

Inviting the Infinifat Voice to the Fatshion Conversation:
An Exploration into Infinifat Identity Construction, Performance and Activism

by

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Abstract

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This thesis explores how self-identified “infinifat” people, defined as those larger than a US woman’s dress size 32, access commercially available fashion and how their lack of access to clothing shapes the performance of their fat identity. Through semi-structured interviews with infinifat subjects and a secondary discourse analysis of “superfat” narratives in popular texts, this research finds that a lack of clothing options reinforces the stigma and discrimination experienced by those at the largest end of the fat spectrum. Particularly, the lack of clothing available to superfat and infinifat people restricts access to social spaces and economic opportunities. While this research draws attention to ways in which my infinifat participants are “hacking” fashion to suit their needs and using social media to advocate for inclusion, the fashion industry’s unwillingness to create clothing options for superfat and infinifat people, supports the perception that being *really* fat is *really* bad.

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Introduction

“The bigger you are, the smaller your world becomes.
The bigger you are, the smaller your world becomes.”

Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017)

This thesis explores how those who self-identify as infinifat, defined as existing in a body larger than a US dress size 32, access fashion. The majority of research that has occurred at the intersection of Fat Studies and Fashion Studies has focused on the fashion and dressing experiences of women who fit the conventional definition of “plus-size.” Commercially available, mass-produced fashion options drop off dramatically for women larger than a US dress size 28 and become almost non-existent for those who are a size 32 or larger. By focusing on superfat people who exist beyond a size 32 I draw attention to the impact that the lack of access to fashion has on the establishment and performance of the superfat identity as well as the power dynamics at play in maintaining the superfat body as especially monstrous or Other.

The term “infinifat” is attributed to Ash, a superfat activist and host of *The Fat Lip* podcast. Ash introduced the term on her blog in 2016 as a way to describe her fat body as existing beyond the size range of commercially available plus-size clothing options. The term also directs consideration towards a “fat spectrum” where those at the largest end of the spectrum may face marginalization in ways that are not experienced, either at all or to the same degree, by those at the smallest end. This thesis directly engages with Ash’s infinifat activism and the infinifat community who have been united by her podcast, and takes up

Charlotte Cooper's (2010) call for increased Fat Studies research which fuses popular and academic perspectives with social justice concerns.

In Chapter One I explore the existing literature on plus-size dressing, performing a close methodological critique of three specific articles in an effort to illuminate the knowledge gap my research fills. There are numerous scholars operating at the intersection of Fat Studies and Fashion Studies (Connell, 2013; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Christel, 2014; Downing Peters, 2014; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Romeo & Lee, 2015; Aagerup, 2018). Their work has greatly impacted both fields of study by drawing attention to the plight of "plus-size" dressers and exploring the role of fashion in the resistance of normative thin beauty ideals. However much of this work has focused on those who exist at the smaller end of the fat spectrum. By documenting how those at the largest end of the spectrum access clothing my work contributes to a greater understanding of how the superfat body is Othered and established as monstrous by the fashion industry and directly addresses a gap in the existing literature on "plus-size" fashion and dressing, also known as fat fashion or "fatshion."

My work also speaks towards the growing criticism of Fat Studies as a field that privileges the voices of those whose fatness fits within a socially acceptable construction of fat and offers a path forward to the inclusion of infinifat voices within the fatshion conversation through a greater engagement with fat activist work that challenges our contemporary understandings of what fat activism is and who it is for. This intention towards greater, more meaningful engagement is at the core of my methodological approach and research design, which I explore in Chapter Two. In that chapter I review my approach to participant recruitment and sampling, as well as my rationale for employing semi-structured, photo-based "wardrobe

interviews” (Woodward, 2007). My research design is intended to challenge the inherently unbalanced researcher/participant power dynamic, especially in consideration of the emancipatory underpinnings of Fat Studies. Historically, knowledge around the fat body (“obesity”) has been constructed by those without a lived experience with being fat and has often been weaponized against fat people. From the design of this project through to the presentation of the findings in this document, I strive to establish the interview participants as experts in knowing what it is to be in a fat body and the impact a lack of clothing options has on the lived in a fat body experience.

Chapters Three and Four present the findings of this research project related to identity construction, identity performance and the impact the lack of in a fat body-sized clothing options have on participation in social spaces and activities. Framed by Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity (1989; 1993) and Joanne Entwistle’s concept of dressing as a “situated bodily practice” (2000/2015) my work in these chapters foregrounds the voices of those who are seldom heard in the field of Fat Studies in order to bring their experiences from the margins to the center of the “fatshion” conversation. Chapter Three explores how superfatness is constructed as a wholly physically and socially disabled identity in Western popular culture, often situated against other types of “acceptable” portrayals of fat identity performance. I investigate the impact these constructions have on the lived experiences of in a fat body people and utilize this investigation to underscore the impact limited in a fat body-sized fashion options have on any type of resistive performance of identity. This chapter builds off the existing literature on plus-size dressing that focuses on limitations in identity construction and performance experienced by those who are able to access commercially available plus-size fashion. Chapter

Four shifts the focus to the issue of access. Clothing is one of the primary ways that we indicate belonging. Without readily-available situationally-appropriate clothing, inififat and superfat people are excluded from social spaces such as office work environments. This exclusion serves to remarginalize an already marginalized group and is felt most acutely by those who embody additional marginalized identity markers, such as those who are racialized or living in poverty. In this way, the findings presented in this chapter further address the inififat-sized gap in existing literature on plus-size dressing and lay the foundation for future work that engages with the inififatshion community.

The analysis shifts towards the “getting by” methods employed by the interview subjects of this project in Chapter Five. Framed by Otto von Busch’s (2009) concept of fashion “hacking,” I identify the ways in which inififat people not only modify specific clothing garments but also how they use particular strategies, especially around the act of purchasing and clothing procurement, in an attempt to circumnavigate the mainstream fashion industry and redirect the flow of social currency. This chapter focuses on the everyday activities that inififat people use to chart their own path for access and identity performance. These everyday strategies are not neutral. They have political implications towards the reshaping of boundaries around access and identity for superfat and inififat bodies.

These political implications are further explored in Chapter Six, where the activist-oriented activities of the inififat community are catalogued and theorized in consideration of the work of Charlotte Cooper (2016) and Zoë Meleo-Erwin (2012). It is in this chapter that I deeply engage with the question of who is being left out in contemporary fat activism movements and how the work done by the inififat community around community-building

and increasing visibility for infinifat people resists the dominant superfat narrative as explored in Chapter Three. This type of analysis is especially important when we consider the ways in which contemporary framings of fat activism exclude those at the margins of an already marginalized group. My intention in this chapter is to not only draw awareness to the important activist work being done within the infinifat community but to chart a path for further engagement with those who identify as superfat or infinifat by Fat Studies scholars.

Discrimination and fat stigma are not felt equally by all those who identify as fat. Increased attention to those at the largest end of the fat spectrum will only benefit future research in this field.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I build from the activist work explored in Chapter Six and lay the groundwork towards the imagined infinifat inclusive future expressed by the research participants. While I hope that the field of Fat Studies benefits from the work I have done here, I equally hope that the field of Fashion Studies is able to build from the knowledge expressed by the participants in this project. In particular I hope that future fashion designers and industry professionals consider not only accommodating those who are superfat and infinifat, but centering the superfat body in their clothing designs. Deliverance to an infinifat inclusive fashion future will not eliminate the intersecting axes of oppression faced by those at the largest end of the fat spectrum, but as I illustrate throughout this thesis it will take important steps towards addressing many of the systemic barriers to access infinifat and superfat people face.

As with most research in the field of Fat Studies, this work is both political and personal. My lived experience with fatness, fat stigma and fat-based discrimination permeates every

aspect of this project. I have presented iterations of this work at numerous conferences and in university classrooms in an effort to bolster the actions of infinifat activists and challenge the boundaries of “acceptable” fatness. My own fat activism practice has benefited greatly from this experience. I am grateful to the participants of this project for not only sharing their knowledge and expertise with me, but also for challenging my own perceptions of what a lived superfat or infinifat experience entails.

Chapter One: Literature Review

In her article “Fat Studies: Mapping the Field” Charlotte Cooper establishes Fat Studies as “an emerging interdisciplinary academic field, which is ripe for sociological exploration” (2010, p. 1020). She charts the course for future scholarly work that fuses popular and academic perspectives with social justice concerns, calling on Fat Studies scholars to “consider the value of fat diversity, fat culture, address new complexities, and create possibilities for recognizing fat as a perspective, a new kind of interdisciplinary lens” (Cooper, 2010, p. 1029). One area where we’ve seen fat deployed as an interdisciplinary lens is in the field of Fashion Studies.

Numerous fashion scholars have used the lens of Fat Studies to investigate the ways in which the fashion industry marginalizes those it considers plus-size (Christel, 2014; Peters, 2014; Romeo & Lee, 2015; Aagerup, 2018) and numerous Fat Studies scholars have used the lens of Fashion Studies to explore concepts of fat identity formation and performance (Connell, 2013; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015). These scholars have done important work in charting the ways in which fat bodies access (or don’t access) fashion and how fashion can serve as a tool for resistance of the fat body against normative thin body ideals. However, it’s important to look at the fat voices that are noticeably absent from the existing research. After an overview of the operationalization of the term fat, this literature review explores three articles located at the intersection of Fat Studies and Fashion Studies to illustrate the overarching methodological and sampling issues that can be seen in the majority of work in the “fatshion” field. The three articles I critique are Lauren Downing Peters’ “You Are What You

Wear: How Plus-Size Fashion Figures in Fat Identity Formation” (2014), Lauren Gurrieri and H  l  ne Cherrier’s “Queering beauty: fatshionistas in the fatosphere” (2013) and Anu A. Harju and Annamari Huovinen’s article “Fashionably voluptuous: normative femininity and resistant performative tactics in fatshion blogs” (2015). While there are numerous articles situated at the intersection of Fat Studies and Fashion Studies, these three articles in particular are emblematic of the research that exist at this junction and it is my hope that a close critique of their contributions to the “fatshion” field will illuminate the specific knowledge gaps that my work in this thesis address.

Operationalization of Fat

Operationalization of the term “fat” has been a contentious issue since the emergence of Fat Studies as an academic field (Schoenfielder & Wieser, 1983; Campos et al., 2005). Numerous scholars annotate the terms “fat and obese with inverted commas to emphasis their constructedness and contestability” (Cooper, 2010, p. 1021). As fat is seen as a fluid identity marker in relation to social norms, the majority of contemporary research in the field focuses on subjects who self-identify as fat. As Cooper explains, many Fat Studies scholars “regard the fixing of fat bodies as a dangerous and irrelevant goal” (2010, p. 1020). They argue that “fatness is part of the human experience and should be explored without the overriding judgement that it should be eliminated” (Cooper, 2010, p. 1020), an orientation found in the academic fields which pathologize fatness and frame it as an “epidemic” that must be “eradicated.”

However, fatness is not a universal experience nor is it experienced as a fat/thin binary. An open-ended, self-determined definition of fatness can lead to a flattening of the lived fat

experience, as those who are on the larger end of the “fat spectrum” experience marginalization and discrimination in ways that are significantly different from those who are on the smaller end. In spite of this diversity of experience, members on both ends of the fat spectrum would most likely self-identify as “fat” if the only other option was identifying as “not fat.” Even within the fat activism community there exists a hierarchy of size, with those who are closer to the socially accepted body size of ‘fat, but not too fat’ often further marginalizing those who are seen as ‘too much’ or ‘out of control.’ In the articles reviewed below, some researchers are amplifying their subjects own self-described fat identities. Nonetheless, those who exist beyond the small end of the fat spectrum remain outside the frame, belying the emancipatory underpinnings of the field of Fat Studies.

You Are What You Wear: Sartorial Biographies and Hanging Out

Lauren Downing Peters details the “sartorial biographies” of three self-identified “plus-size” women in consideration of self-fashioning as a tool for fat identity formation and as an investigation into the role the fashion industry plays in her 2014 article “You Are What You Wear: How Plus-Size Fashion Figures in Fat Identity Formation.” She employs ethnographic methodologies, namely formal interviews and “more casual conversations in the women’s bedrooms and during shopping trips” (Downing Peters, 2014, p. 51). Her case studies are presented as evidence of the “complicated, creative, and sometimes subversive means through which fat women engage with plus-size fashion” (Downing Peters, 2014, p. 46).

Downing Peters’ critical ethnographic approach to bridging Fat Studies and Fashion Studies connects the concept of dress and performativity with the formation of fat identity. This

work draws attention to those affected by a lack of attention from the mainstream fashion industry. However the relatively small sample size she draws from and the lack of size diversity among her subjects limit the effectiveness of her study. Downing Peters' research question could benefit from more thorough operationalization, especially around the term fat and in consideration of the small number of voices being represented. Had her study included women living in bodies larger than a size 28 (the numerical size where most plus size fashion ends) and those whose access to fashion may be limited by other factors, such as economic circumstances or geographic location, Downing Peters might have offered more rich and complex answers to her research questions around how plus-size fashion figures in fat identity formation and the role the fashion industry plays in marginalizing fat bodies and perpetuating fat stigma.

In consideration of the intersection between the fat body and fashion, to which Downing Peters is drawing attention, the work of Joanne Entwistle offers a framework towards understanding the importance of clothing and dressing in identity performance. In her benchmark text *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress & Modern Social Theory* (2000/2015), Entwistle lays the foundation for fashion scholars' increased attention towards the body: "Dress in everyday life cannot be separated from the living, breathing, moving body it adorns" (Entwistle, 2015, p. 33). Entwistle furthers her challenge to the scholarly community by introducing the concept of dress as "situated bodily practice" (Entwistle, 2015, p. 34), a notion that acknowledges the socially constituted nature of bodies and encourages a deeper investigation into the structural influences on how we dress our bodies. The accessibility of clothing and fashion is impacted by a number of factors, including body size and other intersecting identity markers, such as class, race, gender and sexuality.

Downing Peters speaks to some of the obstacles she faced in locating participants, particularly given her identification of “fat” as “fluid identity marker” (Downing Peters, 2014, p. 51), but she doesn’t describe the ways in which she attempted to access self-identified fat or plus-size women, making it difficult to assess her approach to sampling. Ultimately she discovers the online “fatshionista” community and recruits her participants from that virtual space. She describes the “fatshionistas” as women who “self-identify as fat and demonstrate a vested interest in issues related to fashion” (Downing Peters, 2014, p. 51). Downing Peters’ study is focused on how fat bodies perform their fat identities through fashion, and so her selection of research participants from a pool of fashionable and fashion-aware plus-size women has some grounding. However, as my work goes on to suggest, this selection process leaves out many plus-size women who may not consider themselves fatshionistas or those who may access fashion differently. All bodies are dressed bodies, according to Entwistle (2000/2015); and by extension, all fat bodies are dressed fat bodies. A look at how unfashionable or “fashion-unaware” fat bodies perform their fat identity through dress and fashion is valuable, and the inclusion of these non-fatshionista voices in a sampling approach could help to complicate the contribution Downing Peters’ work has made.

A lack of physical size diversity among research participants limits the contribution of Downing Peters’ work. This lack of size diversity also raises concerns around whose voices are being heard through the data presented. The three case study participants are all a US dress size 18 or smaller, which affords them more privilege in accessing fashion than those at the larger end of the fat spectrum as most plus-size retailers in North America focus on woman’s sizes 12 – 24. Commercially available, mass-produced fashion options drop off dramatically for

those than a size 28 and become almost non-existent for people size 32+. As referenced in the introduction of this thesis, the term “infinifat,” coined by Ash of *The Fat Lip* podcast (2016), has been taken up by those at the largest end of the fat spectrum in recognition of their existence in bodies that are beyond the measurable size range of any fashion retailers.

Seeing as Downing Peters’ main research question examines “the ways in which the fashion industry neglects and marginalizes fat consumers” (Downing Peters, 2014, p. 45), her lack of acknowledgement of this aspect of plus-size dressing, either through her case study participants or through the introduction of other qualitative or quantitative data in regards to the larger end of the plus-size spectrum, is a conspicuous oversight. I argue that turning attention to the “super fat” or “infinifat” body and the complete lack of clothing options available to them would underscore the omission and marginalization of the fat body by the fashion industry. This gap in body size diversity in plus-size fashion research, particularly towards those at the largest end of the fat spectrum, is the primary concern of my work. While striving to fill this gap in knowledge, I borrow extensively from Downing Peters’ methodological approach and I mirror her implementation of semi-structured interview techniques in construction of “sartorial biographies.” Downing Peters’ work plays an important role in illuminating the limitations faced by plus-size dressers in expressing their identities through dress, particularly as compared to those who could be considered “straight-sized.” My work builds directly from her research and strives to deepen our understanding of the impact clothing limitations have on those at the margins of an already marginalized group.

“Fatshionistas in the Fatosphere”: Netnographic Approach

Like Downing Peters, Lauren Gurrieri and H  l  ne Cherrier’s research in their 2013 article “Queering beauty: fatshionistas in the fatosphere” asks important questions towards a greater understand of fat identity performance through fashion, but their answers are limited by narrow sampling considerations. While Gurrieri and Cherrier analyse an impressive 922 blog posts in their netnographic (or cyber ethnographic) exploration into how fat women experience and represent beauty online, these 922 posts are authored by only five individual Australian fatshionistas. In spite of this limited sample size of subjects, Gurrieri and Cherrier engage with subjects who exist in a larger physical size range than Downing Peters’ case study through a purposive approach to sampling. Coming from the academic fields of marketing and business, Gurrieri and Cherrier attempt to “understand linkages between an individual’s fluid and contested identity work, consumption and their marginalised status within the marketplace” (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 278).

Gurrieri and Cherrier use queer theory to critically engage with the ways in which normative ideas of idealized beauty, established and expressed through marketing and advertising, are destabilized by the fat female body. The authors state, “Whilst our sample is biologically female, their fat bodies complicate their participation in the ‘feminine’ marketplace of beauty” (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 278). They draw a parallel between the fat body and gay body, seeing them both as “culturally constructed in and through heteronormative discourses and practices that render them ‘deviant’” (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 278). Grounded in the theories of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Gurrieri and Cherrier find that fatshionistas renegotiate cultural notions of beauty through three performative acts – coming

out as fat, participating in fat citizenship and flaunting their fatness – and they see these acts as integral to the ways in which the performance of fat identity online challenges normative thin ideals of beauty.

Similarly to Downing Peters (2014), Gurrieri and Cherrier focus on subjects who self-identify as fat. In contrast to Downing Peters, however, Gurrieri and Cherrier participate in purposive sampling through the conscious inclusion of those subjects who “invoke different fat bodily identities, ranging from ‘inbetweenies’ who sit outside of mainstream ‘straight’ fashion sizes but are considered small in plus-size circles... to ‘death fatties’ whose morbidly obese status makes the pursuit of finding fashionable commercially produced clothing a challenging task” (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 279). This inclusion of a wide spectrum of body size in relation to fat identity, and the acknowledgment that there is a difference between how an “inbetweeny” and a “death fatty” experience fatness, both enriches and complicates the representations of fat identities and signals towards the gap in plus-size fashion research that my work addresses. A significant portion of the article focuses on the self-identified “super size” blogger Fat Heffalump, who “provides an invaluable resource for fatshionistas struggling to find fashionable options that fit their shape” (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013, p. 286) and directly addresses the plight of those who may face additional challenges in accessing clothing due to body size. I suggest that this “borrowing” of terms such as “death fatty” from the fat activism community is an important tool towards more inclusive research design for fatshion researchers moving forward and will further underline this in my work.

While their sample contains what one could consider a “good” range of size diversity, Gurrieri and Cherrier fall short in their exclusion of the other intersecting identities of their

research subjects, such as race. An appendix is included with the article that states the gender, age, occupation, fat identity (either “in betweeny” or “death fatty”) of the subjects and the number of blog posts associated with each. Through the occupations listed the reader can make assumptions as to the class of the subjects, and the article includes many images of the blogger subjects through which the reader can again make assumptions (spoiler: all of the subjects appear to be white), but the relative silence by the researchers to this aspect of their sampling is disappointing. Gurrieri and Cherrier also repeatedly refer to their subjects as playing a “significant role in the Australian fat activism movement” (2013, p. 279) without clearly defining what that significant role is or how it informs their methodological approach or research findings.

While silent on some aspects of their research design, Gurrieri and Cherrier clearly define “fatshionista” as an identity born of the fat activism movement in challenge to normative thin beauty standards often performed in the “fatosphere” – a constructed safe online space where individuals can “counter fat prejudice, resist misconceptions of fat, engage in communal experiences and promote positive understandings of fat” (2013, p. 279). This performance is situated within the confines of a “fatshion” blog, where the practices of dressing up and self-portraiture are performed and where followers are invited to comment and participate in discussions. These discussions mainly revolve around the trials and tribulations of acquiring fashionable clothing for a fat body in a marketplace that does not offer much in the way of plus-size fashion options. Whereas Downing Peters (2014) seemed to “stumble” upon the “fatshionista” community, Gurrieri and Cherrier make it clear that they sought out the “fatshionista.”

Gurrieri and Cherrier employ a netnographic, or cyber ethnographic, methodological approach. This approach provides an unobtrusive and naturalistic method of gathering information about how marginalized groups interact, perform and unite online. In his 2002 article, "The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities" Robert Kozinets writes, "Ethnographic methods have been continually refashioned to suit particular fields of scholarship, research questions, research sites, times, researcher preferences, and cultural groups" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). It is this flexibility and malleability that is ethnography's greatest strength as a methodological approach. Kozinets defines netnography as ethnography on the internet, a "qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Gurrieri and Cherrier explicitly outline the methodological steps of their research. Following Kozinets' netnographic guidelines, they established relationships with key activists in the Australian fat activism community. Through these relationships they were able to "overcome issues of membership and obtain consent for the data" (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 279). The authors state that these key activists also helped to guide the selection of blogs and bloggers who became the subjects for their research, but they don't elaborate further as to what this guiding included and how it impacted their sampling criteria.

It's important to consider the ways in which Gurrieri and Cherrier's methodological approach limits the scope of the conclusions they draw. Little is mentioned about the context of the blog posts or their intended audience. While they may have given permission to the researchers for use after the fact, the "fatshionista" bloggers were initially writing for a non-

researcher audience. How does this impact the bloggers' performance of a disruptive fat identity? Presumably, by operating in the safe space of the "fatosphere," they may perform in a way that is different than in their offline lives. Even in the online retelling of stories or events from their offline lives, much of which is directly quoted by Gurrieri and Cherrier in the presentation of their findings, there is an element of performing for a "safe" audience. A mixed methods approach that includes interviews or other direct participation of the blogger subjects along with the multi-layered analysis of the fatshionista blog posts could yield results that are much more nuanced and would perhaps lead to considerations around how the subjects continue, or not, their disruption of normative beauty ideals in the world outside the fatosphere.

My work draws from Gurrieri and Cherrier's engagement with the fat activist community and their "borrowing" of activist terms such as "death fatty" to address body size diversity amongst their research participants. I integrate their method of terminology "borrowing" by focusing on subjects who self-identify as infinifat, a term with activist origins. My work also applies many of the themes found in Gurrieri and Cherrier's findings to my own interview data, particularly around the ways in which their fat subjects attempted to "get by" with the limited clothing options available to them, bringing Gurrieri and Cherrier's work to bear in a non-online, "real world" context.

"Fashionable Voluptuous": Critical Discourse Analysis

In their 2015 article, "Fashionable voluptuous: normative femininity and resistant performative tactics in fatshion blogs" Anu A. Harju and Annamari Huovinen employ Norman

Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore performative identity construction by fatshion bloggers (or fatshionistas), seeking insight into how these performances subvert normative understandings of gender and beauty. Drawing from Judith Butler's theories on performative identity formation and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital as identity resource, Harju and Huovinen establish two performative identity tactics (diversity asserting and similarity seeking) and four resistant practices (destigmatisation, reappropriation, communality and mimicry) that construct the "complex process of conformity and resistance" (Harju & Huovinen, 2015, p. 1620) found within the "fatshionista" community. They classify these "fatshion" blogs as postfeminist identity projects. However their work suffers from many of the same sampling limitations as found in the other articles critiqued in this section.

Harju and Huovinen build directly on the work of Gurrieri and Cherrier, basing much of their theoretical framework on the work done by these authors in the 2013 article explored above. They also follow similar sampling and data collection approaches. Harju and Huovinen analyze the text, images and discussion comments of 12 "fatshion" blogs over a 6 – 12 month period, although they do not state how many individual blog entries were collected in total. No mention is given to any diversity of body size (self-identified or otherwise) or intersecting identity markers such as race or class, although the authors do acknowledge that all of the bloggers self-identify as female and all mentions of dress sizing in the included quotes situate the included bloggers at a US dress size 20 or smaller. In fact, there is no mention of any sampling criteria or approach. They do state that blogs are geographically diverse, representing seven Western countries, although it is not clear if this was achieved through purposive sampling or through some other, unnamed, sampling approach.

The strength of Harju and Huovinen's article comes from their rigorous and thorough CDA protocols. They outline clear criteria for their analysis of the visual communication, textual communication and identity representational features of the blogs, adopting "the position that these modes of communication act together as semiotic, communicative resources, constructing one's identity as an intertwined semiotic process" (Harju & Huovinen, 2015, p. 1610). Through their critical examination of the sociocultural practices of their "fatshionista" subjects Harju and Huovinen succeed in illuminating performances that challenge the normative beauty standards from which the fat body is excluded and chart pathways for inclusion through visibility and mimicry. The authors' attention to societal power dynamics and the creative ways in groups play with inclusion and exclusion makes this application of CDA especially effective when considering the emancipatory aims of Fat Studies.

Many of the thematic findings demonstrated in Harju and Huovinen's work are reflected in my own and I will return to these in the following chapter on identity performance and activism. In addition I apply Harju and Huovinen's attention to systemic power dynamics at play within the mainstream fashion industry to the analysis and exploration of my own findings, particularly around the impact these dynamics have on the ways marginalization is felt by participants who embody intersecting identity markers, such as those who are racialized or gender non-binary. Harju and Huovinen's work on the possibilities and limitations of their subject's activities to increase visibility of their fat bodies through mimicry of existing sociocultural practices also comes into play in my examination of the cultural producing, activist-oriented work of my infinifat participants.

Conclusion

The methodological limitations explored in this chapter are not unique to the work of Downing Peters, Gurrieri and Cherrier or Harju and Huovinen. Fat Studies has often been criticized for being a space that privileges the voices of white, able-bodied, middle-class, straight, and cis-gendered fat subjects (Rice, 2007; Cooper, 2010; Gurrieri 2013). I would also argue that the majority of work in the field of Fat Studies foregrounds the voices of those who are small-to-mid fat and mutes those who are further marginalized within the fat community for existing at the larger end of the fat spectrum. The articles explored above establish fashion and dress as a valid and rich location for investigation into the understanding of fat identity. My research deepens this understanding by inviting the superfat or infinifat voice to the fatshion conversation. While the three articles explored above can be considered emblematic of research in the “fatshion” field, they do not exhaustively represent of all of the methodological approaches and thematic findings found at this academic juncture. However I hope that my close examination of the contributions and limitations of these three articles illuminates how my own work builds from the important work done by the scholars noted above and fills an important knowledge gap in the fields of Fat Studies and Fashion Studies.

Chapter Two: Methods

This chapter introduces the methodological approach that has guided the original research I conducted into superfat and infinifat identity. Situated within the academic conversations reviewed in the previous chapter, I engage a critical ethnographic methodology to study how superfat or infinifat people access clothing and the implications that (lack of) access has on their lived experiences and identity performance. Through photo elicitation and semi-structured interview methods with five self-identified infinifat subjects, I follow Marisol Clark-Ibáñez's (2004) example of mobilizing self-identification and auto-image production to complicate the lines between subject and object of ethnographic study. The qualitative methodological approach of critical ethnography moves beyond the classic ethnographic method of a "neutral" researcher recording, contesting the often assumed position of knowledge holder and expert- and the corollary mirror image of the passive object of study- by centering the question of how knowledge is constructed by dominant powers, and how that knowledge maintains or reinforces unequal power dynamics, including within and through the study itself (Grbich, 2013). Critical ethnography provides the tools to investigate the power dynamics at play in the research process itself, and in the lived experiences being described by research participants, while mitigating imbalances by foregrounding the research subject voice. Historically, much of the scholarly work around fatness and fat identity has focused on quantitative ways of articulating the fat experience (Cooper, 2010; Downing Peters, 2014). However, as Downing Peters explains, "fatness can be best understood as a dual construct: as both biological truth and as a personal and social experience" (2014, p. 46). Through purposive subject sampling and a semi-structured creative interview approach to data collection I

privilege the voices of self-identified infinifat subjects and center them as the experts of their own lived infinifat experience.

Operationalization of Infinifat

The origin of the term “infinifat” can be traced back to Ash, superfat activist and host of the podcast titled *The Fat Lip*. On her blog of the same name, Ash writes:

So if [US dress size] 12 is small fat, 20 is midfat, and 26 is superfat, what exactly does that make a size beyond-36? Because the reality is that my body is as similar to a size 26 as that 26's is to a size 12—that is: not really similar at all. My experiences and struggles are completely different than a 300 pound person's. I weigh an entire fat person more than that. How can we be in the same fat spectrum category?

Honestly, I don't know if this is a question that ever gets asked because my feeling is that a lot of fats don't even know that beyond-36s exist. But we do. And we need fat positivity too.

But what should we fats on the very very very fat end of the fat spectrum be called? I humbly propose “infinifat.” Because what size am I? I really have no fucking idea. A size greater than any assignable size number. Infinity? (thefatlip.com, 2016)

Ash has also created this graphic, connecting categorizations of fatness with US based clothing sizes, which serves to further illuminate the need for consideration of a fat spectrum:



Figure 1: From www.instagram.com/fatlippodcast

Standardization through numeric clothing sizing has a problematic history of establishing the desirable “normal” body and the monstrous “other” body (Matthews David, 2007; Steinhoff, 2015). Looking back to the history of Fat Studies, towards its rejection of rigid medicalized standards of obesity and fatness, we can see why scholars in the field “support the queer strategy of self-definition for working with subjective fat identities” (Cooper, 2010, p. 1021). Pathologized fatness creates rigid boundaries that are often not reflective of who identifies as fat, who is read as fat and how fat embodiment relates to discrimination and marginalization. As the graphic and quote from Ash above illustrates not all fat people will experience equal or equitable access to clothing and dress. Researchers at the intersection of fashion and dress have a unique opportunity to operationalize fat through the lens of clothing sizing. In addition, applying language from activists such as Ash to purposive sampling methods provides researchers, especially those working within marginalized communities, with the opportunity to identify and investigate a wider range of lived experiences.

For the purposes of this research project I operationalized the term infinifat as a person who self-identified as regularly wearing clothing that is larger than a US dress size 32, aligning myself with Ash's definition of infinifat as explored above. However it's important to note that while my research specifically explores how those who identify as infinifat approach clothing and dress, many of the concepts and themes apply to those who might identify as superfat. Indeed, there has been some controversy in fat activism communities around adoption of the term infinifat and its erasure of the superfat identity¹. My use of both terms is meant to identify areas where there could be some overlap in experiences and to acknowledge that the term infinifat has not been universally adopted by those who may still fit the size "criteria" of being larger than a US dress size 32.

Remote Wardrobe Interviewing through Photographs

My semi-structured interview approach draws from social anthropologist Sophie Woodward's (2007) ethnographic research method of merging formal interviews with casual conversations about dress, also known as "wardrobe interviews," and combines it with aspects of photo elicitation interviewing (PEI) in which participants often take images after receiving prompts from a researcher and the resulting photographs are analyzed alongside semi-structured interviews. In this section I define, briefly, key aspects of wardrobe interviews and PEIs, as well as outline my method for combining the two interview approaches and discuss the quality of the resulting data.

¹ See: <https://fatpositivecooperative.com/2019/01/03/exact-numbers-and-levels-of-fatness/>
<http://thefatlip.com/2016/12/20/beyond-superfat-rethinking-the-farthest-end-of-the-fat-spectrum/>
<https://ravishly.com/ash-fat-lip-podcast>

Woodward (2007) describes her wardrobe interview approach as akin to “hanging out” with women in their bedrooms and closets as they navigated the process of selecting what to wear for the day. This process allows her to “arrive at an in-depth understanding of the multiple and often contradictory issues and identities that are articulated through the material culture of clothing” (Woodward, 2007, p. 31). Woodward’s main focus is how women navigate their intersecting identities, both the ones that they currently embody and those they aspire towards, when making choices around getting dressed and fashioning themselves for the day. She is less interested in the specific garments selected by her participants and more concerned with the ways in which they respond to normative beauty ideals and wider societal expectations through their sartorial choices. Wardrobe interviews can more clearly illuminate how participants make sense of their identity in the world through clothing than traditional interview techniques alone.

When applying Woodward’s wardrobe interview technique to my own study I was most interested in the conversational, casual tone she references: this approach of “hanging out” with my participants and talking about their clothing challenges and successes. However, as in-person wardrobe interview sessions were not possible in my study due to the geographic distance between myself and my participants, I attempted to recreate important aspects of the wardrobe interview process through photo elicitation. I asked my participants to send me digital photographs of themselves in outfits that brought them joy and outfits that caused them to feel frustration. These images provided an invaluable entry point for our semi-structured interviews that I framed as casual conversations around their experiences with dressing. However, unlike traditional PEIs, the participants in my project did not create or engage with

images as a key component of our interview process, with many of them submitting images that had previously been taken in response to my elicitation prompts, nor were the visual elements of the images discussed in detail with participants beyond the clothing they were pictured wearing. This marks a significant deviation from the traditional implementation of PEIs and illuminates a new possibility of the use of photographs to accomplish remote wardrobe interviews through the combination of two established interview methodologies.

When describing her own use of photo elicitation interviews (PEIs), Marisol Clark-Ibáñez states, “Photographs elicit extended personal narratives that illuminate the viewers’ lives and experiences” (2004, p. 1511). She later goes on to explain that photographs, especially in her use of the photo elicitation interview (PEI) methodology, act as a communication medium between researcher and participant, stating “Researchers can use photographs as a tool to expand on questions and simultaneously, participants can use photographs to provide a unique way to communicate dimensions of their lives” (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, p. 1512). This was true of my experience with photo elicitation. Take, for example, this image from Kelly:



Figure 2: From participant Kelly

This image provided a starting point for a conversation about the pattern grading challenges faced by infat people when they are able to find clothing in larger sizes. Kelly stated during our interview that they² included this image specifically as an illustration of poor pattern grading and went on to describe, in detail, how various aspects of the image (the folded sleeve cuffs, gaping arm holes, etc.) speak to this issue. By emailing this image to me prior to our interview, Kelly was able to establish that this was an issue that they wished to discuss during our interview, further disrupting the traditional researcher-subject power dynamic. The use of photo elicitation overall helped to build rapport between myself and the participants. Clark-Ibáñez speaks to this in her use of PEIs, stating “Photos can lessen some of the

² Kelly is gender non-binary and uses they/them pronouns.

awkwardness of interviews because there is something to focus on, especially if the photographs are taken by the interviewee and they are therefore familiar with the material” (2004, p. 1512). I argue that through their submission of personal photographs my interview participants could feel secure in the knowledge that we would be able to address their specific concerns around clothing and dress independent of whether I, as researcher, was an inffinat or superfat person myself. This is especially true as superfat or inffinat bodies are rarely seen in popular culture or represented in mainstream “fat liberation” or “body positivity” activism movements. These are concepts that I referred to briefly in my introduction and will return to in more detail in later chapters.

It’s important to note how my use of the image from Kelly above deviates from the use of photographs within traditional implementations of PEIs. This image from Kelly could be read much differently, and with more complexity, than I have done here. Indeed, one of the greatest benefits of PEIs is the ways in which images lend themselves to a range of sometimes contradictory meanings and interpretations. This image of Kelly can be read as joyful or as humourous. The pastel, springtime colours could speak to a sense of happiness or perhaps renewal. Analysis of the visual elements of the image is beyond the scope of this project, however this additional level of data would add much to future research on inffinat and superfat identity construction and performance.

I also must address one of the main drawbacks of photo elicitation in the context of this project. Despite the fact I included a statement that the photo elicitation aspect of the interview was not a requirement for participation, potential participants without the ability or desire to contribute images may have felt that this project was not accessible to them. In future

situations where I would be able to interview participants in-person this objection could be overcome by me photographing the participants or by simply talking about their clothing while looking at the garments; this is outlined by Woodward (2007) in a more traditional “wardrobe interview.” This barrier to access, whether explicit or implied, is a potential drawback of any research methodology that asks participants to contribute resources to the interview experience and is often felt most acutely by those at the margins of an already marginalized group.

Recruitment and Confidentiality

I initially conducted a semi-structured interview with Ash in March 2018 and after our interview she put me in touch with ten fellow infinifat identified people, defined as those who regularly wear clothing larger than a US dress size 32. Initially I was seeking to speak only with self-identified women who also identified as infinifat in an effort to limit the scope of this research project as well as most directly address the gap in plus-size fashion research, the majority of which focuses on subjects who identify as female or as women. However Ash asked if I would be interested in speaking with someone who identifies as infinifat and is gender non-binary. The inclusion of this subject’s voice has been invaluable to my research, particularly their experience with fashioning a non-normative gender identity with the limited clothing resources available to infinifat people, as I will explore in further chapters. I raise this experience here as a note to future researchers: while I anticipated this adjustment to my recruitment approach would expand the scope of this project beyond manageability, it did not.

Any additional work around theorizing this participant's experience was greatly outweighed by their contributions in addressing my research questions.

Of these ten potential subjects, four participated in semi-structured interviews that were preceded by a photo elicitation request. All of the participants are located in the United States. The interviews occurred on either Skype or Zoom, both online video chat platforms, and the photographs from the photo elicitation request were emailed to me either prior to our interview or at the beginning of the interview process. I provided participants with a detailed consent form at least one week before the interview, which included a set of proposed interview questions, and the form was reviewed by me at the beginning of each interview to ensure participants were providing informed consent. The consent form included two areas for participant input: the name they would like to be referred to by, including an option to have no direct quotes or reference to their identity used in the final thesis (this was listed as the default option if no other option was selected) and the option to have all, some, or none of their provided images used in the publication of this thesis (the "none" option was listed as the default option if no other option was selected). All participants consented to having all of their images used within this thesis and all of the participants opted to be directly referred to in some way. In addition to Ash, I conducted interviews with Kelly, Kristen, Amanda and Jossie and their images appear throughout this thesis alongside publicly accessible images from Instagram, mostly from Ash's account as well as from the #infinifat and #infinifatshion hashtags.

Intersecting Identities & Sampling Diversity

In reflection of the emancipatory gesture propelling the field of Fat Studies, there have been calls from Fat Studies scholars for the inclusion of a greater diversity of voices and for increased reflexivity towards the intersecting identity markers of their fat subjects. Fat Studies has increasingly been criticized for being a space that privileges the voices of white, able-bodied, middle-class, straight, and cis-gendered fat subjects (Rice, 2007; Cooper, 2010; Gurrieri 2013). Increased attention towards the ways in which non-white, disabled, poor, queer or transgendered subjects experience fatness will only benefit the field and greatly expand our knowledge around the performance of fat identities. In the spirit of these concerns, I had an open and direct conversation with Ash that I was specifically seeking a diverse group of infinifat voices beyond the white, heteronormative, able-bodied fat body that is often the most heard in fat activism spaces. While my final sample size is only five participants (including Ash), my purposive snowballing approach to participant sampling was, in my opinion, successful. However it's also important to consider that in many ways Ash was the "gatekeeper" in my research design. Ash's involvement in participant recruitment cannot be ignored and while I am grateful for her "opening the gate" to her infinifat community, I also want to acknowledge her role in selecting participants for this specific project. Demographic data was collected as an optional question at the conclusion of our interviews with the preamble that this data was being used primarily to establish the demographic makeup of the participants as a group and to address how intersecting identities and lived experiences may interact with dressing practices. The question was purposefully phrased in an open ended manor, allowing participants to work from their own definition of what "demographic" information to include. To this end, two

participants identified as non-white (one as African American, the other as Hispanic), one participant identified as disabled and one participant identified as gender non-binary. Mentions of class and socio-economic status happened throughout the interviews. The impact that these intersecting identity markers have on the participants' experience with clothing and dressing will be explored in later chapters of this thesis. The inclusion of this question also provided participants with an opportunity to discuss which voices they felt were being least heard in their fat activism communities, be it online or offline, which was an invaluable experience for myself as a Fat Studies scholar and will impact my design of future research projects and recruitment materials.

Data Analysis and Intersectionality as an Analytical Tool

My data analysis focused mainly on interviews with my participants, with the elicited images serving primarily as a mode of conducting wardrobe interviews remotely. All interviews were transcribed and thematically coded using a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is an iterative mode of inquiry in which knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and subject in a reflective process (Grbich, 2013). Both my initial interview prompts and my coding process were guided by concepts and themes that emerged from my initial interview with Ash as well as themes identified from existing literature on plus-size dressing and fat fashion. Additionally, I spent a significant amount of time listening to past episodes of Ash's *The Fat Lip* podcast in an effort to understand the complexities of the lived infinifat experience beyond limited access to clothing. After each participant interview I identified reoccurring themes to address in later interviews and within the coding of my final data. In this way I was able to

loosely “member check” my codes by providing my participants with the opportunity to reflect on themes and concepts that emerged from earlier interviews. I initially coded the data into four main areas of concern that were found in every interview: identity (construction and presentation of the self); access (limitations around physical or social spaces due to a lack of access to clothing as well as specific garment struggles), methods for “getting by” with the clothing available to them; and activism practices (broadly considered). From this point I read through the data collected under each code multiple times to identify specific themes and concepts that reflected particular aspects of each area of concern. I identified areas where participants gave similar responses and areas where their responses could be considered related but illuminated areas of difference related to their personal experiences. It is through this iterative process that I arrived at the findings presented in this thesis.

A key aspect to my approach to data analysis is the application of intersectionality as an analytical tool. According to Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience” (2016, p. 25). Employing intersectionality as an analytical tool can draw attention to the ways in which the “major axes of social divisions in a given society at a given time, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together” (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 4).

Intersectionality as an analytical tool pays particular attention to the organization of power and how that organization positions individuals unequally based on a varying combination of identity markers. Intersectionality understands power through a lens of mutual construction, meaning that, according to Hill Collins and Bilge, “race, class, gender, sexuality, age, disability,

ethnicity, nation, and religion, among other [identity markers], constitute interlocking, mutually constructing or intersecting systems of power” (2016, p. 27). Applying intersectionality as an analytical framework encourages an analysis that investigates power relations both via their intersections as well as across structural, disciplinary, cultural and interpersonal domains of power. To this end I have strived to apply intersectionality as an investigative framework through my data analysis and the presentation of my findings. Throughout the coding process I paid particular attention to areas where there were notable differences in the ways in which different participants experienced or expressed common concerns. I have also attempted to capture the complexity of my participants’ intersectional lived experiences through the inclusion of large, intact quotes from our interviews. The application of intersectionality as an analytical framework is difficult, according to Hill Collins and Bilge, “precisely because intersectionality itself is complex” (2016, p. 29). While my application may be imperfect I hope that it charts the path forward for future research which explores the complicated relationship between power and identity.

The Researcher’s Subjective Positionality

An important component of critical ethnography is reflexivity of the researcher towards their subjective positionality. To varying degrees, knowledge can be seen as dialogical or co-created, and biases can influence every step from subject sampling to data collection to data analysis (Grbich, 2013). This has particular implications in the field of Fat Studies as knowledge about fatness has historically been “granted to obesity experts who are far removed from fat embodiment, whilst fat people’s knowledge-sharing about their own bodies and lives is ignored

or ridiculed” (Cooper, 2016, p. 32). Cooper (2016) goes on to call for increased consideration towards subjective positionality (she uses the term “standpoint”) when researching fatness, specifically when we consider how “expert” knowledge and power is often used as a weapon against fat people.

This is not to say that those who do not have a lived experience with fatness cannot or should not contribute to the field of Fat Studies. In their 2009 article “The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research,” Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle challenge the idea that one is either an insider *or* an outsider to any group, calling for further exploration of the space between, where one can exist as both an insider *and* an outsider, reflecting on shared and different experience at the same time. However, when working with marginalized groups it is important to consider positionality for a number of reasons. Marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to further marginalization through the reduction and flattening of their experiences and the underlying power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. As Cooper explains, fat subjects are often abstract presences within research, “a nebulous blob of people sometimes known as ‘the obese’, which echoes contested approaches to fat people within more traditional medicalised obesity discourses” (Cooper, 2010, p. 1024).

The issue of positionality in Fat Studies is complicated by the fact that fat is a fluid identity marker, meaning that a researcher could have past experience with lived fatness but no longer experience the same corporeal reality. As Meredith Nash and Megan Warin explain in their article “Squeezed between identity politics and intersectionality: A critique of ‘thin privilege’ in Fat Studies” (2017) there are a number of seminal Fat Studies scholars who at one

time identified as fat but currently do not. Does this shift in their corporeal reality negate the academic contributions they made to the field or prevent them from future participation? Nash and Warin argue, “Making space for these complex narratives of embodiment is necessary in the development of a more inclusive politics of resistance” (2017, p. 80). I identify as fat and have for the majority of my life; however I do not identify as superfat or infinifat, nor would I say that I have ever identified as such, although I have experienced being too fat to access the largest size most Canadian plus-size clothing retailers carry. I am also a white, cis-gender female, able-bodied, in a heteronormative-appearing relationship and am lower-middle class. All of these identity markers afford me an amount of privilege that cannot be undone by my relative fatness. In the spirit of the scholars cited above, I wish to acknowledge that my own lived experience with fatness and the way in which my current body is read as fat most likely afforded me greater access to fat-identified research participants and also impacted our interviews, as I was able to relate my own personal stories of fat dressing struggles. This is also one of the main reasons I asked participants to join me on a video chatting platform: my body visually reads as fat, even though I may not be superfat or infinifat. Throughout the interview process I strived to be constantly cognizant of the historically uneven subject-researcher power dynamic by allowing my subjects to “drive” the interview and providing multiple opportunities for them to reflect on topics around clothing that I may not have thought to ask.

When presenting the research findings in later chapters, I have opted to include large, intact quotes from the participant interviews in an effort to afford the participants greater epistemological agency over their own experiences and knowledge. This goes hand-in-hand with a semi-structured, creative interview methodology in establishing the research subjects as

experts in knowing what it is to be infatigable and the impact a lack of clothing options has on the lived infatigable experience. However it's important to acknowledge that while I have attempted to design a research project, and thesis document, that foregrounds the voices of the research participants, I would be remiss not to address that I am, in a small way, personally served by this work in fulfillment of the requirements of my academic program and in furthering myself as an emerging scholar in the field of Fat Studies. I hope that more scholars, particularly those working within and for marginalized communities, acknowledge these concerns in their own research.

Chapter Three: Constructing and Performing an Infinifat Identity

Calla³: Do you feel you have a fashion style?

Amanda: One hundred percent no. (laughs)

I literally wear what lets me go out of the house not nude and... (exasperated slap) It blows my mind to think that there are so many people in the world that can... you can literally wear whatever you want. You can look however you want whenever you want to look it. Because that's just never been my experience.

Calla: Right.

Amanda: It's gotta feel amazing.

(Interview with Amanda, December 11, 2018)

In an interview on the podcast *This American Life* celebrated author Roxane Gay illuminates the difference between the largest and smallest ends of the fat spectrum, stating:

Yeah, I mean, I think there are different kinds of fatness. There's the person who's maybe 20 pounds overweight, who's fine as they are. But if they want to lose weight, they just need to go on Slim Fast for a couple weeks or something.

And then you have people who are-- I like to call them Lane Bryant fat, which means they can still buy clothes at Lane Bryant, which goes up to 28 in size. And they're the ones I find that are often the strongest cheerleaders of, this is who I am, and, you have to take me as I am and respect me because of my body not despite it. And I admire that a great deal. But I think it's easier to feel that way when you have multiple places where you can buy clothes and feel pretty and move through the world.

(<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/589/transcript>)

³ As identity is an important marker in my research, I have decided to refer to myself by first name in any included interview quotations, where appropriate.

As previous chapters have outlined, this thesis focuses on how those beyond “Lane Bryant fat” fashion their identities in the face of extremely limited fashion options. Clothing is one of the main tools we have for constructing and performing our identities. As Entwistle states, “The individual and very personal act of getting dressed is an act of preparing the body for the social world, making it appropriate, acceptable, indeed respectable and possibly even desirable also” (2015, p. 31). Entwistle highlights both the constructed nature of identity, and the central role of “dressing,” and thereby fashion, in constructing identity and identity performance. In this project I critically explore the question of what is the appropriate, acceptable, respectable or even desirable superfat or infinifat identity, and the role this identity construction and performance plays in revealing the type of hierarchization that Gay draws attention to at the outset of this chapter.

I build the foundation for my investigation into infinifat identity by exploring superfat representations in popular culture. This exploration is grounded in concepts and themes expressed by my research participants as they discuss where and how they see bodies like theirs presented in mainstream media. I explore how these concepts and themes are reflected by my participant’s feelings towards fashion and dress⁴. This exploration is loosely structured around three main areas of concern: performance of a non-individualized or communal fat identity; performance of an assigned identity in terms of age, and; difficulty in performing non-normative identities, particularly around ideas of gender and sexuality. I use the term “loosely

⁴ Drawing from the work of Wilkinson, Carter & Shokrollahi (2018) I use the terms clothing, fashion and dress somewhat interchangeably to reflect the considerable overlap in these terms and to be inclusive of terminology used by the participants of my research project.

structured” as there is considerable overlap in each of these categories, especially considering intersecting identity markers such as class, race and ability. By utilizing these permeable categorizations, this chapter illuminates the ways in which these themes connect with existing literature on plus size dressing while demarcating areas worthy of further study.

Performing Superfatness

In her 1993 book *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of “Sex”* Judith Butler argues that gender identity, and arguably also embodied identity, is performed through a reiterative and citational practice as opposed to a singular or deliberate act. She puts forth that while the fixity of the body is established through materiality, this materiality is not benign. Instead it can be viewed as the productive effect of power (Butler, 1993). In this way, embodied identities are the product of a framework of norms, practices, knowledge and power. I explore this framework of power and norms further in the next chapter on access. However, Butler’s concept of identity performance as a reiterative and citational practice is important to keep in mind as I explore how mainstream representations of superfat embodiment establish the expected performance of superfat or infinifat identity.

Kathleen LeBesco builds directly from Butler’s theories on identity construction and performativity in her 2004 book titled *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*. LeBesco’s theorization of the use of rhetorical communication strategies by a politically charged public to destroy fat bodies also relates to the ways in which the fat body is established as

monstrous, or Other. These pervasive socio-cultural framings of fat impact the lived experience of those inhabiting fat bodies and the ways in which fat identity is socially constructed. I would argue, however, that some fat bodies are seen as more monstrous than others and that within current Western social and commercial realms, there is a hierarchy of size, with some fat bodies being seen as more socially acceptable or normative. The concept of micro-hierarchization is helpful in highlighting the distinctions I am making within a marginal identity group. Micro-hierarchization describes how Western society views fatness and fat bodies as less than or least desirable and is also descriptive of the hierarchization that happens within the fat community (Wann, 2009, citing Hogan, 2001). Research participant Ash mentions this in our interview, stating:

It's hard because you just don't see a lot of infinifat people on social media, even. I think part of that is because of the standard fat bias that is everywhere but I think also part of it is being marginalized even within the plus-size community.

Ash's mention of being marginalized "even within the plus-size community" is reflective of Hogan (2001)'s concept of micro-hierarchization. As Hogan states, "Every society hierarchizes its members in such a way as to grant each stratum some degree of relative privilege with respect to system-internal goals" (2001, p. 46). He goes onto explain that the micro-hierarchization that occurs within societal groups, such as those who are fat, posits some members as higher up the ladder of success than others, with their success coming at the expense of those occupying the lower rungs. Members remain committed to the system as they can see a path towards success: they simply need to climb higher on the ladder. As Wann notes, "Each micro-rung on the weight-based hierarchy exerts pressure to covet the next increment thinner and regret the next increment fatter, leaving little room for people to recognize and

revolt against the overall system” (2009, p. xv). This regret of the lower, fatter, rungs of the ladder contributes to Ash’s feelings of being marginalized within the plus-size community and is a theme I return to at various points in this projects.

Micro-hierarchization, according to Hogan (2001), relies on the success of some being established at the expense of others. In *Revoltin' Bodies?* LeBesco draws on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s concept of the “normate” or those who “command power based on a combination of bodily configurations and cultural capital” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 76), and whose normalcy is established at the expense of others. LeBesco uses this framework to examine how fatness is represented as both a physical and social disability in the television show *The Simpsons* and the movie *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?* Similarly, we can apply LeBesco’s use of the “normate” to subsequent representations, such as TLC’s reality television show *My 600-lb Life*, where the superfat subjects are presented as wholly socially and physically disabled by their superfatness and unable to participate in any activities we would associate with “normate” life. Such extensions of LeBesco’s work add to our understanding of how the superfat identity is constructed and performed. *My 600-lb Life* is mentioned by multiple interview participants as being the only mainstream cultural product where they see themselves or bodies that look like theirs represented. Ash outlines the impact of this specific television show as such:

And I think shows like *My 600-lb Life*, that's the only representation that people my size ever see. It's hard. It's hard to think of yourself as a whole healthy vibrant person living an active life in this world when the only other people you've ever seen who look like you are in hospital beds being told that they're going to die and they need to do something about their lives immediately. That's just not reality for a lot of 600lbs

people. A lot of 600lbs people have perfectly active lives. You know, I have a very hot husband. (laughs)

That is something that 600lbs people can have but I think that having the only representation of someone your size being a sad person in a hospital bed it really affects you.

As Ash mentions above, in each episode of *My 600-lb Life*, the superfat protagonist is often bedridden, unable to step outside of their home or participate in any life that exceeds the confines of the hospital bed. Any friends or family are presented as enablers who either “come around” to support the protagonist in their journey towards extreme weight-loss through surgery or as unbelievers who must be banished due to their lack of support for the protagonist’s “new (anti-fat) life.” At no point in the show is a superfat person represented as anything other than, literally, exceeding the bounds of normality; they are categorically socially and physically disabled. The journey towards weight loss (through surgery) is the only narrative of redemption, allowing the hope of a “normal” life.

Ash’s quote also speaks to the difficulty superfat individuals face when challenging or resisting the *My 600-lb Life* performance of a wholly socially and physically disabled superfat identity. She states that it is difficult to view herself as a vibrant participant in life in the face of this mainstream discourse of superfatness. Returning to the notion of how identity is constructed and performed through the practice of dressing, and how that identity performance is an act that cites and reiterates cultural frameworks of norms and power, we can see how the extreme lack of clothing options available to superfat and infinifat people further inscribes the mainstream discourse of superfatness as performed in *My 600-lb Life*. Without “multiple places where you can buy clothes and feel pretty and move through the world,” to

refer back to the Roxane Gay quote at the beginning of this chapter, it can be difficult for superfat individuals to challenge or resist the *My 600-lb Life* performance of the superfat identity. Yet, why would the fashion industry consider superfat individuals as a viable market when this is the pervasive narrative of superfatness? Indeed, the majority of superfat protagonists in *My 600-lb Life* are often naked or covered only by a non-clothing item such as a sheet or towel. They are simultaneously unworthy of being clothed and also without need for fashion through their wholly physically and socially disabled existence. This dominant representation, which seeks to reassure all other body types of their acceptability and proximity to normal, flattens the lived experience of those at the largest end of the fat spectrum and serves to compound the marginalization felt by superfat and infinifat people.

The impact of these dominant discourses that inscribe superfatness and the superfat identity extends beyond clothing and dress. As Ash explains in her earlier quote, "having the only representation of someone your size being a sad person in a hospital bed it really affects you." This effect is reflected by other interview participants in various ways. Jossie describes a pivotal interaction from her childhood, stating:

My grandmother told me when I was little, I was very little, I was a big girl, and she told me, "Jossie, you need to make sure that you always take a shower, you always smell good, you're always taken care of, you always look pretty and you're always well put together because people expect fat people to be dirty, smelly, looking bad. They always expect fat people to be gross and slob. You need to separate yourself from those things. You need to always make sure that when you take a shower you wash well in every fold, you make sure that you smell good, whatever soap that you use, use perfume. You do your makeup right, you take time with your hair, you take time with your nails, you make sure that your dresses are pressed and clean. Never leave the house dirty or looking like a slob because people, that's what they expect from fat people."

Jossie goes on to explain how, even while disabled, she takes this directive to heart, instructing her personal care worker to be scrupulous in their care of her body and ensuring that anytime she goes outside her wardrobe, hair, makeup and styling is “on point.” As Jossie explains, “It's not only because [of others] it's also because of me, it makes me feel good. It separates me from what people think that I should be and it makes me who I am.”

Jossie's experience also speaks to the “good fatty” archetype that is commonly found in mainstream discourse. Layla Cameron applies this concept to her analysis of another TLC television program, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life (MBFFL)*, in her article, “The ‘good fatty’ is a dancing fatty: Fat archetypes in reality television” (2018). While *My 600-lb Life* posits their superfat protagonists as wholly socially and physically disabled until undergoing redemptive weight-loss surgery, *MBFFL* offers a different path to performing an acceptable fat identity, at the expense of the unacceptable, or bad, fatty. As Cameron states, “The good, or acceptable, fat body is either fat because it is diseased, or remains fat despite proving itself to be physically active and healthy” (2018, p. 2). Seeing a 380lb woman such as Whitney Way Thore, the main protagonist of *MBFFL*, posited as the “good” fatty can be seen as a “win” towards a more inclusive, dynamic representation of fat bodies beyond the socially disabled framing explored above. However Thore is performing a very specific type of acceptable fatness, one which speaks to a “will to innocence” (LeBesco, 2004) around her fatness, that is not attainable by those who exist at the largest end of the fat spectrum, nor those whose fatness intersects with identity markers such as disability, race or class. LeBesco (2004) defines “will to innocence” as the rhetorical practice by fat people of relieving themselves of responsibility for their fatness. This assimilationist practice of “size acceptance” manifests itself in a variety of ways, including,

according to LeBesco, the “moral segregation of the ‘fit’ fat from the general fat population” through the “praising of fat fitness overachievers... suggesting that despite their girth, they deserve to be treated well because their deeds make them healthy” (2004, p. 112). Thore attributes her weight to a health disorder (PCOS) that is “outside of her control” and remains physically active “despite” her weight. She is representative of a “good fatty” archetype that capitalizes on its proximity to normality, at the expense of the “bad fatty.” As Cameron states, “fat bodies in... reality television do not deconstruct or fully reject fat stigma, but rather dictate instances where fatness may be permitted” (2018, p.3). Jossie’s grandmother’s imperative to “Never leave the house dirty or looking like a slob because people, that's what they expect from fat people” is evidence of how the dominant discourse around fatness, such as the “good fatty” performance of acceptable fatness, impacts the treatment and stigmatization of fat people, particularly those who have fewer tools to access “good fatty” behaviours.

While it’s important to consider the ways in which assimilationist tactics such as Thore’s claim of worthiness through physical activity and Jossie’s grandmother’s imperative towards cleanliness work to establish “acceptable” performances of fatness, it’s equally, if not more important, to consider the context in which these tactics are deployed and who may be wholly unable to access the tools for their performance. Throughout our interview Kristen speaks about having few, if any, tools with which to adopt the performance of an acceptable fat identity, particularly as a poor, Black child with few familial or other supports. As a child, for Kristen, there was no acceptable fat identity. She describes an experience that was especially traumatic:

Like there was one time we were doing laundry at this laundromat. And back in the day they had these laundromats where you could buy food like pizza and hamburgers and things like that. Just snack food. And we were sitting at the bar, the counter, and this guy was like "Hey, I got to throw this food away darlin', you want some pizza?" And you know me, an 11 year old kid I'm like "Yeah I want some pizza!" And my dad was like "No, you don't eat that." And he said, he told this guy, to my face, he said "If you ever have a daughter, never let her look like this."

This powerful quote speaks not only to the difficulty of specific people to situate themselves as the “good fatty” but also to the impact of the “bad fatty” archetype. Kristen faced an impossible uphill battle in establishing herself as a “good fatty” and her father’s violence towards her body reflects his knowledge of this fact. At various points in our interview Kristen mentions her father’s wholly negative view towards fat bodies and how it impacted her inability to imagine herself as a worthy participant in society, much less one who could fashion an acceptable fat identity. While I explore the childhood experiences discussed by the research participants in more detail later in this chapter, returning to the themes of identity performance through clothing, this quote from Kristen serves as a reminder of the unique challenges faced by fat people who embody additional intersecting identity markers of marginalization and discrimination in performing as the “good fatty.”

You Are(n’t) What You Wear

When asked if they felt they could express their identity through clothing and dress, all but one of the project participants answer with an unequivocal no. When asked if she was able to express her identity through clothing, Ash answers:

No, not at all.

Every once in a while, I'll find a piece that I really like and really feels like me but the options are so limited that most of the time I feel like I just have to take whatever will fit me and make myself fit into that. Like make that my identity for the day.

This feeling of restriction or limitation is reflected by all participants to varying degrees. Jossie is the only participant who said she felt she was able to express parts of her identity through her clothing, especially in comparison to the lack of fashion options she had as a fat child, although she admits that she often relies on her sewing skills and the sewing ability of her mother to either tailor commercially-available clothing to her body or construct fashionable outfits from scratch. Similarly to how Downing Peters' (2014) plus-size research participants expressed feeling shoehorned into performing a prescribed fat identity by virtue of having to shop for clothing at the "fat lady" store, all of my interview participants echo Ash's statement above in relation to an "if it fits, I wear it" approach to dressing. When asked about her feelings towards clothes shopping, Amanda states:

It's always been a struggle. I honestly can't- I was thinking about it this weekend and I don't know that I've ever, in my, like, as far back as my memory goes I've never been excited about clothes shopping... because it's all just utilitarian: "does it fit? Okay, I have to wear it." That's how it's always been for me."

This utilitarian approach to dressing is reflected by Kristen in relation to past experiences of dressing her body. Referencing a time when her body size was approaching, and eventually surpassing, the largest size of clothing available at plus-size retailer Lane Bryant and the ways in which she stretched the garments to fit her body, she states, "[t]hose types of things [do] kind of make do but I never really had any particular sense of style, I just found what I could fit." Drawing from themes expressed in these participant interviews, below I consider

this concept of limited identity expression through three specific experiences: the performance of a non-individualized or communal fat identity, performance of an assigned aged identity and difficulty in performing non-normative identities, particularly around ideas of gender and sexuality.

“We all have to wear the same things.”

With limited clothing options available in sizes beyond a US dress size 32, almost all of the research participants spoke to the ways in which this limitation creates a type of communal superfat identity. As Ash explains:

I'm also one of those people that... so I have a lot of superfat and infinifat friends and we all, ultimately, end up owning the same things.

We all end up dressing the same and it drives me crazy! The thing is, I've always been the person that wants to dress differently than my friends. I want to have something that's special and that people are like, "Oh my god that looks so nice on you." And I can be like, "Thanks!" And then they don't own it also. That just doesn't happen. Because if you're a [size] 34 and you find a dress at Torrid that fits you, then all of your friends have also found it and they're wearing it too, you know?

I don't know how- my friend Allison in Texas, she's a little bit smaller than me but half the time I'll post a photo on Instagram and she'll be like, "Haha, I wore that dress today!" Like... Nooo! But it's like, that's all we have. We all have to wear the same things.

Almost all of the participants mentioned this concept of communal fashion identity, with the majority of them referencing Ash and either her Instagram account or *The Fat Lip* podcast as the source for their knowledge about where to shop for clothes and “tips” about specific garments that work for the infinifat body. While I explore the possibilities of this type of

community-building and knowledge sharing in further chapters, specifically around fat activism, for the majority of participants this type of knowledge sharing reinforced the limited options available to them when shopping for clothes. When asked about the impact of a communal fashion identity, Amanda says, “It makes me sad for myself that there's not more available so that I can explore that for myself but it's just the status quo for me.” The status quo and adoption of a communal “fat” fashion identity is reflected in the findings of Downing Peters (2014) as well, however her subjects are afforded a greater ability to individuate themselves through their ability to access mainstream plus-size fashion. To quote from one of her participants, “I just keep telling [the plus-size readers of the participant’s fashion blog] to go to the store and try things on” (Downing Peters, 2014, p. 57). Yet just “trying things on” often isn’t possible for infinifat people, drawing further attention to the marginalization faced by those who are larger than the largest size available in mainstream plus-size retailers. As Downing Peters’ participants discuss their fashion blogs and their sharing of clothing knowledge and resources as a method towards individualization and resistance against a communal fat identity, the participants of my research project spoke to this sharing as reinforcing a shared fashion identity that is difficult to challenge.

Childhood memories and “old lady dresses.”

While the above described concept of communal identity performance is born from a connectedness with other infinifat and superfat individuals, the majority of participants describe their childhood experiences of dressing through lenses of exclusion and difference.

Specifically, as fat and superfat children, they were forced to adopt identities older than their chronological age, and the age of their peers, due to a lack of age-appropriate clothing available in their size at that time. Jossie, Ash and Kristen all spoke about specific garments and experiences that reflected these feelings of separation and isolation. For Jossie and Ash, the specific garment was jeans. As Ash states here:

Then when I started to get into junior high I noticed kids were saying things about the fact that I didn't have jeans. Like, "Why don't you wear jeans like everybody else?" And, there were no jeans to fit me at that point. So it was like... and I remember talking my grandma about it, we were super close, and she's like, "Well, we'll see what we can do, we'll see what we can find." I remember the first pair of jeans that I wore- it was probably like... 8th grade, and I was already a [size] 24. So I'm like, "Wow, this is the last size there is, in jeans, and I'm already there." And so that became something I was super conscious of. That and the kids at school would be like, "What brand are your jeans?" because obviously plus size jeans are a different brand than straight sized jeans. Even if you're shopping only at Wal-Mart like- I grew up with a lot of poor kids too, but of course my jeans were a different brand. They were looking- you know that little brown patch on the back of your jeans- they were like, "What does that say? Why is that a different brand?" I was mortified of course, because when you're in 7th and 8th grade the last thing you want to be is different.

Jossie reflects a similar feeling of difference related to jeans here:

I didn't wear jeans until I was in my late teens, when [plus size clothing store] Avenue came out. I couldn't wear jeans to go to elementary school like every other kid because they just didn't fit me. They just didn't make them in my size. So I remember having to wear- (laughs) I called them old lady's pants, you know, with elastic on the waist because you couldn't find the one with a button. You couldn't get slacks, you just had to wear the old lady pants with elastic in the waist. And again, I tried to rock it the best that I can and try to pair it with something that made me less older. But, you know, that's what it was. It was horrible. I fucking hated it.

Jossie goes on to explain how even though she was the only fat student between five classes of sixth grade students and was bestowed with a negatively charged fat related

nickname (“gorda”) it was the lack of connection with other fat children around what to wear that underscores her feeling of being an outsider in elementary school. As she states:

Instead of calling me Jossie, which is my name, most of the time they called me gorda, that became my nickname. I didn't take it as an insult, I just took it as a description. Like this is me, I'm gorda, I'm fat. I didn't ever take it as someone was trying to be make fun of me or hurt my feelings, it was just something that happened...I remember, you have sixth grade classes had different classrooms, so it's like five classes of sixth grade and all between the five classes I was the only fat one. I had nobody to go like, "Oh hey, how do you do this?" "Oh wait, where did you find that?"

I could never tell my friends, "Oh hey, that's a really cool coat, where you got it?" Because I knew that even if I asked, there was no place for me to go get it. There was nowhere that's going to fit me.

In addition to a sense of disconnection, Jossie mentions the concept of adopting an identity that is older than her own by virtue of limited availability of age-appropriate clothing in her size. This performance of an assigned older identity was also experienced by Kristen. Kristen relates this adopted identity to her family's past poor economic status and reliance on donated clothing through their church. Kristen and Jossie were the only participants to send pictures from their childhoods. Although I did not specifically ask for images related to a participant's past experiences with clothing and dressing, for both Kristen and Jossie these past experiences ground their current feelings towards fashion. During our interview, Kristen used the image below as an entry point for discussion around her history with clothing:



Figure 3: From participant Kristen

When asked to talk further about her childhood and clothing, she states:

It was horrible because I was so large. My mom was intent on keeping me as a little girl, so instead of buying me- well, a lot of the clothes that she would have normally bought me wouldn't fit so I bought like- dress me in like husky and maternity clothes. Literally, like. My father's a pastor, well he's not a pastor now, but all my life I've been a PK [pastor's kid] and so to church I would wear maternity dresses. Thirteen, fourteen years old, wearing maternity dresses just because that's all she thought would fit me- and it probably was, you know.

Kristen goes on to describe a specific instance of dressing in an “old lady” style at a school dance due to her family’s reliance on donated clothing items. She relates this experience back to her childhood feelings of disconnection and social isolation, as well as to a more general sense of exasperation. She concludes the story by stating, “Like, this was my life, you get what I'm saying? I was bullied, I was picked- you know, typical. Just because I never really felt good in my clothes, I never had any clothes that I was proud of. I just wore what I could find that would

fit on my body.” This concept of “if it fits, I wear it” is referred to by all participants, both when speaking to their past and current experiences with dressing their superfat bodies.

When asked about her experience with clothing in childhood, Jossie references this picture:



Figure 4: From participant Jossie

She describes this dress as “the worst,” explaining:

The yellow one is the worst! I was 14 years old, my dad wanted to take me to my first "grown up" party with him, like a Christmas party... My mom and dad are kind of like freaking out, because they really want me to go to this party, kind of like show off their young daughter, and I couldn't find a dress. I remember we went to [store name]. They had these boutiques- I mean, they still have them now- where they sold these dresses that you didn't know where the hell they came from. I call them the mother of the bride kind of dresses. You know, the long skirt with the jacket on. That's the only thing I could

fit in! I remember my mom feeling bad for me that I have to wear these old lady dresses because they were the only thing that would fit me. I try to put my brave face [on], I was trying to wear my really nice dress, do my hair. Trying to look as nice as possible. I was like, okay if I have to wear this crap, I'm going to try to rock it as best as I can... Because if I'm going to wear something that makes me look older at least I'm going to try and act older.

In addition to create a sense of separation and isolation from their peers, this adoption of an older identity impacted the way Jossie was perceived by adults. In reference to being a fat child Jossie states, "I was 14 and I had a woman's body. I had a woman's body. I had men come to me and like give me lines and flirt with me because they thought I was older, they thought I was 17, 18 years old. I was not, I was 14, 13 years old." Kristen also mentions this sexualized aspect of growing up as a fat child as further heightening her sense of isolation from her peers. Premature sexualization is often combined with weight-based discrimination and bullying directed towards fat children, particularly towards children from historically marginalized groups (Garnett et al., 2014). Both Kristen and Jossie's experiences speak to the compounded nature of their exclusion as multiple identity markers (race, class, weight) contribute to a sense of difference and isolation from their childhood peers. As clothing is one of the key ways to indicate belonging within social groups, not having access to situationally and age-appropriate fashion in their size during childhood made it challenging for participants to "fit in" with their young peers. For most participants, this difficulty "fitting in" has continued into adulthood and continues to be felt most acutely by those who embody intersecting marginalized identity markers. I look at the specific experience of Kelly, a participant who is gender non-binary, in the next section.

“I don't even know what gender neutral looks like a lot of times.”

In considering the relationship between the inifinat experience and identity performance through fashion, it is important to also look at the ways in which the challenges around fashioning identities that exceed constructed norms or binaries are further compounded by the lack of clothing options available to inifinat people. In the context of this project, this is revealed most sharply in Kelly's experience; Kelly is gender non-binary, and emphasizes their compound exclusion through fashion.

Gender queer or transgender communities provide a rich history of gender “play” via clothing; current news and social media, especially within fashion circles, regularly document a largely apolitical fascination with non-binary bodies and "gender neutral" clothing (Sears, 2014; Moore, 2018). However, Kelly describes the contemporary options for gender play via clothing as inaccessible, demonstrating the severe limitations in choice, personal expression and fashion engagement they must navigate as an inifinat. Kelly states:

I don't even know what gender neutral looks like a lot of times. I don't have the option to play with gender expression as much as I want to and I also don't feel like I have the safety or the option to explore my gender identity and gender advocacy because I'm having to deal with this other stuff first.

The “other stuff” that Kelly is referring to includes advocacy for larger sizes in clothing in general, with most of that clothing existing within the traditional binary of “men's” and “women's” garment categorization. Lamenting the lack of non-gender specific clothing in inifinat sizes, Kelly goes on:

It's all extremely basic stuff that is included [in size 32+]. One of the things that is included is the gendered item of dress, you can have a dress that's a 7x or a 6x. You can buy gendered fashion that is appropriate for your body shape and your body proportions as a physiological woman... So I can buy a 6x man's coat but the sleeves are going to be past my fingertips. If I buy [men's] pants, the crotch is going to be down [by] my knees. The length is going to be wrong. Men's clothes are tailored differently and so basically, it doesn't feel like there are very many options for expressing gender identity or even just playing with gender identity. The main gender identity thing I actually feel like I can play with every once in a while, is if I wear a plain white t-shirt that's coded, in my mind, as masculine. So I can wear a plain white t-shirt and I'm like, "oh, look at me, I'm so handsome." But that's it. And there aren't other gender signifiers that you can play with from the male side, typically. Like, make-up is heavily all coded as feminine.

Even for those participants who identify as normatively female in terms of gender expression, expressing gender through clothing as an infatigable feels like an impossible undertaking. Amanda is a cis-gender woman and when asked if she felt her clothes help her to identify as female, she answers:

I mean I guess in some of the colour choices, if you're going to go with gender norms, it helps identify me as female but other than that, like... I just. As far as clothing wise... if I just look at my outfit I'm like, "oh that's a frump." Like that's just a human dressed in clothes. I don't know that they're all that female presenting. Because I choose to present female and that's how I identify I do have necklaces and a little bit of make-up and I try to choose feminine-ish glasses, things like that. That's how I try to make the distinction but as far as just clothes I don't know that I can [express gender] based on what's available to me.

Calla: So maybe turning more towards accessories or things that are less size dependent when you want to feel more feminine or dressing up a little bit more girly?

Yeah, yeah. I have a lovely string of pearls my husband got me one year. I have a few little necklaces and bits and bobs but yeah, if I'm not wearing any of that it's just utilitarian frump walks about the earth. (laughs)

Non-size specific items, such as make-up and some jewellery, were also mentioned by Jossie as key to her gender expression through clothing. According to Entwistle, "So significant are clothes to our readings of the body that they can come to stand for sexual difference in the

absence of a body” (2015, p. 136, emphasis in original). Clothing is crucial to identity performance in general and is especially salient for those who are at the margins of mainstream gender performance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, all of the research participants expressed challenges in performing unique aspects of their identity through dress and clothing. This particular finding is not unique and is aligned with much of the existing literature on plus-size dressing. However what I have strived to illuminate is the degree to which inffinifatt people are limited in terms of identity expression by the complete lack of clothing options available in superfat and inffinifatt sizes. In the next chapter I will explore how this lack of clothing options impacts inffinifatt people’s participation in social spaces, however it’s important to draw attention to the ways in which this lack of access is felt most acutely by those who embody additional marginalized identity markers and the enormous task ahead of them in fashioning their identities. The intersection of fatness, specifically superfatness, gender and clothing, alongside race and other markers, demands further study.

Chapter Four: Limited Access and Restricted Social Participation

Ash: I think we're fighting a battle on so many fronts because on one level we're saying, "It's not our fault that we're fat so we need accommodation." But then there are so many people that are like, "Well it is your fault so if you changed yourself then you wouldn't need this accommodation."

On another level it's like, even if it is my fault, even if I did eat my way to this weight, I still deserve accommodation. (sighs)

There's so many- we're fighting this battle on so many fronts but really all we're saying is, "We already exist, fat people already exist, so we just need access."

(Interview with Ash, March 30, 2018)

The themes of access and identity are intrinsically woven through our experience with dressing our bodies. The clothes we wear are one of the key indicators of belonging: of the social groups we identify with and belong to, alongside the spaces we belong in. The concept of dressing appropriately is directly related to ideas around social currency. This chapter will explore how the limited clothing options available to infinifat people impact their experience with accessing certain environments and social situations. I will begin by establishing a framework for how clothing impacts our ideas around belonging and access, drawing from the theories of Joanne Entwistle (2000/2015). This framework serves to ground the experience from my interview participants describing specific situations and lived experiences where a lack of available clothing options resulted in limited access. Finally, by referring back to the themes of social disability explored in the previous chapter on identity performance we can see how this lack of access serves to further the marginalization of superfat and infinifat people and deepen the marginalization faced by those who embody diverse intersecting markers of

identity. Throughout this chapter access through clothing is considered through a lens of social justice, which calls back to the emancipatory underpinnings of Fat Studies.

Dressing as a Situated Bodily Practice

In her benchmark text *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress & Modern Social Theory* (2000/2015), Entwistle introduces the theory of dress as a “situated bodily practice” (2015, p. 34). She establishes the act of dressing as key to the performance of embodied identities and speaks to the effect clothing has on how our bodies are read within prescribed societal norms. Drawing from Foucault’s theories around the body as a site upon which discourses of power and knowledge are exerted, Entwistle argues that the dressed body “is a product of culture, the outcome of social forces pressing upon the body” (2015, p. 41). Approaching the act of dressing as a “situated bodily practice” encourages a deeper investigation into these structural and political forces and acknowledges that clothing is key to the way we move through the world. There are very few social situations where bodies are not dressed. Contemporary structures of power and knowledge impact what clothing is considered appropriate for specific situations and environments and therefore establishes which bodies are appropriate in specific situations and environments. In this way, we can consider Entwistle’s theory of dress as a “situated bodily practice” as speaking not only to how bodies are situated in the context of greater structures of power, but also towards how bodies are situated within particular environments with specific “clothing codes” and how the dressed body can reinscribe these codes. Power and authority

are dynamic fields in which even those at the bottom contribute to the reinforcement of dominant structures.

This type of bottom-up reinforcement contributes to the micro-hierarchization occurring within the fat community by establishing certain types of fatness, including superfatness, as less desirable than others. As all of my participants expressed in their interviews, clothing options for bodies in the small to mid-fat range continue to increase at a rate that is disproportionate to any increase in options for those in the super to infinifat range. Referring to the increase in use of the term “inclusive” by clothing companies, particularly by plus-size clothing companies, Ash addresses this discrepancy by stating:

That's what's the most offensive. Places that- and I've even seen it from plus-sized business owners that are offering up to a [size] 30 now. They'll say, "Finally! Inclusive Sizing!" or, "Finally, fashion for all curvy women!" And I'm like, "But you do realize that there are those of us who are wearing above a 30." And it makes- I don't know. I don't know. Sometimes I'm like, "Does a size 24 realize that there's something above a size 30?" Or do they think that that's as fat as people can possibly be?

I don't know. It's hard to understand their motivation, in that way. Do you just not know that I exist? Or are you consciously trying to not include me? What's going on in there? It's hard to know.

At a later point in our interview Ash relates this discrepancy back to the concept of access:

It's like, it's hard to make people realize or hard to- I think most people don't even think about it. I think even regular plus-size, standard plus-size people don't often think about all of the things that their access to clothes allows them to do and how people that don't have access to those clothes then can't do those things.

Ash's comment on the lack of consideration towards the infinifat experience by those who are “regular plus-size” illuminates how those at the smaller end of the fat spectrum contribute to the micro-hierarchization occurring within the fat community. When you are unable to find

kinship with those who also identify as fat it can be near impossible to imagine that normatively thin bodied individuals will be able to understand the infinifat experience and engage in meaningful inclusive activities.

The affordance of clothing to some fat bodies but not all fat bodies furthers the marginalization of superfat and infinifat bodies. As explored in the previous chapter in regards to identity performance, the limiting of appropriate clothing for superfat bodies to access specific social spaces reinscribes the dominant narrative of the superfat body being wholly socially disabled and unable to participate in “normal” life. By distancing themselves from those who are considered “too fat,” small and mid-fat people stake claim to a position adjacent to the “normate” and draw from the social capital afforded to those that inhabit normative sized bodies. This remarginalization is felt most acutely by those who embody identities that have historically been afforded less social capital, namely those who are non-White, disabled, queer, transgender and/or poor. While I have strived to apply an intersectional lens to my analysis throughout this project, a thorough analysis of all of these themes is beyond my scope. It is imperative that further work on infinifat dressing and fashion considers these intersections.

Infinifat in the Workplace

When asked about situations where they feel they don’t have access to appropriate clothing almost all of my research participants mention workplaces, both traditional office

environments and non-traditional work spaces. As Ash outlines, the concern around work appropriate clothing starts at the initial job interview stage:

And so, when things like the job interview comes up it's something that really makes me anxious. Because if I can't dress like everyone else dresses at this place of business then I can't go to that job interview. My best friend [who is infinifat], she doesn't work. She is super anxious about even attempting to get a job. So she's married and it's fine that she doesn't have a job but she is super anxious about it, she just can't wrap her mind around having to go to a job interview dressing the way she has to dress.

Every time something like that comes up I just think about her. She is really- it really affects her feeling of self-worth because she feels like she can't contribute to her marriage or her household because she can't work because she- like how's she going to go to work every day? Like, having one outfit for a job interview is one thing but having seven outfits to get you through a week... like, how do you even fathom going that far and finding clothes? It's a huge problem.

The inaccessibility of traditional office spaces due to a lack of appropriate workwear is repeated by Amanda and Kristen. Amanda explains that while she is working as a homemaker currently, “were I back in the workforce, were I in a professional environment, I don't know where I'd go! There's nowhere someone like me can get a blazer or separates, things like that. There's no where I can go to get things like that.” Kristen expresses a similar “I don't know where to go” sentiment when speaking to the challenges of finding work appropriate clothing in infinifat sizes.

Size discrimination in the workplace is a well-documented concern for fat people (Powroznik, 2016; Stoll, 2019). Having access to garments that are appropriate for a traditional workplace is one of the ways that fat bodies are able to overcome or distract from the dominant narrative that fat people are less worthy within the dominant neoliberal framing of productivity equating worth. Superfat bodies and disabled fat bodies face additional barriers to

physical access within office spaces, with concerns directed towards accessible seating and office layouts that don't allow for larger bodies or bodies in wheelchairs to navigate between desks or in boardrooms (Owen, 2012). Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals face similar concerns around fashioning an appearance that is deemed acceptable in traditional workspaces, as do people of colour.

Kristen speaks at length to the ways in which her intersecting identity markers contribute to an increased concern around workplace discrimination. Here she speaks to feeling unprepared for discrimination around her weight as opposed to her race:

And so at that time they were paying \$14 an hour and that was huge for me at that time. This was like maybe 12 years ago. I get to the place and the lady's like, "Oh, come on in." It's like a front desk receptionist type job. And I get there and all the managers are these white men, right? These khaki pants. I reached my hand out to shake one of their hands and they just looked at it like, "I'm not touching you."

So...And the job was cush, like easy! Like I could do this in my sleep, it was nothing. So the next day I went to work. The lady trained me some more. I get back to my hotel and they're like, "You don't have to come back tomorrow." Immediately I was like, "it's because I'm a black woman," because of the way they reacted to me, you know? And it probably was because I was black. But he was like "No, it's your weight."

The economic realities of having limited professional clothing options available in your size and within your economic means are felt most acutely by those who already face barriers to entry and success in work spaces. Kristen goes on to state:

This is my life, you know what I'm saying. Like this is like everywhere I go. Even a job I had for like 13 years, I was writing - my major is mass communications with PR. I'm a PR major. I write. I'm a writer. I'm writing a newsletter for our state publication. This guy is like "Did you write this? You?" This has been like the pattern. They used to hate that I wore my afro at work, I didn't care. I'd have a big huge afro I wore to work. I mean I just, I don't know, I guess I was defiant, but at the same time it hurt, you know?

And that, and being fat, and trying to fight my way and trying to do double of what everybody else was doing just to prove that I belonged? That's been my whole life. My whole entire life. Just surviving. Fighting all the time. Fighting, fighting, fighting. All the time. To be accepted, to feel like I belonged, and never really feeling put together. Never really having money to take care of myself the way I needed to. Never really knowing what that even meant, to take care of myself.

Kristen's description of "doing double" the work of her non-racialized, economically advantaged thin peers in an effort to establish her value and belonging illuminates how weight-based discrimination is felt more deeply by those who embody traditionally marginalized identity markers. Her description draws particular attention to how the discrimination she faces limits opportunities for economic advancement and the compounding nature of those limitations.

Kristen underlines this connection by stating:

So clothes haven't been a huge priority. But what I had was kind of just thrown together. And I never felt like I really belonged anywhere. I do feel like, had I had a better sense of what it meant to care for myself, and to put things together and to feel confident when I left the house- just basically confident- would have helped a lot... And I think that that was what I suppressed for so long, was that expression of myself through my clothes. Because I wasn't thinking about that. I was just trying to find something to put on.

Kristen's compelling description of the struggles she faces as someone who has been poor, racialized and superfat may seem beyond the scope of this section on the workplace limitations faced by infat folks due to lack of clothing options. However in the above quote we can see the connection she draws between clothing, confidence and a sense of belonging. Greater access to work-appropriate clothing for infat people can begin to dismantle, or at least challenge, some of the barriers of entry they face in fully participating in traditional workplaces and the gains, economic and societal, associated with this participation.

Continuing with Kristen's experience, we can see that traditional workplaces are not the only work environments where infat and superfat people face challenges with finding situationally appropriate clothing. Kristen has transitioned to a career as a singer, performing in entertainment venues and private homes. She included the picture below and describes the impact that limited fashion options have on this aspect of her life here:



Figure 5: From participant Kristen

I was actually singing at a restaurant, and that dress [pictured above] was on its last leg. And that jacket was too, and I was just in my mind thinking "What am I going to do when I can't wear this anymore?" Because it's so difficult for me to find things that are comfortable that I will wear in front of people. And feel good in. And be able to sing in... I just don't have enough to pull from so that I can feel comfortable doing things that I want to do. It's affected everything.

Now that I talk about it with you, I hadn't really thought about it. I mean there were other reasons, you know, just things I was dealing with, but a lot of it did have to do with the fact that I just felt like - I just look at my closet, and there was nothing I felt comfortable in.

Again we see Kristen drawing a connection between clothing, confidence and her sense of belonging in a specific space. Social spaces, including workspaces, have implied “dress codes” and these codes not only establish who belongs in a space, they also establish who will succeed.

In their 2017 article, “Dressing ‘in code’: Clothing rules, propriety, and perceptions,” Gurung et al. demonstrate the impact appropriate clothing choices have on a woman’s assumed competency and professionalization. Women who dressed appropriately were more likely to be perceived as intelligent and powerful (Gurung et al., 2017). This positive perception can lead to raises, promotions and other workplace gains. However, even making it to the initial job interview stage can seem impossible with no work appropriate clothing available in your size. This furthers the economic marginalization of superfat and infinifat people and perpetuates fat discrimination and stigma. Workplaces are but one social space that has implied rules around dressing, as I will explore in the next section.

Infinifat in Social Spaces

The limiting effect that a lack of access to clothing has on infinifat people expands beyond experiences located in workspace and was addressed by multiple research participants in regards to social situations and normative life events. We can consider the way that limited access to social spaces contributes to the furthering of social disability as a condition of

superfatness or infinifatness. A common theme from all participants was the importance of clothes in navigating these social spaces and a sense of protectiveness over the few clothing items they have been able to purchase or acquire that they can wear in these contexts. Amanda describes her experience with flying and the fear of losing her luggage here:

So if I'm flying somewhere and I have to check luggage I am SO anxious about it because God forbid they lose my luggage I cannot just go into a store and buy clothing. Last October, we were supposed to go on a vacation with my in-laws to Florida and do Universal Studios and that and I was just so stressed the whole time thinking, "Please don't lose my luggage." If my luggage gets lost I am literally screwed. I can't even go buy underpants. So that's something that feels very, very limiting to me. I don't have a lot of travel wishes but there are people I love that live far from me that I'd like to go and visit but thinking about travelling and possibly not having clothes and then not having access is a huge source of anxiety for me.

There's a lot of leg work behind it [acquiring clothing]. It's funny actually hearing myself say it out loud. Being an infinifat person flying, I don't have much anxiety when it comes to the airport or the airplane at all because I've done my due diligence. I know I've purchased my two seats. It's literally just the clothes for me. (laughs)

"Please God, let my clothes make it there with me." That is where my travel anxiety lies. Which, until I had said it out loud I didn't really think about it.

As Amanda suggests, though much of the research of fat bodies in spaces has been oriented towards the ways in which physical spaces like airline seats are ill-designed for fat bodies (Owen, 2012), what is equally important is this intersection of access and fashion in terms of the fat lived experience.

All of the participants in my project described their day-to-day wear as a combination of leggings and knit wear, generally purchased from the same two or three retailers. The lack of options in terms of formal or fitted wear was lamented by all participants as a limiting factor in their ability to access and feel comfortable in specific social spaces. For Jossie, the key to feeling

comfortable in environments that have a specific dress code is having the ability to sew and access to someone in her life who can tailor garments as she wishes. When speaking about attending a BBW Bash⁵ in Las Vegas and not finding anything appropriate to wear in her size, she states:

So I told my mom, she was like, "Okay, so what do you want to do?" And I'm like, "Let's go to a fabric store." We went to the fabric store and we got this beautiful purple, shiny, glossy, organza kind of thing. Like flowy. And then we got the inside silk to go in the inside and some silk to go on the outside. She made this grey and purple dress with a train on it and I'm like, "Yup, this is what I wanted." I wanted a dress with a train and she did and I got it. So to me having the option is great. Maybe it's cheating but you know...

This echoes Amanda's experience with the only garment she addressed when asked what clothing brought her joy, her wedding dress:

⁵ A social gathering for fat and superfat women and their admirers. See: <https://ravishly.com/take-the-cake-my-first-bbw-bash>



Figure 6: From participant Amanda

Well with my wedding dress I ordered it from eShakti [customizable online clothing retailer] so it was custom but even then, when I got it, I had to take it to a tailor. Thankfully I know a great tailor but she actually ended up having to take it basically apart and re sew it to my measurements but because it was made for me I felt amazing in it. It fit me great, it looked great... And we saved up for that and I had a specific budget for that but that's certainly not my everyday life.

These two experiences with formal dresswear are in contrast to Kristen's experience with her wedding dress. Without the economic means to have a garment custom constructed or extensively tailored, Kristen included this image of her wedding dress and described the experience as such:



Figure 7: From participant Kristen

I felt like...disgusting. Because at that time, I was like, "Oh my stomach, my stomach." ... And so it, I mean it was a beautiful day and everybody came together and my family was there. I just remember feeling so... (ugh). Because I felt like the dress caught me in all the wrong places.

When asked about specific social situations where she has difficulty finding appropriate clothing, Ash brings up weddings as well:

I got married on New Year's Eve and part of the reason I didn't want a wedding was because I was like, "there not a beautiful wedding dress that exists out there for me." Like, I would have to have something made. And, so it's like there are all of these experiences that infinifat people just can't have because there aren't the clothes that they need for them, you know, for those things.

It's like, it's hard to make people realize or hard to- I think most people don't even think about it. I think even regular plus-size, standard plus-size people don't often think about all of the things that their access to clothes allows them to do and how people that don't have access to those clothes then can't do those things.

Across cultures, weddings have specific social codes and norms. In "The Dressed Body," Entwistle (2011) refers to the wedding scene to reinforce how cultural knowledge is reinscribed through the garments worn by both the bride and guests. According to Entwistle, "Formal events, such as weddings, funerals and job interviews, impose themselves more forcefully on

the body” (2011, p. 143) and make greater demands on the body towards following established, universal “clothing codes.” In Western wedding culture, only the bride is expected to wear white and the opulence of her bridal attire is the focus of much attention from guests. The universality of the wedding event provided the participants with the knowledge that I would most likely understand why this event, in particular, mattered in terms of accessible and appropriate fashion. The universality of the wedding event also meant that the majority of my participants, if they were or had been married, would have pictures of themselves from such an experience. These pictures served as “jumping off” points for conversations directed towards the impact of a lack of clothing in everyday situations and specific garments that the participants struggle to find.

Winter coats and undergarments, such as bras and underwear, were also mentioned by almost all of the interview participants as being areas of particular concern. These types of findings, the cataloging of specific garment struggles, chart an important path forward when we consider this research through a social justice lens. These findings also illuminate the gap between the findings of existing plus-size dressing research and my own on the infinifat experience. For example, in Downing Peters’ (2014) study of plus-size dressers, all of her participants describe a sense of “overcoming” limitations in identity expression through clothing by eschewing established rules around what plus-size bodies should and shouldn’t wear. However none of her participants express limitations in terms of access to social spaces due to an inability to acquire appropriate clothing. While Downing Peters’ (2014) participants may, presumably, face challenges in finding winter coats that adequately express their sartorial perspective, their existence at the smaller end of the fat spectrum ensure that they will, indeed,

find a coat that fits around their body, something that both Ash and Amanda expressed is impossible for them at this time. The cataloging of specific garments that infinifat people find impossible to acquire underscores the degree to which a lack of access to clothing limits infinifat people from fully participating in social spaces.

Conclusion

While the subjects in Gurrieri and Cherrier's (2013), Downing Peters' (2014), and Harju and Huovinen's (2015) work speak to the limitations faced by plus-size dressers in expressing their identities through fashion, there is very little consideration towards the impact these limitations have on perpetuating fat stigma, discrimination and the marginalization of fat people. These impacts do exist, and I argue that they are illuminated most clearly by the experiences expressed by the research participants in my project. However, in all of the three articles mentioned above, subjects reference the concept of "getting by" with the limited options that are available to them. This concept was echoed by the participants in my research project and is the area of concern for the following chapter that will explore how the participants in this project are getting by and fashioning their own infinifat identities.

Chapter Five: From Getting By to Inififat Hacking and The Possibility of Social Currency

Redirection

Calla: And have you thought about making any of those things? Is that sort of the driving force behind wanting to learn how to sew?

Amanda: Yes! Which angers me because I just- I don't understand why we have to teach ourselves to do these things so that we can feel human like other people. It's absolutely crazy-making for me. Like one of the shirts in that "every day" photo, one of them is very, very tattered and torn but that is earmarked for- that's going to be my first project. I'm going to cut it apart and make a pattern, so I can at least make more of those to have since they've changed the style, and branch from there. It's really frustrating to think that I need to start making all my own things. It's just- it's not anything I ever thought I'd be thinking about but here I am. I own a sewing machine now and... (laughs)

(Interview with Amanda, December 11, 2018)

This chapter explores the practical methods and techniques employed by the interview participants to “get by” with the clothing options available to them. Drawing from Otto von Busch’s concept of fashion “hacking” (2009), I will identify the ways in which inififat people not only modify specific clothing garments but also how they use particular strategies, especially around the act of purchasing and clothing procurement, in an attempt to circumnavigate the mainstream fashion industry and redirect the flow of social currency. Building from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), I am purposefully conflating social capital and social currency to draw attention to the ways in which gains of social capital flow to those who are most able to participate in normative societal activities and spaces and bypass those who are constructed as wholly socially and physically disabled. As Bourdieu states, social capital is the combination of actual and potential resources, acquired through networked relations,

which “provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). This chapter focuses on the everyday activities that inffinat people use to increase their collective social capital and chart their own path for access and identity performance. These everyday strategies are not neutral: they have political implications towards the reshaping of boundaries around access and identity for superfat and inffinat bodies. The following chapter will look at the implications many of these strategies have on the culture and politics of fat activism and fat liberation.

Fashion “Hacking” and Redirecting the Flow of Currency

In his 2009 article, “Engaged Design and the Practice of Fashion Hacking: The Examples of Giana Gonzalez and Dale Sko,” von Busch brings the methodology of “hacking” to bear on two fashion projects which attempt to redistribute power within mainstream fashion systems by empowering normally passive fashion customers through skill sharing and knowledge transference. The concept of fashion hacking presents an interesting lens through which we can examine the “getting by” techniques employed by the participants of my research project, particularly in the way it illuminates the political and cultural possibilities of these practices towards an imagined fashion industry that is inclusive of inffinat bodies. However when we compare the activities of the two projects in von Busch’s article to the actions described by my research participants we can clearly see the limitations faced by inffinat people, especially those who embody additional marginalized identity markers, in fully participating in a method of hacking that fundamentally redirects the current of power in their direction. Therefore, I

argue that the practices described by the participants of this research project can be considered “proto-hacking” as these activities speak to a not-yet-fully-realized future where infinitely people will have access to the tools and strategies they need to engage in an organized hacking practice.

Von Busch introduces hacking as a methodology that has three main characteristics: skill in opening and mastering a system, reclamation and redirection of the system’s flow, and free sharing of hacking knowledge and tools in order to facilitate further system modification. Drawing from the work of media theorist William J. Mitchell, von Busch describes hacking as “circling around a DIY [do it yourself] ethos and a desire to amplify our means of interaction with the world” through a “reclaiming of authorship (or co-authorship) of a technology by supporting transparency and unanticipated use” (2009, p. 165). This reference to DIY practices and a desire to increase interaction with the world relates directly to the strategies and methods employed by the participants of my research project. The practices I explore in this chapter are their way of navigating a fashion system that does not address or even acknowledge their clothing needs, through which they construct the means towards increased interaction with the world.

Hacking can be seen as a tool for liberation. Von Busch describes the practice of circuit bending as “the culture of explorative tinkering with old electronic instruments and music products” which results in “artistically tuned music machines” (2009, p. 168). This circuit bending, von Busch argues, “actually *liberates* the hidden potential... and opens up new possibilities” (2009, p. 168, emphasis in original). In this way fashion hacking can be considered a method of taking something which is “not for you” and stretching or manipulating the

boundaries to construct a version which is for you. As established throughout this thesis, infatigable people often feel that the world of mainstream clothing (and the world in general, one could argue) is “not for them.” Hacking is one way of liberating the hidden potential of clothing to accommodate the infatigable body and begin to address an infatigable person’s specific concerns around identity performance and access through fashion. The possibility of liberation is further illuminated by comparing the infatigable hacking practices described in this chapter to Anne Galloway’s work on the ethics and politics of hacking, as outlined by Von Busch. Von Busch presents Galloway’s four central points of hacking politics as, “access to a technology and knowledge about it; empowering users; decentralizing control; creating beauty and exceeding limitations” (2009, p. 167). These points will ground my examination of the specific techniques and methods described by my participants as they attempt to “get by” with the limited clothing options available to them.

“That's How I Shop for Clothes, Which is Terrible”

Strategic clothing shopping strategies were mentioned by all of the research participants, with the most common technique being bulk buying. Amanda explains her approach to bulk buying here:

I actually have one specific style of knit pant that I like and it's from a specific store in the States, Catherine's, and I'll often go and buy like six pairs at a time and what I like about them is, yes they are knit but it's a nicer quality knit that washes, like multiple times, well and it doesn't look, you know, like crap immediately... Whereas, honestly anywhere else I've found that has pants that would even fit me, they're just terrible quality. They look awful within two washes. So I literally wear the exact same pants daily. I own like five or six pairs but it's the exact same pants. Even my tops are the same shirt in as many colours as I could get it in because it fits me well... That's just where I'm

at in my life right now is if it fits and it works I need to have as many as possible because what if they stop making it. That's how I shop for clothes, which is terrible.

Amanda's description of buying strategies motivated by fear is echoed by Jossie:

I don't take anything for granted. Once I find something I treasure it. I have clothes in my closet that are five years old and they look like new. Because I'm afraid that one day, someone [clothing designer] is going to say, "it's not worth it" (snaps) and there will be no more clothes.

I always take care of my clothes, I always make sure that everything is... if I find something, and I have the money, I immediately buy it. Even if I'm not going to wear it right away, because again, I'm afraid of that one moment when they're going to be like, "Ah, it's not worth it clothing these fat people." And we go back to wearing old people's clothes, you know what I mean?

Like Amanda and Jossie, all interview participants described the fear of having the few clothing items they had been able to find in their size either discontinued or the pattern modified to a degree that the garment no longer fits. Returning to Galloway's four central tenets of hacking, strategic buying practices, such as the bulk buying described by Amanda, or Jossie's "immediate buy," could be considered methods of partially, but not completely, decentralizing control. One could even go so far as to suggest that a person could feel like a some-what empowered user with multiple pairs of a garment (that they know will fit their body) in their possession. Yet in both situations participants describe feeling beholden to a clothing company that operates on a purely market model and could disrupt their access to garments that fit their body on a whim. Consideration needs to be paid to the capitalist environment the mainstream fashion industry operates within and where these strategic buying methods are situated. Relying on a system which has historically ignored those at the largest end of the fat spectrum, along with other marginalized groups such as those who are disabled, makes any meaningful decentralization of control or empowerment challenging, if not impossible.

It is also difficult to see any meaningful decentralization of control or empowerment in either situation when we consider both of these methods as being accessible only to those of a certain economic status. Both Amanda and Jossie described themselves as lucky to have the economic means, at times, to participate in both of these purchasing strategies. As Amanda states:

It honestly feels like torture. I probably... I mean, [Ash] and I talk about this all the time. I have spent and returned thousands upon thousands of dollars of clothes. I can make an order- and I'm lucky, that I have this access but I can order three hundred, four hundred dollars worth of clothes, get them, and honestly most of them go back. All of them go back, typically. Honestly, it's torture.

While Amanda describes the “torture” of having to shop this way, many participants don’t have the financial resources for even such inadequate strategies. Custom made clothing is available from a limited number of mainstream fashion retailers, yet that option is also curtailed by financial accessibility. Almost all of the participants referenced online retailer eShakti as one of the few companies offering custom garment construction that accommodates superfat and infinifat bodies. Yet their offerings are not without drawbacks, particularly around the added cost of having a garment customized, as Amanda did with her wedding dress.

Kristen also mentioned eShakti, describing the unpredictability of clothing that claims to be fully custom:

Now eShakti, I like them because you can custom- like I think that green dress I got came from them. But I like that because you can customize your sizes. I just have been so nervous about, kind of, venturing into that because I'm not sure, I don't know. Like that just seems kind of scary to me. But I'm sure if I really learned what I really needed to do and got into it, it would work.

Strategic purchasing methods, such as bulk buying, immediate buying and custom commercial options were referenced by all of the research participants. Yet these methods reflect little of the ethos and practices of hacking, as outlined by Von Busch (2009). Framed by fear and a reluctant reliance on dominant fashion systems, they also do little to imagine an empowered inifinat consumer or user of clothing. Looking towards the ways in which the inifinat participants are attempting to reroute the channels of cultural currency by employing their own hacking methods and techniques yields a different perspective on the exercise of agency in this regard.

“I Hack Everything”

The hacking methods employed by the participants in this project range from basic techniques such as wearing garments in unexpected ways to more complex construction and modification practices. Amanda, who doesn't currently sew or construct her own garments, spoke to her method of modifying the commercially available clothing she has so that it can better fit her body:



Figure 8: From participant Amanda

When I have- like the pants I wear for example get like- I'm short- I'm barely five foot one- and the pants in petite are entirely too petite so I buy them regular and I end up wearing them like my grandfather up under my breasts. Because I'm not good with a sewing machine yet- I'm teaching myself how to sew, but at that point, you know. Wearing them differently, folding waistbands so pants and bottoms fit me better is something I do...

In the one everyday wear photo you see [above] it's like the sleeveless top and the sweater that, unfortunately, is my winter wear. I just have to layer sweaters. So I guess that's sort of hack-y for me. I'm just- I'm not real good with sewing yet so I haven't gotten too into the hacking so much.

Ash also speaks to this “making it work” style of hacking where commercially available garments are worn in slightly unexpected ways:

My best friend, she wears nightgowns as t-shirts and actually I've done that too. If you can find a cute size 3x chemise or something that's like knit, not something obviously, like, mesh or something- (laughs)

She's been buying nightgowns and like wearing those as like- you know, long sleeved solid nightgowns- and wearing those as shirts. Oh, another thing I do sometimes is I can buy Old Navy straight sized XXL. Sometimes they'll have dresses, like a fit and flare knit dress, and I buy that and I wear it as a tank top. I mean, it works decently. For the summer, you know. Yeah, just like- it's basically just trying to find ways for things that don't fit you to somehow go on your body in a way that like will kind of work, you know?

There are obvious physical limitations to the approach outlined above: not all infinifat people will be able to take a conventionally plus-sized garment and stretch it to fit their body. However this method of hacking clothing that is “not meant” for someone who is significantly larger than a size XXL speaks to the possibility for social currency redirection through the subversion of existing fashion power structures such as garment sizing.

In this picture from her Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/fatlippodcast/>)

Ash is demonstrating the “dress as tank top” technique described above and refers to it as an “infinifat trick” in the accompanying caption.



Figure 9: From www.instagram.com/p/BfbbO6tAxGz/

Another “trick” that Ash mentions on her Instagram account, and in our interview, is turning “too small” graphic t-shirts into crop tops:

For me I'm sort of into graphic Ts [t-shirts] a little bit. So I will buy the largest size graphic T there is and I will cut the bottom band off and then like stretch it- you know like when you cut a t-shirt you can stretch it and it kind of rolls up? So I do that and that's what all my crop tops are. Just like, you know, some cute graphic T that I found that I've cut up to make fit me.



Figure 10: From www.instagram.com/p/BfMZ6gNAhpX/

Kristen also mentioned the physical manipulation of existing commercially available garments, describing the way she uses her knees to “stretch out” t-shirts, particularly around the waist. Kelly explains their own method of hacking graphic t-shirts in reference to the photograph below:



Figure 11: From participant Kelly

I have hacked a lot of stuff... So the one [photograph] that says "Fat Bitch." If you look at that one, you can actually see that there is a heart-shaped seam that goes around. What happens is, I want to buy graphic t-shirts or graphic tank tops- tank tops, especially, do not come above like 2x or 3x, most of the time. They're even more limited... But, in any case, I would buy the graphic shirt or tank top that I wanted and I would cut out the design and I would transplant it onto a tank top that would fit me or a t-shirt that would fit me.

So for the "Fat Bitch" shirt, that's actually a Universal Standard shirt that was a [size] 30 and the "Fat Bitch" shirt was a 4x but it was like a small 4x... That's when I ended up transplanting it, is because the Universal Standard shirt fit me better but it was also like it didn't really fit me well. I have since gotten a new "Fat Bitch" shirt because Fat Girl Flow increased her size range.

Graphic t-shirts play an important role in identity performance and perception (Gurung et al., 2018) yet are often inaccessible in terms of sizing availability, as Kelly notes in the above quote. Their "transplantation" of a graphic from a too-small garment to one that is more appropriately sized indicates a desire to participate in the social practice of performing identity through the wearing of graphic t-shirts. This is but one way that the hacking methods described by the

participants can be seen as increasing their social capital through their ability to access a social practice that was once off-limits.

Returning to von Busch's definition of fashion hacking, we can clearly see all three characteristics represented by the participants, although perhaps not yet fully realized. Through the physical manipulation of garments that were originally "not meant for them," the participants are opening up the commercial mainstream fashion industry, reclaiming space within the system and redirecting it towards the "more desirable goal" (von Busch, 2009, p. 164) of garments which accommodate an infinifat-sized body. Ash's posts which describe her "infinifat tricks" are illustrative of the free sharing of methods, techniques and tools that von Busch establishes as key to the practice of hacking. In this way, Ash, Kelly and even Amanda are redirecting the flow of social currency towards a group that has been historically ignored and underserved by clothing designers and manufacturers.

This disruption of the mainstream fashion industry through the ethos and practice of hacking is clearly demonstrated in my interview with Jossie. While the majority of participants mentioned the tailoring and sewing of garments as one method of "getting by," all of the current photographs that Jossie emailed prior to our interview were of garments that had been fundamentally structurally altered through tailoring or constructed anew by her mother, who is an experienced sewer. As Jossie explains:

I really recommend that if you're a big girl, learn the basics of sewing. It's just- it will be such an advantage because then you can buy things that you're like, "oh, okay. The lining doesn't fit well, fine. Just take it apart." You know, cut it, cut a triangle, do a triangle add on to it, there you go, you're fixed. If not, if you think that you could just pull it apart and nobody would notice, just pull it apart and don't put anything on it and

just go on. Those little things help. I recommend every big girl at least have one of those little hand sewing machines and know how to thread a needle. It will be a lifesaver. You know, it helps.

Jossie returns to this point again when addressing this photograph:



Figure 12: From participant Jossie

That is a coat that I got from [clothing store] Avenue. Actually, the coat wouldn't go completely around the bottom so what I actually did was go inside the coat and cut the lining and have my mom fix it so it could actually go all the way around my waist without having it look funny. Sometimes even big clothes you have to go and take the time and modify it.

I think if you're a big girl and you like to look good, you have to have a sewing machine at some point. Because this is when you go and you make it fit. You make it yours. You do it and you fit it... So, yeah, if you're a big girl you need to have a sewing machine. Even like a little one. And learn the basics of gathering and cutting and- even if you're not cutting but there are little cheap cheats that you can do. Instead of cutting the

whole thing you can just bend it in and sew it in, you know? You have to have those little things to make things fit you.

Garment reconstruction and tailoring is key to Kelly's experience with fashion hacking as well.

When discussing underwear, Kelly explains:

I literally was taking two butts and sewing them together. Like of your Hanes or whatever. Like standard department store panties. That was mostly because, again, with the [pattern] grading. If you're a size 14/15 panty, then you probably have a gut and your shape is probably more likely- if you're looking in profile, to be like this (gestures) then it is to be flat in the front and then like a bit booty. So I was buying packs of underwear on Amazon and then cutting them up so I could put two butts together. I still have those. I've gotten rid of a couple pairs that got really holey and messed up but it's a comfort thing. I can't bring myself to get rid of all of them even though I have a lot of [clothing company] Kade & Vos underpants now, in my actual size, because it's a safety thing. If all of a sudden Kade & Vos turns into a shithole or if they all disintegrate, I need a backup underpant.

As discussed in the earlier chapter on access, Jossie speaks at length about how her ability to have custom clothing made is key to her feeling a lack of restriction around access to particular social spaces. In our interview she talks about this specific dress:



Figure 13: From participant Jossie

The one that I sent you that is like black with the two buttons? That actually, my mom made that dress. Yeah, that was another option of mine. I also- when I started looking for dresses, I couldn't find what I wanted. The exact thing that I wanted. So I told my mom, "let's just make it." I buy her the fabric, I tell her what I want and she just makes it for me.

So that also is a big option for me that if I want it, then I can just tell her, "Make it." So if I don't find it, I just make it.

Jossie's comment, "if I don't find it, I just make it" is illustrative of the potential these hacking methods have towards decentralizing control and empowering users, which are two of the core tenets of hacking practice according to von Busch (2009, p. 167; referencing Galloway). While the manipulation of already existing garments redirects the flow of currency within the mainstream fashion industry, construction of new garments represents a fundamental shift of power away from a system which marginalizes infinifat bodies and towards an imagined future of limitless infinifat fashion possibilities. Referring back to this dress, Jossie underlines what this

future could mean to infinifat people. She joyfully states that this dress encapsulates her style and that it makes her feel positively about herself. You can see her happiness and satisfaction reflected in the picture above.

Unfortunately, the tools to construct this future are not equitably accessible to all. As

Kristen explains:

So I see kind of the style that I like. I wish I could sew. My mom can sew. If I could sew, oh man. People would be in trouble. Because I'd have some cute, cute, cute stuff. They'd be like "Where'd you get that from?!" (laughs)

...That you can- I mean how much- it's too complicated to make those patterns as large as they need to be. And then paying somebody to sew for you? Oh my gosh. That's just...crazy expensive. There's a lady who makes her own clothes that's - Uh, she makes, you know, super-sized clothes. She only goes up to like a [size] 32, 36. And I'm like (sigh). And I know because of just what she said. The cost. She doesn't go any higher and she at the place to where she can't really do like, piecemeal orders. She has a line. You know what I mean? And it's like - you are so close! Just a couple of more sizes! You were so close... And I'm like, oh man. It's just hard to find - it's so much easier for smaller people just to kind of look out and say "This is what I want. I have a plethora of directions to go." We don't have that.

Cost as a barrier is also mentioned by Ash in terms of constructing her own garments:

Yeah, it has. So it's hard because... so the thing I like about making skirts for myself or making dresses for myself is that, again, then it's something that I have that not all of my friends have. So, I've done that several times in the past. I think I only have one or two left. But, I sort of hold onto those just because it's like, yeah, it's a thing that not everybody can get and it's the only thing I feel like it's unique. It does work, but it's like... a tedious process- it's actually really expensive to make clothes for yourself. Especially when you're an infinifat because, like, if you're a big company that has access to wholesale pricing then it's like no big deal but when you've got to buy three yards of some fabric to make a skirt it gets expensive.

Kelly also brings up cost in terms of the "risk" associated with hacking existing garments,

stating:

I hack everything. Just so that it fits what I need and what I want. But sometimes it's hard because you pay \$40 for a pair of slippers that decent and then you're like, "This isn't working for me." So what do you do? You either ruin it, or potentially ruin it by trying to fix it yourself.

Beyond concerns towards the financial resources needed to significantly modify existing garments or construct clothing anew, multiple participants mentioned having little time to devote to clothing hacking. Kelly, who has sewing skills, spoke to this, stating:

I've really struggled with- so I can sew and I've sewed a lot in the past. I've made my own clothes in the past... So I was grading and drafting my own patterns from old vintage patterns but even that is so much fucking work. Even now, when I'm like, "I'm going to save the tank top that I like so that I can recreate it later." I have my own small business now, I have two toddlers and I run a household, I stay at home with them. Plus I have hobbies. Way too many hobbies...

But for me sometimes the only option is that I can make it myself but then I don't have the option. So one of your questions, I don't remember which one it was, I think it was like "what clothes would you wear if you had access but you don't have access to?" So literally, for about six months, I had this stack of clothes that I wanted to alter and I needed to alter before I would feel comfortable wearing them. Included in that stack was four pairs of jeans, like big, giant stretchy jeans from Torrid. So I carried them around, literally they came through the move when we moved back to Chicago, and I finally was able to sit down and I was like, "I'm going to alter these fucking jeans." I altered three of the pairs and a pair of leggings from Torrid. So now I'm wearing them. People are like, "Wow! Jeans! You look great in jeans! I've never seen you in jeans!" And I'm like, well, it's because they didn't fucking fit until I had the time to sit down and spend two hours tailoring them to fit my body correctly.

Kelly's retelling of other's reactions to their wearing jeans underlines the possibilities of redirecting social currency through the tailoring of garments that were not meant for them into garments that now fit and flatter their body. However, the extensive amount of time it took for Kelly to alter their jeans points to the challenges around tailoring and garment construction beyond lack of skills and monetary concerns.

Resources such as time, money and skills are often unequally distributed along lines of race and class. This inequality affects one's ability to participate fully in the practice of fashion hacking. The two projects which von Busch put forth in support of hacking as a method towards imagining a decentralized fashion future offer little in the way of solution to the issue of unequal access and participation. First, von Busch describes the practice of fashion designer Giana Gonzalez and her workshop series titled "Hacking-Couture." During the workshops participants decodify the materials and sign systems employed by well-known fashion brands in an effort to reverse-engineer their "source code." This "source code" is then applied to clothing items supplied by the participants, through hands-on methods of de- and re-construction, to create garments that "were reinterpretations of the code, not copies, with a code as "real" as the authentic pieces" (von Busch, 2009, p. 175). Von Busch then goes on to describe the "Dale Sko Hack" where the expected workflow of a small shoe factory in Dale, Norway was disrupted by opening the factory floor to six prominent Norwegian fashion designers. These designers were encouraged to use the factory machines "wrongly" and create their own pairs of shoes free from expected conventions and construction practices. Von Busch argues that these projects cultivated an increase in participants' "clothing competence." He draws a comparison between clothing competence and craftsmanship, stating:

To grow this competence fashion can be used as a driving force for craft engagement among users who were previously just "passive" consumers. They can choose to renegotiate their usual role as ready-to-wear consumers and instead develop skills and share techniques under organized forms that will bring them closer to understanding the "operating system" of fashion, its materials, processes, and powers, and learn to hack it. (von Busch, 2009, p. 171)

To this end I argue that the methods outlined in this chapter more closely align with a proto-hacking practice: while the individual acts are redirecting social currency on a small scale there is a potential for development of skills and sharing of techniques under “organized forms” towards a large scale challenge to the “operating system” of fashion that has yet to be realized.

Conclusion

Many of the techniques described by participants in this chapter illuminate the potential development of an organized infinifat fashion hacking system. This can be seen most clearly in the experiences of Jossie and her full access to the resources necessary to both alter existing mainstream clothing garments to fit her infinifat body and construct new garments when the commercially-available options do not fit her needs. However, even those participants without the same level of access to necessary hacking resources attempt to disrupt the “operating system” of the mainstream fashion industry through the physical manipulation of garments, such as Ash’s removal of the bottom half of too-small graphic t-shirts and Kelly’s transplanting of graphics from too-small garments to infinifat-sized plain t-shirts. These techniques speak to the possibility of redirecting social currency and the construction of an imagined infinifat fashion future. This potential is at the heart of the activist practices of my infinifat participants and is where I will turn my attention in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Activism and Imaginings of an Infinifat Inclusive Future

Ash: I've spoken to so many women, so many women, who have said to me that before they heard my podcast they just felt like fat acceptance wasn't for them. Like fat acceptance is for people [size] 16 - 30. And if they're beyond that then they are too far and they need to do something about themselves. I think a lot of people that are infinifat feel that way.

(Interview with Ash, March 30, 2018)

In her 2016 book *Fat Activism*, Cooper renews her call for direct engagement of Fat Studies scholars with the experiences and voices of those in the fat activism community. She sees this engagement as a “valuable means of undoing the proxies that currently stand-in for fat activism” (Cooper, 2016, p. 35) by situating fat people as the primary instigators of fat epistemology, or how we construct knowledge about fat, fatness and fat activism. This thesis as a whole, and this chapter specifically, is my response to Cooper’s call. Drawing from queer theory and disability studies, this chapter explores how my participants are “doing” fat activism and how their actions challenge, or queer, the boundaries of contemporary fat activism. In particular I engage with Meleo-Erwin’s (2012) work on challenging the concept of bodily normativity, or “body positivity” as its often taken up in popular discourse, as it relates to the practices of the fat activist movement. Employing Cooper’s (2016) concept of proxies within fat activism, alongside her classification of fat activism activities, I will illuminate the possibilities and limitations of the #infinifatshion movement in imagining a more inclusive fat future.

Who's Being Left Out of Fat Activism?

In her 2012 article titled “Disrupting normal: Toward the ‘ordinary and familiar’ in fat politics,” Meleo-Erwin argues that “those of us engaged in fat politics must look carefully at the tactics and strategies we choose precisely because the movement is helping to produce ‘Fat’ as a mode of subjectification, identification and collectivity” (p. 389). She draws attention to the dangers of a fat activism, or fat politic, that attempts to challenge fat stigma and discrimination through aligning fat bodies with contemporary constructions of health and health-oriented behaviours. The danger, she states, is thus:

Such a framing threatens to leave behind those individuals whose fatness can be directly linked to behavior and who are therefore least able or willing to measure up to ‘normal.’ I suggest that, because identity-based politics necessarily excludes at the same time that it consolidates, fat politics may be better framed in terms of *what we desire* rather than *who we are*. (Meleo-Erwin, 2012, p. 389, emphasis in original)

While Meleo-Erwin is most concerned with those at the intersection of fat and disability, superfat and infinifat bodies face the same challenges with accessing the type of fat activism that equates fat with ‘normal,’ especially when compared to those who inhabit bodies that are read as small or mid-sized fat. Small or mid-fat bodies are more easily able to align themselves with activist movements such as “Health At Every Size” and “body positivity” as they inhabit a closer proximity to normative thinness and the associated tools of health and health-oriented behaviours. As Ash states in the opening quote for this chapter, those at the largest end of the fat spectrum are not afforded this proximity and are often considered “too far gone,” even by those in fat acceptance, or activism, spaces.

Cooper (2016) employs the concept of proxies in an attempt to “undo” the politics of fat activism and queer the boundaries of who is being excluded from various activist movements.

In this context proxies are stand-ins, or shorthand, for the assumed desires and objectives of a collected group or movements. In *Fat Activism*, Cooper (2016) puts forth four sets of proxies that are often held up as being representative of fat activism: fat activism is about body positivity; fat activism is the actions of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA)⁶; fat activism is about eating disorders and body image; and fat activism is about obesity and health. As she cautions, proxies often result in “particular facets of fat activism [being] taken as a whole and, as a result, problematic assumptions arise” (Cooper, 2016, p. 11). She sees these proxies as permeating research on fat activism and argues that this prevalence of proxies constructs dead areas in terms of those whose activist work is understudied or even ignored. While important activism work is occurring in all of the four spaces Cooper (2016) outlines above, these proxies are unable to capture the complexity of fat activism, particularly when we consider activist activities through an intersectional lens. All activist movements, by their very nature, simultaneously include and exclude. For example, Cooper (2016) draws attention to the ways in which the fat activism is about body positivity proxy focuses on how fat acceptance and liberation is tied to neoliberal ideas of self-responsibility and “trying harder” to liberate oneself while ignoring systemic inequalities and power dynamics. As Cooper states, critics of the body positivity as fat activism proxy challenge the “monolithic ideal of trite self-love that mirrors diet culture with its fantasies of transformation and happy endings” (2016, p.15). In the same way that Ash links lack of visibility of infinifat people with a missing place for infinifats at the fat acceptance table, I argue that drawing our attention to the activist work being done by those at the largest end of the fat spectrum will begin to unsettle the proxies

⁶ See: <https://www.naafaonline.com/dev2/>

that fat studies researchers have come to understand stand-ins for the goals and desires of all fat activists. At the same time, this chapter invites questions around access to fashion as a similarly problematic and limiting proxy for fat activism and fat liberation.

“It Actually Kind of Felt Empowering to Me”

While Cooper (2016) considers the definition of fat activism to be potentially limitless, she outlines five types of activist activities that were most often described by the fat activists that she engaged with in writing *Fat Activism*. As Cooper states, “These include political process activism, which means the kind of things that most people in the West think of as activism; community-building; cultural work; micro-fat activism, which takes place in very small social spaces; and ambiguous activism” (2016, p. 51). Drawing from my previous chapter on the ways in which the participants of my project share knowledge around establishing a fashion hacking practice that serves infinifat people, I am particularly interested in illuminating connections between the experiences described by the participants and Cooper’s findings on political process activism, community-building, cultural work and micro activism. Drawing attention to the multi-faceted ways that infinifat people are carving out a space for themselves in the fat activist movement has important implications for other social justice movements that are concerned with affecting social change for similarly marginalized communities.

Infinifat engagement with the public sphere.

In Chapter three of this thesis, I operationalize the term infinifat and trace its origins to Ash of *The Fat Lip* podcast. In 2017, Ash began using the hashtag #infinifatshionfebruary on the

visual social media platform Instagram. #inifashionfebruary is an online event created by Ash in reaction to the plus-size situated #fatshionfebruary event, which itself was borne in reaction to the straight-sized, mainstream #fashionfebruary online event. During the month of February, fashion “influencers” and bloggers post images of their outfits of the day (OOTD). Initially Ash’s intention was to draw attention to the lack of fashion options for bodies her size by posting her own OOTD posts, which would be the same three outfits over and over again, in response to the fantastic variety of outfit of the day images being posted by plus size fashion bloggers during #fatshionfebruary. However, the #inifashionfebruary and #inifat hashtags have galvanized a small community of inifat people towards inifashion activism.

Cooper defines political process fat activism as activism which “takes place in specialist organizations [sic] and also makes strategic use of existing structures and institutions” (2016, p. 55). The majority of examples that Cooper (2016) cites are situated within traditional institutions of Western democratic politics and policy generation, such as the organizing and advocating towards anti-fat discrimination legislation or the removal of weight-loss language on posters about city-sponsored activity programs. With a slightly broader consideration to the location of political process activism, we can see how Ash’s use of the existing structure of #fatshionfebruary to advocate for greater access to clothing for those who are underserved by the mainstream plus-size fashion industry fits with Cooper’s definition. Ash includes the following text in the captions that accompany most of the images she hashtags with #inifashionfebruary:



Figure 14: From www.instagram.com/p/BfjeQz2AvOz/

Please remember us when you advocate for more plus options. Sizes 32+ exist and we are underserved.

From this text we can see Ash’s message of inclusion: her ask is to be included in an already established movement towards an increase in fashion options for plus-size bodies. She is using already existing structures such as the #fashionfebruary Instagram event, and tools such as the OoTD image, to advocate for a mere expansion of boundaries. As Cooper states:

Political process fat activism is appealing because it offers a set of distinctly defined interests, aims and objectives founded on a sense of common purpose and oriented towards a progressive future. In using the tools and processes of the dominant culture, political process fat activism has a good chance of being recognisable and intelligible by that culture, ensuring its prominence, presence and legitimacy within a public sphere. Its rationale is to influence rather than re-order (2016, p. 57).

This use of existing tools and processes, such as the established format of the OoTD image, also speaks to the technique of mimicry which Harju and Huovinen (2015) identify as a key resistive tactic of fatshion bloggers. According to Harju and Huovinen, fatshion bloggers follow the photographic conventions of normatively thin-sized fashion bloggers in an attempt to access

normalcy and social sanction. They state, “In emphasising similarity, fatshionistas position themselves closer to the marketplace ideals: this strategy has the capacity to mediate resistance but also convey and reconstruct normative ideals” (Harju & Huovinen, 2015, p. 1616). In this way we can see how Ash’s use of the OoTD framework and expected aesthetic conventions as an effort to align herself and her infinifat community with the established landscape of fatshionistas and plus-size fashion bloggers on Instagram and other social media platforms who themselves are actively seeking inclusion in a fashion space that was once not for them. However it’s important to consider how Ash’s work diverges from the established OoTD format as it focuses on her lack of outfit diversity as opposed to celebrating her (non-existent) daily sartorial successes.⁷

The goals of #infinifatshionfebruary are distinctly defined and easy to recognize through the infinifat community’s use of tools and processes of the dominant culture. Ash and her #infinifatshion community seek to influence existing plus-size fashion advocates, and by extension, existing plus-size fashion retailers, as opposed to advocating for a complete re-ordering of the world at large to accommodate infinifat bodies and center the infinifat experience. While an increase in clothing options for infinifat people would, unquestionably, positively impact the ability of infinifat people to access social spaces and express their identities, it’s only a first step towards an imagined infinifat future in which those at the largest end of the fat spectrum do not face additional marginalization and discrimination. It’s also

⁷ We can also apply Entwistle’s (2000/2015) concept of dress as a “situated bodily practice” to how Ash’s OoTD posts both reflect and resist the expected conventions of images that are situated within the online fatshionista landscape. With extremely limited clothing options available to her, Ash is unable to meaningfully mimic the fashioning of unique and dynamic outfits that smaller fatshion bloggers accomplish. This online vs. physical world application of Entwistle’s theory, especially as it relates to infinifat dressing practices, is beyond the scope of this research project but is an area in need of future research.

worth noting which voices we see most often when looking at those participating in #infinifatshionfebruary and who we hear from least. The majority of posters utilizing the hashtag appear white and most often present as economically secure, able-bodied and cis-gender female. The voices of those who do not embody these identity markers are notably absent or muted. As Cooper explains, the tools for participation in spaces of public discourse, such as Instagram, are not equitably accessible to all and this inequality often reproduces expected unequal power dynamics.

Building towards an infinifat future.

Community-building can be seen as a part of political process activism but can also be considered a form of activism in its own right because it's one method for fat people to create social capital (Cooper, 2016). She argues this work often happens behind the scenes of more organized forms of activist work, such as the connections made by performers of a fat acting troupe who continue to meet outside of the theatre once their show's run has ended. As Cooper explains, "Building community, simply getting together, is a project of generating social capital, developing connections that enable people to exercise power, become agentic and visible, and be legitimised" (2016, p. 61). This idea of building visibility and legitimization through connecting with others is clearly and loudly reflected by my research participants.

When asked how she felt when first hearing the word infinifat, Amanda responded:

I was elated. I was like, "Yes! That is it!" Because, honestly even supersize doesn't feel right because if you ask any, you know, quote-unquote normal or typical plus-size person, to them supersize is the size 30/32 at the fat store or, you know, the person that wears the largest size but that's- that's not me either. I am past that. So, infinifat- it actually kind of felt empowering to me. Because I don't think there's anything wrong or bad about my body and I never have and finding this identifier that's also kind of a "F-

you" to people. Like, you know, you won't make me feel bad about myself. It felt really great, actually.

While Kristen does not specifically refer to herself as infinifat (although she says the term does reflect her lived experience with a lack of access to clothing due to being larger than a US dress size 32), she does echo the same themes of visibility and legitimization as Amanda when talking about her interactions with Ash and *The Fat Lip* podcast:

I found out about a lot of people through her. A lot of other companies. And then, more than anything though, I kind of lost - or it helped me begin to lose I should say, because I'm still working on it - that kind of shame and self-loathing and just fear about accepting myself and presenting myself to the world. That really helped me. Meeting her and talking to her and seeing the things that she does, it really helped me not care so much about what people say about my own perception of my body. Or at least how to improve it. It really helped me see myself a different way. And that what other people saw when they looked at me didn't really matter. It matters to an extent but not to the extent that I had allowed it to matter I should say.

Kristen goes on to describe how her connection with Ash and the infinifat community has given her the tools for self-advocacy and encouraged her to share those tools with others:

I'm feeling so relieved after, because I did one of the interviews, the [Fat Lip] podcasts with her, and I remember feeling so relieved after I did it. Because I said so many things that I was thinking that I didn't even know that I was thinking. About myself and my experiences as a large person. And I don't think it has been the same for me since then. I was kind of like an awakening so to speak. Now I talk to different people, like a friend of mine on Instagram. She was saying that she was nervous because she had to go to the doctor. (sighs) And she didn't want the doctor to be fat phobic. And I told her, and I kind of surprised myself, I said "You demand what you need. Just tell them what you need." Whether it's a larger seat, or you know, a different scale, whatever it is. You tell them what you need because they're providing a service to you.

And it's hard to get to that place. And I still - I can tell myself and have those pep talks with myself when I go to the doctor. But they will never know it. And as a matter of fact I have a new doctor and an appointment and the scale didn't weigh me. And when they sent me a feedback thing, I said "You're awesome, but you need a scale that weighs bigger people. And you need some seats that don't have sides or handles on them. Or arms on them. Because not everybody can fit in those seats." I would have never done that. Before The Fat Lip and Ash, I could honestly say I would have never have done that.

The above quotes from Kristen clearly illustrate the importance of community-building fat activism in terms of increasing visibility for inififat bodies and legitimizing the lived inififat experience. As Cooper states, "To recognize oneself and others, to commit to a relationship, is a political act in a context where one's humanity is repeatedly diminished in the wider culture" (2016, p. 67). This also speaks to the concept of "coming out" as fat, a practice that is often described as an important act of resistance and reclamation by fat people and fatshionistas in particular (LeBesco, 2004; Murray, 2005; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015). Amanda's feelings of empowerment and Kristen's feelings of relief both point to the positive impact a term such as "inififat" has for those who feel that current fat activist movements don't adequately make space for their unique experiences and requirements for liberation. For many of the participants I interviewed "coming out" as inififat was an important first-step into fat activism and superfat activism in particular.

While the term "inififat" is invaluable in terms of bringing visibility to a group of fat people who are repeatedly diminished not only in mainstream culture but also within much of the fat-authored culture, it has its limitations, particularly when it comes to organizing and community-building that happens predominantly online. Ash speaks to these limitations here:

Like even finding other people to identify with, because- so, say I am a [size] 46 and I'm talking to someone who also identifies as an inififat and maybe they're actually only a [size] 34. So it's hard to figure out what our shared experiences are if we don't even know what size we are. Because, if we were in person it would be a different story. I could say, "Oh you're much smaller than I am" or "You're much larger than I am so you must have a whole different set of experiences." But when we're all interacting online it's hard to tell what somebody's body size really is.

So it's hard to- I think being able to identify as a size really helps you figure out who you can talk to about certain experiences. I just think about all of the influencers that identify as a [size] 30 and it looks like a large range of sizes and shapes but they all identify as a 30 so they all know where they can shop and they can all share tips and tricks. But because I don't know what size I am it's hard to feel like I have community in that way.

While acknowledging the limitations of organizing around a term that does not have a specific defined boundary, Ash continues to do important work sharing “tips and tricks” of how to navigate the world in an infinifat body, particularly when it comes to accessing clothing.

Amanda speaks to this resource sharing here:

Ashley [Ash] is magic. She somehow ferrets out all these little bits and bobs that look great. Like a couple years ago she discovered this denim vest from Torrid that on superfats like us came right under our bust and it looked bomb over maxi dresses and that was amazing. You saw a lot of the superfat and infinifat people were wearing things like that when she was because it looked great and it was a little bit different.

Resource sharing such as Amanda describes above can be seen as contributing to the communal identity performance explored earlier in this thesis, which many participants found limiting or frustrating. However, Amanda’s declaration that Ash is “magic” speaks to the ways in which Ash’s activist activities, such as posting a “fashion find” on Instagram, build community. These activities increase the social capital for the members of the community: Amanda is able to look “great” and a “little bit different” by means of the denim vest sourced by Ash. Harju and Huovinen refer to this practice of building social capital through community as communality against exclusion, stating that within communities marginalized individuals “find empowerment as well as validation of their personhood...through collective action and a shared social identity” (2015, p. 1614). Resource and skill sharing, and the resulting community building, also speaks to the possibility of constructing a fully-realized infinifat fashion hacking practice, as outlined in the previous chapter.

Ash has faced difficulty, however, in expanding her community-building outside of those who identify as infinifat. Here she speaks to the lack of support she's found from fat fashion social media "influencers" who are smaller than a US dress size 32:

I think that one of the hardest things is- because there are so many options now for regular plus sizes, like even up to a [size] 28 and 30 now, it's hard because I feel like a lot of influencers think that I'm just being ungrateful. I see a lot of people say, "Well, it's a start," "30's a start" and "You've got to start somewhere" and "Baby steps" and it's like, okay, I understand that progress is slow and it's going to be slow. However, a 30 is as good to me as a 20 is to you. Or a 30 is as good to me as a 6 is to you! Like, no matter what it still doesn't fit me!

...I guess it was kind of eye opening when that happened, when I was getting that push back because it made me realize that a lot of fat influencers aren't really that fat positive. Like they're fatshion positive, they're all about plus size fashion but they really aren't all about fat positivity or fat activism. They think that being plus size is fine but they think there's a limit to what is fine. And I'm seeing that, like not directly, nobody's specifically saying "You're too fat and it's your problem." Well, I mean some people are saying that but nobody influencer-y. But I definitely get that from them, from some of them.

And yeah, it's been eye opening because it's like, "Oh, okay, like I thought we were on the same team but you're just on the clothes team, not on the activism team." Which is fine! Not everybody has to be an activist and I don't need everybody to care about infinifats but I just need some people to.

The lack of support Ash has found for her organizing from the greater plus-size fashion activist and influencer community could possibly speak to the perceived precarity of the gains made in terms of increased options for plus-size dressers. The growth of the fatshionista space, particularly on Instagram, has established plus-size consumers as an increasingly viable market for the mainstream fashion industry. However, the commodification of fatness embraces fat people as consuming subjects but eschews them as social subjects and as such the mainstream fashion industry acts to reinforce parameters of acceptable fatness (LeBesco, 2004). Ash speaks

to these enforced parameters of acceptable fatness in her quote above and her feeling that for many plus-size fashion influencers her level of fatness is seen as “too much,” preventing them from advocating for sizes beyond current plus-size offerings. The lack of interest in advocating for infinifat-sized clothing could also be seen as a desire not to “rock the boat” by drawing attention to those who are underserved by the mainstream fashion industry. As Ash states later in our interview, her perception is that the monetary relationship between plus-size fashion influencers and their clothing company sponsors disincentivizes influencers from being critical about those who are left out of the newfound plus-size clothing gains for fear that companies will no longer view the plus-size market as a lucrative one and will therefore sever the sponsor/influencer partnership.

Ash’s experience with trying to get the plus-size fashion influencer community “on board” with infinifat activism also speaks to the limitations of a fat activism that builds capital through its member’s proximity to the ‘normal’ thin body. As Ash explains:

I mean, it's hard though because fat phobia is pervasive and everybody is trying to get through it on some level. If you're a size 20 and you've gotten through it for yourself that doesn't necessarily mean that you aren't freaked out by the prospect of getting any fatter. Or the prospect of other people that are fatter being around you. It's hard to think about that just because a person is fat or also plus size or also marginalized that doesn't mean that they don't also think that you should be marginalized. Like, think that you're too far.

Jossie also speaks about the discrimination and marginalization that she faced from within the fat community when participating in spaces intended to promote visibility and community building for those at the largest end of the fat spectrum:

Okay, so, when- I call it the revolution of clothing and big girls happened a couple of years back, all these places started carrying big sizes. I remember it was like an influx, all at once. Then girls started posting pages full of websites that carry big sizes. I was like, "Oh my goodness, this is great!" I remember somebody opened a Tumblr for those who were [size] 32 and up to post outfits of the day. I was like, "Great, this is me! Right here!" I was very into wearing my clothes and every day I had a pretty cute outfit. So I decided to submit two pictures of myself. And even though I got lots of praises there was always one dude that was like, "Oh my god, look how fat she is."

And you know what was the saddest part? It wasn't men and it wasn't skinny girls, it was all my own fat girls. It was the same BBWs [big beautiful women] and then I started seeing it was a line between the BBWs and the SSBBWs [supersize big beautiful women]. The BBWs looked down on the SSBBWs. They're like, "Oh, I'm big but I'll never get that big. How can you get that big? How can you let yourself go? How come you did this? How can you do that?"

And I'm like, "Girl, we're the same! I might be bigger than you but I've been in your place! You shouldn't be criticizing because you know how hard it is out here. You know how hard it is to survive in this world and we shouldn't be fighting each other." So after that I stopped posting pictures of my outfit of the day. It didn't hurt- people who are skinny, men, they say those things to me it just rolls off my back. Because they just don't know me, they don't know my life. They don't know the things I'm going through. They don't pay my bills. But when I see a girl who's like a big girl putting down another big girl, that hurt my feelings. That really hurt my feelings. That's why I stopped putting outfit of the days on Tumblr.

Jossie's quote clearly speaks to the micro-hierarchization that occurs within the fat community, drawing attention to how even those who may be considered "too fat" by society at large build social capital at the expense of those who are larger than themselves. Both Ash and Jossie describe feelings of surprise and hurt towards a fat community that they thought would support them based on their shared experience of knowing how "hard it is to survive in this world" as a fat person. These experience illuminate the exclusion felt by those at the largest end of the fat spectrum.

Amanda speaks to these themes of micro-hierarchization and exclusion as well, stating, "And there's tiers to everything right? Like, okay you're fat but if you're the small healthy fat

you're okay! At least you're not the big giant disgusting fat! There's tiers to everything.” This reflects the findings of Cooper in *Fat Activism*, where she explains that fat activism organizations are often assumed to be founts of shared ethics and collective organizing but instead contain “a broad range of ideologies” (2016, p. 66). To this end I contend that it’s important to consider the community-building activist work of Ash and her infinifat community as both separate from, and in conversation with, the larger plus-size activist movement. This type of attention to specific community-building actions can help those doing research on fat activism identify voices that are being least often heard and begin to dismantle the activism proxies introduced in the beginning of this chapter.

“I think the more of us that do, the better off we all will be.”

Visibility and legitimization are key to our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of community-building infinifat activism. These concepts are also key to our understanding of Ash and her #infinifatshion activist actions in consideration of fat activism as cultural work. As Cooper explains, “Like community-building, cultural work is activism that generates capital and socially transforms fat. Because it is interpretable and unfixed, it offers new possibilities for imagining fat, the first step towards creating change” (2016, p. 69). Cooper (2016) specifically mentions fat photography and art as cultural works that create visibility of fat embodiment and the fat activist community. For infinifats, this type of fat activism that engages with raising infinifat visibility in public spaces can feel particularly risky, as Ash explains:

My Instagram was not- I had like 2000 followers even two years into the podcast before I started #infinifatshionfebruary. Doing that sort of put me in front of a lot of people and suddenly my- I was posted on [the website] Fat People Hate and I was getting all of these troll comments and just- the nastiest comments, like just terrible, terrible things that people say. When people that are infinifat, looking for any representation of people that look like them, if they come to my Instagram and that's what they see? Is that hatred? Then of course they don't want to post any photos.

It's just hard to find other people that look like me to have community with because there are so few of us doing it. I think because so few of us are doing it other people are afraid to do it also. It's hard, it's hard. I feel like we're at very early stages and hopefully more infinifat people are going to be posting photos of themselves and I think the more of us that do, the better off we all will be.

Despite the risk, many of the participants spoke to the empowering aspect of reimagining their fat embodiment through cultural work as activism. As Amanda states:

When I do post photos of myself and things like that, I'm not like, "Oh make sure you get the angle where my chins aren't visible." I wear my bare arms out all summer long and I live for it. I am fat and I am not apologetic about it! When I do share myself online I will always frame myself for myself and not for others. Like, I do have double chins! And I do have jiggly arms! And you're going to see it all and you're going to appreciate it all or you're going to move on.

However for some participants, the risk of their images being received negatively is too great and they choose not to share images online or participate in #infinifatshionfebruary through the posting of images on Instagram.

Additionally, we can look at ways that the fashion hacking practices explored in the previous chapter contribute to greater visibility and legitimization of infinifat people through cultural work. Jossie and Kelly's methods of altering existing clothing items and constructing garments anew redirect social currency and create visibility for infinifat people by taking items that were deemed "not for them" and laying their own claim of ownership. Ash's method of creating crop tops out of existing graphic t-shirts allows her to participate in a creative cultural

space that was once off-limits. The sharing of these techniques and the possibilities imagined through that sharing is important cultural work that carves out a space for inifinifit bodies where there was none.

Outside of Ash's activist practice on Instagram and her fashion hacking methods, we can also consider her podcast *The Fat Lip* as important cultural work that brings visibility to different types of fat embodiment. The content of episodes of *The Fat Lip* ranges from critiques of fat representations in popular culture, to tips about inifinifit-accommodating products such as vehicles and chairs, to interviews with inifinifit listeners. Podcasts play an important role in interpreting social issues and offer significant value towards new ways of learning (Brabazon, 2016; Park, 2017). The topics covered by Ash and *The Fat Lip* contribute to further community-building of inifinifit people through the sharing of lived experiences and resources around how to navigate the world in an inifinifit sized body and offer the opportunity to imagine a more inifinifit inclusive future.

Micro inifinifit activism.

The final area of inifinifit activism-oriented activities I will look at is micro fat activism. Cooper (2016) describes this type of activism as the least obvious, and least often studied, form of fat activism. She draws attention to two important aspects of micro fat activism: it happens in everyday spaces and it requires few material resources to accomplish. In this way Cooper states that micro fat activism, "is an activism that can engage people who might find other

forms of activism inaccessible or exclusive” (2016, p. 78). This is also activism that can happen in isolation and is often not documented in easily researchable forms such as public posts on an Instagram account. While all of the research participants referenced experiences and actions that could be classified as micro activism, Amanda’s experience stood out as being most reflective of Cooper’s definition:

Just being who I am in the world, it's always interesting to me when I see new and different reactions to me as I'm just kind of going about my daily life. I'm never upset, I'm never the angry fat woman, it just- I give people- I recognize that I am probably the fattest person that most people are seeing and I honestly feel a little empowered by that because I'm not scary and I'm not a bad person and I'm not lazy. I am not anything that you think I am so yes, gaze upon me is how I feel most of the time.

It's important to note here how Amanda frames her approach to micro activism in a way that still reinscribes notions of the “good fatty,” as she establishes her empowerment in opposition to the “lazy” and “bad” fatty. In a follow up to the above quote, I asked Amanda if she felt she received a different response from fat or thin people when being out in the world. She answers:

I think so. Oftentimes when it's thin people I get a sense of genuine, "Wooooah, that's a fat person" which to me it's not bad because fat's not bad to me. Like, yes, I am a fat person. A lot of times when it's fat people that I notice a reaction, you can see it in their face, it's because they don't like themselves. They're buying what everybody else is selling and they're like, "Oh my god, please don't let me be that. Is that me? Do I look like that?"

Honestly if I catch it in time I will walk up to a person and be like, "Hi, I'm Amanda. I'm a human. How are you?" And you can see it change. If you are able to take the opportunity to present that there is humanity behind your instant snap judgement- I guess that maybe it lessens it for them? I'm not sure. But yeah, for sure from fat people I feel like it's more judgemental sometimes.

This quote from Amanda speaks to the micro-hierarchization that happens within the fat community, as evidenced in previous chapters, but it also illustrates a clear micro activism

activity. Amanda's engagement with members of the public who may gawk at her, after her acknowledgement that she may be the fattest person they have ever seen, is an activity that happens in an everyday location and requires few material resources. As Cooper states, "Micro fat activism is underscored by thought and intention... [and] is often conversational" (2016, p. 79). Amanda's micro activism here is clearly underscored by her intention to humanize her infinifat body.

Kelly also reflects this thoughtful, conversational type of activism when describing a time they reached out to an influencer in the fat activism community:

I think it's really common to- when something is your size, your clothing activism stops at that size. I actually wrote a blog piece about it a while back, kind of gently calling out [fat activist and author] Jes Baker and she responded to that. She was like, "Oh, thanks so much." She did something where it was like, "Oh this goes up to a 2x. And you can get a 3x in the men's, or something, or you can just check Amazon and see if it's available." And I'm like-

Calla: Come on!

"Are you serious? Size activism doesn't stop at your own size." And she responded really well to that, I was so impressed. I met her in person last year, actually. She's so nice. And she's like, "I remember you and thank you." So she was so gracious about it and wonderful. I was like, "That's good activism." Learning and growing. Right?

Cooper addresses this concept of "calling out," describing it as "the act of identifying and refusing oppressive behaviour... [and] involves a personal act of speaking in order to assert collective responsibility" (2016, p. 80). In this way we can consider micro activism as a gentle community building activity as it speaks to the ways in which fat phobia and fat stigma impacts both thin and fat bodies. Conversely, micro infinifat activism can be seen as especially powerful, and subversive, when we consider the dominant narrative of superfatness to be one which

posits superfat people as socially disabled. Amanda's statement, "Hi, I'm Amanda. I'm a human. How are you?" directly confronts and resists this dominant discourse and imagines a different embodied experience for infinifat people.

We can also consider the fashion hacking techniques explored in the previous chapter as part of a micro-fat activist practice. Kelly's construction of a wearable "Fat Bitch" t-shirt and their act of, presumably, wearing that garment in public points towards the importance of participating in micro activism activities that confront dominant narratives of superfatness. Kelly's claim to the politically-charged phrase "Fat Bitch," particularly in light of the fact the the graphic originally appeared on a garment that was not large enough for them to wear, is a way of asserting ownership over a space that was not intended for infinifat participation. While the example of Kelly wearing their "Fat Bitch" t-shirt could be considered a more confronting or abrasive action than Amanda's gentle, "Hi, I'm Amanda" conversation starter, both serve to confront and resist dominant discourses around superfatness in a way which requires few resources and occurs in everyday spaces. This may lower the "barrier to entry" for this type of fat activism but also results in a lack of scholarly attention towards micro activist practices and their contribution towards fat activism as a whole.

Looking Ahead to an Infinifat Future

My intention with this chapter is to not simply answer the question of whether Ash's actions, and those of her greater infinifat community, are activism. By connecting the activities and experiences discussed by Ash and the other interview participants with Cooper's (2016)

categorization of fat activism activities, I have attempted to answer Cooper's call for a further queering of what constitutes fat activism in particular, and fat identity more broadly. As Cooper states:

As queer loosens up how people think of identity, it also unfixes ideas about what the movement or fat activism can be. To queer is to connect that which is subversive and breaks rules. (2016, p. 193)

In this way, I argue that while infinifat activism actively queers and subverts constructed notions of fat identity, I too have attempted to queer and subvert constructed notions of what fat activism is and who it serves by drawing attention to Ash's work and the activist work done by those I interviewed. As both Cooper (2016) and Meleo-Erwin (2012) have explored, a more inclusive queer fat activism requires an identification with the Other and the casting of a more critical eye towards contemporary fat activism proxies.

In the conclusion of this thesis I will draw attention to the areas for further research that this project has illuminated, including the benefits of deeper, more meaningful engagement with fat activists such as Ash. However, I'd like to end this chapter with an exchange from my interview with Ash around the challenges of imagining a fully inclusive infinifat future. For me, this quote is especially salient as it points towards a shift from calls for infinifat accommodation towards a future that fully includes, even welcomes, infinifat people. This is an important distinction to make. While Ash and her #infinifatshion community are doing important advocacy work towards increased clothing options for those at the largest end of the fat spectrum, she (and they) are under no illusions that equitable access to fashion and dress will eradicate the discrimination and stigma faced by superfat and infinifat people. However access

to clothing is but one step forward towards a fully inclusive and welcoming future. As Ash states:

...Even in the most liberal environments I've found people still think that I need to be cured and that they're helping me by suggesting cures for me. I think that's part of our culture in that we've been taught that what we're supposed to be is thin. So thin people think that all fat people want is to be thin. I think that liberal people that otherwise care so much about people and the world and being good community members, they think that as a liberal person their job is to fix us. And help us fix ourselves. Because that's what we "really" want. But that's not it at all. We just want to be allowed to exist as we are and to have people allow us to tell our stories and use our own voices. It's hard. It's hard because I think that people genuinely want us to be happy and they think that what we want is to be thin.

...On a lot of levels I just don't want to argue the rest of it. I don't want to argue whether I'm healthy or unhealthy or whether I made myself this way or didn't make myself this way. All I'm saying is, "I'm already here, this is where I already am, so I need accommodations." Getting people to hear that and to step back from their feelings about how you got fat or what you should do about it is so challenging. Because everybody comes with their own feelings about their own bodies and their feelings that they project onto fat people. It's like, I don't want to hear all that noise, I just want to say, "I'm already here so what do we need to do to accommodate me."

There are a lot of people that think, "Well, you don't deserve to be accommodated because you're this size."

Calla: And how do we move from just accommodation to actual invitation to be in a space.

Yeah, yeah! Gosh, that would be nice!

(both laugh)

Like, I have a chair for you but I'm actually going to invite you to sit in it, would be nice.

Calla: Or I'm going to put you in the front of the restaurant and not the back.

Yup.

Calla: I wish I had answers!

Me too, me too. I feel like we've got a long road we're still trudging down.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

As stated in my introduction, this work is both personal and political. The lack of clothing options available to those at the largest end of the fat spectrum negatively impacts superfat and infinifat people and contributes to the furthering of fat stigma and discrimination at the largest end of the fat spectrum. Infinifat and superfat people experience a lack of access to social spaces as a result of these clothing limitations. Important work is happening around advocating for infinifat inclusion by people such as Ash, through her *The Fat Lip* podcast and #infinifatshion activism on social media sites. Those who are able to alter existing clothing garments or construct new ones illuminate the possibility of a fully imagined infinifatshion future, however these tools are not accessible to all.

As Deborah A. Christel states in her 2014 article, “It’s your fault you’re fat: Judgements of responsibility and social conduct in the fashion industry”:

It is clear that the gatekeepers of the fashion industry continue to comply with the socially accepted stigma that *fat is bad*. Fashion students do not have positive beliefs about [fat]⁸ people and therefore may not want to design for them (p. 312, emphasis in the original).

From the findings explored within this thesis, we can continue Christel’s line of thinking. It is clear that the gatekeepers of the fashion industry comply with the accepted stigma that being *really fat is really bad*. It is difficult to interpret the extreme lack of clothing options for superfat and infinifat people as anything other than a moral judgment against those who are often constructed as “too far gone” and unable to participate in a socially meaningful life. This lack of

⁸ Christel uses the word obese. I have replaced it with the word fat to reflect the rejection of terms such as obese and obesity by Fat Studies scholars in reaction to the pathologization of fatness through such language.

attention from the mainstream fashion industry is felt most acutely by those who exist at the intersection of additional axes of marginalization, such as those who do not conform to normative gender roles, those who are racialized and those who are poor or disabled.

It is from this point where I look towards a fashion future that accommodates, perhaps even embraces, infinifat and superfat people and all of their intersecting identity markers. My work focuses mainly on the ways in which infinifat people are limited by the dearth of clothing options available in their size. This is reflective of the experiences expressed by the majority of research participants. When asked what fashioning their identities could look like, initial responses ranged from fantastic disbelief to reluctant refusal of the mere concept of a meaningful engagement with fashion. However, when I returned to the question, an imagined infinifat future emerges. Amanda describes her imagined wardrobe as a capsule type wardrobe⁹:

Well like, I wish I could have... like I dream- like I think I would probably be a person with like a capsule type wardrobe. I wish I could find and wear little poplin button-shirts that are maybe babydoll-ish style and like simple... like coloured denim. To look cute and feel a little bit dressed up to go and do things in.

Ash's wish list also includes tailored items like the button-up shirt mentioned by Amanda.

Jossie's desires are directed towards the very feminine end of the spectrum, reflecting a desire for a specific type of delicate dress:

One thing that I've always loved and I can [never find] are lacy, delicate tops or dresses, you know what I mean? The ones that you see skinny girls wear and it's all lace and cinched at the waist and they look very sweet and very delicate. You don't ever find that in big girl's dresses. You always find them in cotton, cotton dresses, you find different kinds of dresses that look very nice, and they make you look delicate but you don't ever get that- I call them Victorian-style dresses with the long sleeve that is all lace. It makes

⁹ Hsiao and Grauman define a capsule wardrobe as: "a set of garments that can be assembled into many visually compatible outfits" (2018, p. 1).

you look like you're going to a tea party. You never get those kind of dresses. I don't know why people just don't make those kind of dresses. Like, dresses that are extremely delicate, that look delicate, that make you feel delicate.

Kristen also has very specific items in mind. She sent this picture titled “How I would like to dress” and further elaborates on her imagined style by asking if I know of the fashion journalist Leon Talley:



Figure 15: From participant Kristen

Okay, so he wears these capes, yo. And they're beeeautiful capes. And I wouldn't walk around wearing capes all the time. But like that aesthetic, like the colours and the flowing- like I would love to be a woman known for wearing really beautiful fabrics and things like that. Some form fit stuff. But just really high quality, opulent clothes that are comfortable. Not always bright. Some darker stuff. But just a certain style that's just comfortable, but put together, and creative.

Calla: Well capes, yeah.

Yeeeeeah!

Calla: That is a presence!

Oooh, or even like for a- because you know, like, polyester blends and so on, they don't breathe well. So really figuring out how to make nice breathable fabrics that are flowy. Sleeveless maybe, or like a cape that goes closer into the body than just- Yeah! Yeah!

Like a caftan-ish type. But not always muumuu. Not a muumuu, but a cute caftan that's fitting, with really nice accessories. I like a kind of African vibe. I like all that stuff. I just love colour, and flow. I will wear- I can wear pants, with beautiful blouses of different lengths. They wouldn't have to be long, they don't have to cover my belly but, just as long as they kind of flow and they're really pretty. Like dark pants with a colourful top. Like a poncho or a um- like a caftan but cut short like a shirt. Like a tunic. That type of stuff.

Calla: Sounds amazing.

But really colourful. With really cool, like handmade accessories.

Kristen, along with the other research participants, longs to be included by a fashion industry that continually ignores her. While those who are at the smaller end of plus-size have experienced fashion gains in terms of the variety of clothing available to them, those at the largest end are left wanting. This divide underscores Ash's feelings of being left behind by fatshion influencers and fat activists who advocate only to their own size and not beyond.

My hope with this work is two-fold. Firstly, I hope that the knowledge expressed by the participants of this project, including the imagined infinifatshion future touched on above, inspires emerging fashion designers to take up the call. In the same way that Cooper (2010) calls on academics to consider fat as a type of interdisciplinary lens, I call on fashion students to apply the critical lens of superfatness and infinifatness to their clothing designs. I hope that research such as my own supports efforts, such as Ash's #infinifatshion activism, to dismantle the fat bias held by the mainstream fashion industry.

Secondly, I hope that the knowledge expressed by the participants of this project encourages a deeper engagement with the entire spectrum of fatness and fat lived experience by those who situate themselves within the fields of Fat Studies and Fashion Studies. This work represents but a sliver of what could constitute a comprehensive examination of the superfat or infinifat lived experience. More work needs to be done to address the intersecting axes of marginalization and discrimination that face infinifat people. My work also speaks directly to the need of Fashion Studies scholars to engage with those who are unable to access mainstream fashion and clothing. In the spirit of von Busch's (2009) concept of fashion "hacking," I hope that my work serves as a building block towards future research that actively redirects scholarly attention to the voices we hear from least often. I have strived to be reflexive towards the ways in which my research could be improved and built upon. I hope that this is not the last time I see the term "infinifat" in an academic context.

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