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Moralizing Hunger: Cultural Fatphobia and the Moral Language of Contemporary Diet Culture

Emma Marija Atherton

Abstract

This article explores three contemporary online diet communities—"thinspo," "fitspo," and "wellness." I examine and analyze the distinctive moralized vocabularies these communities use in relation to food and eating. I argue that within their respective diet communities, these moral vocabularies function as mechanisms of *collective self-discipline*, tools that community members use to discipline themselves and each another into adhering to the food- and body-management strategies they have collectively created and adopted. These strategies are designed to mitigate the social risk of becoming fat and the social abjection fatness involves. I argue that within the broader social context these moralized vocabularies also function to reproduce *fatphobia*—a form of bodily normativity that identifies thinness with dignity, normalcy, desirability, and worthiness, and casts fat bodies as undignified, disgusting, socially threatening, and abject.

My arguments place thinspo, fitspo, and wellness on a fatphobic continuum, challenging the widely held perception of wellness as a progressive rejection of harmful dieting and body ideals. I also suggest that the slogan "food is not a moral issue," popular in "fatspo" and other diet-critical communities, addresses the fatphobic moralizing of food and inspires more liberatory ways of relating to food and eating.

Keywords: diet culture, fatphobia, thinspo, pro-ana, fitspo, wellness, embodiment, discipline, collective self-discipline, self-discipline

Introduction and Background

> "I'm being naughty today," the woman in front of me paying for her coffee and brownie says to the cashier. I grit my teeth and bite my tongue. I want to tell her that the word "naughty" does not apply to food. I wanted to tell her that being naughty is doing something wrong,

> and food is not a matter of right and wrong. I wanted to tell her that food is not a moral issue.[1]

In the above excerpt from the blog *Feminist Chatter,* the author echoes a claim made frequently in recent years in body-acceptance and fat-acceptance online spaces: "Food is not a moral issue."[2] This claim is made in response to a fact about the social world feminists have long recognized: the ways we relate to food and eating, and especially the ways women relate to food and eating, are heavily socially moralized (Bordo 1993). Analyzing the diet culture of the 1980s and 1990s, Susan Bordo revealed how moralizing women's relationships to food functions to discipline women's eating habits and bodies. In this paper, I explore the distinctive moral vocabularies surrounding food and eating that have arisen in *contemporary* diet culture—that is, the diet culture of the 2010s and early 2020s: the age of "wellness" and online dieting communities. I aim to understand how these vocabularies function—what they serve to do in the social world and how they serve to discipline women's eating practices and bodies—in this contemporary context.

I analyze three different contemporary diet subcultures in the United States: (1) "thinspo" (thin inspiration) or "pro-ana" (pro-anorexia), online communities of women and girls motivating one another through imagery and text to adopt very restrictive diets with the aim of becoming "anorexic thin"; (2) "fitspo" (fit inspiration), another online community of women and girls, this time motivating one another to develop or maintain "fit" bodies; and (3) "wellness" culture, a mainstream diet community mostly consisting of a number of blogs that promote eating (and dieting) toward "wellness" and "optimum health." These three dieting subcultures have distinctive moral vocabularies surrounding food and eating. I argue that all three moral vocabularies function as mechanisms of *collective self-discipline*, tools that members of those diet communities use to discipline themselves and one another into adhering to the food- and body-management strategies they have collectively created, adopted, and endorsed. These are strategies members of these communities have taken up to mitigate the risk of becoming fat and the social abjection fatness brings. I argue that the moral vocabularies of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness have the additional social function of reproducing *fatphobia*—a form of bodily normativity that

[1] Sarah Frances Young, "Food Is Not a Moral Issue," *Feminist Chatter* (blog), February 8, 2018, https://feministchatter.com/2018/02/08/food-is-not-a-moral-issue/.

[2] See, e.g., Young, "Food Is Not a Moral Issue"; Ellen Friedrichs, "Food Choices Aren't Moral Issues—Here's How to Stop Making Kids Think They Are," *Everyday Feminism*, January 16, 2017, https://everydayfeminism.com/2017/01/teach-kids-food-choices-arent-moral/.

identifies thinness with dignity, normalcy, desirability, and worthiness, and casts fat bodies as undignified, disgusting, socially threatening, and abject.

My argument places thinspo and pro-ana (hence thinspo), fitspo, and wellness on a fatphobic continuum. This continuum is well recognized in "nonacademic" online feminist body-acceptance and fat-activist spaces but is relatively underexplored in philosophy.[3] It is worth exploring, however, because wellness culture is not only socially normalized but also often presented (and experienced by its proponents) as a progressive, healthy, and sustainable answer to harmful body ideals centering extreme thinness and punitive dieting. Recognizing that wellness reproduces the same fatphobic logics as those dieting cultures (of the present and past) widely regarded as extreme and unhealthily focused on thinness shows us that the same social prohibitions and stigmas surrounding fatness are just as operative in mainstream society as they are in fringe spaces recognized as harmful. Further, recognizing the continuum that links thinspo, fitspo, and wellness enables us to see how wellness—a diet culture that explicitly rejects and is framed as an antidote to harmful dieting practices and ways of relating to food and bodies—ends up reproducing and rationalizing the core of fatphobia: a socially normative body hierarchy in which fatness is denigrated and abject. In response, I argue that we need to reject the tendency to moralize individuals' food choices with respect to fatphobic notions of body normativity if we are to relate to food in ways that are genuinely progressive, liberatory, and anti-fatphobic.[4]

In section 1, I briefly detail feminist critiques of the ways earlier diet cultures moralized food and women's eating, and describe some of the key ways diet culture has shifted since these critiques were leveled. In section 2, I look more closely at contemporary diet culture. I describe thinspo, fitspo, and wellness and illustrate their moral vocabularies. These subcultures and their moral vocabularies have developed in and must be read against a cultural context of fatphobia, so, in section 3, I follow the work of fat studies scholars to detail how fatphobia produces and reflects a particular—thin, white, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, wealthy—bodily ideal, producing patterns of discrimination against fat people. In section 4, I look to feminist

[3] Feminist and body-positivity, body-acceptance, and fat-activist blogs tend to recognize the fatphobic continuity between these dieting subcultures. See, e.g., Friedrichs, "Food Choices Aren't Moral Issues"; Jen Wilson, "Can We Stop Assigning Moral Value to Food?" *Medium,* April 29, 2019, https://medium.com/@jenwilson4472/can-we-stop-assigning-moral-value-to-food-55ff4983fd91.

[4] In presenting an analysis of large and influential contemporary diet cultures, I intend this paper to contribute to recent work in feminist philosophy analyzing and applying earlier foundational feminist insights to contemporary diet culture (see, e.g., Leboeuf 2019).

notions of the abject and recent work on fatphobia and disgust to argue that fatphobia casts fatness as a social threat and works to render fat people socially abject. In section 5, I argue that the moralizing vocabularies of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness function as mechanisms of collective self-discipline, tools utilized by members of those diet communities to discipline themselves and one another into adhering to the food-management strategies they have taken up to mitigate the possibility of fatness. I also argue that despite some important differences, thinspo, fitspo, and wellness are on a fatphobic continuum, in that all three diet cultures valorize and reproduce a normative body hierarchy celebrating thinness and denigrating fatness. I conclude by arguing that the slogan "Food is not a moral issue" and positive "fatspo" (imagery of fat people showcasing their beauty, humanity, and joy) aim to disrupt fatphobic diet cultures and advocate for ways of relating to food that are more liberatory and just.

1. Diet Cultures, 1980s–Present

Before beginning, there are two points I wish to highlight. First, the word "fat" is typically used in a negative or derogatory way and is typically thought to have negative and judgmental associations. Throughout this paper, the word "fat" serves as a neutral descriptor of a certain body type and as a term describing a social group whose members experience discrimination on the basis of their body size. This usage reflects how fat activists typically use the term "fat."

Second, diet cultures ought to be approached with intersectionality in mind. Academic work on dieting and eating disorders has historically focused on white, heterosexual, nondisabled, cisgender, and middle-class or wealthy women, and often perpetuates the belief that eating disorders only affect this demographic. This belief is erroneous. Nicole Danielle Schott (2016) argues that thinness ideals, body image concerns, and eating disorders significantly affect women of color. Work by Rice and her coauthors (Rice et al. 2020) suggests that thinness ideals affect queer women, disabled women, and poor women also. However, in this paper I am examining three particular diet cultures, not dieting or disordered eating generally. With some important exceptions like "black girl thinspo" (see sections 4 and 5), the aspirational images and aims shared by thinspo, fitspo, and wellness center white, heterosexual, nondisabled, cisgender, and middle-class feminine bodies, and these three particular dieting subcultures are overwhelmingly occupied by white, middle-class, heterosexual/heteronormative, able-bodied, and cisgender women and girls.

I examine the question of why these groups are so homogenous and discuss how thinness ideals function with respect to people whose bodies are multiply marginalized (by race, sexuality, disability, and so on) in section 4. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to do a focused and detailed intersectional analysis of any one of the diet cultures I examine. (See Hatherley [2015], Prohaska and Gailey

[2018], Mollow [2015], Rice et al. [2020], Schott [2016], and Williams [2017] for more focused analyses of diet cultures and fatphobia as they intersect with other particular forms of marginalization.)

Feminists have long recognized that the ways women relate to food and eating is socially moralized. Such moralizing reflects and reinforces gendered bodily normativity and the cultural identification of women's worth and being with their bodies. It also serves to discipline women's eating habits and bodies, both through external pressure and through the internalization of moralized ways of regarding and valuing food (see, e.g., Bordo 1993; Wolf 1990).

In *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo (1993) analyzes how the diet culture of America in the 1980s and 1990s arose from and contributed to the distinctive forms of patriarchy operative at that time. In Bordo's analysis, the moral language and symbolism surrounding food and eating exemplified in popular advertising, medical advice, women's magazines, and so on was a key influencing factor in how women in general, and women who developed eating disorders in particular, related to food, eating, and their bodies. This moral language contained not only terms like "good" and "bad," but also topes of saintliness, transcendence, and salvation linked to "control" over one's appetite, and those of sin and gluttony linked to "indulging." Even when abstracted from overt religious associations, words like "control" and "indulgence" are themselves morally valenced, invoking notions of "character" and "self-control." Women's sexuality, itself heavily socially moralized, was symbolically and visually linked in multiple adverts to women's hunger and appetite for food, bringing all the moralized sexual connotations of temptation and losing control with it. In these media, women's emotional satisfaction was depicted as *properly* arising from giving others (usually men and children) food to consume rather than from consuming it themselves. This kind of moral language becomes the vocabulary many women take up and reproduce to modify their behavior and "work on" their bodies.

While much in Bordo's analysis is relevant today (and is by no means done justice through the brief sketch above), the diet landscape has changed in significant respects since *Unbearable Weight*. The diet culture of the 1980s and 1990s was the height of Weight Watchers, diet pills, and "heroin chic" fashion icons. Partially in response to feminist critiques filtering into the mainstream, and in response to the recognition of the harmfulness of the diet practices of the 1990s, the mainstream diet culture of the late 2000s to the early 2020s purportedly celebrates "health" and "wellness." The rhetoric of dieting has changed, with Weight Watchers and other organizations rebranding and moving away from words like "thin" and "fat" and from an overt emphasis on weight in itself, toward talk of "wellness," "health," and "self-

care."[5] Despite wellness being the most mainstream and visible form of contemporary diet culture, contemporary diet culture has an underbelly comprised of fringe and marginally fringe diet subcultures, such as thinspo and fitspo, which are explicit in their celebration of slenderness, restrictive eating, and extreme exercise. Moreover, even within mainstream wellness culture, food and women's eating practices are still socially moralized, often by women themselves (as the excerpt opening this paper suggests).

As diet cultures have proliferated in the contemporary context, so too has the moral language used to talk about food. As we will see in the following section, while the "good/bad," "restraint/temptation" framings of the 1980s and 1990s are still present within contemporary diet cultures, there is also a newer focus on health, "clean eating," and "self-care." Moreover, while advertising, medical advice, and women's magazines still play a role in the transmission of this terminology, this role is reduced in contemporary diet culture. As Céline Leboeuf (2019, 6–7) details, diet culture is now predominately online, represented in vast online dieting communities sharing, through forums and hashtags, endless images of "perfect" bodies enhanced by strategic angles and photoshop alongside countless diet tips. These communities are complex. They are spaces of support and understanding to many women and girls struggling with food and their bodies, but they are also spaces within which women and girls valorize thinness and entrench moralized ways of talking about food and eating.

In the following section, I describe some of these online diet cultures and the moral language they use in reference to food and eating. I leave analysis of these communities and their moral vocabularies until sections 4 and 5.

2. Thinspo, Fitspo, and Wellness

2.1. Thinspo

'"Thinspo" and "pro-ana" blogs emerged on platforms such as Tumblr and Pinterest in the mid-2000s.[6] A 2012 *Huffington Post* article describes these online

[5] See, e.g., Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "Losing It in the Anti-Dieting Age," *New York Times,* August 2, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/magazine/weight-watchers-oprah-losing-it-in-the-anti-dieting-age.html.

[6] Leboeuf (2019) argues that thinspo and pro-ana groups overlap in significant respects but are not identical. She argues that thinspo has more visibility (via public Pinterest blogs) than the usually secretive pro-ana forums, and that thinspo is distinct from pro-ana in that "there is a distinction to be made between the psychology of anorexia and that inherent in undertaking a dietary or physical regimen for the sake of slenderness" (Leboeuf 2019, 8). I group thinspo and pro-ana because their

spaces as "secretive communities of teenage girls who celebrate ghoulish thinness, relish photos of emaciated women, and furtively share tips about how to stave off hunger."[7] The popular feminist news and culture website *Jezebel* echoes this description, with an article from March 2012 describing thinspo spaces as consisting in "online forums where women with eating disorders commiserate and encourage each other with pictures of emaciated women and tips on how to most effectively starve oneself."[8] Since 2014, media attention to thinspo has mostly died down, and Tumblr and Pinterest have developed regulations banning and deleting blogs found to contain or promote thinspo content. Nevertheless, in the early 2020s thinspo persists online on multiple platforms. Girls in these spaces do indeed celebrate extreme thinness and aim to motivate themselves and one another to significantly restrict their food intake so as to become or remain very thin. "Motivation" appears in the form of motivational quotes attached to images of extreme thinness, sharing advice on how to refuse food even when extremely hungry, "meanspo"—intentionally harsh statements (directed at oneself or at others) to "help" people stick to their weight loss goals—and, more rarely, "fatspo"—images of fat people utilized to elicit disgust to further motivate not eating (there is another use of the term "fatspo" in fat-activist and body-acceptance communities which connotes positive imagery of fat people shared to normalize body diversity and showcase fat self-acceptance and happiness. I discuss this form of fatspo more in my concluding remarks).

Thinspo communities have particular, morally inflected vocabularies around food and (not) eating. Food itself is often described in terms of *safety and fear.* Someone's "fear foods" are those that induce fear either because of the high number

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significant overlap means they share a common moral vocabulary surrounding food and eating. I agree with the claim that there is a distinction between the psychology of anorexia and that involved in dieting for slenderness, but I wish to emphasize that online thinspo spaces often have pro-ana content and pro-ana forums often contain thinspo. In popular commentary, thinspo and pro-ana are often considered indistinguishable; the two spaces significantly bleed into one another, with "thinspo" frequently just meaning "pro-ana." Further, undertaking a dietary regime for the sake of slenderness, *if* one is utilizing thinspo spaces that often have pro-ana content as motivation, can easily bleed into pro-ana behavior and thinking.

[7] Carolyn Gregoire, "The Hunger Blogs: A Secret World of Teenage 'Thinspiration,'" *Huffington Post,* last modified December 6, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/08/thinspiration-blogs_n_1264459.html.

[8] Erin Gloria Ryan, "The Scary, Weird World of Pinterest Thinspo Boards," *Jezebel,* March 19, 2012, https://jezebel.com/5893382/the-scary-weird-world-of-pinterest-thinspo-boards.

of calories they contain or because they are foods people are prone to binging. Common fear foods include pizza, juices, sugary spreads, and cake.[9] "Safe foods" are those which promote feelings of comfort and security. They tend to be low calorie, often with packaging around specific controlled portions, so lessening the risk of binging. Fat-free, low-cal popcorn is a frequently mentioned safe food.[10] Not eating, or the state (and, for members of these communities, hopeful transformation) not eating brings, is described in terms of *purity, strength*, and *control*, emphasizing the mental and physical "strength" required to withstand hunger and control one's behavior and body. Breaking diet is described in terms of *shame* and *guilt*. Significantly, thinness and food restriction are described in terms of *perfection.*[11]

While "perfection" in thinspo often refers to supposed bodily perfection, striving and starving for perfection in thinspo goes beyond the body in any simple sense. Thinspo blogs also contain a significant number of motivational posts about the need to be "perfect" in multiple areas of life, such as school and relationships. Achieving thinness is cast as essential, as a precondition, in attaining perfection in these other spheres of life. Highlighting this are frequent "ana imagine" posts, or posts in which bloggers imagine, again as a form of motivation to not eat, the perfection of their lives filled with friends, love interests, fun, esteem, and success once they have become "skinny."[12] Many of these posts explicitly communicate the belief that life, or true personhood, won't really begin until skinniness is achieved. A rich and enjoyable life is something these girls feel unentitled to, or unable to access, until they are "properly" thin.[13]

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[9] See, e.g., this October 7, 2014, post by sailorxthin on the forum *My Pro Ana*: https://www.myproana.com/index.php/topic/286325-fear-foods/.

[10] See, e.g., this December 15, 2016, post by unnatural-bones on the forum *My Pro Ana*: https://www.myproana.com/index.php/topic/1012281-list-your-safe-foods/.

[11] Given the nature of Tumblr blogs and Pinterest forums, which are generally updated frequently, the exact content of these blogs is constantly changing. To get a sense of the terminology I'm describing, see the Tumblr blogs *Thinspo and Motivation* (https://skinnyhelper.tumblr.com/), and *Unsteady* (https://palerskin.tumblr.com). These are just a few examples; googling "thinspo" or "pro-ana" turns up hundreds of these blogs.

[12] See, e.g., this post from August 11, 2017, on the Tumblr blog *Unsteady*: https://palerskin.tumblr.com/post/164067492108/thinspo-imagine.

[13] Thinspo and pro-ana can sound horrific for the uninitiated, and in certain respects they are. It's worth noting, however, that the online thinspo/pro-ana communities are complex spaces, and many bloggers have ambivalent relationships with disordered eating and "ana." While the worrying common features and linguistic

The notion of "perfection" has additional layers still. The "perfection" described in "ana imagine" posts also refers to a kind of perfection of will: perfection in the (supposed) virtue of willpower as the ability to control one's appetite and manage one's eating. In the thinspo schema, achieving *full* perfection in this sense (alongside achieving full bodily perfection) enables one to transcend the need to hyper-focus on the body, achieving such a state that thinness and not eating are no longer effortful work. Hunger and "lightness" are frequently framed as transcendent states of mastery over the body. The transcendent fantasy is that if one masters the hungering body *fully*, if one excels at such mastery to the point that one has become "thin enough" and "strong enough" to reliably not eat, the hungry, needy body and the will of the person will transform into a body and will so "perfect" that mastering the body is no longer effortful, and the *work* of managing it can end. "Perfecting" the body through hyper-focus on diet and "perfect" steadfastness in the discipline of hunger is framed as that which makes it possible to transcend being subject to a needy, hungry body and the effort required to discipline it. "Ana imagine" posts emphasize how effortless life will be once "perfection" in body and will has been achieved, how easy it will be to not eat, how unappealing or downright revolting the majority of food will be. Hunger will cease or transform into something entirely nonmotivating, any compulsion to eat will vanish, and enduring perfection will be "effortless."[14] In thinspo, this path seems to be the only path to gaining freedom from a body felt to be "unworthy" of properly participating in yearned-for realms of life like intimate relationships, friendships, and, sometimes, family.

Scrolling through thinspo blogs, one quickly notices that they overwhelmingly represent a particular demographic: young women who are white, middle class or wealthy, heterosexual, cisgender, and able-bodied. The idolized bodies the blogs share and display are almost invariably white, young, marked as heterosexual and wealthy, and nondisabled, as well as being thin. But it's important to highlight that while the vast majority of thinspo spaces are nondiverse and predominately white, "black girl thinspiration" exists also.[15] Schott (2016, 1029) describes black girl thinspo subcultures as seeking "to inspire black women to reject fuller-figured body shapes as beautiful and responsible." Black girl thinspo replicates much of the same vocabulary

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trends discussed above are a major part of these communities, many bloggers also state that they get a level of support and acceptance in these online spaces absent elsewhere.

[14] See, e.g., 24heaven (https://24heaven.tumblr.com/post/167487219265/imagine) and s*tarving to be happy* (https://ciqarettes-0.tumblr.com/post/184681637101/ugw-imagine).

[15] See, e.g., the Tumblr blogs *Black Girl Thin* (https://black-girl-thin.tumblr.com/) and *Black Girl Thinspo* (https://african-american-thinspo.tumblr.com/).

centered around safety, fear, self-control, and purity as the dominant white thinspo spaces.[16] I discuss black girl thinspo further in sections 4 and 5.[17]

2.2. Fitspo

Fitspo is often mentioned alongside thinspo, either as a point of contrast (fitspo is, according to some, healthy while thinspo is dangerous), or as a point of similarity (fitspo is, according to others, just as damaging as thinspo, just with some muscles and a different kind of focus on exercise thrown in).[18] In online fitspo spaces, women (who on average are slightly older than the teenage girls involved in thinspo) share imagery of "fit" women, again with text designed to motivate the reader in sticking to their diet and exercise goals to attain a "better" body. "Better" here doesn't signal just "skinny," although thinness is built into dominant fitspo conceptions of a '"good" body. While thinspo is largely intended to motivate people in not eating so as to lose weight with a secondary focus on exercise, fitspo's imagery and text are often focused on exercise and obtaining a toned, lean physique or specific bodily features (e.g., toned arms or thighs) with a more secondary focus on diet, although the focus on diet and eating "right" is still prominent. As in thinspo, imagery of slim, young, white bodies dominates, but there is more focus on defined abs and grueling exercise than on collarbones and hip bones. Fitspo blogs also tend to share more images of food itself. Thinspo blogs do contain *some* imagery of food—when positive, this imagery often depicts cups of green tea or small bowls of berries; when negative, deliberately off-putting pictures of hamburgers and pizza. Fitspo food imagery follows similar, if slightly more expansive, themes: pictures of salads, vegetables, and smoothies are presented in a positive and aesthetically pleasing light,

[16] See, e.g., the blog *BlackGirlThinspo - Skinny Curves* (https://blackgirlthinspo.wordpress.com/).

[17] Some LGBTQ+ thinspo spaces exist also, though these are rare, and more common in cisgender gay male online spaces than in other LGBTQ+ demographics. This fact itself is no doubt interesting and worthy of analysis, but I leave such analysis for future work.

[18] See, e.g., Kate Harvey, "Fitspo vs. Thinspo: Are They Basically the Same Thing?" *Kate Harvey: Eating Disorder Expert,* accessed June 25, 2018, https://katyharvey.net/fitspo-vs-thinspo-are-they-basically-the-same-thing/; Elise Holland, "Why the 'Fitspo' Movement Is Damaging to Women," *The Conversation,* July 14, 2016, https://theconversation.com/why-the-fitspo-movement-is-damaging-to-women-60453; and Abigail Miller, "5 Reasons Fitspo Is Just as Unhealthy as Thinspo," *Spoon University,* accessed June 25, 2018, https://spoonuniversity.com/lifestyle/5-reasons-why-fitspo-is-just-as-unhealthy-as-thinspo.

while pictures of "junk" foods are positioned—either through the imagery itself or through accompanying text—to look disgusting.[19]

Fitspo's moral vocabulary surrounding food and eating overlaps with that of thinspo but also diverges in interesting respects. Notions of *purity*, *strength*, and *self-control* still dominate, but they are accompanied by rhetoric of *health*, *wellness*, and *clean eating*. Moreover, while thinspo connects the notion of self-control explicitly to withstanding hunger, fitspo links self-control and strength to the willpower to endure extreme exercise and body sculpting. While I don't wish to deny the extent to which fitspo bloggers also seem embroiled in a quest to attain a "better" body so that the "real" business of life—relationships, fun, confidence, and so forth—can begin, there does seem to be a more direct focus on that body than the complex and apparently contradictory relationship with the body in thinspo.[20] As discussed in section 2.1, many thinspo posts revolve around the hope of mastering the hungry body so completely, "perfecting" the body and the willpower to not eat, such that maintaining the body is no longer effortful. "Ana" is imagined to lead to a state where one can just *be*, no longer having to constantly try or work for the maintenance of a "good" body or to navigate hunger. Within fitspo, the transcendence of bodily maintenance (supposedly) offered by thinspo or "ana" isn't a goal or possibility. Members of fitspo communities accept that work on the body is a lifestyle one makes a long-term commitment to, and that ceasing to exert effort in working on the body will lead to the body ceasing to be "good." In fitspo, a sculpted body is evidence of your ongoing hard work. A sculpted body shows that your willpower is stronger than your pain or want for junk food, and it shows that you "respect" yourself and your body by committing to working it hard, sweating out "impurities," and fueling it only with "clean," "healthy" things.

The tendency for fitspo to promote unrealistic, harmful standards has been discussed in academic and popular commentary.[21] Fitspo can bleed into thinspo relatively easily, and many of the most common fitspo body goals also overlap with those of thinspo (such as a "thigh gap" and a flat stomach).[22] However, most fitspo bloggers maintain that they are promoting health and proper nourishment of the

[19] See, e.g., the Tumblr blog *Let's Get Fit!* (http://fitspiration-blog.tumblr.com/).

[20] Leboeuf (2019) picks up on a similar kind of difference between women and girls with anorexia and those undertaking more specific dietary and exercise regimes for the sake of slenderness or body sculpting; see also footnote 7.

[21] See, e.g., Alberga, Withnell, and von Ranson 2018; Harvey, "Fitspo vs. Thinspo: Are They Basically the Same Thing?"; and Miller, "5 Reasons Fitspo is Just as Unhealthy as Thinspo."

[22] Holland, "Why the Fitspo Movement Is Damaging to Women."

body, and they condemn thinspo spaces for promoting unhealthy behavior, starvation, and unattractive emaciation.[23]

2.3. Wellness

Arguably, "wellness" is currently mainstream in the United States, in that it is one of the most publicized, prolific, and widely accepted health, fitness, and diet frameworks. This is reflected in the enormous number of "healthy living" blogs, the vast majority of which are written and run by middle-class white women in their 20s–40s, focusing on "wellness": wellness in eating, in exercise, in body, in mind, and, generally, in life. In its original 1950s definition, "wellness" described "a condition of change in which the individual moves forward, climbing towards a higher potential of functioning."[24] The notion of movement toward being *more* well undergirds many of the most popular health and fitness blogs today (even those which don't use the term "wellness," although many do). "The Nutrition Twins," for example, describe themselves as "hooked on healthy," choosing the "right" food so as to "completely improve our energy, athleticism and mood—and make us feel and move at our utmost awesome!"; Monique Volz of *Ambitious Kitchen* describes herself as on a "wellness journey"; Kathy Patalsky of *Happy, Healthy Life* writes that it takes "strength" to fight for one's own "authentic wellness," and that "wellness is a day-to-day journey"; Samantha Rowland of *Bites of Wellness* wants to help her readers become "the best version of themselves"; and so on.[25] Many of these blogs share recipes, exercise and workout routines, and advice on mental health and practices such as meditation, as well as general advice on a "holistically healthy life."

The moral language surrounding food in mainstream wellness culture diverges from that of both thinspo and fitspo. While some wellness bloggers retain terms like "good," "bad," and "pure" in reference to food, many more explicitly critique casting food as "good" or "bad" and deliberately avoid terms like "pure."[26] Nonetheless, hyphenated terms like *good-for-you*, *good-for-your-body*, and *feel-good* figure

[23] See the blog *Fitspo* (https://www.pinterest.com.au/pixiestix718/fitspo/?lp=true).

[24] Daniela Blei, "The False Promises of Wellness Culture," *JSTOR Daily*, January 4, 2017, https://daily.jstor.org/the-false-promises-of-wellness-culture/.

[25] Tammie Lakatos Shames and Lyssie Lakatos, *The Nutrition Twins,* accessed July 15, 2018, https://nutritiontwins.com/about/; Kathy Patalsky, "My Philosophy: Food and Life," *Happy Healthy Life,* last modified May 5, 2020, https://healthyhappylife.com /about-kathy-patalsky/; Samantha Rowland, "About Samantha Rowland," *Bites of Wellness,* accessed June 25, 2018, https://bitesofwellness.com/about/; Monique Volz, "Where It All Started," *Ambitious Kitchen,* accessed July 17, 2018, https://www.ambitiouskitchen.com/about/.

[26] See, e.g., Volz, "Where It All Started."

prominently. *Nourishing* and *natural* are often contrasted with *processed.* Terms like *clean eating* or *clean food* appear frequently. Food high in calories or sugar is often described as *indulgent* or as an *indulgence* (usually accompanied by the claim that these are allowed in moderation). Finally, eating and preparing food is often described in terms of *responsibility*—responsibility to animals or the environment (several bloggers incorporate veganism into their "wellness" practices), responsibility to families (most of the bloggers are in heterosexual marriages and many have young children), responsibility to one's body, and responsibility to one's self.

The rejection and critique of simple "good" and "bad" terms for food is plausibly in part due to the critical backlash thinspo and fitspo have received, but the deliberate moving away from these normative descriptors is also due to the fact that many wellness bloggers themselves are critical of thinspo and fitspo, and several of them are writing from the perspective of formerly having lived with eating disorders.[27] The contemporary reincarnation of wellness emergent in these blogs is in many ways a response not just to the ubiquity of "junk" or processed food but also to the extreme diet and exercise online communities that have proliferated over the last 15 years, and to past mainstream diet cultures celebrating thinness and encouraging restrictive eating. Within the wellness community, the practice and ethos of eating "nourishing" food in a "responsible" way is framed as a critical response and antidote to other more harmful and punitive dieting and exercise practices. Wellness offers more "sustainable" and "balanced" ways of relating to food, ones that emanate from and evidence "self-care" and care for others, animals, and the environment. However, even if wellness blogs are critical of more "extreme" weight-loss and exercise communities, and even if wellness centers a kind of self-care in eating, weight-loss and attaining a "healthy body" (i.e., a slim body) is still a major feature of contemporary wellness culture. Although thinness isn't often celebrated in overt terms, the use of phrases like "body-journey," eating in "moderation," and so on suggest that being thin, or working to be thin, is a key focus in online wellness culture. While aiming to be "skinny" would be critiqued as unhealthy, aiming to lose "excess" weight or maintain a "responsible" body weight is still bound to wellness understandings of food and eating.

3. Fatphobia

3.1. Fatphobic Discrimination

To properly situate thinspo, fitspo, and wellness cultures and to understand how their moral vocabularies surrounding food function, we must consider the contemporary meanings of fatness. After all, all three movements are self-defined, at least in part, by their members' desire to not be fat.

[27] See Lakatos Shames and Lakatos, *Nutrition Twins*; Volz, "Where It All Started."

Fat activists may use the term "fat" as both a neutral descriptor or as a word that picks out a social category of people who face particular forms of discrimination, but the term "fat" is usually, in present usage, not neutral. The social meaning of "fat" is generally negative, a negativity often justified by appeals to health. Being fat is unhealthy, the commonsense argument goes, and so we are right to have negative attitudes toward fatness. But the negative social meanings connected to fatness invoke a range of moral and character failings beyond features strictly associated with health. In *Fat Shame*, Amy Farrell (2011, 34) writes that historically "connotations of fatness and of the fat person—lazy, gluttonous, greedy, immoral, uncontrolled, stupid, ugly, and lacking in willpower—preceded and then were intertwined with explicit concern about health issues." While fatness has been seen as a marker of prestige, prosperity, wealth, fertility, and authority in previous historical eras and in regions of the world characterized by food scarcity, the contemporary United States casts fat bodies as markers of gluttonous lack of self-control, selfishness, burdensomeness, poverty, and greed. Concerns over health developed secondarily to these discriminatory attitudes and negative connotations and became intertwined with them. As A. W. Eaton (2016, 44–47) argues, the actual linkages between fatness and poor health are disputed, poorly understood, and not as drastic as they are often imagined to be. Eaton (45–46) makes the further point that even if these linkages *were* indisputably proven, they would not justify fatphobic attitudes or discrimination against fat people.[28] Nonetheless, fatphobic attitudes and discrimination, often justified in the name of health, have a firm place in contemporary culture. Moreover, where fat bodies are cast as markers of lack of self-control, poverty, and burdensomeness, thinness has become a marker of prestige and wealth—an essential element in striving toward improving oneself and one's life (Farrell 2011, 7).

While the negative associations with fatness are widely familiar, people who are not fat are less aware of what these negative associations and discriminatory attitudes *do*—the ways they structure the social world to produce specific unjust outcomes and experiences of discrimination for fat people. Fat people experience discrimination "in schools, at doctor's offices, in the job market, in housing, and in their social lives": fat children experience stigma, getting automatically labeled as "undisciplined" and "stupid" by classmates and by teachers; many fat people have countless stories about doctors who assume any and every illness fat patients experience is weight connected, often leading to misdiagnoses and a lack of adequate health care; fat job candidates are less likely to be hired and promoted; fat rental or mortgage applicants are more likely to be rejected; and fat people are more likely to

[28] Excessive and unwarranted "concern" over fat people's health is often a hallmark of fat discrimination, in the form of "concern trolling": expressing "concern" over health as a means of perpetuating discrimination.

be dismissed as potential friends or lovers (Farrell 2011, 7). This means that fat people's "*life chances*—for a good education, for fair and excellent health care, for job promotion and security, for pleasant housing, for friends, lovers, and life partners—are *effectively reduced"* (Farrell 2011, 11). Fatphobic discrimination has significant negative ramifications for fat people's health, well-being, and happiness.[29]

3.2. The "Proper" American Body

The contemporary notion of fat in the United States emerged as part of the "cultural development of what constituted a proper American Body" (Farrell 2011, 5). Such a body is not only slim but also white, nondisabled, cisgender, and marked as heterosexual and wealthy. Such a body is a "civilized" body, a respectable, restrained body.

As a form of deviation from the imagined "proper American body," fatness is conceptually linked to other ways bodies can be socially deviant: being nonwhite, visibly queer, trans, gender nonconforming, disabled, or working class. We see these conceptual linkages play out in various stereotypes and patterns of discrimination experienced by marginalized people. The body of the "fat dyke," for example, makes

[29] It's important to emphasize that fatphobia doesn't only arise in conservative, socially dominant ideologies or typically powerful institutions. Fatphobia is inflected throughout many organizations, institutions, and political movements that are broadly considered progressive, ethical, and left-wing: food activists tackling the "obesity epidemic" use negative imagery of fat bodies to capture public attention; People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) uses images of fat bodies to turn people off eating meat and go vegetarian, with the flawed operative assumption that being vegetarian will make one thin (as in PETA's infamous "Save the Whales" billboard; see Katherine Goldstein, "PETA's New 'Save the Whales' Billboard Takes Aim at Fat Women," *Huffington Post*, last modified December 7, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/petas-new-save-the-whales_n_261134); Michael Pollan (2006, 100–101) describes America as '"the republic of fat" in his attempt to communicate what his health and "good eating" ethos in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* stands in contrast to; and so on. Further still, while the contemporary celebration of "curvy" feminine bodies is often regarded as a more progressive and positive ideal, social sanctions against being *fat* still persist. There are norms regarding how and where curves should be distributed on a body (while hips and buttocks can be "curvy," waists and necks, for example, ought to be thin), and cellulite or flab—connected to fatness through notions of degeneracy and "letting one's self go"—are considered things to be overcome on all bodies.

the deviancy of queerness visible and, to heterosexual sensibilities, disgusting.[30] Women of color and particular bodily traits associated with women of color (such as comparatively large hips and buttocks) are regarded as "uncivilized" while also being regarded as aggressively sexual (hooks 1992). There is a pervasive association between working-class people, particularly working-class women, and fatness or "corpulence," often taken as a marker of stupidity, a lack of dignity, and inappropriate sexuality (Hatherley 2015). While slim and "fit'" bodies are seen as independent and productive, disabled and fat people alike are framed as "burdens" on others and on the health-care system. Further, the term "obesity" explicitly characterizes some fat people as disabled, and, as Anna Mollow (2015, 201) argues, fat people and disabled people are subject to a similar form of condescending social "pity."

Noting that associating fatness with these other marginalized social categories produces specific stereotypes isn't to suggest that it is always factually incorrect to associate fatness as a bodily trait with the bodies of people in these marginalized groups (although it often is). But the negative stereotypes linking fatness to other forms of bodily and social deviance go beyond just noting (sometimes) associated features. The fatness of queer, black, disabled, trans, gender-nonconforming, and working-class bodies is socially imagined to indicate that queer, black, disabled, trans, gender-nonconforming, and working-class bodies are inherently undignified, excessive, lacking control, and unhealthy. And the idea that there is something inherently unhealthy or degenerate about queerness, disability, nonwhiteness, and being working class is further imagined to justify the denigration of fatness. Simplified, fat bodies are bad, and "bad" bodies are fat.

As fatphobia complexly intersects with other forms of marginalization to reproduce not only thin but also white, heterosexual, cisgender, nondisabled, and classed bodily normativity, it produces particular experiences of discrimination and oppression for people who are fat and who are also members of other marginalized groups. For example, "mainstream obesity literature frames fatness as an 'epidemic' disproportionately affecting poor, racialized, working-class, and disabled women" (Rice et al. 2020, 181); fat black people are seen as "excessively powerful due to their body size and/or as inherently disabled or injured by fatness itself" and so are regarded as "unvictimizable," leaving them with minimal recourse to seek justice for state violence (Rice et al. 2020, 187; discussing Mollow 2017); and fat disabled people can face difficulties accessing public spaces, goods, and services due to the fact that their disability and size is structurally not catered to in public infrastructure and services (Mollow 2015, 205).

[30] Though the term "fat dyke" is often used as a positive self-description in lesbian and queer women communities also.

Fatphobia, then, is a complex phenomenon. Fat people experience very real discrimination, much of it interwoven with social norms that encode fat as immoral, dangerous, pitiable, and selfish. In the contemporary United States, fatness is interwoven with gender, race, sexuality, class, and (dis)ability, and it is historically entrenched in widespread understandings of bodies, of what bodies should be like, and of what "kinds" of people are worthy and capable of full humanity and flourishing lives.

To better understand how the moral vocabularies of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness function, we need to look more closely at how fatphobic moralizing functions in general. I turn now to a discussion of the moral panic and disgust elicited by fat happiness to argue that moralizing fatness functions to uphold the social norms and boundaries that cast fat bodies as abject.

4. Fatness and Abjection

4.1. Moralizing Fat Happiness

> You want to really blow people's minds? Try this at home: Be fat and happy. Be unapologetically fat. Wear a bikini, and mean it. Eat pizza and ice cream and enjoy it. Drink up your life and a bottle of wine, and make no apologies.[31]

The above excerpt from an online blog highlights an interesting and telling dimension of fatphobia: the idea of fat people experiencing genuine happiness, liking themselves, liking their bodies, and enjoying their lives can be "mind-blowing" to others in the fatphobic culture. Bordo (1993) describes the utter disbelief of a talk show audience in response to an obese woman's insistence that she was happy. In response to this insistence, audience members tried to convince the woman that she was delusional: "'I can't believe you don't want to be slim and beautiful, I just can't believe it.' 'I heard you talk a lot about how you feel good about yourself and you like yourself, but I really think you're kidding yourself'" (Bordo 1993, 203). When fat people refuse to go through the public rituals of suffering and hating themselves, the kind of denial expressed by disbelieving thin observers can escalate to anger, fear, and disgust. Fat people being happy and fat people experiencing pleasure—especially pleasure related to food, sex, or relationships—often elicit hostility, disgust, and almost a kind of moral panic (Bordo 1993, 204).

Eaton (2016) argues that negative sentiments directed toward fat bodies, notably disgust and distaste, play a constitutive role in fatphobia (or "fatism"). She

[31] Joni Edelman, "I'm Fat and I'm Happy," *Scary Mommy* (blog), last modified August 16, 2019, https://www.scarymommy.com/im-fat-and-happy/.

argues that disgust is "part of what, in the first instance, establishes and maintains the implicit biases, reactions, habits, norms, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices" that constitute fatphobia (Eaton 2016, 38). This argument runs against the view that sentiments like disgust are secondary, epiphenomenal effects of fatphobic beliefs (such as "fat people are unhealthy") and practices. I agree with Eaton here, and think that collectively held sentiments, like disgust toward fatness, drive and enact fatphobia, and that these sentiments often firmly persist even when people adopt non-fatphobic beliefs and work to interrogate their fatphobic biases. Moral panic about fat people and fat bodies plays a similar role to disgust in this respect. Accepting Eaton's argument that sentiment is a direct driver of fatphobia, we might ask the following: what fatphobic *functions* do disgust and moral panic play? What do they serve to do when they are produced and experienced in response to fat happiness?

Many of us are deeply emotionally invested in the bodily hierarchy and social order of the "proper American body."[32] In simple terms, I think that fear and disgust in response to fat happiness are associated with seeing that order threatened. Moralizing disgust and panic directed at fat happiness both reflect investment in that hierarchy and effectively function as attempts to reinforce that hierarchy, (re)producing fatphobia. Recognizing this is important. The emotional investment many of us have in fatphobic body ideals makes the moral panic and moralizing responses of disgust in response to fat happiness *feel* right and correct, and it makes denial and dismissal of fat people's testimony about their own happiness and own lives feel so morally righteous.

The notion of *abjection* can substantiate the above suggestion, and it offers insight on how emotional investment in the social norms and boundaries associated with the "proper American body" connects to the moralizing disgust and panic directed toward fat bodies and fat people's lives, and particularly toward fat happiness. The notion of abjection can also offer insight into exactly how moralizing disgust and panic function with respect to fatphobia.

Many theorists have developed notions of the abject. Julia Kristeva (1982, 4) ties ambiguity and liminality to the abject, writing that what "does not respect

[32] Such emotional investment comes in the form of the cliché (but real and widespread) *excitement* of starting a new gym membership or exercise routine, or the *hope* directed toward an imagined future where one is slimmer and more confident, or the *pleasure* of fantasizing about fitting into that outfit, or the *comfort* of planning to lose those winter pounds, and so on. These are not experiences shared by everyone, but they are common enough to be recognizable tropes, and they speak to the ways people generally have emotional stock in certain forms of bodily normativity.

borders, positions, rules" and what "disturbs identity, system, order" leads to abjection. Judith Butler (1990) regards abject persons as those unable to be made sense of by dominant categories and who, as a consequence, do not have a socially valid subjectivity. Spaces of abjection, as I am understanding them here, refer to the spaces outside the dominant, positive social order where subjectivity and valid social identity occur. People with identities, bodies, and lives that are confusing or horrifying to dominant hierarchies are cast out into these spaces. Thinness ideals presently play a significant role in most people's sense of self and the social order. Within this order, fatness threatens social norms and refuses to respect the borders and rules that tie the possibility of subjectivity to certain modes of embodiment. To be fat is to transgress entrenched social normativity. Such transgression risks social condemnation in the form of abjection. In rendering fat people abject—in placing fat bodies firmly outside the social spaces that allow for full subjectivity and human experience—the threat fatness presents to social normativity is contained. Fat bodies and other threatening bodies (queer bodies, black bodies, disabled bodies, and so on) are *deviant* bodies, inherently threatening to the dominant social order. In abjection, however, they are ordered and contained, no longer presenting a threat to social norms.

The idea that fat bodies are cast as abject can go some way to explaining why fat happiness elicits such intense moralizing responses in the form of moral panic and disgust, and how such moralizing functions. A fat person who loves themselves or who is even just okay with themselves, who insists that they experience happiness, is effectively contesting their abjection, insisting that they exist in a social space where subjectivity, positive experiences, and meaningfulness can occur. In this sense, they are no longer staying in their abject place but are contesting a normative body hierarchy many of us are deeply emotionally invested in, reassured by (regardless of how consciously we register such investment and reassurance), and pursue for our own possibilities of personhood, happiness, and material reward. The moralizing responses of fear and disgust reflect that this internalized normative hierarchy has been threatened, and also work to reinforce it. Fear creates a kind of moral panic as people try to reinforce fat abjection ("'I heard you talk a lot about how you feel good about yourself and you like yourself, but I really think you're kidding yourself'" [Bordo 1993, 203]). Disgust at the supposed baseness, sordidness, and inappropriateness of fat pleasure or happiness serves to reinforce (perhaps justify) discriminatory fatphobic practices and the belief that fat people don't and shouldn't have valid social subjectivity. Moralizing panic and disgust also function as attempts to discipline fat bodies, instilling in them the habitus expected of a fat person (shame-filled, embarrassed, apologetic, awkward), and shaming them into exercise and dieting so as to lose weight, or into social isolation, withdrawal, and self-hatred so as to remain abject.

We can understand fatphobic disgust and moral panic as functioning to maintain the boundaries between abject and nonabject or socially valid bodies.[33] At an emotional level, many individuals are deeply invested in maintaining such boundaries even if they critique and reject some of the beliefs used to justify them, because such boundaries inform shared cultural understandings of and hopes for a good, fulfilled life and promise real material and social rewards to those who conform to and uphold them.

4.2. Fat Abjection in Thinspo, Fitspo, and Wellness

So far I have argued the following: collectively, we are emotionally invested in the social boundaries expressed in the notion of the "proper American body"; responding to fatness with moral panic and disgust expresses and evidences this investment; and fatphobic moral panic and disgust work to maintain those social boundaries and bodily norms. To connect this to the moral vocabularies of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness, we need to understand how members of these communities relate to the boundaries and norms of the "proper American body," what their investment in this schema is like, and how the risk of abjection affects them.

Thinspo, fitspo, and wellness communities are overwhelmingly comprised of white, heterosexual, middle-class, nondisabled, cisgender women. What do fatness, the norms of the "proper American body," and the threat of abjection mean for this demographic? Feminists have detailed the particular pressure on women to be thin and the fact that thinness is often cast as a prerequisite for being attractive. Attractiveness is further cast as crucial for women if they are to have valid social subjectivity: the recognition and acceptance of women as valid social subjects hinges significantly on their desirability and attractiveness (according to dominant standards) in a way and to a degree it does not for (some) men in mainstream society.[34] For *some*

[33] Eaton (2016, 43) suggests something similar when she notes that disgust can play a role in "demarcating and maintaining group boundaries by vilifying and dehumanizing a given out group."

[34] It's important to note that while *some* men are allowed a form of valid social subjectivity that doesn't rely on them being attractive and desirable (and thin), many men's social subjectivity or lack of social subjectivity is tied to their body or appearance in various respects: cisgender gay male communities can be spaces of intense body normativity, and many gay men face enormous social pressure to be thin and attractive (there are some cisgender gay male thinspo online communities also); men of color's social subjectivity arguably hinges on them meeting dominant attractiveness standards to a degree it does not for white men; trans men face particular social pressures concerning their appearances, as do disabled men; and so on.

women, then—for white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and wealthy women—being thin offers a path to the "proper (feminine) American body" and valid social subjectivity. The prospect of thinness carries an imagined life where recognition, intimacy, and pleasure are possible, while fatness is felt to negate these possibilities. This illuminates what thinness and fatness mean to the members of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness communities: fatness is, for them, the most salient bridge to abjection, while thinness offers the promise of positive social subjectivity and the imagined life (and real social and material advantages) such subjectivity brings. This is most saliently reflected in "ana imagine" posts on thinspo blogs, in which bloggers imagine and detail the positive social experiences, friendship, confidence, and love they will experience when they become thin. Less explicitly, fitspo and wellness also tie thinness to valid social subjectivity by framing their respective regimes of food management as keys to unlocking lives full of esteem, admiration, and respect (for fitspo), familial love, inner peace, and career success (for wellness), and intimacy, pleasure, and confidence (for both).

Fatness, however, represents only one bridge to abjection and nonnormative embodiment. For those with bodies who are marginalized in other ways, thinness alone cannot hold the promise of subjectivity in the way it can for white, heterosexual, nondisabled, cisgender, and middle-class women. For people existing at multiple intersections of marginalization and oppression, fatness isn't the only barrier to having a "proper American body" and the social and material advantages such a body confers. Disabled bodies, even if thin, are still likely to be abject (and disabled people who resist abjection by insisting on their capacity to be happy are also often met with a moral panic and disgust similar to that generated in response to happy fat people[35]). Visibly queer and gender-nonconforming bodies, black and brown bodies, and bodies marked as poor are also at greater risk of abjection. Losing weight or maintaining thinness only promises valid social subjectivity to some.

This is not to say that thinness offers nothing in terms of social validity or upward social mobility to women who are nonwhite, queer, disabled, trans or nonbinary, or working class. As Schott, focusing on black women and black girl thinspo, argues, thinness brings women, generally, at least some social mobility because it brings them a degree closer to "neoliberal personhood," even if such personhood cannot be fully achieved: black women who are thin are more likely to be hired for well-paid jobs, to access elite social spaces, and to avoid other forms of exclusion and violence than fat black women (Schott 2016, 1037–38). "Neoliberal

[35] For a discussion on disability, happiness, and the prevalence of the belief that disabled people who proclaim to be happy are delusional or lying, see Tom Shakespeare, "A Point of View: Happiness and Disability," *BBC News Magazine*, June 1, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27554754.

personhood" has some important connections with the notion of the "proper American body": both concepts encompass notions of self-control, self-reliance, and civility, in contrast to being unruly, uncontrolled, animal, and unkempt. As the former set of terms are historically and conceptually linked with whiteness and thinness and the latter with blackness and fatness, Schott (2016, 1037) argues that in striving for thinness, the members of black girl thinspo are attempting to "demark their bodies" and move away from blackness and toward the greater degree of personhood afforded to white women.[36] Arguably, women at other intersections of marginalization (women who are queer or disabled or trans or poor) are also afforded degrees of social mobility if they are thin.

Nevertheless, thinness offers a greater promise of personhood and a more complete path away from abjection for white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender, and wealthy women, and the fruits of thinness are more materially and imaginatively accessible to this group. I suggest that this is *part* of why diet cultures like thinspo, fitspo, and wellness are so overwhelmingly populated by white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class, and nondisabled women and center aspirational images of white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class, and nondisabled bodies and lifestyles. Thinness offers more complete promises of social validity and subjectivity (of that available to women) to this group in particular. Even if fat people existing at other intersections of bodily marginalization are invested in thinness ideals and stand to gain some social mobility and validity through thinness, working to be thin does not promise the same social results: thin white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender, and wealthy women can become *only* marked by gender; other thin women will still be multiply marked and therefore more degrees away from the civility and control of the "proper American body."

Another reason why these diet communities are so nondiverse is that many of them actively perpetuate racism, homophobia, ableism, cisnormativity, and class elitism, excluding those who don't fit their demographic. Relatedly, the barriers to entry and access in these communities can be high. The exercise regimes and the kind of "pure, clean" food that thinspo, fitspo, and wellness promote require money and time to access, and they generally presume nondisability.

I have suggested that, to the members of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness communities, the prospect of fatness is the risk of social abjection, a risk that threatens the ability to have a full human life, to have relationships, success, and joy,

[36] The personhood afforded to white women is still not complete, however, because even white women's bodies are still marked as feminine/woman; white, heterosexual, cisgender, nondisabled, and wealthy men's bodies are the only group whose bodies are regarded as completely unmarked and who can achieve full civility by being identified with the mind rather than the body (Schott 2016, 1038).

and to be a valid person. I have also suggested that while thinness holds a promise (however contingent) of personhood and subjectivity to the predominately white, heterosexual, nondisabled, cisgender, and middle-class members of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness communities, the same promise isn't imaginatively or materially available to people whose bodies are marginalized along intersections other than size (at least not to the same degree). With an understanding of what fatness and thinness mean for the members of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness communities, I am now, finally, in a position to analyze how the moral vocabularies of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness function, both within these communities and within wider society.

5. Thinspo, Fitspo, and Wellness Revisited

5.1. Dieting and Collective Self-Discipline

From the perspective of the dieter, dieting practices can be seen as rituals that control the threat of fatness. In a fatphobic culture, and certainly within thinspo, fitspo, and wellness communities, food is cast as a bridge between the abject (fatness) and the nonabject (the presently thin or the future-thin body).[37] Within this schema, food emerges as a dangerous, risky, material-semiotic object. Food's risk needs to be managed just as the body needs to be managed: the subject socially invested in this schema must find a way to preserve their place in the social order and not risk abjection. The body is also experienced as a site of risk: it could, unless one does the "right" things and abstains from the "wrong" things, become contaminated by food and fat, and it could then become abject. Thinspo, fitspo, and wellness culture can be understood as food-management strategies. They direct subjects in managing food and containing the risk of abjection, a risk carried by food and ever-present in a body that *might* become fat.

The moral vocabularies each community uses to describe food and eating can be read as mechanisms of collective or community self-discipline. Similar to how moralizing panic and disgust function to discipline fat people and uphold social boundaries, the moral vocabularies of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness, and the moralizing sentiments these vocabularies attach to food and eating, function as tools that members of these communities use to discipline themselves and one another

[37] The idea that food is the major variable in body size is likely erroneous. Setpoint theory suggests that "each person's body has a biologically determined 'setpoint' or weight that it 'wants to' be" (Mollow 2015, 200). Weight loss through dieting or exercise tends, for most people, to be temporary, and setpoint theory offers a framework for understanding why. The widespread cultural belief that eating "bad" food is the major variable in fatness is connected to the (also erroneous) belief that body size is generally something people can control, a belief that is part of the "fat people have no self-discipline" matrix of fatphobic assumptions and sentiments.

into adhering to the food-management strategies they have collectively created, adopted, and endorsed. However, while these disciplinary mechanisms are directed inward, they reflect and ultimately serve to reinforce a body hierarchy that casts fat bodies as abject and unworthy.

Thinspo Revisited

Thinspo presents an extreme strategy to manage the body and the risk of abjection that food brings. Nearly all types of food within the thinspo community are considered risky; some are explicitly dangerous, in that they risk bringing the subject closer to fatness and abjection and so must be completely avoided, but even safe foods need to be monitored and consumed in controlled amounts. Labeling these "danger foods" and "safety foods" promotes feelings of fear or security, respectively, determines how different foods ought to be interacted with, and helps ensure they are interacted with "properly." The high value placed on "self-control" esteems those who can bring the body under control. That not eating at all—or eating very little—is understood in terms of "purity" indicates that this state is highly valuable in thinspo and is something to strive for, as it brings the subject as close as possible to (the fantasy of) being completely untethered from the possibility of fatness and abjection. "Safety," "fear," "self-control," "strength," and, especially, "perfection" and "purity" are terms that evoke strong and motivating emotional responses in members of thinspo communities, directing how they interact with food and strengthening their resolve in adhering to thinspo's strategy of extreme food restriction.

Sheila Lintott (2003) argues that, in not eating, anorexic women can access experiences of the sublime. Within the thinspo framework, not eating effectively equates to being-with or observing one's most feared things—hunger, food, and the hungry body—and not being subsumed or threatened by them. Leboeuf (2019, 3), detailing Lintott's account, describes this sublimity as a "mastery" over "one's fear or of a fearful object." While I don't wish to and cannot speak for all persons who have experienced disordered eating and anorexic thought and behavior patterns, as someone who once lived, on and off, with these patterns for long periods of my life, I find certain dimensions of my experience captured well in Lintott's argument. There is a pleasure in hunger when you know you won't give into it, a power in turning down the offer of food, a sublimity in awareness of hunger and knowledge of its powerlessness over you, and a sense of pleasurable clarity in the belief that this power and control will, eventually, lead you to a place of being able to exist within and be aware of your body and of not being threatened by it or fearful of it.

Lintott's analysis also resonates with the moral language used in thinspo communities. Although not all members of thinspo communities have anorexia, periods of not eating and mastery over hunger, food, and the threat of abjection are idolized, understood, and valued in terms tied closely to the sublime, such as terms

of “transcendence.” But experiences of the sublime, as they are understood and valued within the moral vocabulary of thinspo, also have a significant future-directed aspect, an imagined future of absolute, complete, *enduring* mastery over hunger, food, and the body in general. Content on thinspo blogs describing, in detail, what certain parts of life and life events—family Christmases, wearing certain clothes, being hugged, and so many more besides—will be like once skinniness is achieved is testament to this. Attaining enduring “purity” and “perfection” through absolute mastery means that one has transcended the need to manage food and one’s body at all, and this imagined “perfect” self adheres to society’s norms so well that there is effectively no risk they could become abject. In this sense, experiences of the sublime in thinspo eating practices also have a significant social dimension. The enjoyment of hunger-fueled transcendence is an enjoyment tied, at least in part, to the imagining of oneself as the enduringly perfect social subject. It is this construct, this fantasy, always-future girl, described in terms of “transcendence,” “perfection,” and “purity” that emotionally resonates with those in thinspo communities. It is this fantasy that grounds and fuels their desires to “stay on track” and disciplines their behavior toward the same.

The “purity” attained by not eating is, of course, attainable only temporarily, if at all. “Perfection,” while something to strive and diet for, is always a yet-to-be-realized state. If it *is* realized, it will be short-term and ruined through hunger and having to eat, or it will require medical attention as not eating slowly destroys the person. Nevertheless, the language of “perfection" and “purity” reflects that the thinspo diet strategy revolves around the hope of permanently escaping the risk of abjection by achieving enduring, effort-free mastery over hunger and the body. Recognizing (not necessarily consciously) that hunger will always risk connecting them with bodies that could become abject, those within thinspo communities aim for transcendence in mastering, and so being able to detach from, the body’s needs and hunger completely. Thinspo’s moral vocabulary, replete with notions of “danger,” “safety,” “purity,” “lightness,” and “transcendence,” projects and communicates this fantasy aim, and it functions to motivate members of the thinspo community to discipline themselves and one another into adhering to the strategy of extreme food restriction.

Black girl thinspo spaces utilize much of the same rhetoric as their more common white counterparts. Within black girl thinspo, I think this rhetoric can still be read as a mechanism of collective self-discipline to adhere to the dietary strategies that promise an escape from abjection and the transcendence of a needy, hungry body that is or could become abject. Schott (2016, 1029) describes black girl thinspo communities as communities in which black women and girls “attempt to de-mark their racialized bodies through hard work, will-power, and mastery over their desires.” Here “transcendence” and “purity” speak to a strategy aimed at leaving the

hungering *black* body behind. As thinness is culturally linked with whiteness, becoming thin offers upward social mobility and holds the promise (however illusory) of escaping the stigma associated with dark skin, and so of transcending a body socially read as marked for abjection.[38]

Fitspo Revisited

Fitspo spaces utilize a related but distinct strategy to manage the riskiness of food and the body. In fitspo, the focus is on *dominating* the risk of fatness. Fitspo's moral vocabulary disciplines community members in this strategy of dominance through extreme exercise, requiring the virtues of great "strength" and "discipline," but also through eating the "right" things in the "right" portions.

In thinspo, *any* body short of one that is perfectly skinny and doesn't hunger (and so not a real possible body at all) is a risky body and so must be left behind. Unlike thinspo, fitspo presents a particular form of body—one that still hungers, but whose hunger and efforts are properly directed at the "right" things—as firmly within social boundaries. Where members of thinspo communities desire to transcend the need to manage the body, members of fitspo communities manage the riskiness of the body through a strategy of long-term, ongoing dominance. And while thinspo spaces see all food as potentially dangerous (safe foods are only safe when properly measured and controlled), fitspo spaces tend to break food into "good" and "bad" categories, where "good" ("clean," "whole," "pure") foods *don't* form a bridge to fatness and abjection while "bad" foods do.

The moral vocabulary of fitspo reflects how certain foods are presumed to influence the quest for the perfect body (and the subjectivity such a body entails), and so it functions to motivate particular ways of relating to food. "Clean" foods will leave one untainted; "whole" foods (consumed properly) aid exercise goals. "Junk" foods contaminate the body and must be avoided; eating them evidences weakness. "Good" foods can be safely engaged with, and one is "good" when one does so properly. Some foods can become a strategy in managing the body through ongoing dominance to attain "purity": a pure body is fueled by *clean* and healthy foods and is uncontaminated by impure foods. Extreme exercise—the proper processing of food so that it affects the body in particular ways—helps purify the body further. "Purity," control over the danger of fatness and the guarantee of a socially valid body/self, here is not attained in leaving the body, its needs, and its risks behind (as it is in thinspo), but through ongoing dominance of the body to sculpt it in particular ways. Terms like "good," "bad," "clean," "pure," and so on direct members of fitspo communities in

[38] The intersections between online disordered eating communities, fatphobia, and race deserve much deeper exploration than I have space for here. For more thoroughgoing analysis, see Schott (2016).

this strategy of dominance, and support them in disciplining themselves and one another to "stay on track."

Sandra Bartky's conception of *bodily alienation*, as detailed by Leboeuf (2019) in her analysis of the thigh gap, can help illuminate fitspo's dominance strategy further. Bodily alienation arises when one's being is identified with one's body and one's body is experienced as a project that could always do with "improving." Bodily improvement is understood as self-improvement—to work on the body *is* to work on the self. Members of fitspo communities accept that to work on the body is, in a very socially real sense, to work on the self: one's pursuit of a certain body shows "strength" of character and "willpower." Engagement in projects of self-/body improvement like fitspo is also *narcissistic* and *repressive*—narcissistic as it is fixated on and overly invested in the appearance of the body, and repressive as the "body is always experienced as in need of disciplining" (Leboeuf 2019, 5). Unlike those in thinspo communities who work to leave the body behind, fitspo community members commit to ongoing dominance of and identification with the body. Effectively, they commit to an ongoing alienated, narcissistic, and repressive relationship with their bodies, accepting the belief that the ways one interacts with food will produce a particular body and the social fact that such a body can be read as saying something about one's worth.

Understanding fitspo as alienated, repressive, and narcissistic, and situating fitspo within my analysis of fatness and abjection, suggests that the threat of abjection can be a key part of the alienation and repressive narcissism women can experience in relation to their bodies. Fat is an existential threat for the members of fitspo communities; it means a kind of social death. An alienated stance toward the body, a repressive and narcissistic regime of bodily dominance, and the development of a moralizing language aimed at collective self-discipline, is, in certain respects, an understandable response to this threat.

Wellness Revisited

Wellness culture employs a related but different strategy to fitspo in managing the body's riskiness and the risk of food. Many of the wellness blogs I surveyed are maintained by women who have experienced disordered eating or obsessive exercise. They know thinspo and fitspo strategies are unsustainable, yet many, like those within thinspo and fitspo communities, "struggle" with food. They need a strategy to manage the danger of fatness, to control the body's potential to become fat and the subject's potential to become socially abject. I consider the strategy they adopt to be a strategy of *negotiation*—negotiation with food and with one's body. This strategy has nothing of the sublime that thinspo offers, and it is less alienated, less repressive, and less narcissistic than that of fitspo. Those in wellness communities *do* manage their bodies

and food, but the project of such bodily management is interwoven with other aspects of the self that have to do with family, relationships, and careers.

The strategy of negotiation is evident in wellness's moral language. Terms like "nourishing" and "good-for-you" highlight that food can be navigated in such a way that it need not carry the danger of fatness, and that the body's needs and hunger can be negotiated with on "good," "enriching" terms. While negotiation doesn't guarantee the same results as the dominance of fitspo, it does aim at maintenance of thinness on potentially softer terms: rather than being "perfect" and "sculpted," the practitioner of wellness is "healthy" and doesn't carry any "excess'" weight. It is in this sense that the practitioner of wellness is "responsible"—they work to maintain and keep their bodies within society's normative bounds, but they render this pursuit a key part in the vision of a holistically sustainable lifestyle.

Nonetheless, the moral terms of wellness still serve as means of community self-discipline to ensure certain ways of relating to food. Recall the framing of certain foods as "indulgences." "Indulgences" typically describe foods imagined to form a bridge to fatness, like ice cream and chocolate. Because these foods are, generally, pleasurable to eat, *some* exposure is recognized as crucial in more generally keeping control and not overexposing oneself. Thus framing certain foods as indulgences is a form of negotiation with the body and desires, through directing how much of a tempting food it is "okay" to consume. It is also a form of negotiation with food*,* through accepting the exposure to danger, *but only a little bit*.

The language of "responsibility," "sustainability," and "indulgence" and the strategy of negotiation enable wellness to access to forms of social legitimacy that thinspo and many variants of fitspo are unable to access. Schott (2016) argues that the pursuit of thinness often involves a social trap: thinness is a key point on the "journey to personhood," but being labeled as someone with an eating disorder (or as an obsessive "exercise junkie") also risks moving one further away from personhood and closer again to abjection. Wellness's strategy of negotiation evades this trap and so offers a path toward thinness while navigating around the deviancy attached to those who develop eating disorders or obsessive eating and exercise behaviors.

5.2. A Fatphobic Continuum

There are some clear and important differences between thinspo, fitspo, and wellness cultures. The strategies each community employs to manage the body and food so as to mitigate the threat of abjection are different and mean different things to the members of those communities. We've seen that thinspo encompasses a strategy of transcendence—one that ultimately isn't realistic but speaks to the desire to be a "perfect" embodied subject so that one can be free from any regimes of bodily management. Within this framework, not eating can create experiences of the

sublime, in that not eating equates to the mastery of the threats presented by food, hunger, and the body. Despite fitspo's tendency to bleed into thinspo, the theme of transcendence and the experience of sublimity are not features of fitspo. Fitspo's strategy of dominance and breaking food into resolutely "good" and "bad" categories means that food isn't experienced in the same fearful "safety/danger" categories of thinspo. A conception of "good" food as something that fuels the body and the stronger focus on exercise means hunger is not as threatening as it is in thinspo spaces. Given this, it seems less likely that not eating could offer the same sublime experience of mastery over hunger and food as it can within thinspo. Moreover, members of fitspo communities effectively accept and commit to long-term, ongoing regimes of bodily management. They identify with their bodies and don't seek to transcend the need to manage them but commit to working on them long term, continually "improving" them. In this sense, fitspo is an alienated, repressive, and narcissistic.

Wellness has neither thinspo's focus on transcendence and its prospect of the sublime, nor fitspo's alienation and repressive narcissism. Wellness's strategy of negotiation enables a place for all foods, even "indulgences," so that one relates to them "properly," with "responsibility," rendering them nonthreatening. Hunger is to be respected, heeded, and gently negotiated with, so it is not threatening either. The sublime mastery over the feared objects of food and hunger thus isn't available here, and strategies of transcendence are recognized as delusional and unhealthy. The practitioner of wellness accepts that she has to live with hunger, food, and her body. But unlike in fitspo, living with the body doesn't mean alienated hyper-focus on the body and treating it like an always-to-be-improved project. Instead, it means incorporating ongoing, sustainable management of the body into a lifestyle, one that also incorporates family, social responsibility, and self-care. The food-management strategies of wellness thus also encompass these other parts of life: organic, vegan, and "healthy" are the preferred foods of choice, even while there is some room to "indulge." This enables those who practice wellness lifestyles to pursue normative modes of embodiment while navigating around the risk of being marked with the deviant label of having an eating disorder or as an obsessive "exercise junkie" and the abjection such labeling can bring, avoiding the social "trap" (Schott 2016, 1038) that thinspo and sometimes fitspo fall into.

Despite these important differences, understanding the moral vocabularies of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness as mechanisms of collective self-discipline, and understanding such collective self-discipline as being performed by members of these communities in order to manage the threat of fatness and fat abjection, enables us to recognize that thinspo, fitspo, and wellness cultures are on a continuum. For such collective self-discipline mechanisms to function as they do, the community

employing them has to, at some level, buy into the idea of the "proper American body" and the fatphobia it entails.

The moral language and disciplinary measures in thinspo, fitspo, and wellness are directed inwards. Aside from the very occasional use of "fatspo" (in the negative/derogatory sense of the term) in thinspo spaces, most of these communities don't take up the explicit discipline or denigration of fat people outside of these communities. Nonetheless, the moral vocabularies of these communities (re)produce fatphobia. While these vocabularies and their disciplinary effects are directed inward, their language still reflects and reproduces the wider cultural moral panic and disgust surrounding fatness. Their use contributes to the perpetuation of fatphobic discrimination. The moralizing of food and hunger in these communities reflects a fear of abjection, but it also reinforces the social boundaries that work to make fat people abject. Within thinspo, fitspo, and wellness, people are "good," "clean," "pure," or "responsible" when they stay within and work to stay within the boundaries set by the ideal of the "proper American body." People are "bad," "unhealthy," "irresponsible," "unsustainable," "disgusting," or "naughty" when they do not. This language reflects an emotional investment in the "proper American body" and in the promise of the happiness that working to attain it supposedly brings. It also reflects an emotional investment in fatphobia, in a hierarchy of bodies where only some are worthy of pleasure, happiness, value, and respect. So while the moral vocabularies of thinspo, fitspo, and wellness function within those communities as templates for relating to food and bodies, they also function to reflect and reinforce socially dominant ways of reading others' worth though their bodies and eating practices.

Recognizing that thinspo, fitspo, and wellness are on this fatphobic continuum is important in understanding how fatphobia is perpetuated in the contemporary United States. Thinspo and, to an extent, fitspo are widely recognized as promoting harmful body standards and eating practices, and members of thinspo (and some members of fitspo) can gain the deviant labels of "disordered eater," "obsessive," or "exercise junkie," partially delegitimizing those communities' dieting strategies and their extreme body normativity. Wellness, however, normalizes, legitimizes, and rationalizes fatphobia, couching it in terms of "responsibility," "moderation," and "sustainability." Wellness is acceptable and mainstream. Further than that, wellness is generally considered progressive. In certain respects, wellness is framed as the responsible reaction to the harmfulness of other dieting subcultures focused on thinness. It is also considered a progressive way to relate to food in the social contexts of the "obesity epidemic" and growing concern over the abundance and comparative affordability of processed food in the United States. I've argued that wellness communicates and reinforces a social order in which fat people are denigrated and abject within appeals to "responsibility" and "sustainability." This fatphobia is largely masked by wellness's rejection of more extreme diet cultures and the more extreme

forms of bodily normativity central to those cultures: wellness can effectively claim to reject "unhealthy" body normativity, rendering its own fatphobic body normativity invisible or legitimate and "healthy." In this sense, wellness is far from progressive. Further, in focusing solely on maximizing individual happiness or success in the face of harmful diet cultures, wellness obscures the fact that collective action and critique are necessary to actually, substantively contend with the harmful cultural norms regarding bodies and eating.[39]

Rejecting the goal of transcendence, and the alienation and repressive narcissism of treating the body as a project isn't enough, then, to relate to food in an actively non-fatphobic and progressive way. Rejecting fatphobia and moving away from the harmful ideal of the "proper American body" requires a different strategy, something more radical that breaks with the practice of moralizing food choices and the bodies food choices are (often erroneously) imagined to result in.

6. Concluding Thoughts: "Food Is Not a Moral Issue"

I opened this paper with a claim made frequently on feminist, fat-activist, and body-acceptance blogs—the claim that food is not a moral issue. After analyzing how moralizing food functions both in contemporary society as a whole and in specific diet cultures, what this claim is getting at is now, I hope, clearer. As I read it, the insistence that food is not a moral issue is not a claim that food is apolitical or that there are no moral questions with respect to food. The existence of food deserts and other structural and economic limitations on food choice, the environmental costs of some forms of food production, the unjust working conditions of much food production, the ways in which some cultures' foods are unjustly devalued compared to others, and the suffering and exploitation of animals as a routine part of the food industry are all ethical issues relating to food. But these are all *structural* issues, which require collective action going beyond individual eating choices to address. The claim "Food is not a moral issue" addresses specifically the moralization of *individuals*' food choices *according to fatphobic norms*. Like thinspo, fitspo, and wellness, the claim that "food is not a moral issue" must be read against the current fatphobic culture, a culture that assigns moral worth to certain bodies and not others and moralizes

[39] Another problematic feature of wellness hidden behind apparent progressivism is the "good health imperative," the belief that it is the responsibility of all individuals to work to be healthy, to take health into their own hands (Welsh 2020). The good health imperative neglects the fact that many issues of ill-health are social issues, brought about by social and environmental circumstances, and it places responsibility for health erroneously in individuals' hands. It also reinforces stigma around ill-health and disability, and works to justify discrimination against people who are, or seem, unhealthy.

individuals' food choices with respect to how those choices are imagined to bring about certain body types.

Moralizing food in this way acts as a disciplinary mechanism directing people to relate to food in ways that will, supposedly, ensure their thinness (or punish them for their fatness). Moralizing food upholds social boundaries that denigrate fat bodies and render them abject. Insisting that food is not a moral issue is, then, not a denial of the structural and ethical issues surrounding food production, distribution, and access, but a call to emotionally disinvest from fatphobic norms so that we no longer see individuals' food choices, as they are imagined to connect to the potential for fatness, as speaking to their moral worth. It is also a call to relate to food on different terms, ones that are more liberatory and just.

Fat-activist, body-positivity, and body-acceptance movements are varied, with multiple different communities focusing on issues pertaining to fatphobia in different ways, centering different political commitments.[40] While it is important to recognize this variance, multiple fat-activist online spaces share in the ethos communicated by the claim that "food is not a moral issue," and envision more liberatory and just ways of relating to food as a personal and political strategy of combatting fatphobia. One resistant way of relating to food I read these communities as (sometimes tacitly) endorsing is a mode of relation that emphasizes pleasure and joy as opposed to fear and bodily alienation. This can be considered a form of *pleasure activism*, understood as "work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy" (Brown 2019, 13). As pleasure activism, refusing to relate to food in the moralizing terms of a fatphobic culture and instead relating to food in terms of pleasure and bodily enjoyment communicates the message that pleasure is important for a good life, and pleasure is something oppression stifles and takes away from oppressed and marginalized people. (This form of personal activism might also be in the same family as the mode

[40] Some examples to illustrate this: while some movements like the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement aim to dispel false beliefs about the connections between fatness and ill-health and promote health for all bodies, fat-acceptance movements critique the focus on health and instead advocate for nondiscrimination with respect to all body types, regardless of size *or* health. There is also a difference between body positivity, which generally holds that people ought to feel *good* about their bodies, and body acceptance, which promotes just that—acceptance, not necessarily positive feelings. The pressure to be "positive" about their bodies and the shame experienced when they cannot make themselves feel so positive turns some people away from body positivity and toward body acceptance. See Williams (2017) for more detail on some of the differences between different body-acceptance/ fat-activist movements.

of "sensualism" Leboeuf [2019] describes, the embodied awareness of the pleasures and sensations of the body.)

Fat activism as a form of pleasure activism goes beyond advocating for pleasure-based ways of relating to food. The *other*, positive kind of fatspo, encompassing images of fat people shown in a positive light and highlighting their beauty, joy, self-acceptance, and pleasure, is one example of this. Unlike thinspo, fitspo, and wellness, fatspo explicitly undermines the notion of the "proper American body," showing the happiness, richness, and beauty in fat people's lives. Fatspo *is* fat people refusing to be abject: fatspo aims to upend the scaffolding upon which thinspo, fitspo, and wellness form a continuum and to communicate the message that, contrary to widespread cultural fatphobia, fat people are capable and deserving of pleasure and happiness. Worth noting also is that fat-activist spaces tend to be, on the whole, significantly more diverse than contemporary diet cultures. While there are issues with white dominance within fat-acceptance and fat-activist movements, there are significantly more explicitly black and queer fatspo spaces than there are black or queer thinspo, fitspo, and wellness spaces; and generally fatspo features much more diversity in terms of class and wealth, disability, gender expression, sexuality, and race than any of the dieting subcultures. While not wanting to diminish the problems of white women dominating body-acceptance spaces and discussions, fatspo and fat activism tend to collect alliances with people whose bodies are marginalized in other and multiple ways. This is understandable, given that fatspo explicitly rejects the "proper American body," which, as described in section 3, is white, heterosexual, gender normative, wealthy, and nondisabled, as well as being thin.

Moral language surrounding food and eating is suffused throughout the contemporary United States (and in many places besides). This language is most visible and extreme in controversial dieting communities, like thinspo and fitspo, that adopt specific moral vocabularies as means of collective self-discipline, as tools to help dieters stay on track with their dieting and body goals. Thinspo and fitspo, with their respective dieting strategies of transcendence and dominance and the moral vocabularies they have developed in accordance with these strategies, work to uphold fatphobia, reinforcing the social abjection of fat bodies. Despite this, and despite working so hard to meet dominant thinness ideals, the members of thinspo and (sometimes) fitspo are often themselves cast as deviant, and risk a different form of social abjection: in obsessively working toward thinness or fitness, members of thinspo and some members of fitspo communities become marked with the label of "disordered eater" or "exercise junkie," partially delegitimizing their dieting strategies, the ways they moralize food and eating, and the intense body normativity they promote.

By contrast, contemporary wellness culture *seems* like the progressive, responsible response to these dietary extremes, a progressive and rational negotiation point between thinness ideals and the deviancy of eating disorders or obsessive exercise. Wellness has access to social legitimacy, where thinspo and fitspo generally do not. Nevertheless, wellness is still invested in and reproduces a normative body hierarchy that ties weight to worth, character, and personal and social responsibility. The moral language wellness uses in reference to food and eating, and its dietary strategy of negotiation, centering terms like "responsibility," "sustainability," "indulgence," and "balance," also function as mechanisms of collective self-discipline and uphold fatphobia. Appealing to "sustainability" and "responsibility," wellness positions certain modes of embodiment as necessary for healthy, productive, responsible citizenship more generally (in raising a family or being environmentally conscious, for example), rendering thinness a central part of the good—and responsible—life. Wellness rationalizes and normalizes fat abjection and the social sentiment that fat bodies are, in some sense, immoral.

If we are to envision and practice genuinely progressive ways of relating to and talking about food, eating, size, and bodies, we must think beyond the moralized terms set by fatphobia. We must work to reject the ideal of the "proper American body," and, in doing so, move away from the tendency to moralize others' (and our own) food choices with respect to how we think those choices accord (or fail to accord) with this ideal. The slogan "Food is not a moral issue," understood and analyzed in its proper context of widespread, moralizing, fatphobia, offers, I think, one path in the movement toward relating to food and eating in a way that is more liberatory, just, and genuinely anti-fatphobic.

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