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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4tq95737>

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Publication Date

2010-04-01

Fighting Fat Fear with Marilyn Wann

IF YOU WERE WALKING PAST

THE Dodd lecture hall on March 1st, you may have been startled to hear a group of people yelling “fat” at the top of their lungs. Usually, a single utterance, or worse, a cheerleading-style chant of the word “fat” is not a good thing—someone is probably being insulted or harassed. On this day,

however, activist/scholar Marilyn Wann asked the gathered students and faculty to do just this, to shout out the word “fat” to launch the beginning of her talk, “Fighting Fat Fear During the War on ‘Obesity.’” Wann’s talk was the third and final talk in the Center for the Study of Women’s Winter 2010 Faculty Curator lecture series, “Gender and

Body Size,” curated by Professor Abigail Saguy, Department of Sociology at UCLA.

For Wann, “fat” is the most neutral descriptor available and one that she embraces in her own self-description. “Fat” does not automatically carry the judgment that words like “overweight” or “plus-size” do; these words imply

Most importantly, love your body—it's the only one you've got and your love for it shouldn't be conditional.



that there is an ideal of which individuals are in excess. “Fat” is also devoid of the connotations and consequences of a word like “obese,” a category created and perpetuated by insurance companies, the medical industry, and government agencies to classify individuals as unhealthy and unworthy.

Wann has not always identified with the word “fat.” Her transformation into a fat activist was sparked by what she refers to as her “really bad day.” On the same day that she was denied health insurance coverage because she was considered “morbidly obese,” a man she was interested in

admitted that he was embarrassed to introduce her to his friends because she was fat. These two events led Wann to “come out” as fat. As Wann herself noted in the talk, the notion of “coming out as fat” seems counterintuitive. “It’s not as if it’s a secret,” Wann quipped, gesturing towards her body. Wann’s

invocation of the language of coming out, however, speaks to the profound personal and social difficulties most people have accepting, much less celebrating, their body size. Body size is often viewed as a transient state of being, a temporary state perpetually on the cusp of a diet-driven transformation. According to Wann, most people think to themselves, “This isn’t really me. In the future, I will be different.” This way of thinking is perpetuated by a multibillion dollar weight loss industry that encourages individuals to think of themselves as a constant work-in-progress, just one New Year’s resolution shy of “the real me.”

Since Wann’s “really bad day,” she has become a leading member

“If you can’t be at home in your body, where are you supposed to go?”

of the fat activist movement, becoming a board member of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), publishing the zine *Fat?So!* and a book of the same name, as well as performing with the Padded Lilies, the Phat Fly Girls, and the Bod Squad. She received national attention in 1999 when she organized a protest of a franchise fitness club at their San Francisco location, a story she recounted during her talk. The fitness club ran

a billboard advertising campaign featuring a space alien with the words, “When they come, they’ll eat the fat ones first.” In protest, Wann and other fat activists carried “Eat me” signs, handed out lollipops, and conducted their own aerobics class outside the gym. Their activities drew attention from both local and national media as well as from city officials. In response, San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors called for hearings to examine the



for people who don't apologize for their size

BMI (the Body Mass Index of fat culture)

Number of weight control services in the Oakland yellow pages: 55
Number of battered women's shelters in the Oakland yellow pages: 1
Percentage of clothing stores in Oakland that carry size 14 or larger: 10
Percentage of American women who wear a size 14 or larger: 40
Marilyn Monroe's dress size in 1960: 16
Twiggy's weight in pounds when she appeared on the cover of Vogue in 1967: 91
Number of times Twiggy graced the cover of Vogue that year: 4
Average hip measurement, in inches, of female department store mannequins between 1920 and 1950: 34 In 1993: 31
Average hip measurement, in inches, of a young adult woman in 1993: 37
Number of people who enrolled in commercial weight loss programs in 1991: 7.9 million
Amount of revenue, in dollars, those programs generated that year: 2 billion
Percentage of weight loss program enrollees who are women: 95
Percentage increase in likelihood that a woman will live in poverty if she is fat: 10
Sales price, in dollars, of the 17-year-old Weight Watchers Empire in 1978: 100 million
Number of dollars American businessmen sacrifice in salary for every pound they are overweight: 1,000
Average difference, in dollars, between a fat woman's household income and that of a thin woman: - 6,710
Percentage of dieters who will regain the weight they lose within three years: 95-98
Percentage of Americans who believe in miracles: 70

- compiled by Sondra Solovay

Sources: Pacific Bell Smart Yellow Pages; Glamour; MENSA Magazine; Working Woman, October, 1992; UC Berkeley School of Public Health Wellness Letter, December, 1993; Marketdata Enterprises; Never Too Thin, by Eva Szekely; the New England Journal of Medicine, September 30, 1993; Working Woman, October, 1992; New York Times article, Obesity: A Heavy Burden to Bear by Gina Kolata; the New England Journal of Medicine, September 30, 1993; the 1994 World Almanac.

Sondra Solovay is a performance artist currently operating undercover as a law student.

issue of weight discrimination, which led to the adoption of a height/weight anti-discrimination ordinance, making San Francisco one of only a few cities to have such an ordinance.

The San Francisco gym protest is indicative of Wann's general approach. If Wann is involved, there's a good chance that fun and humor are going to be involved, too. Indeed, the most striking aspect of her lecture was the amount of laughter that consistently filled the room. It is no small feat to take a subject that has a tendency to generate a great deal of anxiety and turn it into a source of inspiration, humor, and joy. This directly relates to the principles of Wann's "Health

at Every Size" philosophy: "Love your body, eat well, and go outside and play." This philosophy sounds a lot better than the principles of punishment and denial that typically accompany discussions of weight, eating, and exercise. Don't like celery sticks? Then don't eat them. Eat vegetables you do like. Hate running? Don't do it. Do activities that you do give you pleasure. Most importantly, *love* your body—it's the only one you've got and your love for it shouldn't be conditional. As Wann asks, "If you can't be at home in your body, where are you supposed to go?" Given the energy in the room after Wann's talk, I wouldn't be surprised if some attendees join the front lines alongside Wann. Her version of "go outside and play,"

after all, sounds like a pretty good time.

Anna Ward is a PhD candidate in the Department of Women's Studies at UCLA. With Professor Abigail Saguy, she is co-author of the article "Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma," forthcoming in Social Psychology Quarterly and her article "Pantomimes of Ecstasy: BeautifulAgony.com and the Representation of Pleasure" is forthcoming in the journal Camera Obscura. She is the recipient of a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Humanities at Swarthmore College.

Note: You can view a video of Marilyn Wann's talk on UCLA's YouTube channel.

Credit: Photo of Marilyn Wann by L. Garber.