Where is She?: Pandemic Teaching, Freedom, and Bodies (not) on Zoom

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Where is She?: Pandemic Teaching, Freedom, and Bodies (not) on Zoom

AH: When I woke up this morning, I was excited to get dressed. I’m wearing one of my favorite skirts and a pair of my well-loved Snag tights. I love how the tights and the skirt feel as I’m sitting here typing this, but I know that if I were going to campus to teach, I probably wouldn’t have worn this outfit.

Oh, it’s snazzy enough. The tights are slate gray, the skirt is a fantastic gray and shell abstract pattern that makes me happy to look down and see covering my lap. But that’s also part of the problem. On campus, this outfit would make me really “seen.” It’s capped off with a red jacket and my red lips; there’s no hiding here. And yet, there is a kind of hiding because I’m meeting with my classes by Zoom today. They’ll see my up-do, my lipstick, my red jacket, my bright lips, but they won’t see the pattern spread across my lap as I sit down or my Snag tights expand to fit my thighs as they spread across my desk chair. And that’s part why I love this outfit but know I wouldn’t wear it to campus. In my mind’s eye, I can see people on campus noticing that what I lovingly call my “side chub” on my hips disrupts the pattern a bit, especially on the right hip, which has always had a little extra measure of fat on it. I can predict them noticing that the skirt clings a little more to the tops of my thighs than it might on someone with smaller legs. They’re looking at the outfit from the outside and from an aesthetic standpoint only.

Yet, I’m sitting here in clothes that are so very physically comfortable because of how they fit my body and because I’m okay with how I look in them. I’ve taken so many more fashion chances since I’ve been working from home, and one of the biggest chances is putting together outfits that please my eye and my stomach and thighs. The clothes I wear to campus, unlike what I’m wearing today, are usually the kinds of clothes my body has to fit into. Pants that aren’t quite made to fit the 10 inch difference between my hips and my waist. Shirts that have to be really big in the chest to fit across my hips. And I wonder if or when I go back to campus if I can hold on to this new found freedom in a different kind of fashion.

ED: As faculty, we often poke fun at student sartorial choices: the basketball shorts and t-shirts, the leggings and sweatshirts. Those have been, historically what visually separates them from us, the professionals whose job it is to be seen. Nowhere is this more stark than the classroom. I distinctly remember the discomfort of heels and dress shoes, fitted skirts and dresses, and yes--the bra. Not the sports bra or the t-shirt bra, but the “right” bra, the one that held in, smoothed out, and ensured my dignity in front of the classroom. Most folks who wear bras know that bra. It’s the One.

Now, I don’t even know where the hell she is. My laundry cycles are filled with sports bras, the beloved “comfy bras”, leggings, sweatshirts, nice t-shirts, blazers and sweaters. It’s like a whole new world. And it really is. This is the semester in which I am blissfully unaware of my body and its massive visibility. As a fat woman whose weight has shifted in many directions since I first stood in front of a classroom in graduate school, I have always been hyper aware of my body as a visual object—or as Laura Mulvey put it over thirty years ago—my “to-be-looked-at-ness” when I am teaching. While I do not teach with the goal of being on display, the standard

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classroom creates precisely that effect, which in turn becomes part of the teaching process itself. As I work to share knowledge and guide students, the *other* work is there, too, the necessity of providing a pleasurable or least palatable image to look at. I have been aware of the way things pull, the way my breasts, belly, and arms contort the lines of my clothing. I have been aware of my arms jiggling as I write on the board (the one student who wrote about that in their evaluation clearly was, too). But teaching remotely and synchronously, I am simultaneously less of a body and more of *my body*. What I mean is that my body is less open to and prepared for the consumption by my students and more open to my own use, configuration and--my God--comfort.

AH: Yes, I feel like my body is also more mine now that I’m working from home. And this is true of everything from being able to make sure I drink enough liquid to being able to go to the bathroom in peace. I feel so much more awake, and sometimes I think it’s because I have water and tea and coffee at my fingertips. When I’m teaching on campus, I would often get through all my morning classes and lunch and then realize I hadn’t had a thing to drink because I’d been pulled in so many different directions since arriving to campus. I used to regularly get sleepy enough that I had to lie down on my office floor for a nap in the afternoons, and I can’t help but wonder if some of that was just dehydration or the after effects of anxiety. To be fair, I have some chronic health conditions that sometimes sap my energy when I have flares, but I also know that not eating and drinking at regular intervals doesn’t do anyone any favors.

My bladder is also happier. I know that going to the bathroom isn’t something we talk a lot about as teachers, but I feel like we should. We’re not just floating heads or intellects; I, for one, also have a pretty demanding bladder, especially after my hysterectomy. I used to have to regularly tell students to take a few minutes and talk amongst themselves because I needed to go to the bathroom. I never really minded telling them that, but there were times I heard a snicker or got a certain look that made me hesitate in some classes and sometimes just hold it until class ended. Now, on Zoom, I don’t have to explain anything. I can send them to breakout rooms for the five minutes it takes me to get to the bathroom down the hall and back, and I don’t have to tell them I’m leaving the classroom. It’s a relief to be able to finish teaching without feeling like my back teeth are ready to float.

I’ve also been thinking a lot about student evaluations. Like you, I’ve had students comment on my body and also on my wardrobe. Everything from my nose ring, to my arms, to the fact that I had a period in my life when I wore only black pants because I just couldn’t find much else in my size--all of these things and more have been mentioned in evaluations over the years. As a Fat woman and a Fat Studies scholar, I’ve fought the idea of the “headless fatty” for years--that ubiquitous image that cuts fat people’s heads off in photos for news stories. One of the things most troubling about the practice of only showing fat people’s bodies is that they become stand ins—almost like interchangeable cardboard cutouts—that are used to make monolithic claims about fat people. The “headless fatty” is a practice people in Fat Studies and in Fat activism have rightly proclaimed dehumanizing and suggestive of fat people *only* being their bodies. Now, I find myself being a kind of body-less fatty, and although part of me thinks I shouldn’t feel good about that because it seems like it ought to be as troubling as the “headless fatty,” if I’m being honest, I’m enjoying that life from the neck up on Zoom.

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scholars—with works such as Marcia Millman’s *Such a Pretty Face*—have also, after all, argued that it can be equally as dehumanizing to have all of the focus on one’s face as an effort to ignore a fat body or suggest fatness is not a legitimate embodiment. Living from the neck up, then, can also be seen as troubling. Because, whether it’s the “headless fatty” or the “such a pretty face,” neither of those takes a fat person’s whole being into account and being fragmented leads down a dangerous path. Yet, as I think about all of this, I know it’s not that I feel bad about my body that makes me feel more comfortable on Zoom; I still get dressed every morning and like how I look. It’s that I know how our society, which includes my students, stigmatizes large bodies. Something about that kind of gaze being taken away feels good to me, and I’m still sorting out exactly what that means. I suspect it’s because I’m now in control of what people get to see, and that feels oddly empowering—in spite of my being fully aware of all the possible downsfalls and criticisms.

ED: That’s the rub, isn’t it? This sort of push-pull, contradiction in terms, thing has been a major part of my pandemic teaching experience. In Fall 2020, I taught a class on Intersectionality and one of our readings discussed the limits of visibility, specifically in transgender organizing. Activists CeCe McDonald and Joshua Allen, in conversation with Mia Fischer and Sarah Slater called into question “the very ‘celebratory view’ of trans visibility that has accompanied this alleged ‘transgender tipping point’” marked by the rising prominence of transgender celebrities. As Joshua Allen put it, “the fact is that our experiences are being dimmed and those liberal experiences that fit into the already existing power structure are being hyper, hyper, hyper seen and visibilized by the media.” This reading stuck out to my students, but also to me as I considered the task of visibility I have always faced as openly queer, a woman of color, but most importantly to this conversation, a fat woman. My visibility has meant that I have always been “hyper, hyper, hyper seen” and for many students that has had a lot of meaning and importance. Course evaluations and conversations with students inevitably feature what I sometimes think of as the first, the only, wherein students tell me I am the first or only (insert identity category here) professor they have had. So, my body has meaning which shapes the learning environment not only for students who share these identities and embodiments, but also those who do not.

Despite this celebratory view, I am drawn back to the critique offered by McDonald, Allen, Fischer, and Slater. Allen in particular suggests that despite the perceived benefit of visibility, those who are multiply-marginalized through gender non-conformity, class, race, and criminalization do not actually reap those benefits uniformly and that “visibility in the age of neoliberalism that we’re living in actually does the work of giving us a sense of complacency” (186). This is what I think about when I consider April’s question about what happens when the “gaze being taken away” via remote teaching. Now that this celebrated thing is gone or at least fragmented or perhaps mediated in some way, what other work can I turn my attention to? What other work can I turn my students’ attention to now that we aren’t all sitting in the feel-good space of visibility?

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5 Fischer, et. al. “Transgender Visibility, Abolitionism, and Resistive Organizing in the Age of Trump: A Conversation with CeCe McDonald and Joshua Allen.”
In part, this has been a semester where questions of disability have repeatedly come to the fore, in both my classes and in my writing. While it has always been part of my teaching praxis to discuss disability as a key aspect of race and vice versa, I have found myself thinking more about the ways in which the focus on my ethnicity, my gender, and my body size have erased equally important, often more complex, questions of access and equity that center on illness and disability. In other words, it’s just not enough anymore for me to be seen. My needs also need to be met, in terms of presence. What I mean is this: students have traditionally seen me in a classroom with little understanding of my presence in that space. What did I have to do to be seen there? Am I fully present or am I experiencing discomfort or even pain so that I may be seen by them? Disability Studies has been a helpful site for examining these questions, especially as we consider the social model of disability which offers a space to critique not the body, but the social environment. As I focus less and less on being seen, and more on accommodating the realities of a pandemic as well as accommodating the needs of my body, I find myself less interested in being seen and more interested in being present--at ease, without nagging discomfort and full-blown pain, and invested in making the spatial, social, and digital adjustments that allow me to teach and think with a more full presence.

AH: This tension you’re calling out between being seen and being present is so strong in my experience as well. I was immediately reminded of a piece by Brenda Jo Brueggeman, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Georgina Kleege. In their conversation piece about teaching with disabilities, Garland-Thomson writes about that tension around seeing and what it means that sometimes students forget the teacher is a person with a disability and how that can seem like both a good and a bad thing simultaneously. She writes, “It seems to me what we want to try to achieve here is subtle in the sense that what we want is not for them to forget that we have disabilities and therefore to assume we have normative bodies and to assume that we fit the standard expectation. We don’t want them to forget that, but what we do want, I think, is for them to realize that our impairments no longer have the determining force of a master status. We want to redefine, to reimagine disability—not make it go away. But also not have it remain with its stigmatic force. So we want it to go away in a way that we want it to go away” (15).

That’s how I feel about it. I don’t want my fatness to go away. I don’t want the fact that I suffer with the after effects of Lyme in my knees and back to go away. I don’t sit around wanting my celiac disease to go away. I don’t want my queerness to go away. I have come to peace with having PTSD. I do, though, want to be able to tend to my body as it is and to make myself present in the ways you’re talking about. I’ve been writing and teaching about disability and fatness and the intersections for a long time; I have a firm commitment to social justice around those issues and getting environments where all kinds of bodies can be welcomed and thrive. Right now, when I can tend to my body fully is, maybe ironically, when my body isn’t in an office or a classroom but in this new world of Zoom. This new online environment is a place where the traits students probably most closely associated with my physical body--my fatness and my back and knee pain that is often visible--no longer take center stage. This happens both because students don’t see them and because I’m not thinking about them because I’m in a chair that actually fits my wide hips and in shoes that cradle my feet. The social construction of a

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normative body is real. So is the pain of certain conditions, but when I’m teaching on Zoom, I somehow feel like both of those things can be better managed by me. I hope that my fatness and my intermittent disability can go away in the way that I want them to go away, to borrow Garland-Thomson’s phrasing. I want to teach students about fatness and disability and queerness and all of the intersections of complicated identity categories, but maybe I don’t want to teach them about those things in a world I don’t fit in, which is often the case with a traditional classroom and its furnishings and configuration.

And the truth is that, In this new world, I’m way more present in classes with my students. My ability, in this pandemic world, to treat them with kindness when they’ve fallen ill and be understanding of their struggles is so much greater. Don’t get me wrong; if you asked students they would have told you I was encouraging and funny and nice and all of those things before I started working from home via Zoom. And I was. But it’s different now. It’s as if lessening (and some days even losing entirely) the pain has made me better able to connect with them. And while I don’t want them to forget entirely that I am a Fat woman, that I do suffer intermittent disability, that I am queer identified, I also don’t want that to be center stage for viewing at the front of a classroom every day. There’s something about my body that feels like it’s much more mine now. I can own these things to them--be out about all of them--but my body can still be mine on Zoom, and the way that I am present in that forum, I hope, teaches them that many different kinds of bodies can function just fine--in spite of impairments--when they are in a space that works with them rather than against them.

ED: The question of agency feels really important to me at this moment, the idea--as you wrote--that the “body feels like it’s much more mine now”--and that we, with the “new” affordances provided by technology and the university are more able to determine how and if we exist in a space. While both of these questions or the how and if are important, I’m going to focus for now on much the how of our presence actually speaks to a broader question of agency and self-determination that marginalized and multiply-marginalized folks have been seeking in many different arenas. The notion that we, as folks with chronic illness or chronic pain have the right to manage our own conditions in the ways we see fit is something that is really shining through for me in this moment. In other words, the management of my specific embodied needs is no longer up for public viewing or public discussion. This reminds me of when I was a college student, newly diagnosed as diabetic and working my first “office job” as student staff for a unit on-campus. I experienced a mix of kindness and patronization, as those around me tried to “help” me manage my needs by suggesting snack breaks and time to get up and move, or suggested that a strong reaction to an issue was actually a blood sugar fluctuation (it wasn’t--some computer issues are just infuriating).

We can now pretty clearly recognize this as a hallmark, almost laughably stereotypical example of ableist discourse and action, specifically because it denied me the agency to manage my own needs and the right to have my own reactions and responses. However, through the lens of this moment, I also see it as demonstrative of the difference between public and privacy (or semi-privacy) in the right for marginalized people to care for their own needs without scrutiny. I’m not suggesting that fat folks or disabled folks or People of Color should hide in their homes or offices and never come out, but rather that when it comes to the management of our needs specific to our marginalization, we ought to have the right and the means by which to manage
those as well as control over how publicly we choose to make those needs and those moments of management. Hence, the question of both privacy and alternative workspaces is tantamount here. The opportunity to work in a place where I have all of the things I need means there is less possibility for surveillance as to how I manage my body. My home office is a private space, I have control over what my students see of that space, rather than in my campus office that is meant to be a semi-shared working space where my colleagues and students can see, hear, and find me. Sure, I can close my door if I need to eat or stretch or test my glucose levels or react to the latest racialized and/or gendered microaggression, but I am still in a public workplace where my presence or lack thereof is noticed. The closed door has meaning and, for some, invites scrutiny.

At home, however, my level of control over the public performance of self-management is much higher. This, I should note, is also a function of my physical, environmental privilege--I have a private workspace with a door that is only consistently invaded by cats. Still, the fact that it is a privilege speaks volumes to how we have set up work, in some ways necessarily because of the role of collaboration and community (after all, my house is not a university) but also unnecessarily in the name of productivity and surveillance. How much of our work lives are built around being watched to ensure that we are doing enough, performing enough, not “slacking” (which is a really obnoxious way to characterize rest)? This is true in other sectors like factory work and the service industry, but it’s also true of academia and teaching and the further we move along this pandemic trajectory, the more ridiculous that seems to me--that teaching, mentoring, and research are quantifiable and that success is equal to productivity and that productivity is measurable by what? Physical presence? Performed exhaustion? Hours per day spent in my office? I feel as though I took these for granted before the pandemic--feeling like I “did my job” because I didn’t leave my office until 7pm or because I spent 2 hours with a student or because I wrote for hours and paid for it the next day (inevitably a weekend) with a migraine triggered by eyestrain. That was my metric, too, and I performed it as much for myself as for others. But now? On the internet, no one knows you stopped to pee.

For folks of color, especially those racialized as “foreign” or “other,” this question of the American obsession with and the definition of productivity is particularly fraught. As I have written elsewhere, the measure of productivity is also a measure of belonging. Do we produce and do enough for our presence to be justified, for us to be imagined as true citizens who are allowed to remain part of the American body politic? A similar question exists for fat people in general--does their fatness preclude productivity and can their use of social services and healthcare be justified in light of their presumed lack of productivity. Of course, for those at the intersections of these categories of race and fatness, this question takes on a new edge, asking not simply if we deserve assistance and care but also if we deserve to be here.

AH: The public performance of “acceptable fatness” has been written about so much by Fat Studies scholars and/or activists as being a “good fatty.” That idea that fat people are supposed to eat salads in public, take the stairs, never buy chips; it’s never ending. And you’re right that it isn’t left at the door of the workplace--or of academia. There’s this idea that other people know

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what my self-care ought to look like--because I’m fat. It’s as if they feel like they know my bodily needs more than I know them myself.

Your workplace story immediately made me think of something that happened to me when I was much fatter than I am now and the scrutiny around my body and how I chose to move it was much more intense. I was waiting for the elevator in a building with several floors. One of my coworkers came up and grabbed my hand, literally pulling me toward the stairs while exclaiming, “Oh, come on! You can walk up three floors.” I pulled myself away, but I was pretty jarred by their feeling like they could just grab me like that (we were not close friends and only spoke occasionally) and tell me what my body needed. I managed to say something really general about them not knowing why I was taking the elevator and it not being their business. But that’s the thing about living with, in and through a fat body: everyone thinks it’s their business.

That kind of surveillance is hard to live under. The idea that someone else knows when you’re hungry or what you need to eat or how you need to get from point A to point B is so infantilizing and disrespectful. What you say about the politics of workplaces in this is also critical. That’s a space where having someone else observe and/or judge your body and/or the practices around it is especially threatening. Workplace discrimination against fat people is well documented, so having people comment on bodily practices such as eating or walking up or down stairs can feel especially threatening. We all have bodies we have to take care of in the workplace, but somehow--likely because of the stigma and the visibility--fat bodies are the ones most noticed as needing a kind of “care.” I put that in scare quotes because what I experienced from other people is not actual “care,” but that kind of care that’s supposedly “for my own good” but ultimately really damaging to my psyche and my sense of agency. I won’t be the “good fatty” so many people seem to want me to be. If my knees are hurting or I’m tired or carrying a load of books--or just because I feel like it--I’m going to take the elevator.

Like you, I’ve been privileged enough to work from home during the pandemic, and I have total control over that space. I take a thermos of hot water upstairs to make tea so I don’t have to come back downstairs every time I want another cup. If I want a nap, I take one. And the ironic thing about all of this is that it has made me so much more productive than I was before. In that way, I’m capitalism’s dream. Yet there’s no one watching me. I would argue, in fact, that the way working from home limits how much surveillance I’m under is why I’m so productive.

And the looming question for me is this: how do I not just survive but thrive if I have to go back to that old working environment?

ED: That last piece is one I have been dancing around in my head a lot--trying to avoid it as much as possible. I chafe against the general framework of productivity, but I also find myself really happy with what I have been able to accomplish since this started. More importantly, I worry about what will happen when we “go back to ‘normal’” because, as I think we’ve been saying without really saying flat out, “normal” was pretty bad. It was damaging to our bodies and it was rife with the surveillance and performance, which for fat folks and other marginalized folks, go hand in hand. This push for “normalcy” frustrates me to no end--it conflates “normal” with so many good things--safety, health, goodness, stability, prosperity. But if it was so
precarious to be upended so swiftly, could it have been any of those things to begin with? And who was it normal for? I mean that in both senses. For whom did this normalcy function well, certainly, but also, was it actually benefiting those who as educators we are meant to serve—namely students?

From my particular position as a Latina faculty member teaching in an Ethnic Studies department, I think about that a lot. My teaching, mentoring, and research is all dedicated to creating more space in higher education for marginalized folks, not less. As I reflect on this idea of normalcy and going “back,” it reminds me of Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again” which has been the horrific, racist, xenophobic backdrop to this pandemic experience. So was it ever great? Was it ever normal? Or were “normalcy” and “productivity” part of what maintained the status quo for me and for my students—the thing that actually made it harder to create more space for us? There are some moments when I really see this—when it’s clear to me that teaching online has made learning more accessible to my working students who can use asynchronous portions of our course on their own time. My students who don’t have cars can meet with me during office hours, literally from anywhere. At the same time, the unequal access to technology is stunningly, achingly more clear as we see news stories about k-12 students working in the parking lots of their schools for wi-fi access. So no, the pandemic hasn’t “fixed” anything or made things more equitable, but it’s shown us the fault lines more clearly and, in some cases, those fault lines are in the places we so nostalgically characterize as “normal” or the “way things used to be” and ought to be again. For example, we know that students of color are facing dire setbacks in their education during this pandemic. But we also know that this has been historically true in the United States, and has shaped questions of equity, access, and (dis)ability in education since slavery.9

I’m not convinced that this nostalgia is really going to serve us well in the long run. Should we go back to systems that enforced physical presence as the only means by which we could (temporarily) engender equity? Should marginalized folks in faculty positions go back to experiencing chronic discomfort and literal physical pain in order to “serve” our students and perform productivity, presence, and expertise?

AH: I spent a long time thinking about what you wrote about “normal” here. When I first started doing Fat Studies work, one of the first things I started to interrogate was the idea of “normal.” I quickly realized that—within medicine—“normal” had once meant something that was statistically average or in keeping with the majority but was now being used much more often to mean what was thought to be socially “ideal.” Scholars in Bioethics had been working with this idea for some time.10 This was certainly true of fatness. It’s statistically normal for Americans to be overweight (read that with all the scare quotes you can attach), but it’s stigmatized because it’s not socially acceptable. So, “normal” came to mean what was desirable not what was statistically average.

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This dovetails with the questions you’ve posed here about what was seen as “normal.” I feel like the “normal” before the pandemic was the socially desirable system that meant folks who were in pain hustled off to work to perform their tasks in the way other folks thought they ought to be performed and be observed doing so. I don’t think it was necessarily the way many of us would have chosen to do our work, but then we didn’t really know what else was available. Until now. And we can’t unsee it.

I’ve also been thinking about what you’ve said about the weaknesses and shortcomings of the system being exposed during this pandemic. It reminds me of an antique vase I scored at a yard sale once. It was covered in what looked to be a thousand microscopic cracks; I was amazed that it still held water, until the day it didn’t. Turned out that it was covered with thousands of tiny, microscopic cracks, and one day it just gave way. I came home to find it in tens of different pieces on a soaking counter with the flowers languishing in the dry air of the house.

I feel like this pandemic shattered the normalcy in a similar way. We all knew there were cracks in the system. Working class folks, women, people with disabilities--so many groups of people--have pointed out for years that our system around work and productivity wasn’t good for them. They told us about the cracks, and we saw them. But we kept pouring water into that container.

Now that the pandemic has cracked our idea of normalcy wide open, I think we ought to get to decide how we put it back together and what it looks like. And I mean all of us--not just the people who want the “normal” they knew back just as it was. It has to be the kids idling in parking lots and ordering sodas at restaurants so they have wi-fi access. It has to be those of us who have chronic conditions, and pain, and disabilities. It has to be people of color who are so often monitored and scrutinized in traditional working environments. We have an opportunity to let all the stakeholders into this conversation about what the future of work looks like in education and what education looks like, and I sure hope we don’t just try to glue the same system back together just because we can.