Through thick and thin: Storying queer women's experiences of idealised body images and expected body management practices

Jen Rinaldi  
*University of Ontario Institute of Technology*

Carla Rice  
*University of Guelph*

Andrea LaMarre  
*University of Guelph*

Karleen Pendleton Jiménez  
*Trent University*

Elisabeth Harrison  
*York University*

May Friedman  
*Ryerson University*

Deborah McPhail  
*University of Manitoba*

Margaret Robinson  
*Dalhousie University*

Tracy Tidgwell  
*University of Guelph*

**Recommended citation:**
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Abstract

In this study we examine how discourses of obesity and eating disorders reinforce cissexist and heteronormative body standards. Sixteen queer women in Canada produced autobiographical micro-documentaries over the course of two workshops. We identified three major themes across these films: bodily control, bodies as sites of metamorphosis, and celebration of bodies. Such films can be memorable, cultivate empathy, disrupt misunderstanding of queer bodies, and inform medical practice. Our analysis suggests that research and policy on ‘disordered’ bodies must better account for how people negotiate discourses around body shape and size, how shaming is internalised, how regulation can function as resistance, and how variant bodies can be embraced, desired, and celebrated. Community-grounded, arts-based research points to new ways of gathering and producing knowledge.
Keywords
multi-media storytelling; fat, obesity; eating disorders; queer

In collaboration with Rainbow Health Ontario (an organisation that provides LGBTQI+ health-related training, resources, research, and policy development in Ontario, Canada) and Project Re•Vision (an arts-based research program at the University of Guelph), our initiative ‘Through thick and thin: Investigating body image and body management among queer women’ engaged with how queer women negotiate, are affected by, and resist body image ideals and body management expectations in heteronormative and queer communities. Our research team is a diverse group of queer and trans women and allies of different ethnicities and races, class backgrounds, body sizes, and abilities. We are women who have lived with eating disorders, fought fatphobia, and experienced body distress. For this project, we and 11 community participants engaged in multi-media storytelling, creating autobiographical micro-documentaries that challenge dominant narratives about our bodies and present alternatives. The stories serve as tools for educating healthcare providers and engaging queer audiences on the impacts of queer and weight stigma (interacting with other forms of power and oppression), and as artistic explorations into embodied experiences of queer desire and foodand fat-related distress.

In what follows, we review the limitations of existing literature on our topic, explain our multi-media storytelling method, and analyse a selection of the stories produced over the course of our project. Our analysis is
organised around three central themes: control over bodies, bodies as sites of metamorphosis, and celebration of bodies.

Literature review

We recognise that since the term ‘obesity’ frames fatness as a potential or actual pathology and that since ‘fat’ is the preferred language for fat activists and fat studies scholars, we use obesity when referring to the condition as defined by obesity science and fat where we describe people’s embodied experiences of non-normative size. Like obesity, the phrase ‘eating disorders’ frames problem eating as pathology. We thus use the term ‘eating disorders’ throughout this article when referring to the diagnoses as described in the conventional literature and ‘disordered eating’ when talking about the larger phenomenon of individuals’ problem relations with and distress around food and weight.

Currently, discussions about body shape, size, and satisfaction are framed in relation to concerns about obesity and health effects associated with larger body sizes (e.g. Caballero, 2007). Such concerns have given rise to research designed to track, contain, and cure obesity (Paradis, 2016). Meanwhile, prompted by concerns over rising rates in diagnoses, researchers engaging with eating disorders have sought a cure to deviations from ‘normal eating’ (e.g. Guarda, 2008; Kruger & Kennedy, 2000). Literatures on obesity and eating disorders tend to frame both conditions as health concerns, offering solutions that require medical intervention and entail behavioural modification (Brumberg, 2000; Eckermann, 2009).
Proponents of alternative perspectives, drawing from critical obesity and fat studies scholarship, argue that obesity and the ‘obesity epidemic’ are categories that interact with and reinforce norms of gender, race, class, and sexuality, upholding inequitable power relations and social structures (Gard & Wright, 2005; McPhail, 2009; Rail, 2009, 2012). Scholars in the fields of critical obesity studies (who critically examine the claims of obesity science) and fat studies (who investigate the meaning, nature, and consequences of fat as a social construct) insist that obesity should be regarded not as a disease or an inherently pathological condition, but as a culturally produced artifact with social effects such as the devaluation of, and discrimination against, those labeled obese or fat (Herndon, 2005, 2010; LeBesco, 2004). Some scholars note that the stigmatization of fat is in itself unhealthy (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; Seacat et al., 2014), and propose that such stigma may cause health effects attributed to ‘excess’ weight, for instance by de-incentivising helpseeking for healthcare (Brown et al., 2006; Puhl & Heuer, 2007; Rice, 2007, 2014; Wray & Dreery, 2008). This is exacerbated by how the conflation of ill health and fatness has led to discrimination within healthcare systems (Wann, 1998), resulting in misdiagnoses and the denial of care.

Critical feminist scholars in the eating disorder field have followed a comparable trajectory to critical obesity and fat studies scholars, seeking to understand disordered eating as an embodied response to a culture that objectifies the female body (Bordo, 1993; Chernin, 1981, 1985; Orbach, 1979, 1986). More recent feminist theorists have considered the persons who manifest diagnosable symptoms as not merely impressionable or vulnerable to cultural dictates of beauty, but as negotiating pervasive,
institutionally entrenched expectations around bodily control beyond appearance ideals (e.g. Day & Keys, 2009; Eckermann, 2009). Framing eating disorders as a biomedical phenomenon has rendered treatment standards inadequate for bodies that fail to fit normative corporealities and has left unexamined the social conditions in which disordered eating is situated (Gremillion, 2003; LaMarre, Rice & Bear 2014; LaMarre & Rice, 2015; Rinaldi, LaMarre & Rice, 2016).

In the few instances in which weight and sexuality are considered jointly, queer women are positioned as ubiquitously fat in public health literature; in these accounts, their presumed fatness tends to be tied to the notion that lesbian culture allows for a larger body ideal (LeBesco, 2001). As a result, queer women have been largely absent from scholarship on eating disorders (MacDonald, 2011; Jones & Malson, 2011); when present in studies exploring eating disorders, being queer is often treated as a variable to be controlled for, rather than a core component of participants’ embodied subjectivities (e.g. in Bankoff & Pantalone, 2014) Within the mainstream literature, eating disorders typically refer to restrictive eating disorder practices, including dieting, exercise, purging, and laxative use, and excessive thinness is frequently read as symptomatic of these practices. Binge eating, which itself is a symptom of eating disorder pathology, tends to be afforded less attention in eating disorder research and in clinical practice and is most often associated with bodies typified as fat. Some studies presume queer immunity due to higher rates of body acceptance or satisfaction (French et al., 1996; Herzog et al., 1992; Share & Mintz, 2002); others claim that queer women are less likely to internalise expectations of femininity and appearance (Ludwig & Brownell, 1999;
Meyer et al., 2001). MacDonald (2011) cautions against these sorts of speculation, arguing that such assumptions reflect a reductionist understanding of the causes and consequences of disordered eating. The exclusion of some women from the diagnostic categories for eating disorders may act as a barrier to their seeking and/or receiving support and treatment, as individuals may fear dismissal of their symptoms or hesitate to subvert cultural norms that preclude treatment-seeking (Becker et al., 2010; Rice, 2014; Thompson, 1997).

The presumption of immunity is not unanimous; some studies report that women experience body image issues and practice problematic body management strategies regardless of sexual orientation (Feldman & Meyer, 2007; Moore & Keel, 2003). Other researchers argue that behaviours coded as eating disorder symptoms are actually more common for queer women than they are for women with a cisgender and heterosexual identity (Austin et al., 2013; Koh & Ross, 2006; Wichstrom, 2006). Some have used a minority stress model to make sense of the phenomenon, where body issues are attributed to stress associated with stigma and marginalization (Austin et al., 2013; Balsam et al., 2006; MacDonald, 2011; Thompson, 1997), whether this stigma derives from sexual identity, fatness, or from various intersecting stigmatised embodiments. Such evidence, though, has not been enough to disrupt the assumption that body standards do not affect queer women (Jones & Malson, 2011).

This problem reflects how research on women’s body image and body management practices has focused primarily on the narratives of white, able-bodied, middle to upper class, cisgender, heterosexual women, reconstructing and perpetuating a particular femininity within a compulsory
heteronormative paradigm as the starting point for all women’s narratives (Bordo, 1993; Grogan, 2008; Lau, 2011; Thompson 1997). As long as these paradigms hold, it remains unclear how multiply marginalised queer women negotiate body management, and we cannot presume that clinical standards on obesity and eating disorders are effective or even beneficial for this population. Current clinical practices, which aim to modify behaviour and achieve a target weight, produce limited results, and may reinforce cultural expectations around fitness as well as dominant narratives around obesity and eating disorders (e.g. Balsam et al., 2006; Martell et al., 2004).

The scholarly fields of obesity and eating disorders reinforce cissexist and heteronormative body standards and erase LGBTQI+ communities, as well as other intersecting identity markers and other forms of body diversity (Jones & Malson, 2011; Rinaldi, LaMarre & Rice, 2016). For example, mainstream eating disorder literature frequently frames eating problems as affecting mainly the privileged groups of women described above (Rice, 2014; Thompson, 1997). For its part, mainstream obesity literature tends to frame fatness as a problem of escalating proportions disproportionately affecting poor, racialised, and Indigenous peoples (especially in the Global North) (Fee, 2006; Foulds, Shubair & Warburton, 2013; Oster & Toth, 2009). Queer women, especially African diasporic and Indigenous women, are oftentimes presumed to be fat and immune to body dissatisfaction or restrictive eating disorders (Hanley et al., 2000). While some African diasporic and Indigenous Canadians value larger bodies (Poudrier & Kennedy, 2008; Willows et al., 2009), white and colonial standards also impact how women from these groups assess their bodies and their cultures (Fleming et al., 2006; Marchessault, 2004). Assumptions about
multiply marginalised queer women’s size and body satisfaction impact how healthcare providers read and treat their bodies, contributing to queer women’s negative experiences in healthcare. Documented problems include misdiagnosis based on assumptions that fat is unhealthy and the root of health conditions (Hebl & Xu, 2001; Puhl & Heuer, 2009) and that queer women do not experience eating disorders (MacDonald, 2011). In addition, there is virtually no consideration of how weight-based stigma interacts and intersects with other forms of oppression to negatively impact queer women’s health and wellbeing (Berryman, et al., 2006; Buxton & Snethen, 2013; Puhl, Luedicke & Grilo, 2014; Stone & Werner, 2012).

Our research centered queer women’s personal negotiations with culturally and medically inscribed body standards; through this centering, we aimed to shift healthcare practitioners’ interpretation and treatment of queer women’s bodies. We explored, documented, and shared queer women’s stories of negotiating and resisting idealised body images and body management practices to benefit queer communities and healthcare providers. We wanted to document and deconstruct the challenges queer women experience in relation to their bodies, but also to examine alternative and celebratory practices that go underrepresented in dominant discourses.

Methods

We adapted our method from Project Re•Vision, a research lab that uses critical arts-based methods, particularly story, to foster richer understandings of difference and to influence practitioners and decision-makers in healthcare and education. Re•Vision situates its work within
critical arts-based research (Conquergood, 2002), a methodological field that seeks to generate original texts and artefacts – specifically short films – through art-making practices and that endorses postmodern and process-oriented approaches. The coming together of storytelling and social change is at the heart of Re•Vision’s approach; Re•Vision projects are oriented toward the creation and sharing of new understandings of difference that disrupt dominant narratives and open up possibilities for living. Terms such as digital storytelling, ethnocinema, and participatory filmmaking exist for referring to individual and community storytelling methods using film (Brushwood Rose & Granger, 2013; LaMarre & Rice, 2016; Lambert, 2013). In deliberations between Through Thick and Thin and Re•Vision researchers, we have arrived at a preference for the term ‘multi-media storytelling’ as it opens our methods to diverse media forms (visual, sound, and kinesthetic) while still placing emphasis on story.

The multi-media stories produced through this method are 1–6 minute-long videos pairing audio recordings of personal and communal narratives with photographs, video clips, music, dance, artwork, and more. Multi-media stories may be particularly germane to action research. Making space for people to tell their stories, coupled with the translation of these stories into a shareable multi-media format, enables renewed and varied engagements with issues such as homophobia, racism, sexism, and/or colonialism. In our accelerated culture, the format enables an economy of expression through the layering of meanings using narrative, image, and sound, resulting in a form that can convey breadth and depth within a highly compressed timeframe. The distillation of experience that it allows
has emerged as powerful for filmmakers and for provider audiences responding to the work (Rice et al., 2015; Rice, et al., forthcoming).

We held two storytelling sessions: a 5-day workshop spanning June to July 2015 where research team members – five of whom produced stories – were trained in facilitation and software use; and a 4-day workshop spanning November to December 2015 involving 11 research participants. Both workshops were supported by queer-identified artists and Re•Vision staff, and used Re•Vision’s critical arts-based research methodology and mobile media laboratory. Workshops featured interactive presentations on dominant and alternative representations of queer bodies; tutorials on multi-media storytelling, photographic literacy, and video editing; and open studio time where participants collaborated with facilitators/artists and with one another to create their films. In total 16 films were produced.

Our analysis involved a detailed engagement with the 16 stories that were created in our workshops. We approached interpretation of artistic outputs self-reflexively and collaboratively, privileging the storytellers’ own reflections along with theories related to their work. Art- and story-based methods have a long history of participant-centeredness; drawing on this tradition, we foregrounded participants as experts over their experiences whilst also extending their interpretations by bringing storyteller accounts into conversation with critical theory (LaMarre & Rice, 2016; Rice et al., 2015). We revised the analysis in two viewing sessions with the research team, five screenings of the films with insider (queer) and outsider (health provider, educator, and student) audiences, as well as email and live conversations with the storytellers. Thus our analysis was grounded in community interaction, a pillar of participatory research. Our approach was
also rooted in narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2007), which enabled us to identify themes within and between stories without decontextualizing them. This entailed individually engaging with each story from beginning to end in order to identify key narrative themes and overall story arc. This was followed by team discussions about which themes resided within individual stories and which resonated across the stories. We wrote up a short narrative about each video based around its contextualised narrative themes, and also considered which themes most commonly appeared in the stories as a collective set of artefacts. We then selected illustrative examples for inclusion in this article. We augmented this approach with a commitment to member-checking (Morse, 1994) – discussing results with those whose stories we analysed.

This study was approved through the seven research ethics boards with which the research team is affiliated. Ethics procedures for multi-media storytelling differ slightly from those used in more mainstream qualitative research; storytellers have control over how they consent to have their stories shared and whether they prefer to use their names or pseudonyms. As these micro-documentaries might also be conceptualised as works of art, many opt to use their real names. We offered participants a choice of several levels of consent (i.e. only for research purposes, for research and artistic purposes, screening following request to storyteller, etc.); all of the participants whose stories are included in this article provided consent for their material to be included. We acknowledged in ethics review and to participants that workshop participation is intensive, and we mitigated the effects of this labour by stretching our 4–5 workshop days across multiple weekends and offering honoraria.
Findings

We observed three major themes across the multi-media stories produced for our project. These themes intersect and overlap across stories, and our analyses inevitably reduce the complexity of thematic integration. Readers may explore these stories using the following URL: http://projectrevision.ca/storying-queer-womens-experiences (the password for viewing each film is ‘queer’).

Control over bodies

Storytellers described feeling and being made to feel that their bodies were either currently or potentially out of control. Through experiences of, for instance, fat shame and eating disorder treatment, the composition of their bodies – the placement of fat, muscle, and skin – has impacted how they are treated in the world and how they have perceived themselves. Shape and size come to be markers of excess, what Mary Douglas (2002) refers to as ‘matter out of place’ (p.36). Building on Douglas’s theory, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) charts conceptualisations of femininity that are encoded in corporeality and incapable of ready containment, the threat of their volatility justifying mechanisms of control. If we understand bodies to function as assemblages – or drawing from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) whose theory-work implicitly informs our analysis, as provisional moments of concentration or design, becoming through habitual, iterative practices – then discourses affect their organization, moving bodies along trajectories of promised improvement.
Multi-media storytellers considered how they have toed the line between ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ aesthetics throughout their lives, even as aesthetic ideals – and their relationships to these ideals – have been variable and unstable in queer communities. The storytellers narrate experiences of external control, expectations of internal control, and efforts to take control of their narrative arcs, by reaching for strategies that facilitate self-acceptance.

In *No Room for Doubt* (to view this film go to the album available at: [http://projectrevision.ca/storying-queer-womens-experiences](http://projectrevision.ca/storying-queer-womens-experiences), and following the prompt type in the password ‘queer’), Crystal Kotow describes her experience as a ‘superfat’ woman seeking/avoiding/experiencing medical care. Healthcare practitioners indifferently rattle off prognoses and recommendations that stick to her through her body history (see Ahmed, 2014), and fail to follow up on examinations required by her prescriptions. These encounters precipitate a crisis that brings Kotow to hospital, where she fears facing judgment, dismissal, and attribution of her ailment to her size (Wann, 1998). To evade the clinical gaze, she commits to exercise, which along with restrictive eating practices amount to hypervigilant body discipline that eventually leaves her debilitated, thus showing the limits of aiming to push excessive control onto the body.

Kotow illustrates movement visually, using film footage of public transit and street traffic all in perpetual motion. The layers of traffic jams mimic her fear of arterial clotting, the highways her compulsion to move despite not going anywhere. A subway rushes past its station parallel to her admission following extreme weight loss: ‘Everyone celebrates me, but I hate me.’ The film’s narrative ends with what she can now attest is an
unapologetic body politic that has the effect of finally bringing her home; ironically, by ceding control, Kotow arrives at a body that is less out of control. ‘I know myself’ becomes an anthem against medical dismissals of her body, a statement of confidence after work to push out and away the impacts of body shaming, a definitive breaking of her cycle.

In Measuring My Waste (http://projectrevision.ca/storying-queer-womens-experiences, password ‘queer’), Robin Akimbo weaves a tale of control through connections between her family’s history, movement, and abject relations with food. Akimbo constructs herself as someone on the outside of femininity and whiteness, whose relationship with her body has fluctuated in and around the boundaries of femininity and ‘goodness’ without ever really fitting or landing. She anchors her story to high femme pop culture icons without attaining their aesthetic ideals. When her body ‘fits,’ it fits a cool, hot, or athletic ideal, rather than a feminine one. Even the most ideal version of her body is a queer punk body; a body marked by its differences and tied to that which has been co-opted, tokenised, or fetishised and, notably, a body that controls its aesthetic rigorously.
We see control over Akimbo’s body play out between the lines of her story, carried by threads of motherhood and sweetness. Opening her story by telling listeners about being put into ballet class as a child, Akimbo marks her outsider belongings (Probyn, 1996) to the mainstream. Her outsider status is also marked by racial lines; her ‘sweet white mother’ enrolls her in ballet class, ‘as any white mother would do,’ not realising this is a space where her daughter’s racialized body is constructed as Other. Akimbo shows her body in motion, with sharp, sped-up clips marking difference from a narrative of femininity and softness generally associated with ballet. Interspersed with these clips, she layers pop-culture and historical images, many relating to sugar, a sweet substance as enticing as it can be toxic.

Akimbo’s body is perhaps most out of control – along normative standards – when it is closest to the ‘creature place’ she describes herself as seeking. External trappings of control, like the attempts of ballet
teachers to get her body to conform to white standards, or the commodification of queer culture, offer comfort without allowing Akimbo to find herself at home in her body. The film ends with threads unresolved, opening the possibility of belongings and non-belongings as Akimbo’s body continues its becomings.

Bodies as sites of metamorphosis

Bodies are sites of metamorphosis, ever works in progress. Storytellers in this project considered how their bodies have been positioned as the stuff of ‘before’ pictures. This theme was prominent in films that pushed intersectionality beyond queer and size identities and looked at race, ethnicity, disability, and/or age. Storytellers’ bodies defied strict categorization and shifted throughout their lives, challenging dominant discourses. Samantha Murray (2005) refers to bodies so discursively framed as impermanent or in suspended animation, ‘expected to engage in a continual process of transformation, of becoming and, indeed, unbecoming’ (p.155).

But if bodies are ‘forever in the process of undeclared construction’ (Herndon, 2011, p.257), they may commit to lines of flight away from rhetorics of beauty, health, and femininity. If bodies are open-ended in their configurations, if they materialize as a ‘kind of chaotic network of habitual and non-habitual connections…always reassembling in different ways’ (Potts, 2004, p.19), it is myopic to imagine a singular and fixed end-point for all bodies, and violent to devalue their agential capacity to transgress.
In *Butch Coyolxauhqui* ([http://projectrevision.ca/storying-queer-womens-experiences](http://projectrevision.ca/storying-queer-womens-experiences), password ‘queer’), Karleen Pendleton Jiménez meditates on three bodies to guide her metamorphosis: those of her mother, herself, and the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui. Building on the notion that ‘the body [is a] pedagogical device’ (Cruz, 2006), and that learning can be conceptualised as transformation (Wenger, 1998), she seeks instruction from their physicalities. The film opens with a gold and turquoise rendering of the Coyolxauhqui. She is the goddess who attempts to kill her brother, the god of war. Coyolxauhqui ‘was too much of a threat to the Mexica patriarchal war culture represented by Huitzilopochtli to be permitted to live freely,’ and her death and humiliation ‘serve as a warning to other women’ (Blake, 2008, p.96).

![Image of the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui in gold and turquoise, her limbs separated from her body, against a black backdrop.](image)

*Figure 2: Still frame showing the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui in gold and turquoise, her limbs separated from her body, against a black backdrop. From Butch Coyolxauhqui by Karleen Pendleton Jiménez*

Coyolxauhqui’s image breaks into pieces that trail off the screen, quickly replaced by black and white photos of Pendleton Jiménez as a child.
beside her mother. She describes the comfort of snuggling into her mother’s big, soft body while recounting the injurious fatphobic comments directed at this body. The contrast reveals how the same body can be perceived as beautiful by a daughter, and unacceptable by others, and can move through phases of belonging and rejection. The daughter learns to be protective of her mother from these wounding words, and to take seriously her mother’s warning, ‘not to ever say anything bad about a person’s body.’

Pendleton Jiménez attempts to reconcile the ambivalence she experiences over her butch body, a maleness and femaleness that combine and collide, resisting traditional motifs of metamorphosis through binary gender. Through sensual photos of herself as butch lover, she recounts a confidence in her masculinity. However, when she considers her body as woman, uncertainty prevails. She returns to Coyolxauhqui, to her story and representation, for their possible interventions in gender normativity.

Like other Chicana lesbian writers/artists before her, Pendleton Jiménez reconstructs Coyolxauhqui’s torso, head, and limbs back into a whole body as ‘a symbol of the fuerza femenina [feminine force]’ (Ramirez, 2002, p. 234). In this instance, the filmmaker focuses on the representation of Coyolxauhqui’s body and its similarity to her own, the heaviness of breasts, the creases of a post-pregnancy stomach. Instead of a humiliated goddess, Pendleton Jiménez ponders the perception of the artist who sculpted the image of Coyolxauhqui. She asserts that the artist must have believed this goddess to be beautiful in order to have sculpted it, which simultaneously revalues Pendleton Jimenez’s own body as an object of beauty.
In *Through Thick and Thin* (http://projectrevision.ca/storying-queer-womensexperiences, password ‘queer’), Carla Rice explores embodied subjectivity as process, reflecting on her body history, entangled desire and desirability, and her aging body. She viscerally illustrates how discourse becomes lodged in the flesh. Desire/disgust, beauty/ugliness, hate/love, and fear/assurance interweave through the story of her body’s metamorphosis, refusing finality and closure. Rice describes a vintage plastic folding fan she was given by a woman with whom she shared an intimate and complex relationship, and explains that her ‘fan woman’ taught her how to embody a queer femininity at once subversive of heterosexist norms and submissive to cultural scripts about fat female bodies.

Rice’s narrative reveals the interplay of desire and disavowal as her body and her feelings about it have metamorphosed through the past and present in relation to the irreconcilable messages of affirmation and negation she has encountered. The dis/empowering strategies she learned converge with the hateful voices of childhood tormentors, which replay as she retches and purges for the last time. When Rice tells her fan woman about her wanting as well as her hunger, anger, and pain, she provokes a shift in and between them, beginning another phase in their ‘mutual metamorphosis’ (Shildrick, 2015, p.23). Rice then opens a space in which the twinned notions of aging as decline or successful defiance (Sandberg, 2013) are shifted through their co-presence, returning to her fan as a queer symbol for her own aging.

The story’s imagery comprises a series of black and white photographs of Rice’s body in the present, as a woman in her early fifties. The images focus on the textures of her skin over her bones, muscles and
fat: smooth and ornamented, relaxed and folding, wrinkled and puckered. The juxtaposition of these images with Rice’s story of entangled change can be understood in accordance with Margrit Shildrick’s Deleuzian understanding that ‘a human body is not a discrete entity ending at the skin…immersion in the indeterminacy and provisionality of multiple inter- and intra-connections is not simply the condition of living but the source of flourishing’ (2015, p.24).

Celebration of bodies

Storytellers reflected on shifts in their own beliefs and work toward self-acceptance, advocacy, and celebration. They described how and why they were able to conceptualise their bodies as sites of value. Importantly, this celebration does not require forgetting the tensions related to bodily experience, but acknowledges the joys of corporeality in all its complexities.

It is useful to theorise celebration in relation to coming out and being proud, acts with which persons whose bodies are marked by queerness, fat, psychiatrisation, and other intersecting identities wrestle. To live out/ed entails claiming space for a subjectivity that is positioned to fail at enacting and embodying normativity, and instead working to ‘acquire power and work at effective social change’ (Cooper, 1999, p.144). Declaration may imply a fixity of identity, a lack of ambiguity around the subject position claimed post-transformation (Samuels, 2003; Sedgwick, 1993), but transformative identity-work gathers force through successive iterations, and can be provisional, contingent, and productively undone. To make use of Kathleen LeBesco’s (2004) wordplay, the storytellers responded to and resisted framings of their bodies as revolting – objects of disgust or disdain.
– by embracing their bodies as revolting – teeming in their refusal and rebellious force.

In It’s in a Book (http://projectrevision.ca/storying-queer-womens-experiences, password ‘queer’), Elisabeth Harrison revisits a memory from her adolescence, describing how her identity as ‘a reader’ enabled her to envision a range of possibilities for her life. Harrison describes her practice of reading children’s and young adult novels during long school bus rides, and her identification with female protagonists, noting that while she could imagine herself sharing their positive qualities, she was distressed by the disparities between her own body and the idealized images of the characters she idolised.

Figure 3: Still frame showing Elisabeth Harrison in a kitchen, spreading butter across the pages of an open book. From It’s in a Book by Elisabeth Harrison

Harrison describes her discovery of psychotherapist Steven Levenkron’s 1978 anorexia-focused ‘problem novel’ (Goss, 2013, p.56), The Best Little Girl in the World, explaining how she ate a buttered bagel as
she consumed lessons from the novel about methods for achieving bodily control and perfection, which she thought could help her destroy her abject self. She asks whether a different response to the book and its ideas might be more helpful, as she appears in the next shot as a still-fat feminine adult standing at a kitchen counter. As she is heard in a voiceover reading a passage from Levenkron’s novel about excessively calorific bagels, Harrison spreads margarine on a page of a paperback, looking into the camera’s lens as she tears out the page, puts it into her mouth, and chews it. Levenkron’s story fades into silence as she swallows. Smirking, Harrison burps and wipes her mouth with a napkin as the video ends.

Harrison’s double ‘misuse’ of Levenkron’s book – her appropriation of the text as instructional rather than cautionary, as well as her physical ingestion of a piece of the book – could be understood in line with Ahmed’s (2006) discussion of ‘queer objects.’ By refusing to orient to the book in ‘familiar’ ways, Harrison brings other histories to it: first the history of her problematic body, and later her critical understanding of the fatphobic (as well as sexist, heteronormative, racist, and sanist) discourses to which the book contributes. By slathering Levenkron’s words with fat and appearing to eat them, Harrison engages in disorientation (Ahmed, 2006), making the book into a strange and disgusting object from which she can draw nourishment.

In *The Journey of my Strong, Brown, Trini, Carib, Callaloo, Dyke Body (And Our Sexy Shortz)* (http://projectrevision.ca/storyingqueer-womens-experiences, password ‘queer’), Lezlie Lee Kam uses her relationship with her silk boxer shorts to create a revisionary understanding of herself. The shorts help Kam to ‘dream and enact new and better
pleasures [and] other ways of being in the world’ (Muñoz, 2009, p.1) as she traces her body’s transformation with the many entangled forces that threaten to undo her.

On screen, the silk shorts morph and spin into a kaleidoscopic swirl. Her voice-over describes them as a source of desirability and integration, her lucky charm: ‘My magical shorts enticed women to touch me, stroke me, and caress my strong brown legs. Women noticed my silky blue frog shorts before they saw my brown body.’ The erotic potential of the shorts contrasts with the ways Kam – marked by race, gender expression, sexuality, age, illness, and disability – has been alienated in social and medical spheres. She feels seen by lovers only after her silk shorts are noticed. She experiences invisibility under the hyper-observance of doctors as she is ‘poked, prodded, and diagnosed.’ She struggles to hear and see herself ‘above the din and clamour of God-identified doctors.’

But Kam does find her voice and her vision. She creates an incantation with the repetition of words that name who she knows herself to be: strong, Brown, Trini, dyke, differently abled; fierce, tenacious, persistent. As she repeats these words, verbally and textually, she opens a world that is visionary, perceptive, and political. Kam engages in a worldmaking project as a strategy of resistance. José Esteban Muñoz (2009) describes this process as disidentification, a strategy used by minoritized subjects, especially by queers of colour, to navigate and negotiate majority culture in a way that recognises the composite nature of identity. Similarly, Eliza Chandler (2010) discusses the trouble with identification and the need to tell our own stories, especially the stories of disabled people. Kam’s silk shorts guide her to an altered sense of identity.
– a collection of identities – that is radically resistant to dominant narratives surrounding her. They are material testimony of Kam’s love of herself, wholly, here and now.

Conclusion

The stories showcased in this article offer a wide range of experiences queer women are having around body size, shape, and satisfaction. Current literature on these topics misrepresents fat as obesity (and by extension, risk) and eating disorders as pathology (without reference to social conditions and pressures). This literature reduces and essentialises the experiences of women from marginalised communities – including queer women, gender non-conforming women, and women negotiating politics of size. There is a pressing and urgent need to explore

the health impacts of medically entrenched understandings of body image and expectations around body management, and the implications to making assumptions around queer women’s immunities and risks. Consideration of the themes seen here allows for a supple reading of queer bodies as nonstatic, non-binary, and moving in and out of control. This reckoning allows for a more personal and relational response to queer people’s health concerns than that seen in traditional medical discourses that disengage from corporeal and embodied experiences of size, sexuality, race and other markers.

Research and policy on medical treatment of bodies marked as obese or disordered must include the people being studied, and must be calibrated to their personal experiences of body stigma and their own
accounts of body image. Heeding these experiences could shift discourses away from the admonishment of lifestyle, alarmist concerns around obesogenic environments, and the surveillance and rigorous treatment of self-regulation taken too far, and could instead account for how body size is taken up, how shaming is internalised, how regulation may function as a resistance strategy, and how variant bodies can be embraced, desired, and celebrated. Our project shows that there is an urgent need for further community driven and arts-oriented research and creative responses to body stigma and eating/image distress among queer populations. Larger scale iterations of our methodology could simultaneously empower participants and provide valuable knowledge and multimodal teaching tools in order to interrupt the rhetorical conventions of most interventions around body size and eating practices.

Community-grounded, arts-based research points to new ways of gathering and producing knowledge on bodies. Participants in our study reported feeling catharsis after using an artistic medium to explore their positions, and the stories produced are impactful, affective artefacts that develop a queer embodied aesthetic and convey more than what can be said via traditional research. These artefacts have the potential to be memorable, to cultivate empathy, to disrupt understanding of queer bodies of varied sizes, and to inform medical practice.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the Women’s College Hospital’s Women’s Xchange $15K Challenge for the research grant funding required to carry out this project. Research team members also thank their home institutions:
University of Ontario Institute of Technology, University of Guelph, Ryerson University, Trent University, University of Manitoba, York University, and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. We are indebted to the artists and videographers who committed their creative labour to this project including Ingrid Mundel, Michelle Peek, Erin MacIndoe-Sproule, Kimber Sider, Hannah Fowlie, Sharlene Bamboat, Liz Brockest, Michele Clarke, melanie g campbell, and jes sachse, and to Rainbow Health Ontario and especially Loralee Gillis for helping to incubate and manage the data collection and storytelling workshops.

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