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# Guest editorial: An open letter to fat people, their teachers, and their critics

Guest editorial

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*It. Is. About. Damn. Time.*

*About damn time fat people are recognized for their humanity.*

*About damn time we consider fat students in our classrooms, schools, and lives.*

*About damn time that we stop using health as a cover for hate.*

*About damn time we consider males and masc folx in the conversation.*

*About damn time that the words “love fat” become permanent markers of an affirming discourse.*

*It. Is. About. Damn. Time.*

We embarked on this journey to have the conversation that has been omitted from academic literature in a vastly disappointing way. Based on our own experiences as students and teachers, we realize that while schools should be a loving and safe space, fat individuals experience exclusion and policing through policies, procedures, environments and instruction. Furthermore, in some instances, we seek to start the conversation and, in others, extend the conversation around fatness and anti-fatness in P-12 schools. In this special issue, we have those conversations, but do not worry; we have made a lot of room. We seek to create a sanctuary for fat individuals in schooling spaces in this issue. Sanctuary spaces serve as sacred grounds where individuals can embrace their most authentic selves without fear of judgment or exclusion. In these havens, each person is honored, fostering a sense of belonging and profound personal freedom. As sanctuary spaces are a healing and liberatory domain; the cornerstone of sanctuary spaces is reciprocity: reciprocal love, reciprocal respect and reciprocal knowledge. We invite readers to embrace this work with an open mind as our authors have approached this topic uniquely, sharing the truth regardless of how uncomfortable it might be (*News flash, fat individuals have been uncomfortable for decades*). It is important to note that while the scope of this special issue is fatphobia and its historical roots, the authors approach the topic from different angles. Some focus specifically on the intersection of fatphobia and Blackness, while others address the broader issue of fatphobia. Acknowledging how fatness intersects with other identities – such as race, gender, sexuality and disability – is crucial, as these intersections uniquely impact each individual’s experience.

Buckle up. Get ready for the ride. This open letter and the following articles collectively are an unapologetic love letter to fat individuals. We want to see change, and we are starting here.

The Christian bible eloquently shares, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose” (*King James Version Bible*, 1971, Eccl. 3:1). And with all due respect [ . . . ]

*It. Is. About. Damn. Time.*

## To fat people

We love you. We love your rolls and curves. We see no need to *unbig* anything because as you stand, you are situated in perfection. Your story does not begin when you lose



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weight. Your story began when you inhaled your first breath. We recognize that you are moving pieces of artwork, and we will endeavor until your faces, stories and lives are fully embraced by books, curriculum, policies, laws and institutions. The outdated practice of excluding fat individuals not only marginalizes fat students but also fosters an environment of shame and isolation. Fat folx releases the shame in which they paint our bodies (Cameron and Russell, 2016; Friedman *et al.*, 2020). Do not settle for body positivity and self-acceptance alone because it is not enough to shift mindsets and eradicate biases on the complexities of health. Outdated beliefs about the health factors of weight marginalize fat and foster an environment of shame and exclusion (Gordan, 2019; Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019). Fat folx, we invite you to release the shame in which they painted our bodies. Do not settle for body positivity and self-acceptance alone because it is not enough to shift mindsets and eradicate biases on the complexities of health (Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019).

Stand in your truth and demand what Morrison (1987) denotes as “thick love” – a deep, unconditional and unapologetic form of acceptance and care that celebrates our existence and contributions. Thick love is mandatory when combating the pervasive fat hatred that exists in society at large and within educational institutions. It is a love that does not seek to change or diminish fat bodies but rather uplifts and honors them (Smith, 2022). As fat folx, we have the right to learn, grow and thrive in an environment free from judgment and discrimination (Taylor, 2018).

We ask that you consider this special issue as a primer in thick love, honoring the various genres and styles we choose to share our stories; because our stories are research. The primer begins with my catharsis, “Nurturing Loving Fat: Growing Beyond the Weeds of Fat Phobia,” which provides an ethnopoetic analysis of the multifaceted dangers of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness simultaneously occurring. Jarvis Jackson, Allen Taste, and Robert Prosser’s “For Da Brothas: A Call for Fat, Black Male, And Masculine Folx Literature” advocates for the creation and recognition of literature that authentically represents and celebrates the experiences and identities of fat, Black, male and queer individuals. In “I Apologize: Body Positivity and Love Movements,” two professors from a historically Black college or university collaborate with their students to analyze the importance of strategic and plentiful representation for fat folx. Through prayers, letters and self-reflection, they recount the words they wished had been said to them, and the spaces they wished had been held for them.

Moreover, this sacred space is not just about resistance but about reclamation and joy. We want to highlight stories of resilience, creativity and empowerment. We seek to create a dialogue that moves beyond mere survival to one that embraces thriving, where fat folx can see themselves not only surviving in a world that often excludes them but also flourishing within it. This work is a labor of love, driven by our commitment to fostering an inclusive and understanding future. In a testament to our unwavering dedication to embracing fatness with unconditional and unapologetic love, we reimagine and expand upon the inspiring verses of the beloved picture book by Perkins and Collier (2018) “Hey, Black Child.”

*Hey, Fat Folx!*

Hey Fat Folx,

Do you know who you are,

Who you really are?

Do you know divinely created to be beautiful.

What will you be?

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Hey Fat Folx,  
Do you know where you're going,  
Where are you really going?  
Do you know that wisdom  
is encoded in your fat cells  
and rolls?  
How will you transform the world?

Hey Fat Folx,  
Do you know you are strong,  
I mean really strong?  
Do you know insults and lies  
cannot permeate your skin?  
How will you love thickly?

Hey Fat Folx,  
Be what you can be,  
Learn what you must learn,  
Advocate where you advocate.  
And tomorrow your world  
Will be what you want it to be.

### To teachers of fat folx

Fat Folx exist. We are the students demanding to be seen. We are the colleagues working beside you. We are your family and friends. When choosing this profession, you did not sign up to advocate *only* for those who think or look like you. You chose this rewarding, yet demanding discipline, knowing educators are called to advocate for all bodies (Friedman *et al.*, 2020; Smith, 2022). Yes, this means advocating for fat folx and urging education as an institution to create inclusive spaces that celebrate all forms of human diversity (Cameron and Russell, 2016; Harrison, 2021; Smith, 2022). Fat folx demand a visionary curriculum moving beyond traditional health and physical education, which often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and stigmas about fatness (Friedman *et al.*, 2020; Harrison, 2021; Puhl *et al.*, 2019). The same deficit-based lens utilized in framing discourse surrounding racially biased standardized test scores and neo-liberal curricula is utilized to judge the fat frame, and a near consensus finds it morally bankrupt, a societal problem to be punitively corrected or politically coerced (Gordan, 2019; Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019). If fat folx are only seen through a deficit and meritocratic lens, then society and educators alike fail to discern the nuanced wisdom that comes when diverse forms are celebrated (Smith, 2022). Such narratives contribute to a culture of anti-fatness, where students are taught to associate fatness with laziness, lack of self-discipline and poor health without recognizing the complexity of body diversity and the many factors

that contribute to a person's weight and shape (Ashbach, 2019; Puhl *et al.*, 2021). Fat folx need spaces to just BE, and this requires incorporating curricula and policies which foster a sanctuary promoting empathy, understanding and a thick and fulfilling radical love. Because really [...] how are you expecting fat folx to learn when they are maligned, ignored and silenced? Is this not a symbolic, academic and spiritual death by another name?

As editors and authors, we are exhausted from fighting intersectional oppression and discrimination. Despite the emotional and physical toll this ongoing battle takes on us, we willingly choose to work within this liminal space laden with challenges and marginalization as it offers a unique opportunity to curate a sanctuary for fat folx. Learn from those of us who are doing the hard work. Using personal memoir, Kenesha Johnson's "From the Side-Eye of a Fat Black Girl: Using Pop Culture to Tackle Fat Phobia In Education" explores how pop culture can be leveraged to address and combat anti-fatness within educational settings. Anne Valauri's "I Like the Way I Am': Invisibility and Activism in Children's Picture Books with Fat Protagonists" examines the themes of invisibility and activism in children's picture books featuring fat protagonists, highlighting their impact on young readers' self-acceptance and empowerment. "We Need Bigger Mirrors: The Importance of Fat Fiction for Young Readers" by Christine Foo uses sophisticated arguments to elucidate the importance of fat representation in fiction for young readers, emphasizing how it fosters self-acceptance and challenges societal biases. In this dedicated space, we strive to amplify diverse voices and experiences, recognizing that the intersection of fatness with other identities – such as race, gender, sexuality and disability – creates unique wisdom. By doing so, we aim to build a communal counternarrative where fat folx can find representation, validation and support instead of suffocating on the remnants of fake love legacy (Smith, 2022): dehumanization and disenfranchisement.

### **To those who hate fat**

Finally, to those who hate fat. Reluctantly, we write this, but let's be clear: we will not stay here. It is not the responsibility of fat people (or any oppressed group) to *school* you on the truth. OUR TRUTH. We have been told all our lives that fatphobia is okay because people just want you to be healthy, people just have preferences, and it's just for our wellbeing. We call BS. Aubrey Gordon (2019) said it best, "Fatphobia denotes a fear of fat people, but as the most proudly anti-fat people will tell you readily, they aren't afraid of us. They just hate us." So, clearing the air, let's just be honest: YOU HATE US. Is that hate envy because we are fabulously fat and free, or is it racially or socially motivated?

Let's go back in history just a little. Fatness was once a symbol of wealth and prosperity for white people. The bigger the belly, the better off you were. Moreover, even in African cultures, fattening rooms helped women reach their beauty when preparing for marriage. Even to satisfy white men's disgusting fetishes, fat Black women were paraded around for entertainment. And there is so much more to the story, but this is not the time or place. In fact, all this talking that we are doing now is too much. We say again it is not the role of those who have oppressed identities to educate on what is wrong with the harmful behaviors. We will do you a favor, though; here is a list of books you should read to learn more about the hate and oppressive nature of fatphobia and anti-fatness.

- *The Fat Pedagogy Reader* (Cameron and Russell, 2016).
- *Thickening Fat: Fat Bodies, Intersectionality and Social Justice* (Friedman *et al.*, 2020).

- *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (Strings, 2019).
- *Belly of The Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness As Anti-Blackness* (Harrison, 2021).
- *Decolonizing the Body* (Blackwell, 2023).
- *Transformational Sanctuaries in the Middle-Level ELA Classroom* (Smith, 2022).

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