

Big People on Campus

By ABBY ELLIN Published: November 26, 2006

ASK Sheana Director for a detailed description of herself, and chances are the word fat will come up. It is not uttered with shame or ire or any sense of embarrassment; it's simply one of the things she is, fat.

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Scott Austin

"Why should I be ashamed?" said Ms. Director, 22, a graduate student in women's studies at San Diego State University, who wields the word with both defiance and pride, the way the gay community uses queer. "I'm fat. So what?"

During her sophomore year at Smith College, Ms. Director attended a discussion on fat discrimination: the way the super-sized are marginalized, the way excessive girth is seen as a moral failing rather than the result of complicated factors. But the academic community, she felt, didn't really give the topic proper consideration. She decided to do something about it.

In December 2004, she helped found the organization Size Matters, whose goal was to promote size acceptance and positive body image. In April, the group sponsored a conference called Fat and the Academy, a three-day event at Smith of panel discussions and performances by academics, researchers, activists and artists. Nearly 150 people attended.

Even as science, medicine and government have defined obesity as a threat to the nation's health and treasury, fat studies is emerging as a new interdisciplinary area of study on campuses across the country and is gaining interest in Australia and Britain. Nestled within the humanities and social sciences fields, fat studies explores the social and political consequences of being fat.

For most scholars of fat, though, it is not an objective pursuit. Proponents of fat studies see it as the sister subject — and it is most often women promoting the study, many of whom are lesbian activists — to women's studies, queer studies, disability studies and ethnic studies. In many of its permutations, then, it is the study of a people its supporters believe are victims of prejudice, stereotypes and oppression by mainstream society.

"It's about a dominant culture's ideals of what a real person should be," said Stefanie Snider, 29, a graduate student at the University of Southern California, whose dissertation will be on the intersection of queer and fat

identities in the United States in the 20th century. "And whether that has to do with skin color or heritage or sexual orientation or ability, it ends up being similar in a lot of ways."

Fat studies is still a fringe area of scholarship, but it is gaining traction. Three years ago, the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, which promotes scholarly research of popular culture, added a fat studies component to regional and national conferences.

Professors in sociology, exercise physiology, history, English and law are shoehorning discussions of fat into their teachings and research.

At the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, the subject has emerged in a course, "The Social Construction of Obesity," taught by Margaret Carlisle Duncan, a professor in the department of human movement sciences, who takes a skeptical view of the "war on obesity."

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AT THE NEW COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA SCHOOL OF LAW, SONORA SOLOVAY, a diversity lawyer and author of "Tipping the Scales of Justice," talks about weightism in her torts classes.

Out of the classroom, students on at least a dozen campuses are organizing groups focusing on fat politics and acceptance.

Nearly 120 people, including many academics, belong to a fat studies list serve on Yahoo!, which was started in 2004 by activist Marilyn Wann, the author of "Fat!So?"

And the first "Fat Studies Reader," an anthology of scholarly research on fat, is being shopped to university presses. It covers a range of topics, from the intersection of fat, gender, race, age, disability and class to fat heroines in chick lit, the role of fat burlesque dancers and the use of fat suits in film. Chapter titles include "Access to the Sky: Airplane Seat and Fat Bodies as Contested Spaces"; "Jiggle in My Walk: The Iconic Power of the Big Butt in American Pop Culture," and "The Roseanne Benedict Arnolds: How Fat Women are Betrayed by their Celebrity Icons."

Esther Rothblum, a professor of women's studies at San Diego State University, said she received more than 80 letters from people, mostly those with Ph.D.s, interested in contributing to the book, though she and Ms. Solovay, her co-editor, had room for only 45. "We were bowled over with the response," she said.

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