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Embodying a Different Word about Fat: The Need for Critical Feminist Theologies of Fat Liberation

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Abstract: In contemporary Western society, fatness speaks for itself, affirming the fat person as an aesthetic and moral failure even before they say a word. Fat bodies, and fat female bodies in particular, are produced and reproduced as sites of excess and obscenity. Christian theology has protected itself from the contaminating touch of fat by ignoring fatness in theological discourse. Especially concerning is the relative absence of ‘fat talk’ from liberation and feminist theologies. It is time for a different word to be offered on fat that does not speak for itself and that emerges from the lived experiences of diverse women as they interpret their own faith and fatness. This essay explores the need for critical feminist theologies on fat liberation and identifies some features they might display. Here, I discuss Feminist Participatory Action Research and ethnography as methodologies that might help feminist theologians researching fat to prioritise the overlooked bodies and stories of fat women, and to continue liberation theology’s longstanding commitment to constructing historical projects oriented towards social change. Fat liberation, as a historical and theological project, calls for a ‘conversion’ to fatness and for a critical questioning of assumed ‘truths’ about fat. It positions the struggle against fat hatred as a pursuit of life and as faithful participation in the liberating activity of the God of Life.

Keywords: fat; women; feminist theologies; Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR); ethnography; solidarity; conversion



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1. Introduction

According to Marcella Althaus-Reid (2004, p. 158), theological thinking that transcends the politics of limits placed on women’s bodies necessarily leads to ‘indecent, unfitting and transgressive theologies’, theologies that refuse to be domesticated and civilised. Such theologies, she claims, always produce uncomfortable feelings because they engage in ‘honest talk’. In contemporary Western culture, fat, and women’s fat in particular, is a symbol of indecency. Representing too much appetite, too much corporeality, and (thus) too much femininity, fat bodies are produced and reproduced as sites of excess and obscenity. Christian theology has protected itself from the contaminating touch of fat by refusing to engage in honest ‘fat talk’. This is alarming given the way fat phobia and weight-based stigma are destroying the lives of multitudes of people across the globe, especially women, contributing to a range of intersecting inequalities including economic, sexuality, and race disparities (C. Cooper 1998, 2016; Solovay and Rothblum 2009). Especially concerning is the relative absence of fat from liberation theologies and feminist theologies, given the ways in which fat is gendered and informed by other forms of prejudice, constituting a considerable site of marginalisation.

In this essay, I argue that there is an urgent need for an expanse of critical feminist theologies of fat liberation that draw on the lived experiences of diverse Christian women from within the fat community. I set out some of the historical, methodological, and hermeneutical commitments of such theologies as I imagine them, charging liberation theologies with opting for the ‘“decent” poor’ (T. Cooper 2021, p. 39) and with ignoring

the existence of ‘indecent’ nobodies. Fat persons, and fat women especially, are among the indecent ‘non-human’ nobodies that liberation theologies have overlooked. Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation are, thus, crucial. These theologies will develop thick descriptions of ‘liberation’ drawn from a sustained engagement with diverse women’s lived experiences of being fat, and commit to concrete actions that resource the flourishing of fat women’s lives in defiance of fat shame. If the body is a place of divine revelation, then there is a need for a different ‘word’ or (more precisely) ‘words’ to be offered on fat, which originate from the uncensored bodies of ordinary fat Christian women and from valuing their flesh as sacred. Such feminist theologies of liberation will develop in conversation with the critical discipline of fat studies, and will do more than simply give voice to fat women; they will call Christian communities of all sizes towards a ‘conversion’ to fatness. If the task of liberation theologies is to locate voices that have been silenced and claim those voices in an act of embodied solidarity, then the challenge to ordinary Christians and to liberation theology is to *GET FAT!*

2. Searching for the Fat Christ/a

Where is the fat Christa? This is a question asked by feminist practical theologian, Nicola Slee, as she reflects on the multiple images and forms of Christa. We might join her in her query given that Christa—the female Christ—has been imaged in ways that support White cultural expectations about beauty and bodily perfection. Slee, as a poet, finds the fat Christa in the enormous body of the world, ‘diffused in the dimpled flesh of the earth’ (Slee 2011, p. 141). However, we might need to extend the search even wider because it is not just the fat Christ/a that has been missing from much theology, including feminist theologies, but any serious engagement with fatness more generally. Mary Bringle’s (1992) *The God of Thinness*, Lisa Isherwood’s (2007) more recent *The Fat Jesus*, and my own *Feminist Theology and Contemporary Dieting Culture* (2019) are the only theological works to date that offer sustained theological engagements with fatness. In religious studies, at the intersections of religion and gender, there has been slightly more attention paid to fat embodiment by scholars such as Michelle Lelwica in *Starving for Salvation* (Lelwica 1999), *The Religion of Thinness* (Lelwica 2010), and *Shameful Bodies* (Lelwica 2017); by Lynne Gerber (2011) in *Seeking the Straight and Narrow*, by Susan Hill (2011) in *Eating to Excess*, and by R. Marie Griffith (2004) in *Born Again Bodies*. However, these works tend to focus on thinness or so-called ‘eating disorders’, and do not seek to construct alternative theologies about fat or to engage faith with the political struggle against sizeism. Where fat liberation is discussed from the point of view of scholarship and activism is within the critical discipline of fat studies. However, this discipline has been slow to consider the intersections between fat and religion, to the same extent as theology and religious studies have been slow to engage with the insights of fat studies (Gerber et al. 2015, pp. 82–91).

In feminist liberation theology, Lisa Isherwood has offered a rich theological engagement with cultural obsessions with thinness and related fears regarding fat. She imagines the search for liberation as the struggle to resist the desire-denying forces of heteropatriarchy and Christianity, both of which feed into contemporary thin-centric culture, setting up the skinny, young female body as normative. According to her, fat bodies reveal the truth of incarnation by occupying space without apology and ‘in a way that violates the rules of sexual politics and of body movement’ (Isherwood 2007, p. 103). She offers the Fat Jesus in celebration of fat women’s bodies and desires, and as a sensual Jesus who lives counterculturally, proclaiming God’s kingdom through food and through an embodied physical connection with the untouchables of his day. This is a Jesus connected to the flesh rather than a Christ who floats above it, and a Jesus who embraces the flesh with riotous passion, calling us to do the same.

My own work on slimming culture provides a feminist theological account of fat liberation resourced by qualitative fieldwork inside a UK secular commercial weight-loss group. Exposing how the Christian nomenclature of ‘Syn’ is recycled by weight-loss organisation and how women’s salvation narratives reproduce dominant theological ideas

about embodiment and perfection, I reimagine the theological tropes of sin and salvation in ways that resist the politics of fat hatred. I align salvation with the daily cultivation of fat pride and with the personal and communal practice of a ‘Sabbath sensibility’ that dares to rest from the frenetic sacrificial work of burning fat. I also imagine salvation as the practice of ‘sensible eating’—an approach to food that refuses to take leave of the senses and that embraces greater levels of attachment to eating. I identify sin with sizeism, with the victimization of food, and with a divided self that is ‘conditioned to enact its own dismemberment’ (Bacon 2019, p. 216).

While such feminist theological contributions have been important for taking fatness, and women’s fat specifically, out of the closet, in so doing they potentially illuminate one reason fatness has failed to take up space in Christian theologies.

3. The Failing of Liberation Theology: A Preference for the ‘Decent’ Poor

In Western culture, fat is viewed as indecent and unsightly, and fat bodies frequently rendered invisible. Despite being ever present in the commercial media and at the forefront of medical, psychological, and capitalist discourses, they are erased by these very same discourses—pathologized and declared unclean (Brazier and LeBesco 2001, pp. 1–15; LeBesco 2004, pp. 1–9; Kent 2001, pp. 130–52). Conjured as diseased or impaired, morally weak, and as a drain on a nation’s economic resources, fat people are seen as freakish and monstrous, and take up the position of the spectacle. In postmodern capitalist patriarchal society, there is no room for alternative interpretations of fat. One possible explanation for the paucity of theologies focusing on fat is that fat is assumed to be unsightly in theology and is best kept out of view. Whether wittingly or not, fat may be assumed to be so obviously obscene that its absence from theological conversation is deemed unproblematic if it is noticed in the first place.

In feminist and other liberation theologies, we might expect a more serious engagement with fat, not least because of how fat phobia feeds financial markets, commodifies thinness, and acquiesces with the neoliberal capitalist ruse of limitless choice and self-improvement (Guthman and DuPuis 2006; Guthman 2009). Feminists have identified how Western philosophical thought has associated a lack of self-control with women and reason with the intellectual pursuits of men (e.g., Grosz 1994, pp. 4, 14), exposing fat phobia, in part, as an outworking of patriarchy and the commodified pursuit of self-improvement as an attempt to make women responsible for their own surveillance. Theologically, corporeality and a lack of self-control have also been identified with women and with sin, glimpsed in early Christian interpretations of Genesis that present Eve as ‘the devil’s gateway’ (Tertullian 1995, II.1.1), and that see her lust for food as the reason for Adam’s sin (e.g., Augustine 2002, 12.12.17). This is largely due to the influence of Greek metaphysics, where matter was often denigrated and viewed as a threat to the operation of reason (Grosz 1994, p. 5). In this philosophical system, fat occupied the symbolic space of the female and was aligned with excessiveness and with a lack of restraint. Aristotle, for example, identified corporeality with softness and softness with incontinence, the female, and corpulence (Brazier 2001, pp. 231–40). Such assumptions about bodies and fatness have shaped the Western cultural imaginary and fuelled a suspicion of corporeality that establishes women’s bodies as cultural carriers of guilt and shame, and women’s fat as an especial site of danger. If fat is feminine, then women’s fat is doubly feminine, and doubly dangerous. This is reflected in Western culture, where, as Le’a Kent (2001, p. 61) rightly observes, ‘real women’ are expected to be ‘thin, nearly invisible’. Fat women are often accused of ‘letting themselves go’, and this exposes fat oppression as carrying ‘the less-than-subtle message that women are forbidden to take up space (...) or resources’ (Kent 2001, p. 66). The absence of fat talk from theological debate thus assists with keeping fat bodies out of sight and in their place.

However, the obvious relevance of fat to feminist and other liberation theologies makes its absence from these theological settings alarming. This difficulty, I suggest, is reflective of a wider problem in liberation theology, which Marcella Althaus-Reid helps illuminate. Charging early liberationists with failing to go beyond a ‘gender-tolerance model’, she

accuses early liberation theologies of including gender and sexuality without ‘question[ing] further’ how the pursuit of social and economic justice was supported by colonial ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 24). Liberation theologies were only concerned with including *some* of the nobodies of the Church and theology (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 26), and so only sought to include the “‘decent’ poor’ (T. Cooper 2021, p. 39)—the poor conceived as ‘male, generally peasant, vaguely indigenous, Christian and heterosexual’ (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 27). As such, the project of liberation theology ‘did not set out chairs for poor women, or poor gays—or at least it never did so willingly’ (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 27). Its message of love and justice did not stretch to those outside the decent structures of monogamy and the patriarchal family, and functioned as colonial theology to conform the poor of Latin America to European norms. Such a refusal of difference and tight control over who constitutes the poor, Althaus-Reid thus suggests, means that liberationists often continued to work in a colonial ‘military mode’ (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 28), characterised by rigidity and authoritarianism rather than disruption. Crucially, they failed to attend to the realities of the poor as people of different sexual and gender identities.

I want to suggest that the projects of feminist and liberation theologies have served in similar ways to demarcate which women’s bodies are allowed to count as nobodies in need of theological attention and inclusion. While this is not a new charge given the way feminist theologies have sometimes ignored the voices of women of colour, overlooked gender diversity, and failed to adequately address the intersections between genders, class, race, sexualities, and dis/ability, the failure of feminist theologies to ‘question further’ and set out (larger) chairs for fat women suggests fat women are part of the indecent nobodies that have been forgotten. If liberation theologies have closed their eyes to the colonial ideologies of gender, race, and class, then it is my charge that feminist liberation theologies have similarly ignored fat bodies and insufficiently attended to how a diversity of women from across contexts are normed according to a White colonial thin ideal.

Liberation theology has also been charged with losing sight of one of its primary tasks: the construction of historical projects. According to Ivan Petrella, although Latin American liberation theology was born with the promise of not only talking about liberation, but helping achieve it by freeing people from material deprivation, it now struggles to imagine and develop such concrete historical projects (Petrella 2006, p. vii). Theology has been separated from institutions and from the historical and political task of devising concrete alternatives to the oppressive status quo. As such, it has been ‘excused from dealing with the reality of massive social misery’ (Petrella 2006, p. ix). This disconnect has meant that key principles of liberation theology such as ‘liberation’, ‘the reign of God’, and ‘God’s preferential option for the poor’ have been separated from historical action and abstracted from the content of theology (Petrella 2006, p. 13).

The relative silence of liberation theologies on fat oppression evidences a similar disconnect. If the task of liberation theologies is to connect theology to institutions and rethink oppressive social structures, then they have not helped much with this yet when it comes to fat. Apart from the contributions of Isherwood and Bacon liberation theologies have not connected the good news of the gospel to revolt against the oppressive social system of sizeism, but the task could not be more urgent. As Prohaska and Gailey (2019, p. 2) observe, ‘the oppression of people who are fat is systematic and systemic, as negative ideologies about fat pervade societal institutions’. Indeed, a number of social institutions are implicated in the re/production of sizeism, including health, political, and media institutions. In terms of health, we only need look at the medicalisation of ‘obesity’ to see how anti-fat discourse shapes health policy and practice. In England, the Department of Health and Social Care (2020) cautions that obesity is ‘storing up future problems for individuals and our NHS’ and warns that fat people are more likely to die from COVID-19, to suffer with poor physical and mental health, and are creating a drain on public finances, not to mention placing unwarranted pressure on health and care services. The solution, according to Public Health England’s *Better Health* campaign (NHS 2021), is to empower fat people to make ‘healthier choices’ and to support those ‘in need’ to lose

weight through ‘weight management’ programs. The implication is that fat is an ‘obvious’ result of individual faulty choices and unhealthiness, and that the only responsible action is for the individual to remove it.

In the Euro–American news media, fat is presented as ‘impending disaster’ (Saguy and Almeling 2008, p. 53) and fat people are frequently pictured without heads with their faces cropped out of view. This identifies fat people as tragic and monstrous and confirms that fat people have no right to speak and nothing of value to say (C. Cooper 2007). In Euro–American politics, fat is framed as a risk to a nation’s safety, described by the US Surgeon General appointed by President Bush six months after 9/11 as ‘the terror within every bit as real to America as the weapons of mass destruction’ (CNN 2003). Of course, the weapons of mass destruction did not turn out to be ‘real’, but such anti-fat sentiment shores up cultural assumptions that present fat as an enemy that must be neutralised.

By presenting fat as fault and as danger, such health, political, and media institutions enable fat people to become the financial fodder of capitalist weight loss industries, fuelling a culture where fat shaming and fat blaming are not only acceptable, but defended as necessary. They also conveniently cement associations between fatness and ill health when health professionals and fat activists have shown that fat does not necessarily correlate with unhealthiness. While studies show that high BMI sometimes accompanies other health conditions, they do not show that it causes them. Not only are diseases often associated with high BMI such as cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes present among thinner people, some studies suggest that higher BMIs are actually related to lower rates of cancer and heart disease (Oliver 2006, p. 26). Some health complaints often linked with being fat, such as high blood pressure, may be caused by stress related to fat stigma and conditions such as adverse body fat distribution and high blood pressure produced by weight cycling (Burgard 2009, pp. 46–47). Furthermore, studies that claim to link BMI with ill health tend not to control for variables known to impact this relationship, such as socio-economic status and levels of physical activity (Burgard 2009, p. 46). The ability to access fresh food and good nutrition, medical care, and exercise as well as over access to high-fat, high-calorie food plays a significant role in determining the health outcomes of individuals, and it is often those from minoritized communities, for example, those on lower incomes and from minority ethnic groups, who are especially impacted. In the US, 1 in 5 African American and 1 in 6 Latino households are food insecure, with non-Hispanic Whites accounting for 42.8% of US people in poverty in 2017, Blacks accounting for 21.2%, and Asians for 10% (Fontenot et al. 2018, p. 14). The preponderance of fast-food outlets and convenience stores offering cheap, high-energy, poor-quality food in low socio-economic areas where many already minoritized people do not have the time or money to prepare nutritious food from scratch means that poorer women, and in the US, often non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian, and Hispanic women more specifically, are especially at risk. That women are routinely at the forefront of such inequalities is not surprising given they often shoulder the responsibility to procure, prepare, and serve food. Given the demands of work, childcare, and other caring responsibilities that women are often heavily involved in, fast food industries especially harm and victimize women’s bodies by offering inexpensive options that are nutritionally poor (Yancey et al. 2006, p. 433).

Fat stigma is also linked to structures of racial prejudice and to the global spread of Western values. According to sociologist Sabrina Strings, during the renaissance in Europe, the fuller female figure was celebrated, but this shifted in the 18th century with the development of the slave trade. As slavery became more established, size as well as skin colour came to be a way to distinguish people into racial groups. Europeans were assumed to be the most well-disciplined and rational racial group and Black people—Black women in particular—were assumed to be stupid, gluttonous, and self-indulgent, loving food and sex; Black people were thus assumed to be fat and White people assumed to be thin. Fatness came to be linked to Blackness in the European imagination, seen as evidence of savagery and barbarism, and thinness linked to Whiteness and civility. These associations,

she argues, continue in the European imagination to this day, lurking behind contemporary phobias about fat (Strings 2019).

Theologies of fat liberation must thus attend to such structural inequalities and analyse the complex ways in which anti-fatness intersects with other systems of prejudice. Gender remains a key denominator in fat oppression because fat women often do not have the same life chances and social outcomes as thinner people. In employment, for example, evidence suggests that fat women are more adversely impacted by weight-based discrimination than their male counterparts at a number of levels, including hiring, promotion, performance, evaluation, and compensation (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012, p. 576). They are often paid less and can be fired or suspended because of their size. Fat women experience higher rates of household poverty and receive lower hourly and lifetime earnings than thinner people (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012, p. 577). Women who are fat and transgender are likely to experience significant barriers to participating in mainstream society (Vade and Solovay 2009, p. 167) and fat women may experience higher levels of poverty, not because fatness causes chronically poor health, but because fat discrimination often results in unemployment or low-paid work. The racist underpinnings of fat hatred in Europe and America previously outlined also expose its links with Western colonialism, which makes it unsurprising perhaps that fat phobia is now shaping women's perceptions of body image across cultures and ethnicities (Isono et al. 2009, pp. 127–38). Michelle Lehwica describes the White, thin, affluent, able-bodied, and heterosexual feminine ideal as a 'colonial paradigm' (Lehwica et al. 2009, p. 32) because it norms all women's bodies according to this narrow White Eurocentric template. All of these examples suggest that fat women are subject to various forms of interpersonal and institutional violence.

4. Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR): A Disruptive Praxis of 'Critical Hope'

If feminist and liberation theologies have overlooked fat oppression, but are concerned with understanding and critically responding to institutional, systematic, and systemic forms of dehumanisation, then it is time for feminist liberation theologies to develop historical projects around fatness so that new words can be offered about fat. Such work needs to move beyond a Christian form of 'body positivity', which remains rooted in the politics of thinness and only affirms fat people who wish to be thinner or who continue to worry about their weight (Harrison 2021, pp. 4–6). This common rendering of body positivity is problematic because it lacks any real political weight. It reduces fat liberation to the internal work of self-love when the reality is that self-love will not eradicate the methodical and systemic violence of fat hatred. Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation will instead concern themselves with the radical revolutionary work of disrupting dominant ideologies around fatness. This means exposing and critically analysing how the politics of anti-fatness are resourced by Christian systems of thought and are supported by the politics of race, class, sexuality, ability, age, and gender. It also means attending to the way anti-fatness is normalised through ideological systems such as neo-liberalism, capitalism, and colonialism, as well as reshaping theologies to dismantle these systems. To do this, critical feminist theologies of fat liberation will need to follow liberation theologies in engaging with social sciences, but must draw on the insights of fat studies in particular (I will explore this point in more detail later). Such engagement should not only be used to illuminate the contemporary social situation of fat hatred, but should also be given constructive theological significance as it could help imagine historical projects to change the status quo and improve the lived experiences of fat women that are diminished by fat hatred. The political project of fat liberation is thus a theological project because it is a matter of bringing together God's reign of justice with building and transforming the world.

Isherwood's *The Fat Jesus* and my own *Feminist Theology and Contemporary Dieting Culture* heed to this political challenge in many ways, but neither work engages with the real lives of fat women. Although my work on size is ethnographic, none of the women I

interviewed spoke about themselves as fat. Isherwood's work engages with the ways in which fear of fat is informed by a wider fear of flesh, and female flesh more specifically, but she does not draw on the real lived experiences of fat women. We might thus wonder where the voices and bodies of fat women are in current feminist theological work on weight. Indeed, it seems to me that even if we have found the fat Christa/Fat Jesus, we are still missing the concrete voices, bodies, and lives of fat women!

Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) provides one methodological framework that can position fat women's experiences at the centre of feminist theologies of fat and engage theology with the historical project of fat liberation. Following the trajectory of liberation theologies, this approach begins with the 'non-person', but does not seek an abstract universal or fixed notion of 'liberation'. Instead, it is driven to pursue concrete forms of action—personal, communal, political, spiritual, and religious—that are determined by fat women.

FPAR brings together feminist research with participatory action research to form what Reid et al. (2006, pp. 93–94) describe as a democratic research process directed towards social transformation, founded on the lived experiences of diverse women. This process situates the researched group as co-researchers with shared responsibility for creating knowledge and forms of social action that disrupt hegemonic systems of power. It attends to how social relations are embodied in women's everyday lives and how women's diverse and divergent experiences are embedded within larger relations of power. FPAR also employs an intersectional lens that recognises the complexities of women's experiences and the multiple ways in which various forms of oppression interlink, allowing for more meaningful possibilities for activism and social change. It is committed to making diverse women's voices more audible by allowing women space to narrate their own stories and ordinary lives.

As a methodology to aid feminist theologies of at liberation, FPAR situates the feminist researcher *alongside* fat women at the centre of the research and frames the research as a collaborative, participatory process. Here, fat women are not the objects of study, but are instead subjects with agency to influence the research process. My own research interests as a feminist Christian are moving towards investigating the theological meanings of fat from the perspectives of the experience of self-identifying fat Christian women, as well as exploring and transforming the barriers fat women experience in Church and society, especially around developing a positive body image. Based on the lack of feminist theological reflection on fat and on how fat is often constructed theologically as a site of sin, I am keen to explore with fat women how different women's lived experiences of faith and fatness can contribute to changes in thought and action, thus lending content to the meaning of fat liberation. However, by choosing to employ a feminist participatory methodology in my future research, focussing on the lived experiences of fat women, I aim to involve fat women in deciding what specific problems to address concerning fatness and the courses of action to pursue in the struggle for fat justice. This will involve using self-identifying fat women to assist in co-designing the research methods with me, as well as taking part in the data collection, analysis, and dissemination (c.f. Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014, p. 316). In this respect, this methodology emerges as a form of fat activism and as a radical theological praxis of fat liberation because it positions fat women as producers of theological knowledge and affirms their bodies as sacred. It affords space for a diversity of fat Christian women to voice their own lives and makes their 'unsightly' fat bodies visible, confronting the theo-politics of indecency that erase them with new words about fat that emerge from their own fat embodiments.

This feminist theological approach to fat liberation can also be seen as a form of 'research justice', defined by fat activist C. Cooper (2013) as 'rocket-powered ethics', which offers a paradigm for creating accountability towards the people on whom fat research is focused. Rather than speaking *for* or *about* fat women, it considers fat women as agents of knowledge, research, and social change. It is rooted in a feminist epistemology that recognises that 'the best knowers about fatness are fat people [...] that fat people are

the appropriate people to produce knowledge about fatness' (Pausé et al. 2021, p. 538). Such a 'fat ethic' insists that it is morally incumbent on feminist researchers to include fat women in research about fat women and to recognise that fat women deserve to be self-determining (Pausé et al. 2021, p. 543f). Feminist theological participatory action research—as a form of research justice—thus politicises women's fat by making fat embodiment a resource for thinking, speaking, and acting theologically. Understood this way, it engages in participatory forms of 'honest talk' by bringing together fat Christian women to speak their flesh and bring their fat out into the open.

This is politically important because fat is often considered to speak for itself in contemporary Western culture. According to feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (1995, pp. 34–35), bodies often speak without talking because they become coded with signs, laws, norms, and ideals. Drawing on Grosz, feminist Samantha Murray states that fat bodies are routinely read as immoral, seen to already confess a 'truth' about the inner self. The fat body 'stands as an *exhibition* of a subject's moral investment in health/normality', she claims, exposing the fat person as a failure even before they say a word (Murray 2008, pp. 69–70). Critical feminist theologies regarding fat liberation will challenge this orthodoxy around fatness by redefining fatness on the basis of fat women's speech about their own bodies. In so doing, they have the potential to offer transgressive, uncomfortable theological words on fat that refuse to acquiesce with the status quo. Such theologies thus have the potential to engender what Cahill et al. (2010, p. 150) refer to as a feminist praxis of 'critical hope', where 'what could be, is sought; where what has been, is critiqued; and where what is, is troubled'.

This methodological framework does not insist that feminist theologians researching fat must themselves be or identify as fat. I am not fat and do not experience the social exclusion and marginalisation of being fat. I am, however, also not thin and am aware of the way my body is culturally read as being 'not thin enough'. I have not experienced weight-based discrimination in employment and have usually been able to shop for clothes on the high street (for example), but I have always been aware of my size growing up, compared with my twin sister as the 'chubbier' one, and immersed within cultural discourses that make me see my body as too big. I have felt the need to be smaller and have engaged in weight-loss dieting to try and become smaller (Bacon 2019).

Although I do not identify as fat, I do not position myself as an outsider to the diminishing touch of fat phobia and see fatness as a slippery, undecided category. Despite weight measures such as the body mass index (BMI) seemingly offering objective clinical evaluations of bodies, the classifications used of 'overweight' and 'obese' have changed and shifted over time and in tandem with social attitudes and prejudices about body size. BMI is also often used by insurance companies to increase premiums and was developed originally based on a narrow White European template. As such, it does not offer an objective metric of a person's health. It is also possible to be clinically 'overweight' and not look fat or to be clinically underweight and 'feel' fat. Fat, then, is not self-evident and cannot be reduced simply to a 'visible stigma' (Saguy and Ward 2011).

Such a reading of fat does not, however, deny that fat is an adjective that describes the amount of flesh on a person's body. It simply avoids falling into the trap of essentialism, where fat is assumed to be self-evident and wedded only to a visual economy. It takes account of the way fat phobia impacts multitudes of women of various sizes and acknowledges that women's bodies often change over time. Fat is also a claimed site of marginalisation; an experience of being situated in a thincentric society where women's bodies are made to conform to narrow spaces (physical, social, cultural, political, and discursive) and where women who transgress these prescribed boundaries are made to feel as if they do not belong. If fat is an unstable category that can have multiple meanings—physical, discursive, and political—then insisting that feminist theologians researching fat must be 'fat' seems too simplistic and reliant on the (mis)conception that fat speaks for itself. Instead, feminist research on fat invites women theologians such as myself who

research fat, but who do not identify as fat, to reflect on their own privilege, power, and obligations (C. Cooper 2016, p. 38).

Of course, such an emphasis on participation in the doing of fat feminist theologies of liberation may underestimate the real or perceived risks of participation for some fat women (c.f. Reid et al. 2006, p. 326). The impact of fat stigma on the health and wellbeing of fat women, as well as the multiple ways in which fat women are disenfranchised within society and church, may cause some involved in this kind of participatory research to feel powerless and/or afraid to take collective action. Current political discourse on fat in Euro-American society certainly does not encourage any such collective organising and instead works to personalise and moralise fat. We have already noted how Christianity can assist with this, but American fat activist J. Nicole Morgan draws this into sharp focus. Reflecting on her own experience as an evangelical Christian teenager, she recalls how she used to think fatness was associated with a lack of self-control and became ‘terrified’ that her ‘witness’ would be sabotaged by the size of her thighs (Morgan 2015; also see Morgan 2018, p. xiv). Such theological constructions of fat, taken together with wider cultural stigmas, may cause some women to be reticent about challenging the theological and wider cultural cannon about fat. Some may fear family, work colleagues, or members of their churches finding out about their involvement. This must be taken seriously because, as C. Cooper (1998, p. 54) pertinently puts it, ‘we live in the real world’ and this is a world where there is frequently much to gain from being or aspiring to be thin, and consequently much to lose by coming out as fat and organising for fat justice. As such, it is possible that some actions will be considered too risky or threatening, and a ‘fat ethic’, where priority is placed on relationships, must be sensitive to this. These kinds of difficulties mean that feminist theologians must appreciate the many diverse individual and collective actions fat women may take.

5. Ethnography and Solidarity: Conversion Rather Than Allyship

Ethnography offers a valuable theological tool that allows feminist theologians to practice a preferential option for fat people and to epistemically prioritize the voices and stories of fat women, specifically as indecent nobodies. Empirical fieldwork and the use of immersive qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and different kinds of participation (physical, social, mental, emotion, spiritual, and theological) provide opportunities for feminist theologians to enter the social, cultural, and religious worlds of fat women. Ethnography allows Christian feminists to discern the sacred in fat women’s lives and confirms fat women’s bodies as sites of theological truth and divine presence. Where feminist theologians do not identify as fat, ethnography provides a strategy for bridging the gap between themselves and women who experience the lived realities of fat existence. It enables feminist theologians to develop thick descriptions of sizeism and to attend to the complex and varied meanings of fatness and faith from the point of view of those within the fat community. It also allows feminist researchers to engage in attentive listening through observations, interviews, and other methods—a form of listening that Nicola Slee identifies with the spiritual practice of prayer (Slee 2013, p. 18). For Slee, attentive listening means that we listen with our bodies, our emotions, and our intellects and put ourselves at the other’s disposal, ‘letting them speak as and when and where they will’ (Slee 2013, p. 19).

Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation thus continue the task of liberation theologies in identifying liberation with the pursuit of *life* (c.f. Gutierrez 1991, p. 3; Gutierrez 1974). They involve feminist theologians alongside communities of fat Christian women entering into partnership with the Living God, who bids all humans be full with life (Jn 10.10), against the historical, systemic, and social evils of fat hatred, which stand to diminish life. As feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson makes clear, ‘living’ means not dead, and as living water is ‘fresh, alive, flowing’, the appellation of the living God conjures up a God who is ‘full of energy and spirit, alive with designs for liberation and healing’ (Johnson 1992, p. 4). Reforming Irenaeus’ axiom, she claims that ‘*Gloria Dei vivens mulier*: the glory

of God is woman, all women, every woman everywhere, fully alive' (Johnson 1992, p. 15). Feminist theologies of fat liberation that interrogate the systemic conditions of diverse fat women's experiences of fat stigma and work towards different levels of collective action in the struggle for fat justice, are pursuits of God's glory and offer ways of materialising the livingness and aliveness—the *flourishing*—of fat women. They are theological performances of justice making or 'love making', as feminist theologian Carter Heyward (1984, p. 146) would put it, and are crucial to the re-creation and redemption of church and society.

Theologically, this brings to the fore the importance of 'solidarity' as a critical task of feminist theologies of fat liberation. A key principle in liberation theologies, solidarity insists that individuals and communities participate in the liberating activity of God through identification with the marginalised. According to Black liberation theologian James Cone, the meaning of God's revelation is found in God's liberative activity of siding with the oppressed. To be in relationship with this God means to join God in this plight—to struggle with the unfree for freedom from sin and for relationship with God and others. Cone thus writes that '[k]nowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming *one* with them, and participating in the goal of liberation'. He goes on to claim that '[w]e must become black with God!' (Cone 2010, p. 69). For Cone, becoming Black with God does not mean those racialised as White taking pity on the Black community; it means receiving the gift of Blackness as a gift of salvation from God, and joining God in the work of liberation (Cone 2010, p. 70).

Cone speaks about this as 'a radical reorientation of one's existence in the world' where those racialised as White turn away from their Whiteness and take on the Blackness of God (Cone 2010, p. 103); where they 'die to whiteness' (Cone 1997, p. 222) and cooperate with the Black Christ as he liberates his people from bondage (Cone 2010, pp. 135–36). For Cone, theologically speaking, this is a call towards 'conversion' (Cone 2010, p. 103; Cone 2008, p. 81) and towards a conversion to *Blackness* specifically. It requires those racialised as White to join the oppressed Black community and it requires a total transformation of the White person's self and a commitment to action, not just words (Cone 2008, p. 82).

Ethnography allows feminist theologians researching fat to practice solidarity by converting to *fatness*. If God is the Living God who calls all women everywhere to be fully alive, then conversion to fatness means rebellion against sizeist systems of violence and a refusal to collude with the powers of thin culture that thwart life. With Cone, we can say that this Living God has 'made the oppressed condition God's own condition', seen in God's liberation of the Israelites in the exodus, in the incarnation of Jesus, and through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit as she breathes God's life into the world (Cone 2010, p. 67). If 'God is known where humans experience humiliation and suffering', and in contemporary Western society it is the case that fat people, and fat women especially, experience dehumanisation through weight-based discrimination, stigma, and oppression, then *God is fat*, and, furthermore, *God is a fat woman*. To become fat is to join the Living God in God's fatness, to share in God's word of 'NO!' to fatism, and to actively participate in God's divine liberating and life-giving movement of justice.

Solidarity also expresses with confidence that God is *for* rather than *against* fat people and fat women. It emerges not only as a methodological feature of critical feminist theological ethnographies of fat, but as an ethical challenge to the church to actively participate in God's life and thus in the liberation of the oppressed. To become fat, however, is more than allyship. It is true that feminist theory and activism have stressed the importance of being an ally, accomplice, or co-conspirator for establishing coalitions across differences (Beltrán and Mehrotra 2015). However, fat allyship can play into the hands of thin privilege, allowing those who are thin/ner to feel good about themselves by offering tokenistic support without taking the risk of joining fat people in the political struggle against sizeism. In this sense, allyship threatens to be simply performative and risks reconstituting rather than resisting the anti-fat machinery of power. The language of 'accomplice' or 'co-conspirator' has been suggested to avoid this disassociation with political action and as a challenge to the way allyship has been commodified within neoliberal capitalism. However, all of these

terms lack theological content. Although accomplice or co-conspirator could suggest a form of plotting with God in acts of rebellion against the dominant system, the role of accomplice or co-conspirator does not need to have theological meaning or motivation. Conversion, on the other hand, suggests a spiritual transformation and an intentional faith decision to side with fat people. It suggests a full-bodied, total-self investment in challenging fat phobia as a form of sin and identifies rebellion against sizeism as an agential participation in the salvific activity of a fat God.

6. Feminist Theologies of Fat Liberation as *Critical Theologies*: Engaging with the Critical Discipline of Fat Studies

To end, I want to outline how feminist theologies of fat liberation might serve as *critical theologies*. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1975, p. 607) argues that the task of a critical feminist theology of liberation is to tender a ‘feminist critique of culture’ and to remind the church of its ‘constant need for renewal’ (Fiorenza 1975, p. 612). With this in mind, I hold that feminist theologies of fat liberation will need to be critical in a number of ways. They will need to engage seriously with the criticisms of Latin American liberation theology and other forms of liberation theology, as I have started to express above; they will need to unmask thin culture and offer a critique of the current social situation of fat oppression, locating individual and community experience within the wider social system of anti-fatness and in relation to gender, race, class, dis/ability, sexuality, and other intersecting forms of identity. Related to this, they will need to interrogate the roots of fat phobia in interlocking systems of power, including misogyny, patriarchy, neo-liberal capitalism, and racism (Strings 2019; Tovar 2018; Wann 2009). They will need to offer a critique of the church and how Christian systems of thought and practice, including doctrines, ecclesiologies, liturgies, and biblical interpretations, support institutional inequalities and ideological systems of violence against fat people, and fat women in particular, and they will also need to engage with the critical discipline of fat studies to challenge existing knowledge about fatness.

Engaging with the critical discipline of fat studies is crucial if feminist theologians are to understand the current social situation of weight-based stigma and imagine historical projects with the potential to rupture the status quo. In their editorial Introduction to *The Fat Studies Reader*, Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum describe fat studies as an interdisciplinary discipline ‘marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body’ (Solovay and Rothblum 2009, p. 2). It is a field of study that asks scholars to ‘interrupt’ their everyday thinking about fat and to question the questions that are being asked about fatness in the first place. Theologically, it chimes with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s invitation to practice a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and calls feminists to disentangle the ideological workings of current anti-fat discourse in society and in Christian religion. Just as critical race studies has questioned the category of race and considered what lies behind its usage, so critical fat studies questions how the category of fat has been constructed and asks what agendas are being served through such constructions in religion, public policy, and wider society.

Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation will challenge the structures of a society and culture that operate to keep fat people, and fat women in particular, in their place, and will explore the role Christian religion plays in assisting this. They will emerge from the ‘wound’ of sizeism and use this as a creative space for the production of new readings of Christian faith. They will seek out new cultural and theological images and languages; new forms of spiritual practice; and new Christian expressions of community that are reshaped by attending to the lives, voices, and bodies of fat women. The critical task of feminist theologies of fat liberation, similar to all liberation theologies, is to aid the transformation of Christian theologies, symbols, and institutions and the redemption of society; to offer what Fiorenza calls ‘prophetic criticism’ by daring to challenge ‘common sense’ about fatness as a Christian practice of ‘critical’ hope and as a performance of God’s radical reign of justice. The liberative horizons of such theologies would not serve as a motivation for constructing

new fixed theological orthodoxies around fatness, as this would constitute nothing but ‘colonial mimicry’ (T. Cooper 2021, p. 37), erecting a new static canon that risks the false universalization of diverse experiences. Instead, fat liberation will take many forms, calling for broader, more expansive—*fatter*—theologies.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, I have argued that within current liberation theologies, fatness remains almost invisible. Out of sight, fat people, and fat women in particular, take up the place in theology and in feminist liberation theologies that they occupy in wider society, as voiceless, invisible, and without value. This leaves the toxic workings of sizeism in place. It is time for a new word on fat that refuses to accept that fat bodies speak without needing to say a word. Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation will return face and speech to fat women and will depart from the lives and bodies of self-identified fat Christian women. Feminist Participatory Action Research and ethnography are methodologies that have the potential to help ensure fat women are at the centre of feminist theologies about fat and to connect theologies to the development of concrete historical projects. Fat liberation is a theological call towards a conversion to fatness. It unmasks thin privilege and calls it out of hiding. It demands a rejection of fat phobia and thin culture, together with its offering of thin privilege, and undertakes theology as advocacy for size acceptance. Conversion marks a turn away from the sin of sizeism towards change and action. It challenges ordinary Christians and the academic discipline of theology to *GET FAT* and to join God in actively working for fat justice. *Becoming fat* by identifying with fat women who experience dehumanization and marginalisation because of their size is a faithful response to God’s expansive love and a call to participate in the liberating activity of the God of Life.

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