Transcript: The War on Fatness

The war on fat is also the war on black people, the war on poor people, and the war on women.

This is Zoe from Feminist Food Journal, with another feminist food story.

[FFJ theme music]

Is there social, political, economic, and cultural war being waged on fat bodies? Scholars have argued that fat stigma is contributing to the social and physiological harm of fat people and that this stigma is in fact a central driver of morbidity and mortality at a population level.[1] Others claim that the harms that have been done in the name of eradicating fatness constitute human rights violations.[2]

I had the pleasure of speaking with two scholars who work at the intersection of food studies and fat studies about the war on "obesity", its roots, its manifestations in the food movement, and their hopes for fat food justice in the future.

[FFJ theme music]

Alanna:

My name is Alanna Higgins. I have recently completed my Ph.D. and my dissertation examined changes in federal nutrition policy here in the US, which has come to focus more and more on individual bodies and medical diagnoses. And alongside that, the dissertation looked at public health and food system interventions, which are called "produce prescriptions" here in the US. So I looked at them through that legislation and then their implementation across the US, specifically focusing on West Virginia.

Jennifer:

So I'm Jennifer Brady. I'm the director of the School of Nutrition and Dietetics at a university called Acadia University here in Nova Scotia. The main thing I look at is the history and professionalization of dietetics, and then some spinoff themes in that. So thinking about expertise and expert claims-making as an exercise of power. And I think in the context of this conversation, certainly there's a lot of exercise of power over fat bodies by health experts, dieticians included. And I'm a dietician. So even though I have a background in training and a license to practice as a dietician, I am much more interested in examining the culture and the history of dietetics and thinking about how we came to be very disconnected from ideas like food justice or social justice, and also like – to connect to Alana's work – how we've become at

[1] Hatzenbuehler M. L., Phelan J. C., Link B. G. (2013). Stigma as a fundamental cause of population health inequalities. J. Public Health 103, 813–821.
[2] O'Hara, L., Gregg, J. (2012) Human Rights Casualties from the "War on Obesity": Why Focusing on Body Weight Is Inconsistent with a Human Rights App roach to Health, Fat Studies, 1:1, 32-46.

the same time, very invested in diagnosing and problematizing bodies in a way with science that I think is antithetical to justice.

Zoe:

Okay, so know this interview is related to our second issue of Feminist Food Journal, which is titled WAR. And so I'm wondering if you can reflect a little bit on framing fat hatred as a war.

Alanna:
Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about that since you emailed us. And I do want to give due diligence that a lot of my ideas come from learning that I have taken and gotten from fat liberation spaces, like fat studies, activists and scholars, who are very active not only in scholarship but in the public sphere. It's quite easy for us as scholars to be like, look at these things are so important. And that gets disseminated when really it's these communities and these people who need to be acknowledged. But from learning from these people, I think the characterization of war is completely appropriate when we think about war as violence, as destruction, as death, because we have seen that anti-fatness causes those things, right? People are denied healthcare. People are denied jobs. They're denied sometimes a salary, you know, a salary, next to their thin coworker. They're denied sometimes their humanity because fatness has been seen as immoral and gross and unhealthy. And so I think that the framing of war is appropriate because that's what's happening. And that's how people are experiencing the embodied effects of anti-fatness in societies across the globe.

Jennifer:

You know for me – I thought about that question a lot too. And what struck me is that when I hear that language, a lot of it does add up, because it is violent and it does target a group of people with the explicit purpose of eradicating those people. You know, I've also heard it called a genocide and in many ways it is. There's a really explicit but pervasive program to eliminate the world of fat people like that's really blatant and explicit, and you can, you can see it, name it and identify it.

At the same time, there's still something that troubles me about that language. And I think it's just because while it focuses us in on the violence and the targeting, it also, I think eliminates or obscures, maybe the ways that it's the war on fat or the sort of program of fatphobia – essentially fatmisia, whatever you want to call it – is so intertwined with racism, with classism, with misogyny. So to focus it in that way – I just, you just don't want it to then mean that that language allows us to lose sight of the ways that the war on fat is also the war on black people. Also the war on poor people. Also the war on women.

Alanna:

I think with everything we know about the policing of women's bodies – particularly the expectations of what it is to look like a woman, particularly a healthy "beautiful" conventionally attractive woman – it wouldn't surprise me that there is a gendered aspect.

Jennifer:

The idea of war and how that war gets waged and on whose bodies in different ways. I think it definitely gets waged on women's bodies in unique ways. And then of course also like black women's bodies, indigenous women's bodies still, also in unique ways.

Um, but one of those that pertains to women, in particular, is this idea of the nutrition gatekeeper. That women always conceived of as heterosexual women, in heterosexual partnerships with children, are the nutritional gatekeepers for their families. And because of that role, are then somehow even, you know, they're more responsible when they've got fat kids. Or for preventing fatness in their kids and their families. Yes, it's a war on fat bodies, but it's also a

war on fatness more broadly in a way because of this discourse of risk. Like, if you're fat, we are coming for you, but then there's the like idea of if you're not fat don't you dare get that way because we will then come for you, kind of, kind of thing. And that's like, that gets waged on women's bodies in this role that they play as feeders, not just as eaters.

Zoe:

The fact that fatness can be equated with poor health has become a somewhat taken for granted "fact" – and when I say taken for granted fact, I mean in both popular and scientific circles – but I understand that the truth is, that the connections between someone's size and their risk of disease are really far from clear. There are serious flaws in the methodological underpinnings of many studies that report finding relationships between fatness and ill health. For example, it's really common for weight science research on fatness to overlook other determinants of health like socioeconomic status or activity level, which are well known to impact people's health at any weight. And research that has found that when these factors calls into question the links between fatness and health.

Despite the flaws in the science, acceptance of the links between "obesity" and health have become widely taken for granted. I think you've hinted at this already, but why do you think that is?

Jennifer:

This is where I pull out my registered dietician card and speak some science.

There is a fundamental misunderstanding of the limits of science to understand our bodies. You know, we have this view that science can tell us what every mouthful we put into ourselves is going to then result in. You know, I remember in my dietetic training, just as an example, doing this outrageous assignment where I had to do a nutrition analysis for someone I knew. So I had to write down everything they ate in a day, and then I had to analyze it, find it what nutrients they were deficient in – because of course, like, of course, it's gonna be something. It was something ridiculous, I can't remember, vitamin E, I think, she wasn't getting enough of in a day. And so then what the assignment required us to do was recommend a food that – and enough of it, like in a measured amount – to meet that vitamin E requirement. But *then* I had to explain how I was going to recommend, guide her in offsetting the calories that the extra, like, I dunno, 10 almonds per day, that I was suggesting to eat. And so that, that is an example, and that is not a bizarre example of diet, (like it's bizarre, but it's routine in dietetic education). That's how people are trained in understanding the science. And that's not even addressing people who don't really have a science background who don't understand the difference between things like causation and correlation, that is really fundamental to understanding also the limits of science. There is such an "of course-ness" like there's such a deeply ingrained logic to "fat equals bad" and we're just so steeped in fatphobia in our everyday lives, it just becomes this really like cemented logic.

Alanna:

It's all about power dynamics, but because they've happened over such a long time and because of people saying like, "well, I'm an expert and this is, you know, this is the truth" that it becomes that common sense thing that we don't think about. We just go, "Oh yeah, of course", instead of thinking, "maybe there's something else to this".

I keep this by my desk and every time I talk or anything, I always hold it up. And for the people who are not visually watching, the book is *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia* by Dr. Sabrina Strings. And in it, Dr. Strings really takes you through the history of how our understandings and beliefs of body shape and size have changed and how those beliefs

change because of the desire from mainly European white communities to create and maintain that social hierarchy based on racialized groups. You get these other things that are taken for granted to be the truth and actually when you dig in, you see how they have been constructed, more often than in not, because of anti-black racism.

And sometimes also for class reasons like, um, I'm blanking on her last name. It's Helen, Zoe – she wrote *Modern Food, Moral Food* and I read it in the beginning of my doctoral studies and was like literally blown away to find out that quite a lot of the dietary guidance here in the US was first issued so that working-class labourers wouldn't rise up because they weren't being paid enough. So literally they were being taught how to make do with their wages in food form in order to quell any sort of social unrest.

Zoe:

I think you're getting at something really crucial there – and I think it's part of what's so interesting about your work, Alanna – is calling out the policy implications of this war on fat bodies. It's not just about social stigma based on bad science – but you know, these theoretical ideas about "healthy bodies" also become codified in policy in ways that have really serious implications for the lives and wellbeing of fat people.

Alanna:

If you are immigrating into New Zealand, you have to be below a certain body mass index.

[Sound bite: Man has New Zealand residency rejected due to weight | Newshub]

"A Mexican man says he has been rejected for residency in New Zealand because he's too fat. His doctors agree he's in good health, but Immigration New Zealand has determined his body mass index puts him in a severe risk category. For Immigration New Zealand to deport him because he's fat is discriminatory and an awful thing to do."

Alanna:

And now you're literally policing bodies into and out of space. So I think that so I think that that's an example of how an idea can travel and then be implemented or forced upon people.

I think there's also a lot to be thought about in countries that have been formerly colonized and are dealing with the repercussions that, that, that, you know, that still exists. And I would be interested to know if beliefs about body shape and size and weight and health are prevalent in, you know, health systems that have come from outside, but were forcibly implemented in other places.

[Music]

Zoe:

One of the first things that Isabela and I did when we started FFJ was to buy ourselves a copy of the edited volume *Feminist Food Studies*, which was instrumental in helping us shape our early thinking about this project. The chapter in the book titled "Because . . . 'Obesity': Reframing Blame in Food Studies", which was written, of course, by you Jennifer, and by your colleagues, Jacqui Gingras, and Katie LeBesco, makes some arguments that really stuck with us.

The chapter explores how fat bias and discrimination are reproduced by the food movement, thereby perpetuating discrimination against fat people. I'm wondering if you can you explain

where this framing of fat bodies as somehow emblematic of the ills of the food system came from, and why do you think "obesity" is so often evoked as a call for food systems change?

Jennifer:

When you have food movement, people, food activists and food scholars who also are underfunded, whose work doesn't get a lot of regard, they're grasping for leverage. And I think "obesity" and the you know – big, big, huge quotes – "obesity epidemic" has just been a really convenient way to legitimize their work, but obviously on the backs of fat people. They're using oppression. And I think this is going back to your question earlier about how these things are received. I think they see that when you pointed out, but because of the "of course-ness" and because of the reach, the need for this leverage it, it becomes an automatic unquestioned thing.

Alanna:

When people find out that I study food, they usually bring up Michael Pollan because he's so well known. Everyone talks about *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, but I always think of his little book, it was called like *Food Rules* or something.

[Sound bite: Michael Pollan on Food Rules: An Eaters Manual on Democracy Now! 1 of 5]

"Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."

And then he's like, don't eat what your grandparents wouldn't have eaten. And someone – I can't remember who. It might've been Reagan Chastain who was like, "Our grandparents ate canned goods because they couldn't afford anything because they lived in the great depression. So like, who were your grandparents and what could they afford to eat? Because mine couldn't afford to eat anything."

And he's like, "Only eat greens in season" and I'm like, "no one can afford to do that!" And so I do, think there's, there is this holier than thou approach that people take. And sometimes I'm like – I don't even want to think about it cause it's so annoying. And sometimes I'm fascinated by it simply because I'm like, why – what is it about food that people are just like, "This is right. This is wrong."?

Jennifer:

The food movement – and I know its movements, what the food movement is a lot of is a lot of things. It's hard to reduce it down to one thing. But you know, we also can't give them a pass on the mor– like there's such a moralistic, not just with respect to fatness, but with respect to bloody everything. You know, like if I teach you how to garden, you're going to magically transform your diet and the earth will be sustainable. And food systems will magically transform. And all like these really heavily moralized ideas about good and bad food: What's real food, what's healthy food.

Alanna:

Oh, for sure. Julie Guthman is a well-known food scholar, food geographer. She wrote a piece it's called like "Why Michael Pollan et al. make me want to eat Cheetos". And I laugh every single time I think about it. Guthman, like pinpoints those moralizations and how they're divorced from the everyday realities of like most folks on this planet.

Jennifer:

The food movement is also so, um hasn't gotten beyond the neoliberal politics of food and health. It runs deep, even within those movements. And so it's like, well, if we're going to change the world and we're going to change food systems, me, individual, I shop at farmer's markets. If

we're going to be healthy, it's me. I need to make changes. It's not the way that that's a systems issue. It's a capitalistic issue. It's a neoliberal issue.

Alanna:

That individualization has come to be common sense where people don't like to hear that shopping exclusively at a farmer's market isn't going to solve these issues.

[Music]

Zoe:

Alright, this has been a fascinating conversation so far and I think you've provided us with so many examples of how the war on fat bodies is waged, in theory, and in practice. And before we wrap up, I want to take a moment to come back to our theme. What would an end to this war look like? What would you see as a victory in the pursuit of fat food justice?

Alanna:

Fat food justice is when all bodies are nourished and taken care of and not marginalized or oppressed and that everyone has access to food. But again it's not hinged on the demonization or vilification of fat folks.

Jennifer:

Yeah. I don't know if I need to say any more than that. I mean, I think what Alanna is the pie in the sky. How we get there, I think there are so many different things that would – that need to happen to take us there. I shouldn't call it pie in the sky, but that is the goal. Like that is what it comes down to. That all bodies are nourished and fed and respected and treated with the humanity and dignity that deserve. Full stop. And there are no questions about that. Like there's no room for questioning those things.

[Music]

Zoe:

I want to say thank you so much, Jen and Alanna. I've really enjoyed our conversation and learned so much.

Alanna:

Thank you. Thank you so much. Nice to see you, Jen. Bye!

Jennifer:

Thanks, both. It was good to see you, Alanna.

Zoe:

You can find a transcript of this conversation on the Feminist Food Journal substack, along with a reading list – things that Jennifer and Alanna mentioned during this conversation – where you can seek out more learning on fat food justice.

I want to thank everyone for listening to another edition of Feminist Food Stories, this time for our issue WAR, which you can read, in full, on the Feminist Food Journal substack.

Further reading

- *Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, D.C. (Ashanté M. Reese)*

- *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness (Da'Shaun L. Harrison)*
- *"Can't Stomach It: How Michael Pollan et al. Made Me Want to Eat Cheetos" (Julie Guthman)*
- *"The Fallacy of Eating The Way Your Great-Grandmother Ate" (Virginia Sole-Smith)*
- *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia (Sabrina Strings)*
- *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement (Monica White)*
- *"It's Not a Food Desert, It's Food Apartheid" (Karen Washington)*
- *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century (Helen Zoe Veit)*
- *"Public Health's Power-Neutral, Fatphobic Obsession with 'Food Deserts'"(Marquisele Mercedes)*

More activists and scholars to read, learn about, and follow:

- Cat Pausé
- Erica Zurawski
- Lindley Ashline
- Psyche Williams-Forson
- Ragen Chastain