

# They don't make plus size spacesuits: A fat studies analysis of selected literary texts

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This article used feminist fat studies as the theoretical rubric through which the author has offered a critical analysis of the representations of fat female characters in the two selected literary texts: *Fatropolis* (2012) by Tracey L. Thompson and *They don't make plus size spacesuits* (2019) by Ali Thompson. Both these texts are set in alternative realities and offer sustained engagements with the ubiquitous and pernicious manifestations of fat phobia in the lives of female characters. Although these authors chose science fiction as a genre, no fat woman would be able to read the texts without wincing in recognition. From the fat phobic micro aggressions to the blatant violence and discrimination that shape daily fat lives, these texts offer our experiences writ large. The fat female body remains something of a blind spot in contemporary feminist studies, which is somewhat strange, considering the profound impact that fat, and the fear of becoming fat, has on the lives of women in almost every sphere of life. Diet culture, which is regarded as the capitalist commodification of fat phobia, is so rife and has become so normalised that most people have simply stopped noticing how their bodies and activities are being policed at both the most intimate and the most public levels of their lives. Diet culture and fat phobia constitute a violent assault on fat women, and the experiences of these characters offer a safe space where feminist scholars could explore the dynamics that function to hurt, minimise and isolate fat women beyond the texts.

**Keywords:** feminist fat studies; fat phobia; science fiction; fat female body; diet culture; epistemological; discursive violence.

## Introduction

*They don't make plus size spacesuits* (2019) is a collection of science fiction short stories written by a well-known fat activist, Ali Thompson. The text has been described as an 'incandescent cry from the heart, a radical turn away from utopian daydreaming of future body perfection to center a fat perspective instead' (uncredited quotation from the back page of the 2019 copy of the book). In spite of all their focus on female bodies, the fat female body and its experiences of fat phobia remain a blind spot in feminist theorising. Although Orbach's groundbreaking text, *Fat is a feminist issue* (1978), offered some publicity and momentum to a much needed larger conversation about fat women's lived realities, the work itself seems to be based on fat phobic assumptions that remain disappointingly intact. The most striking of these assumptions is that fatness is necessarily a problem in need of a solution, and another particularly problematic and offensive assumption is that fat women use their fatness to shield themselves from heterosexual sexual advances. This latter assertion is based on the assumption that fatness and sexual attractiveness cannot coexist (Murray 2008:94). It is an indictment of current feminist scholarship that, when the topic of fat studies emerges, Orbach's text is often the only reference that self-proclaimed feminists could offer. Thankfully, the invaluable work of fat activists has taken us far beyond this limited view, and the field of fat studies has enriched the analytical toolkit of contemporary feminist fat studies' scholars. They remind us that our feminism is neither feminist nor intersectional when it does not take fat as a marker of identity seriously. This does, however, remain a niche area, which is somewhat strange, considering the profound impact that fat, and the fear of becoming fat, has on the lives of women in almost every sphere of life. Diet culture, which is regarded as the capitalist commodification of fat phobia, is so rife and has become so normalised that most people have simply stopped noticing how their bodies and activities are being policed at both the most intimate and the most public levels of their lives. From the inner negotiations that take place when most women decide what to eat to the weight loss clubs that litter everything from schools and churches to workplaces, women are constantly receiving the message that we cannot be trusted to manage our own bodies and that the pursuit of thinness must be prioritised at all cost. When one seeks to change any oppressive structural and systemic apparatus, the first step involves exposing such unjust mechanisms as well as the problematic assumptions that underlie them. This article uses

feminist fat studies as the theoretical rubric through which the author offers a critical analysis of the representations of fat female characters in two selected literary texts.

Cooper (2016:6) described fat studies as an 'interdisciplinary field ... [that] puts fat people in the middle of an academic and research discourse' and, importantly, she noted that there is 'no need to justify its presence'. *Fatropolis* (2012) by Tracey L. Thompson and *They don't make plus size spacesuits* (2019) by Ali Thompson are both set in alternative realities and offer sustained engagements with the ubiquitous and pernicious manifestations of fat phobia in the lives of female characters. These authors chose science fiction as a genre, and no fat woman would be able to read the texts without wincing in recognition. From the fat phobic micro aggressions to the blatant violence and discrimination that shape daily fat lives, these texts offer our experiences writ large. Diet culture and fat phobia constitute a violent assault on fat women, and the experiences of these characters as represented within the genre of science fiction offer a safe space where feminist scholars could explore the dynamics that function to hurt, minimise and isolate fat women beyond the texts. The use of science fiction as a genre that could be utilised to critique oppressive contemporary realities is, of course, not new. In his aptly named chapter, "'A galaxy far far away" my foot! Science fiction as a mirror for reality', Sawyer (2008:12) strongly challenged the notion that science fiction is necessarily escapist fun without pertinent social commentary, and he makes a convincing case for the power of science fiction to address social issues in works, ranging from authors such as H.G. Wells to Jules Verne. Berman (2008) argued in the following manner:

[S]cience fiction makes the abstract real, brings the future to the present, and may be used as the 'special lens' [a phrase used by Sawyer] for students [and readers] to see a variety of topics from a unique perspective that is often untainted by preconceptions. (p. 8)

This, however, does not mean that science fiction as a genre has warmly welcomed fat characters. In fact, in an article as recent as 2017, Pausé (2017:74) noted the 'lack of fat women in science fiction'. Whilst this is a growing field, significant fat representation in science fiction does exist and these range from extremely problematic to gloriously transgressive. Cooper (2019) used the term 'future fat' to describe 'how science fiction envisions fat people in the future', and she explains that some of these portrayals of fat people are 'belligerent and ungenerous', whilst others depict them as 'fully realised agents of progressive social change'.

## Discussion

Cooper (2016:9) defined fat phobia very succinctly as the 'fear and hatred of fat people'. In addition to targeting actual fat, Morgan (2011:198) argued that, as a disciplinary mechanism, fat phobia functions even more powerfully as the 'fear and revulsion of the potentially "fat-person-presently-dormant within-but-just waiting-as-fat-laden-flesh-ready-to emerge-expand-and-visibly-engulf-self-and-identity with each potato chip or serving of a sensuous non-low-fat salad dressing"'.

Thin people thus need to be ever vigilant in the war against fat. As women are more closely associated with the body and are more stringently controlled in terms of appearance, the fear of fat is a more powerful spectre that haunts their consciousness. Some of the most influential work on women's alignment with the body continues to be that of Grosz (1994:4), who explained that 'the correlation and association of the mind/body opposition with the opposition between male and female, where man and mind, woman and body, become representationally aligned'. Diet culture could be regarded as a collective umbrella term for the myriad, pervasive social messages we receive that being thin is an imperative that should be pursued at all costs. It is built on, and is the logical outcome of, a social foundation that is rooted in fat phobia. It manifests in the lives of many a fat woman as a 'destructive liminal feeling that her real life would be "better" when and only when she wasn't fat' (Morgan 2011:192). Structurally, fat phobia results in a world that is simply not built to accommodate the physicality of fat people. From seats to clothes, fat people are reminded daily that their bodies constitute an aberration and are a burden in spaces that were designed around thin bodies. The fat woman is always aware that her body is unacceptable in its current form, and she is offered all types of mechanisms that she could purchase to help her attain a more tolerable (read thin) body. She is encouraged to feel alienated from her fat body as it is seen as temporary. The fat body is an object that is to be remedied and the fat woman is expected to expend all types of resources, ranging from emotional to financial, as she constantly works towards disciplining her unruly corporeality. Morgan (2011) offered the following explanation of the incredible reach of systemic fat phobia:

[I]t crosses many domains, referring to behaviors, language, ideas, social and cultural practices and norms, cultural representations in images, media, art, and symbols, as well as social relations, political and legal practices and movements, education, research, and oppressive ideologies that serve to legitimize the hatred of persons regarded as fat. The most oppressive of these ideologies regard fat persons as loathsome, animalistic, slothful, weak of will, ugly, asexual, gluttonous, lazy, and not only enveloped by excess, soft undisciplined flesh but totally defined by this stigmatized corporeality as the visible, undeniable mark of undisciplined desires out of control. (p. 198)

Fat phobia is always experienced at the intersections of gender, race, class, ability and sexual orientation but, for the purposes of this analysis, the focus is on how these 'oppressive ideologies' function to shape female characters' gendered embodiment.

In *They don't make plus size spacesuits* (2019), Thompson provided an introductory essay titled 'Fat the Future', in which she articulates both the challenges presented by entering the science fiction genre as a fat woman writer and how her everyday experiences of fat phobia shape her lived reality. She wonders how she can imagine herself in a science fiction setting that she describes as 'a world of peace and space and transporters' (Thompson 2019:2). She noted the responses to her question as follows:

And every time someone would tell me – kindly, oh so kindly – that in a utopia, fatness wouldn't exist anymore. Because it would have been solved. I would be solved. Solved. Solved out of existing. (p. 2)

Thompson (2019) continued to ponder:

What am I supposed to think about all these sweet, good hearted people who want to wish me out of existence? All these soft words and delicate euphemisms to build a velvet lined coffin to bury me alive. (p. 2)

Her formulation and terminological choices neatly capture the extremely problematic nature of a form of oppression that has become so normalised that 'good' and 'kind' people feel comfortable perpetuating eugenicist rhetoric to someone who, they assume, would be grateful for a future in which she would be solved out of existence.

This assumption that fat is so bad and undesirable that any solution would be preferable to living in a fat body is a form of concern trolling. According to March (2019:133), Internet trolling is defined as 'a deliberate attempt by an individual to create conflict and distress by communicating inflammatory, provocative, and menacing comments to their victim', and it 'is recognised as an antisocial online behaviour'. Concern trolling is a particularly pernicious phenomenon that will be familiar to any fat woman and to anyone working in the field of fat acceptance activism. It is pervasive in online communities and could also be identified in any number of real life encounters. Ewing (2008:588) defined concern trolling as 'a tactic where the troll poses as a supporter of something while asking "just a few questions" designed to undermine or challenge genuine supporters'. Holi (2019) conceptualised concern trolling as a 'modern manifestation of moralizing discourse'. One of the most common concern troll questions revolves around the health of fat people. In other words, such a troll might pretend to support fat acceptance but then 'innocently' question whether the fat person is looking after her health. Quite aside from the obviously ableist bias of this type of supposed concern, Holi (2019) correctly asserted that concerns 'over the health of overweight [people] frequently also express, implicitly or explicitly, a moral distaste for fat' and these concerns mask fat-phobia. Holi (2019) further argued that 'the rhetoric of concern can camouflage anti-fat sentiments into a more culturally acceptable form'.

This type of rhetorical manoeuvre has, at least partly, resulted in the contemporary preference for wellness and healthy lifestyle programmes over diets. Whilst people may reject diets, who could possibly object to wellness or health? Fat studies' scholars have, however, indulged in extensive analytical work on this issue and found that the discursive shift has made little change in the profoundly fat phobic sentiments that form the foundation of imperatives to pursue wellness. When one scratches beneath the surface of these wellness discourses, it quickly becomes very clear that fat has no place there, in spite of a plethora of medical research confirming that fat people can live healthy lives and successfully pursue wellness in various ways (see, for instance,

Bacon 2010; Brown 2015). In fact, numerous studies have found that it is the stigma associated with being fat that results in poorer health outcomes rather than being fat in itself.

Popular misunderstandings about the connections between health and fat could be read as an example of confusion surrounding the dynamics of correlation and causation. Thompson (2019:2) signalled this when she challenged the 'sickly sweetness of their deep "concern"', and when she asserted that all these 'soft words and delicate euphemisms [work] to build a velvet lined coffin to bury me alive'. If anything is a threat to her health, it is fat phobia: 'A culture that wishes us erased from existence is a choking poison that I am forced to breathe every single day' (Thompson 2019:2). It is fat phobia disguised as concern for her health that she experiences as a violent assault on her personhood as a woman living in a fat body and she notes that she is 'afraid of these people and the brutality they call concern' (Thompson 2019:2). Although a more thorough exploration of the intersections of fat studies and disability studies is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth signalling some of the crucially important work that is being conducted in this regard.

Fat and disability scholars and activists have a great deal in common for, as Ema et al. (2013:190) claimed: "'What counts as a legitimate body'" (Shilling 1993:145) is a question that has been at the core of disability discourse'. This, of course, aligns intricately with the questions that shape fat studies. Mallow (2015:200) went as far as to insist that 'the modes by which fat people are oppressed are indistinguishable from ableism: architectural barriers, discrimination, pathologization, pity, and staring are common social responses to both fatness and disability'. In an attempt to assert the legitimacy of our own bodies, it is not uncommon for fat people to perpetuate the very ableism that is our common enemy with statistics about our good health and fitness levels. Such easy rejoinders, however, do a disservice to the larger body justice movement, and contemporary fat scholars are increasingly sensitive to this danger.

In the first story of the collection, titled 'Nothing left to burn' (2019), Thompson invites readers to consider the arbitrary and constructed nature of an idealised, thin, body size by substituting height for weight. In much the same way as strategies for the rigid control over body size are passed down from mothers to daughters, the story opens with a paragraph describing how the mother monitors her daughter's height through daily measurements and notations on a height chart. The pursuit of shortness is something that the mother and daughter practise together, and the tools they employ to make their bodies fit into a predetermined mould seem ludicrous. The reader is struck by the pointlessness of their endeavours because it seems so obvious that a tall body will not become shorter, regardless of how hard one tries to manipulate it. These height-reducing strategies include painful exercises, clothes that create the illusion of shortness, supplements and even teas that promise to reduce height. As is the case with

weight, the target is represented as an ever-elusive goal as the mother reminds her daughter: 'You may already be short, but you could always be shorter' (Thompson 2019:5). Here Thompson critiqued healthist concern trolling whilst also revealing just how high the stakes feel for a young woman who knows that her body is somehow failing to meet some acceptable standard. She accomplishes this when the daughter addresses the imaginary reader as follows (Thompson 2019):

You may balk at the prices of such beauty, but you don't understand. It's unhealthy to be so long; it causes depression and anxiety; it makes your bones more likely to break and gives you cancer and heart attacks. I have vivid and recurring dreams of plunging my own hands into my legs and ripping out chunks of bone like modelling clay, reducing my length like some kind of height wizard. Oh, if only I could. (p. 6)

This toxic, dysfunctional idealisation of shortness shapes the mother–daughter relationship, as the daughter notes: 'Mother is desperate to be short and small, and I am infected by her desperation' (Thompson 2019:6). These experiences echo those of women whose first encounters with dieting and fat phobia came from watching their own mothers diet and disparage their own bodies. In their research on mothers, daughters and dieting, Bronstein and Steiner (2015:609) found that there are 'extreme pressures on mothers to be publicly accountable for their own bodies and for monitoring and correcting their daughters' bodies, indeed, with increasing vigor'. Like many feminist scholars working in the field, they conceptualise thinness as a mechanism for social control, and they argue that the 'unremitting pressure to achieve stringent – even unachievable – physical attributes is a key means of social control' (Bronstein & Steiner 2015:610).

At first glance, it may seem strange and problematic to liken the achievability of becoming shorter to that of being thinner, but the comparison is not that far-fetched, as any woman who has been losing and regaining weight since childhood is able to confirm. In spite of the established medical fact that between 95% and 98% of weight-loss efforts result in failure within 5 years, many women continue to try to exert this elusive control (Lyons 2009:77). The imperative to control the body is a specifically gendered one. Murray (2008) argued as follows:

[E]xpectation of a stringent maintenance, regulation and control of women bodies constructs a particular bodily awareness amongst women in the West. The pressure to present a body that proclaims its adherence to the feminine standards of beauty and sexuality means that the very presence of another female body that is 'fat' and therefore is clearly transgressing these 'norms' is an affront, a defiant symbol that can elicit anger, disgust and resentment. (p. 40)

Even as fat women are doomed to failure in the attempt to alter their bodies and to achieve permanent thinness, there is enormous pressure to be seen trying (and suffering in the process) regardless. If a woman is going to be in the world in a fat body, the least she can do is to attempt to atone for her deviant corporeality by performing the identity of the so-called 'good fatty'. Pausé (2015) offered an insightful explanation of

this concept: 'A good fatty is an apologetic fat person who takes "care" of themselves (read: is well groomed, fashionable, and active) and acknowledges that they could and should be pursuing lifestyle choices that are socially palatable'.

Lupton (2017) similarly described 'good fatties' as:

[F]at people who are making efforts to dress well and look glamorous, trying to lose weight, get physically fit, or eat a healthier diet, or positioning themselves as not at fault for their weight because of such factors as their genetic makeup. (p. 124)

A 'good fatty' is shamed and suffering and presents no real challenge to the gendered, fat phobic status quo. Whilst most women perform their shame and suffering through dieting, some take the extreme measure of bariatric surgery, which basically involves the surgical mutilation of a perfectly healthy organ so that the patient is unable to keep down more than small amounts of food. 'Nothing left to burn' chillingly ends with a reference to this procedure as the daughter, after years of unsuccessful attempts to diminish her height, succumbs to the pressure and is admitted to hospital for a procedure that is described as follows: 'The procedure to cut into the leg and break the bones, removing the too, too long pieces and sew it all back together...' (Thompson 2019:9).

In the next story of the collection, 'I'm not sorry' (Thompson 2019:10), the reader encounters an unnamed narrator whose nightmarish reality describes a world where fat people are stripped of their citizenship rights and where fat people have surgically implanted mechanisms that monitor their every action. The mechanism, with its clear echoes to the contemporary popularity of Fitbits and other step counters and calorie counters, is called a Trackbit and, rather than being worn on the arm, it is implanted in the forearm. If the fat person wearing the device fails to take the designated 2000 steps, then 'there are consequences. Consequences like the light beams from my skin, from strategically placed, ultra-powerful LEDs implanted under the skin of my wrists, the top of my sternum, my earlobes and my temples' (Thompson 2019:11).

In addition to this close monitoring of physical activity, the Trackbit tracks food intake and shames the wearer into compliance. Significantly, the entire population is represented as being complicit in this monitoring process, as other people's electronic devices appear to be synchronised with the fat character's TrackFit. Even though she is very hungry because she had to miss breakfast, she describes the consequences of entering a coffee shop as follows: 'If I set foot in this coffee shop, I will light up flashing red beams from under my skin, and every WiFi device within a 10-foot radius will start blaring, "Obesity, Deviant, Wasteful, Epidemic." On repeat' (Thompson 2019:11).

This horrendously oppressive dystopian universe is all the more frightening because the author employs items and terms that are already commonly employed in the so-called 'war on obesity'.

The public panic, which has been incited around fatness in this alternative reality as well as in our own society, is challenged in the story when the narrator suggests that, in order to deal with problems ranging from resource shortages to rising sea levels, a 'scapegoat is required' and a 'scapegoat will be provided' (Thompson 2019:12). Cooper (2016:3) referred to 'the idea that fatness is a problem in need of a solution, or the obesity epidemic' as a 'rhetorical device to leverage fat panic'. The easy scapegoat here is the fat person, and the narrator recounts discrimination ranging from employment opportunities to access to healthcare, all of which is justified because 'people who are BMI non-conforming cannot be citizens' (Thompson 2019:12). Again, whilst this may seem far-fetched, the lived experiences of fat women tell you that it actually has an eerily familiar ring to it. Wann (2009:xx) noted that weight and fat phobia play a major role in fat people's ability to access employment as well as healthcare with employers admitting to 'routinely turning down promising fat applicants for not "fitting the corporate image"'. In addition, myriad studies have revealed how the 'biased attitudes of health-care providers also put fat patients at risk' (Wann 2009:xx).

Thompson (2019) repeatedly signalled the isolation and shame that are inculcated in fat people and, by the final story in the collection, she suggested that some hope is to be found in fat solidarity. In 'I'm not sorry', the narrator describes how fat people are going missing, and notes that there are no other fat people in this future utopia except for herself and 'the other lonely few, the fat bodies I glimpse at a distance. We can't congregate. They don't want us to become more infected by admitting there are others' (Thompson 2019:13). The diminishing of the self, that is a hallmark of shame, functions in tandem with isolation. The narrator recalls how she 'only ever saw other fat people at a distance, disappearing around a corner, eyes averted on the train, pressed backward, curled in small, as small as small can go' (Thompson 2019:24). Cooper (2010:1020) argued that the overriding popular discourse around fat continues to function '[u]nder the mantra of treatment and prevention, [and holds that] fatness is a problem that requires a solution, that is, the physical reduction of the fat body, and the elimination of the potential for individuals to become fat'. There is violence in this shaming, as the story describes how society will not rest 'until you have made yourself a small cringing shadow of a person, carved up your own soul and sliced it into fine, even pieces' (Thompson 2019:22). This shaming and pathologising discourse prevents fat women from seeking support and challenging the social dynamics that are always actively working towards the eradication of their deviant bodies.

It is thus significant that, by the last story, the narrator, Kit, comes out of this fat closet and proudly asserts: 'My name is Kit and I help us, the fat ones' (Thompson 2019:22). In this last story, the narrator has a name for the first time. In the preceding stories, the namelessness of the narrator served to underscore her dehumanisation in a society that regarded her body only as a problem to be solved. Kit, however, has a name, agency and a decidedly fat activist agenda. The

hope contained in claiming the fat body and standing firm in its power is clear from the title of this final story: 'We shall all be healed, at last, at last' (Thompson 2019:20). This story opens by explaining that the ante has been upped in the war against fat people and that any semblance of free choice has been eradicated. As Kit feels the 'thick ridge of scar tissue' in her neck, she offers the following description (Thompson 2019):

I'd gone in for a visual implant and a WiFi upgrade and come out with a 'complimentary' spinal bypass, my vagus nerve connected to a health center where they could control my hunger signals. 'for (my) own good'. They stopped asking us if we want the surgery. Now all surgeries are The Surgery.... (p. 20)

The hiding and turning away in shame that characterised the earlier stories have, however, now been replaced by anger and defiance. Kit has taken on the persona of a type of guerrilla fighter who is part of the resistance in the war against fat people. When she is reminded of the surgery, she reacts with anger and her clothing aids in the performance of her new, empowered identity as a resistance fighter: '... I scowl down at my thick black boots' (Thompson 2019:20). She describes herself as 'spiky and furious' (Thompson 2019:25). In her new life, Kit helps fat people escape from the oppressive 'Utopia' to a new world called Taget that is simply described as 'a place where fat people can just live' (Thompson 2019:27). For Kit, the dream of a utopian future is about being in a space where fat people can heal in solidarity with others like them: 'One day, we will all be together and on that day? We will heal each other. At last. I can take you there. We can help each other. Just reach out your hand' (Thompson 2019:27).

The idea of fat people being able to 'just live' is a radical one that does, in fact, require entry into an imaginative realm that is conjured up by an author writing literary fiction. Our world is so fat phobic and deeply invested in maintaining the oppressive status quo that science fiction opens up the only space where just living as a fat woman with full humanity is a real option. Fat phobia has been so profoundly internalised that fat women mostly perpetuate their own oppression in ways that are enthusiastically encouraged by social structures ranging from the medical profession to the media. Fat phobia functions at the individual, social and systemic levels, and it shapes the way fat women experience their worlds in ways as seemingly mundane as what they choose to eat to ones that are as obviously impactful as how they progress in their careers (Wann 2009).

Thompson (2012) highlighted the extent of disjuncture between our world and one where fat phobia does not exist in another science fiction novel, *Fatropolis*. The device she selects involves juxtaposing how the fat protagonist, Jenny, experiences her world in reality and how she fares in an alternate reality called *Fatropolis*. The author further emphasises the arbitrary and constructed nature of fat phobia by creating a thin phobic alternate reality in *Fatropolis*. When the reader first meets Jenny, she is a timid, unhappy and utterly disempowered woman whose internal dialogue reveals both how comprehensively she has internalised the

fat phobic messages that litter her daily life and keeps her belittled and reminds her of her 'proper' place. She is shamed and completely alienated from her own body. She notes that 'her body betrayed her on a daily basis' through its cravings for foods such as sweets, breads and cheeses, and she is forever in search of the next diet that would result in the following distinctly gendered outcome: '... finally her rogue behaviour around eating and weight would be bridled and restrained. She would finally be a "good girl!"' (Thompson 2012:12). Her desire to be 'thin and socially acceptable' is shaped by a society whose fat phobia is revealed by the statistics that a newsreader relates in the extract (Thompson 2012) that is quoted below:

University students in the New York area were recently polled about obesity. Forty-nine [nine] percent said they would rather be stupid than fat. At this the news anchor chuckled. Twenty-six percent said they would rather be lame than fat. Thirteen percent preferred to be blind than fat, and a whopping twelve percent said they would rather be dead than fat. (p. 13)

As she negotiates her way through a society that would rather die than have a body as deviant as hers, Jenny 'blame[s] herself for being weak and having no willpower' (Thompson 2012:15).

When she accidentally falls through a portal and finds herself in *Fatropolis*, Jenny is utterly shocked to find herself in a world where fat is praised and thin is shamed and despised. Everything in this new world surprises her as she sees stores catering for fat bodies, fat people eating in public without shame, advertisements representing fat people, to fat being regarded as sexually desirable. In one of her first conversations in *Fatropolis*, she is forced to problematise the word 'overweight', which is commonly used as a euphemism for fat. In contemporary fat studies, 'fat' has been reclaimed as a purely descriptive term that has not been overdetermined by negative connotations. In contrast, 'obese' is rejected as a word that contributes to the pathologisation of fat, and 'overweight' suggests that there is a normative, standard weight which is another assumption challenged by fat studies' scholars and fat activists (Cooper 2016; LeBesco & Braziel 2001; Wann 2009). These terminological manoeuvres are clearly quite foreign to Jenny, as is revealed in an exchange she has when she sees a store filled with fat people. In her world, 'fat' is a denigratory term only spoken in hushed tones or with malignant intent. She thus tries her best to avoid using it (Thompson 2012):

Well – I don't mean to be insulting – but there are a lot of big people in this store. Yeah, there's a lot of us hearty-weight people in the world, he answered in a matter-of-fact voice.

Hearty weight? Don't you mean overweight?, she asked.

No, I don't think so. Over *what* weight? (p. 27)

At this point, Jenny becomes so exasperated that she answers: 'Overweight. As in fatter than you are supposed to be' (Thompson 2012:27). The residents of *Fatropolis* are quite 'perplexed' and ask her, 'How is a person supposed to be?'

(Thompson 2012:27). Jenny's idea of 'how a person is supposed to be' has very much been shaped by the ubiquitous body mass index (BMI) tables, which have, in our contemporary society, been extensively challenged as an indicator of health. Yet, in spite of the extensive research indicating that 'high BMI has been exaggerated as a risk factor and inaccurately portrayed as a causal agent in ill health and premature death' (Burgard 2009:49), medical doctors continue to use it as some objectively determined gold measure of health. In *Fatropolis*, it is well-known that these BMI charts, which they refer to as 'mortality tables', are actually the products of actuarial calculations at insurance companies.

## Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Jenny and the reader continue to be exposed to a different understanding of 'how a person is supposed to be' (Thompson 2012:27) and to the arbitrary and socially constructed nature of fat phobia. The weight loss surgery that is represented as the most perverse manifestation of fat phobia in *They don't make plus size spacesuits* (Thompson 2019) makes an appearance here, but in an inverted form. In *Fatropolis* (Thompson 2012), Angus, a thin man on whom Jenny has a crush, has decided to undergo weight gain surgery in order to escape from the thin shaming that structures his experiences. It is described in a way that echoes the corporeal violence of the bariatric surgery that is routinely prescribed for fat people: 'They go in and make a pouch out of a piece of your intestine and add it to your stomach so it will hold more. Then [...] they put you on medications to slow your metabolism' (Thompson 2012:146).

As with conventional weight loss surgery, the side effects and risks are severe and the long-term 'success' rate is doubtful. These are explained to Jenny as follows: 'Sometimes people lose all the weight they gained within three to five years. Some people have ended up thinner than they started out, and some people even died from it' (Thompson 2012:146). Nevertheless, the thin phobic resident of *Fatropolis* 'think[s] that the risks are worth it, though' (Thompson 2012). Jenny links what she hears to her own experiences and she offers these reflections:

The surgery sounded ridiculous to Jenny, but suddenly she thought about her side of the portal. People in her world went in for weight *loss* surgery all the time – lap bands, gastric bypass, liposuction, butt and tummy tucks. (p. 146)

All this is carried, like in the case of Angus, in the name of health and 'to make them more socially acceptable' (Thompson 2012:146).

Jenny's experiences in her world as well as those of the unnamed narrator and Kit in the short stories suggest that 'women can't be fat. They just can't be' (Thompson 2012:83). Bordo (1993:201) argued that fatness could be read as 'an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire'. Continuing from Bordo's work, Hartley (2001:66) explained that, in "capitulating to desire," fat women are seen as standing in rebellion against the strictures of society. They are breaking the rules, and culture's immediate reaction is to punish them'.

This article has explored both the gendered, fat phobic dynamics that are at play when society engages with fat women and the explicitly violent representations of the ways in which punishment is meted out. In addition, it has demonstrated the extent to which internalised fat phobia serves to ensure that fat women police their own behaviours and punish themselves for their deviant corporeality. In keeping with the central imperative of fat studies, the article has worked towards 'the unraveling of the discourses that have most intransigently defined and fixed fat bodies, nearly preventing the further interpretative analysis of and epistemological inquiry into corpulence and corpulent bodies' (LeBesco & Braziel 2001:1). The fat bodies of these selected female characters speak in ways that reveal that they are far more than symptoms of some epidemic, than problems to be fixed, or than 'failed' women. By using the theoretical rubric of feminist fat studies, the reader is able to hear their fat bodies proclaim their agency and embody their power in ways that suggest radically new understandings of fat.

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### Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

### Author's contributions

The author declares that she is the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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### Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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