficult to accomplish the goals of the original 'body positivity' movement and further marginalizes the bodies for which the movement was created. Finally, we will

1 See Alptraum (2017), Anon (2018) and Dionne (2017).

2 See Hobbes (2018), Eaton (2016) and Torish (2012).

3 It is worth noting that much of the historical 'body positivity' movement was aimed at protecting more than just fat bodies—original strains of the movement also sought to promote acceptance of queer, trans, and other marginalized bodies. Although our focus in this paper is more simply on fat bodies, many people at the front of this movement belong to multiple marginalized groups and seek protection and acceptance for all of their identities under this movement. As such, some of the language used throughout this paper may reflect its broader contexts, especially when citing activists from the original movement.

address two lines of counterargument: that the shift in the movement is necessary given the increasing or changing pressures of norms of beauty; and secondly, that the reframing of the movement to focus on beauty, empowerment, and self-love - even by some fat women - is not problematic.

2 A Brief (and Incomplete) Overview of the Body Positivity Movement

The 'body positivity' movement that emerged in the mid-20th century sought to combat discrimination and help fat people gain "tolerance from a medical establishment that tortured and sought to eradicate them" (Alptraum 2017), as well as working to undo fatphobia in schools, workplaces, and advertising (Dionne 2017). There was also a focus on celebrating and empowering fat bodies and in 1967 a 'fat-in' was organised in Central Park, where demonstrators burned diet books and pictures of the supermodel Twiggy and arrived carrying banners reading "Fat Power" and "Take a Fat Girl to Dinner" (Dionne 2017).

Through the 'body positivity' movement, people have been able to challenge misconceptions regarding fatness and health and the notion that moral worth is inherently tied to health or appearance. The movement created an important space for fat people to communicate and commiserate with one another and advocate for better healthcare, fair treatment in employment, and a more fat-friendly society. This is especially crucial given the oppressive societal structures in place which regularly disadvantage fat people.[4] As Anne Eaton notes, "we live in a fat-hating world, one that regularly refuses to accommodate fat bodies; that openly and unabashedly teases, bullies, shames, and stigmatizes fat people…and that discriminates against fat people in a variety of ways" including medical care, and lack of adequate space on popular airlines. (Eaton 2016, 39-40) Historically, fat people have been subject to wage-gaps, the perception that "overweight" job applicants are less qualified

4 See Eaton (2016), Burgard (2009), Hobbes (2018) and Torish (2012).

than thin counterparts, and increased negative employment outcomes, among other related issues (Cawley 2004).

Additionally, the 'body positivity' movement originally aimed to combat a fatphobic medical system wherein physicians have feelings of "discomfort, reluctance, or dislike" towards patients who are obese, and associate fatness with conditions like "poor hygiene, noncompliance, hostility, and dishonesty." (Puhl and Heuer 2012) This pervasive issue and attitude towards fat patients results in poor healthcare and worsened health outcomes for said patients.

The 'body positivity' movement, then, arose out of a need to protect marginalized bodies, allowing fat people to celebrate their bodies in a world aiming to tear them down. Moreover, it was born out of a need to establish concrete legal protections that could prevent one's livelihood (via healthcare, job security, etc.) from being threatened.

However, much of today's discussion of 'body positivity' focuses on fashion, beauty and self-love. This shift in focus is concerning as it has overtaken

> the radical roots of the original movement. Body positivity has become its own economy, and people with bodies that have been marginalized are no longer the centre of their own creation. (Dionne 2017)

The current 'body positivity' movement tries to promote empowerment, self-love, and representation of all types of bodies (or all 'acceptable' bodies) in the media, but in doing so, it "has failed to address [systemic] discrimination as its foremothers did" (Ibid.).

A Google image search for 'body positivity' conducted in April 2020 offers an array of images centred on beauty and empowerment. Simple illustrations with catchphrases such as 'love your body', 'all bodies are good bodies', and 'more self-love' abound, but feature very few women

who the movement itself would term fat. While these are respectable and important aims, they fail to recognize the systemic injustices the 'body positivity' movement was designed to address. The shift in the movement has turned the focus onto thin, white, cis- and able-bodied individuals. Your Fat Friend, a blog writing anonymously about the realities of life as 'a very fat person', reflects on this shift, arguing that the original 'body positivity' movement was "before Dove defined *real beauty* as multiracial and multi-height, but still free of transgender people, still free of people with disabilities, still free of rolling fat or puckered skin…before *body positivity* became *pride in thin, fair, feminine, able bodies*" (Your Fat Friend 2017).[5] Investigating this shift in the body positivity movement will shed light on the implications of its popularization. The current focus on making fashion more inclusive and broadening beauty norms ignores several marginalized bodies that the original movement centred. The single-minded focus on beauty and aesthetic adornment undermines the original focus on social and political equality. The new movement plays into capitalist society, failing to rectify unjust institutions and policies.

3 The Co-Optation of the 'body positivity' Movement

In light of this, it is our contention that the 'body positivity' movement has been co-opted. Co-opting, Lisa Droogendyk and co-authors claim, occurs in situations in which disadvantaged and advantaged group members interact, and highlights the harm that can come from advantaged group allies undermining resistance movements–even when their intention is to help bolster those movements (2016). In the process of co-optation, a dominant group or its members takes up the language and aims of a movement, often with benevolent aims, such as to help dismantle oppressive societal structures and institutions or to support

5 Here, Your Fat Friend is referencing the "Real Beauty" campaign created by the cosmetics company Dove which featured models possessing a more diverse range of bodies than was standard, but which failed to include a truly diverse range of bodies (importantly failing to include fat bodies).

those who are subjects of oppression.[6] But co-opting a movement has dangerous consequences. As Droogendyk *et al* note, "a movement that is co-opted and led by members of the group that currently holds power is inconsistent with [a] vision of a new and more equal world—no matter how benevolent the intentions of these "leaders"" (Droogendyk *et al* 2016, 324).

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the aims of a movement changing over time, the current ideology behind the 'body positivity' movement violently undermines the aims of the *original* movement. The original movement allowed people who were told their bodies were wrong or unacceptable to carve out space and seek equal treatment in society and under the law. In contrast, the contemporary 'body positivity' movement promotes bodies which society does not attack in the first place. These bodies (which are typically thin, healthy, cisgendered, and able-bodied) are not the bodies against which regular systemic and institutional injustices are committed. As Your Fat Friend argues:

> Body positivity has widened the circle of acceptable bodies, yes, but it still leaves so many of us by the wayside. Its rallying cry, love your body, presumes that our greatest challenges are internal, a poisoned kind of thought about our own bodies. It cannot adapt to those of us who love our bodies, but whose bodies are rejected by those around us, used as grounds for ejecting us from employment, health care, and more. (Your Fat Friend 2017)

The 'body positivity' movement has been *taken* from a disadvantaged or marginalized group. Thin people have taken the language of 'body

6 It is important to note that Droogendyk et al's account centers on co-opting in allyship contexts, while many cases of co-opting of the 'body positivity' movement occur outside of allyship contexts. Although this model is not a perfect fit given this context, it provides a fruitful starting point for assessing the ways in which co-option functions and is harmful to members of disadvantaged or marginalized groups.

positivity' to advocate for themselves, using it *for their own* purposes. When dominant groups practice this kind of taking from a marginalized group (be it a practice, language, symbol, or in this case, a campaign for justice), the taken thing sometimes becomes unavailable for those who used it originally. Indeed, the contemporary 'body positivity' movement seems to fit this model insofar as non-marginalized persons have taken the language of the movement to relate to and promote their own bodies and empowerment. Crucially, they have *taken* this *from* a marginalized group, making it such that fat people are now vilified or removed from the movement entirely—unless they are 'healthy'. When we understand the shift in the 'body positivity' movement *as co-opting* (as opposed to a natural evolution over time), several key ethical harms become apparent which we will now address.

4 Three Key Harms

The first key harm resulting from the co-optation of the 'body positivity' movement is that the movement's original goals have been erased *without having been resolved or accomplished*. The current movement shifts the focus away from justice for fat people, towards acceptance of all bodies. However, justice for fat people has not yet been accomplished. The original 'body positivity' movement aimed to eradicate countless instances and structures of injustice from which fat people suffered. These structures and systems of injustice are still in place, continually harming fat people. As we discussed above, fat people face discrimination and exclusion in day to day life and are at the behest of false discourses equating fat with ill-health such that their medical care becomes inextricably bound to their perceived ill-health. Fat people regularly receive inadequate and discriminatory healthcare in which they are perceived as lazy, detestable, and noncompliant, and that is *if* they receive treatment.[7] They are routinely excluded from many facets of society, from clothing to transportation to equal consideration under

7 See Puhl and Heuer (2009); Eaton (2016); Mull (2018).

law.[8] Moreover, fat people face regular microaggressions and bullying regarding their weight and health, unable to safely exist *as a fat person*.[9] The 'body positivity' movement was once one of few movements championing justice and acceptance of fat people. Its shift in focus where self-love and empowerment are front and centre, thus erases or (at best) ignores the unaccomplished goals of the original movement.

Secondly, in addition to the failure to address the original aims of the movement (ending discrimination towards fat people and gaining acceptance from the medical establishment), the current movement is ironically bathed in anti-fatness. Many of the companies who promote body positivity and inclusivity actively exclude fat people from their efforts. As Amanda Mull notes, clothing company Everlane "recently launched a new underwear line featuring a plus size model in its ad campaign," in the interest of *appearing* inclusive and body positive, "despite making no actual plus-size underwear for sale" (Mull 2018).[10]

Further, many discussions of body positivity go as far as openly denigrating fatness. The 'body positivity' movement has effectively begun to move the goalposts of what body sizes are considered acceptable, bringing smaller fat bodies to the forefront and showing 'real' bodies with imperfections, textures, and different shapes than those historically highlighted in the media. However, many participants of and advocates for the 'body positivity' movement are anti-fat. They disparage fat women over a certain size, sometimes referred to as 'pretty fat' or 'acceptable fat' to denote a range of fatness that is sometimes deemed acceptable in relation to common beauty standards (Shakur 2017). Thus, larger fat people (often referred to as 'superfat' or 'infinifat') are kept out of the movement as their size is often deemed too unhealthy

8 See Cheap Air (2013); Hetrick and Attig (2009); Huff (2009).

9 See Your Fat Friend (2018); Rimm (2004); Weinstock and Krehbiel (2009).

10 At the time of this ad, Everlane sold underwear up to a size XL for a 84 cm [33 inches] waist, which corresponds to a UK 14 or US size 10 (considered straight-size, rather than plus-size).

or unacceptable to promote within the movement. Participants of the movement often claim that fat people who participate in the 'body positivity' movement are potentially dangerous and irresponsible as their participation is 'glorifying obesity'. These claims, rooted in anti-fatness, harm larger fat people by pushing them out of a space designed to protect and celebrate them. Given that the 'body positivity' movement at best moves the goalposts of what is considered acceptable fat, those who do not meet those standards are wrongly sanctioned and punished for their size, and are excluded from the mission of self-love and acceptance for which the current 'body positivity' movement advocates.

Finally, these societal attitudes, informed by an anti-fat 'body positivity' movement, help reinforce oppressive structures in society, resulting in an anti-fat society with few (if any) legal protections for fat people. As previously mentioned, an anti-fat society results in other legal, institutional, and structural inequalities that harm fat people. With very little prohibition of systemic discrimination based on weight, an anti-fat 'body positivity' movement deepens the threat towards fat people's wellbeing and livelihood. Fat people cannot afford to be excluded from one of the only movements originally centred on advocating on their behalf, as the lack of organised activism on their behalf allows society to remain stagnant and apathetic towards legally sanctioned or excused discrimination against fat people (Hobbes 2018). As such, co-opting the 'body positivity' movement and turning it into a movement that advocates for self-love as opposed to acceptance of fatness is ethically impermissible, as it threatens the lives of already marginalized people.

5 Two Objections

We will now briefly address two objections pertaining to our framing of the 'body positivity' movement as a harmful co-optation. Firstly, some might quibble whether the change in the movement is best summarised as a co-optation. Social movements change over time in scope and focus as the social context they are situated in changes. Could it not be the

case then that new (or perhaps different, or stronger) ideological aesthetic demands are being made on women's appearance, such that the empowerment strand of the movement – that which addresses one's relationship to oneself – has come to appeal to more people, and, as such, the radical political aims of the movement to restructure society's treatment of fat people have become a smaller focus as the movement has grown?

Heather Widdows argues that the beauty ideal—the ideal standard of feminine beauty against which women are judged—is becoming an ethical ideal (2018). The beauty ideal is not a single model, but a (relatively narrow) range of acceptable models, centring on women's bodies and faces, favouring thinness (perhaps with curves) and firmness. Widdows argues that the beauty ideal is emerging as a standard against which we judge our own (and others) success and failure, goodness, and practices of daily existence. She argues that we are beginning to see engagement in practices that will bring us closer to beauty norms as "good in and of themselves, not just prudentially or to comply with a social norm, but intrinsically" (Widdows 2018, 28). Rather than tying into other goods, such as wanting to be healthy, beauty work, such as everyday grooming or cosmetic surgery, appears to be valued because we are coming to esteem the act of attaining beauty as a good in itself. Failure to be or strive to be beautiful effectively ends up as a failure of the self. When one has 'let oneself go' then this is deemed a morally bad action; it is shameful and the unbeautiful person is deemed disgusting. Widdows contends that shame does the same work in accounts of beauty failureas in traditional accounts of moral failure.[11]

11 We can see evidence of the all-encompassing nature of the beauty ideal on one's self-conception in statistics about current relationships to our bodies. Widdows writes that "preschool girls between three and five exhibited strong preferences for thinness" (2018, 69) and that "there are a whole host of things that girls report they do not do because of their low body confidence: from wearing clothes they like, to having their pictures taken, to taking part in sport, and to speaking up in class. If we add this to the evidence the harms of body dissatisfaction, then unquestionably worries about appearance severely limit what girls can be and do" (Ibid).

As such, perhaps we can see the shift in the 'body positivity' movement as an expansion of the original movement, aiming towards resistance of the aesthetic and moral imperative the beauty ideal has come to dictate. We might even want to deem this expansion as good insofar as it is more inclusive, recognising that *all* bodies are 'good' bodies. The beauty ideal is clearly oppressive and the 'body positivity' movement has reacted by expanding to resist the ideal.[12]

However, this is precisely the problem that we have attempted to outline. We are not trying to suggest that the social context in which the movement exists has not changed such that more and more people are beholden to various aesthetic (and perhaps ethical) norms pertaining to our bodies. But we do wish to challenge that the ways in which the norms effect and play out within our lives differs. As long as one is in possession of a body more in line with the beauty ideal, the less structural and institutional barriers one will face in their day to day life and, we contend, the more strongly one might be able to leave behind the affective dimension of the beauty ideal. Whilst the beauty ideal is so stringent as to make many people feel they do not meet it, not meeting it by a small degree is different to not even existing on the same plane as it. Positioning thin, white, cisgendered, youthful, and beautiful women as the recipients of the 'body positivity' movement may do some work to undermine the aesthetic and ethical imperative of the beauty ideal, but unless it addresses its anti-fat rhetoric then the serious ethical harms that we outlined above will remain.[13] 'Body positivity' will remain a marketing implement for capitalism and a salve for some women's under-confidence, without rectifying unjust institutions and laws.

12 Examples of body confidence campaigns that aim towards this are the Dove Real Bodies campaign, discussed above, and Radhika Sanghani's Side Profile Selfie campaign.

13 We contend that whilst the body confidence movement might be able to slightly alter the beauty ideal, as it currently stands it is more likely to create a new ideal standard of normative beauty. Whilst this new standard might have slightly larger goalposts, it will not ultimately change the game.

Framing the shift as an incidental evolution in the 'body positivity' movement ignores the serious ramifications that allow 'body positivity' to be turned into what Rutter calls 'Socially Acceptable Body Positivity': a movement primarily centred on bodies that are already accepted anyway (2017). The contemporary 'body positivity' movement promotes bodies which society does not attack or target in the same way. These bodies are not the bodies against which regular systemic and institutional injustices are committed in virtue of their body and appearance. In other words, part of the issue in *all* bodies being a part of the 'body positivity' movement is that society has not discriminated against or disenfranchised *all* bodies as such. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the aims of a movement changing over time, the current ideology behind the 'body positivity' movement undermines the aims of the *original* movement in ways that are violent, as we have outlined above. Again, whilst these people are entitled to, and deserve the social conditions to, love their bodies, and acceptance of *all* bodies is an important aim, the use of the hashtag or language of 'body positivity' redirects that movement's focus away from marginalized bodies.

This leads us to the second potential objection to our argument: that the new focus on *empowerment* in 'body positivity' discourse will perhaps be even more necessary and useful for those who were the recipients of the movement's initial aims. In an increasingly looks-obsessed culture, with a beauty ideal that values thinness and firmness becoming more entrenched, is the capacity to demand a broader understanding of beauty not important, both personally and politically?

Again, we are sympathetic to this claim. Some of those who are furthest from the standards that it sets up will no doubt feel the beauty ideal intensely. But until the institutions and structures change it is likely that this insistence will remain necessary. Altering our relationship to fatness politically might turn out to be a precondition to altering it aesthetically. It does not seem likely that personal and societal acceptance

that someone who is fat is merely fat, or even beautifully fat, will do the necessary work to dismantle the correlating false discourses surrounding what it currently means to exist in a fat body: namely, that one must or may be unhealthy or unintelligent.

We take both counterarguments to be addressing the same thing: that the co-opted movement's search for aesthetically directed self-love, self-empowerment, and self-respect in the face of a firmly entrenched narrow beauty ideal is worthwhile, and we agree. Nevertheless, we contend that it is possible to pursue these goals without appropriating the language and destroying the efficacy of the original 'body positivity' movement.

6 Conclusion

We have argued that today's 'body positivity' movement is a violent, harmful act of co-opting, one which further marginalizes the very people it initially aimed to protect. As the movement has become inextricably tied up with a fight to un-norm beauty norms and combat the crisis in confidence that these instil, what was originally a movement aiming towards respect, dignity, adequate medical care, and justice for fat people, has further entrenched the fatphobia it initially sought to eradicate. Moreover, this marginalization helps foster further social stigma around fatness, which in turn perpetuates legal and structural inequalities against fat people.

It is crucial that we critically reflect on our learned fat-phobia and the ways in which the 'body positivity' movement has shifted over time, hurting the very groups it aimed to protect. As Dionne argues,

> body positivity can't focus on thin, white women and simultaneously tackle discrimination against fat, trans, and disabled people. Expanding legal protections must be the focus [of the body positivity movement], otherwise the outcomes of our lives will continue to be determined by fatpho-

> bia, transphobia, and ableism. Until body positivity centres that, the message will continue to be that all bodies are good bodies, but some bodies are still treated better than others. (Dionne 2017)

There is a genuine question regarding the best way to continue and to navigate the current 'body positivity' movement. Given its extensive popularisation, it would be difficult (if even possible) to return the movement to its rightful owners without first educating people on the oppressive structures which gave rise to the movement in the first place.

Regarding the aims of self-empowerment that have overtaken the current movement, Sonya Renee Taylor's concept of 'radical self-love' may be of use to resist the beauty ideal (2018). This concept allows people to tear down self-judgment and body shame, both of which are a result of "ancient, toxic messages about bodies" (Taylor 2018, 10). Radical self-love is an ongoing process that requires an ability to recognize and accept differences in bodies, experience, and lives, and to accept and refuse to apologize for your own body (Ibid 19-24). Moreover, this movement requires critical reflection on the commercialization of beauty in order to unpack the harmful learned prejudices we have developed against certain body types. With time, Taylor argues, we can and should learn to unpack our desire to apologize for our bodies, dismantling body-based hierarchies and challenging our learned assumptions about bodies, health, and shame (Ibid 33-34).

Regardless of whether we focus on this aim of body neutrality or radical self-love (or a combination of the two), it is crucial that we recognize how corporations have perpetuated body discrimination and self-hate in ways that uphold oppressive institutions and policies in society. It is only through recognition of this destructive pattern that we can begin to confront a fat-phobic society and address the aims of the initial 'body positivity' movement.

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