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Fattie at the Front of the Room: Fat Professors as Embodied Visual Feminist Praxis

Katie Manthey and Rachel Robinson-Zetzer

Abstract: In this piece, we, two white, middle-class, cisgender, queer, female professors, bring together fat pedagogy, an approach that focuses on "reducing weight-based oppression in educational settings" (Cameron & Russel, cited in Hunt & Rhodes, 2018, p. 21), and fat rhetorical embodiment (Manthey, 2025) to argue that the bodies of fat professors can be both a site for and a place of practice of feminist visual rhetorics. We do this by building on Mulvey's (1975) idea of the "gaze" to see how the perceived gaze of students and the gaze of fat professors might contribute to what we call the "fat pedagogical gaze" as part of feminist visual rhetorics. This piece practices embodied writing (Banks, 2003) by combining threads of feminist, fat, and rhetorical theory into a frame for our stories—much like granny squares in a quilt of theory.

Keywords: fat, embodiment, pedagogy, feminist

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INTRODUCTION

In this piece, we, two white, middle-class, cisgender, queer, female professors, bring together fat pedagogy, an approach that focuses on "reducing weight-based oppression in educational settings" (Cameron & Russel, cited in Hunt & Rhodes, 2018, p. 21), and fat rhetorical embodiment (Manthey, 2025) to argue that the bodies of fat professors can be both a site for and a place of practice of feminist visual rhetorics. We do this by building on Mulvey's (1975) idea of the "gaze" to see how the perceived gaze of students and the gaze of fat professors might contribute to what we call the "fat pedagogical gaze" as part of feminist visual rhetorics. This piece practices embodied writing (Banks, 2003) by combining threads of feminist, fat, and rhetorical theory into a frame for our stories—much like granny squares in a quilt of theory.

A SCENARIO

Imagine it—your first day teaching at a new institution. You walk into class and you don't see anyone who looks like you—anyone who is fat. How do you feel? Do you show up differently for these students? Do you let this change your pedagogy?

In a similar scenario, when you turn to face your students, you are greeted with faces and bodies that mirror your own. You have fat students. How do you feel? Do you show up differently for these students? Do you let this change your pedagogy?

As two mid-career faculty, we would like to say that of course we treat all students the same all of the time; of course, we practice our pedagogy to the highest level regardless of the students in front of us. However, based on our own experiences as two fat women in front of classrooms in both types of scenarios, we admit that it's impossible not to teach differently based on the bodies of the students; both the real and perceived gaze of the students back at us will always affect our pedagogy. At the same time, just like our

perceived reception of the fat gaze from our students, we are looking at our students with a gaze that focuses solely on body size and making assumptions accordingly. Similarly, we feel our students' gaze holds us in a sort of limbo—we're aware of our bodies constantly while we teach, but there is nothing we can really do about it.

We argue in this piece that this interaction–this gaze–is feminist visual rhetoric, and we will offer embodied writing as a vehicle to further parse this out. Our hope in this exploration is to reveal the affordances of engaging with feminist visual rhetoric in embodied fat pedagogy.

Thread 1: Fat Pedagogy

Fat studies scholars have discussed size in higher education for years, drawing attention to the ways that size contributes to oppression in ways that are both very high stakes, such as being less likely to receive tenure (Fisanick, 2006) as well as microaggressions (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018). There is also robust conversation about courses that explicitly bring in size as an identity category (Cameron, 2018; Guthman, 2019; Christel, 2018), with scholars noting that the practice of fat pedagogy in the classroom often results in discomfort (and potentially productive discussions about discomfort) for both the instructor and of the students. This piece contributes to fat pedagogy scholarship by focusing on the discomfort (and perceived discomfort) of being a fat professor in front of students. By focusing on our discomfort, we offer our own fat pedagogy that holds what we call the "fat pedagogical gaze."

Thread 2: The "Gaze" and Feminist Visual Rhetoric

Our offering of the "fat pedagogical gaze" is rooted in Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational idea of the "male gaze," which has been taken up by feminist scholars in various ways since its introduction. While Mulvey examines feminist visual culture through film, her idea is that film offers a view of women as passive objects for a presumed heterosexual male viewer, reinforcing an oppressive ideology towards women through beauty (Mulvey, 1975). In the fat pedagogical gaze, fat people (especially women) are viewed as passive objects that fail at meeting societal beauty and health standards (Gordon, 2020). Of particular interest to our work here, fat women are also often additionally seen as maternal (The Representation Project, 2025) since this is also something attributed to teaching evaluations for women more broadly.

Our idea of the fat pedagogical gaze consists of two parts: 1) the instructor gaze, where we make assumptions about our students, and 2) the student gaze, where the students perceive us. We offer that one of the most powerful parts of this idea isn't the actual act of gazing—it's our perception as instructors that we are being gazed at. It is when we think we are being judged by our students that we feel the most uncomfortable, highly due to our own internalized fat phobia—that is, when we adjust how we show up, what conversations we are willing to have, and even our own potential microaggressions toward our students. These actions aren't something we are proud to admit, but that admission is useful in service of further exploring how feminist visual rhetorics can reveal moments for potential understanding and even intervention in relation to being fat in the world today.

Thread 3: Embodied Fat Rhetorics and Writing Our Stories

While discussions of the fat pedagogical gaze focus on the looking and the perceived being looked at (with all the cultural assumptions that are embedded, such as internalized fat phobia), we want this piece to be a sort of intervention into the often presented disembodied, passive way that fat people are viewed: as viewers and passive receivers, not as living, breathing bodies. Rhetorical notions of embodiment (Knoblauch, 2022; Johnson et al, 2015; Banks, 2003) offer ways to keep the body and the lived experiences of the body as the focus of rhetorical scholarship. Fat rhetorical embodiment (Manthey, 2025) posits that size can be an "embodied orientation" that can exist strategically–purposefully–in opposition to cultural norms about acceptable size. Our stories that follow show some of the different ways and contexts in which we each do this as two fat women. Our hope is to show how embodied fat rhetorics can be an intervention for the fat pedagogical gaze–and how ultimately the fat pedagogical gaze might be able to be turned into a useful tool for intervention in educational spaces.

The Granny Squares: Our Stories

*Piece 1: Katie**

It's 2008, and I am a 22-year-old master's student teaching first-year composition for the first time; teaching anything college for the first time. I have two problems: 1) the students in front of me are just a few years younger than me and to me, it's painfully obvious, and 2) I am ashamed of my body. I think that I am fat, and that my body is a failure and needs to be modified through clothing until I can successfully lose weight

Luckily, the answer to both of these problems could be solved with a credit card from The Limited.

That summer, I got a part-time job at what I thought was the most sophisticated store in the mall and used my employee discount to purchase every single item that came through the store that was an XL, whether I liked the piece or not. I believed that as long as I am pretty, as long as it's clear that I am trying, I am not a failure as a woman.

Figure 1 Katie smiling at an academic conference with other panelists, who are cropped out of the image.

So I find myself standing in front of a group of students just a few years younger than me. They are dressed in casual "undergraduate" clothes, while I am trying to look very serious. I am aware of my body and its shape, and I'm doing my best to hide my curves. Even though the clothing feels artificial–not something I would ever wear on my own outside of this context–I wear it like armor. It both helps me show up in front of the students looking different and hides the parts of my body that make me feel vulnerable. No students ever said anything to me about my appearance, but I don't take off the blazers all semester, no matter how constricted or warm I get. This is me as an instructor. Take me seriously; please don't look at my fat body.

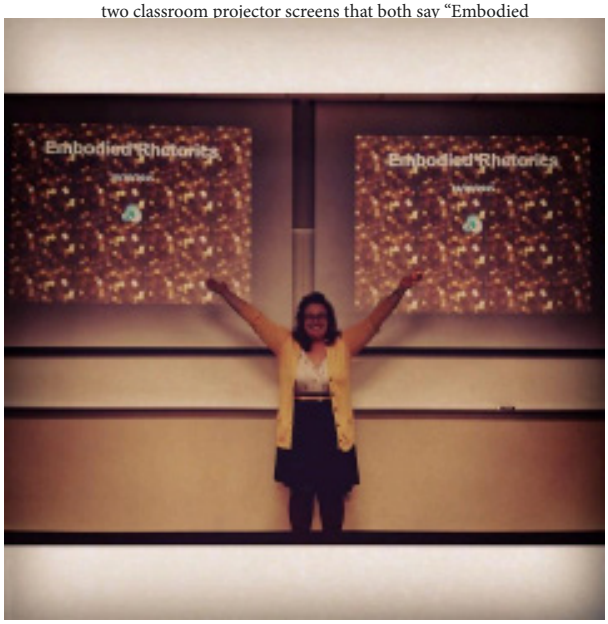
Piece 2: Katie

It's 2014, and I am 28 years old and teaching another first-year writing class at a different large state school in the Midwest. This time I'm a bit older than the students and, while I'm still establishing my ethos, being a PhD student helps me feel more confident.

Through the years between my first teaching experience and now, a few things have changed: I have aged, I have gotten fatter, and I have started to lean into my own style. I don't shop at The Limited anymore (they went out of business at some point–maybe because I stopped buying everything they had in my size?), but instead, I follow fat fashion blogs and know how to hunt for colorful blazers, cute cardigans, pants, and skirts that are playful but professional and, above all else, flattering.

I still wear armor when I teach; I am always cognizant of my body in space. The larger I get, the more important it is to me to keep the right shape. I hint at the shape with my clothes, but don't show bare skin–especially my arms. I am staunchly against "letting myself go"—it's still very important to me to try as hard as I can to be conventionally attractive in spite of the body that I have.

Figure 2 A picture of Katie with her arms raised in front of two classroom projector screens that both say "Embodied Rhetorics."



I distinctly remember one day when I was teaching the students about something I was really passionate about. I remember being excited about what they were saying and how they were making connections. There was a moment of misunderstanding in the discussion, and I remember feeling a rush of excitement, and then physical discomfort. It was hot and stuffy in the room, and I needed to write something at the top of the board, but my sleeves were tight and I couldn't easily reach. I remember at this moment I made a decision that, to me, felt big: I took off my cardigan so I could more effectively be in the moment and teach the class. I distinctly remember thinking to myself in the moment something along the lines of "I am sacrificing my body for these students."

While admittedly hyperbolic, it was also very true for me. At that moment, I could feel myself giving up something–I never wanted the students to see me as sexy, but I did want them to think I was conventionally attractive in an age-appropriate way. But for me, by shedding my armor, I went from being a cool, conventionally attractive young professor-in-training to a matriarchal pedagogue.

At the time, my response to this change–this potential bit of freedom–was overwhelmingly discomfort and disgust. To be clear, no students ever commented on my size or my appearance beyond general compliments; no one audibly gasped or fainted when I took off my cardigan in the heat of the pedagogical moment.

That year, I won an award from the university for excellence in teaching composition; I couldn't dislodge the feeling that part of me had given up because I had let myself go.

Piece 3: Katie

It's 2018, and I am 32 years old and teaching at a small women's college in the south. The campus is historic, which means that the air conditioning doesn't work well most of the time. In the fall and the late spring, it is ungodly hot both outside and in my classrooms. I still care about how I look, but I have embraced sleeveless clothing. I often bring a blazer with me to campus in case I need to put on armor, but that usually only happens around other faculty or administrators. I still teach first-year writing, but I have also created and taught classes like "Embodied Rhetorics" for the professional writing minor and "Fat Feminisms" for the women and gender studies program. These classes demand that I show up as myself—that I embody what I teach. I still care about being attractive, but I have pushed myself to try to let go of convention–or at least be more aware of it when making choices and perceiving judgment from others. I have found a space between fat fashion blogger and matriarchal pedagogue, and I dwell there. Because of the way my embodied orientation to my size has changed, I see opportunities to use my body as a pedagogical tool. When we talk about size in class, I tell parts of my own story. I rhetorically analyze my clothing in relation to fit, size, and societal expectations for women with my students during my lectures. In real time, we all experience rhetorical embodiment through fat pedagogy.

There are a couple of things that make this teaching context different from the other two: I am as old as the students' mothers (which someone seems to point out at least once each year), I am the fattest I have ever been, and I only teach folks who identify as women. The male gaze is present in the classroom, but only in a way that has been absorbed by AFAB (assigned female at birth) folks in our culture. Again, no students comment negatively on my size; this time, some students tell me in private that seeing me show up in class and talk about fat studies has helped them see themselves differently.

Figure 3: A picture of a polaroid of Katie in her writing center at Salem College.

I don't think I am resilient enough to practice fat pedagogy in a co-ed institution, but I find solace and even joy here.

Piece 4: Rachel

Where are all the fat people? This was my first thought on my first day at a small, private university in New England. As I pulled into the parking lot, I couldn't help but notice the absence of fatness. Going throughout my day, I realized there were no fat students–or faculty–anywhere I could see. They weren't in my classes, I didn't pass them

on the quad, I didn't see them in the library. Instead, I saw students clad in barely-there shorts and tops the size of my thigh (no judgment here!) darting to and from classes on our hilly campus, while I struggled and huffed up the sidewalk from the dining hall, constantly aware of my labored breathing. The absence of fat had me mesmerized. Much to my chagrin, I would often find myself staring at a student's flat midsection or the sliver of tummy right above their waistband with envy and a lot of curiosity.

When I did see a random fat person on campus (I can count them on one hand), I felt an uncanny kindredness to them, and I had to stop myself from frantically waving, drawing more attention to myself, just so that we could see each other safely. With their university shirts stretched over their rolls and hugging their curves, I would stare with a joy that bordered on obsession. Do I follow this fat student to find more fat people on campus? No, of course not. Right?

Figure 4:A collage with three depictions of Rachel with her face covered.

The desire to be both seen and invisible is a duality I've lived with since childhood. My own image of my body, and, therefore, my fatness, has developed over a long time. I've not always been nice to myself. I didn't accept the word "fat" as a descriptor of myself until about five years ago when I found fat scholarship; however, as a child, preteen, teen, and adult, I'd shunned the word with every fiber of my being. It felt so succinct a description for everything that my body held. The hard "t" at the end slipped through my gritted teeth each time I would utter the word: faT, faT, faT.

In fifth grade, a bully I had class with would call me "fatso" every single day during after-school care at the Boys and Girls Club. Of course, I didn't tell anyone because I believed him and felt deep shame for this perceived—and visible—flaw. Though he completely crushed my self-esteem, he did help me get used to the "fat" label being thrown toward me. He helped to desensitize me.

Something changed, though, in the 2010s. I started to see fat people, women specifically, in the media embracing their bodies. My Instagram page slowly started to become littered with images of Ashley Graham (not a fattie, but not a waif, either), Nadia Aboulhosn, and Tess Holliday. All of these women are beautiful and not straight-sized, something I didn't know could exist together.

In the years since my divorce in 2013, I've persistently worked on myself and my own view of fatness with the attitude that I had to be nicer to myself. There were now women who looked more like me on magazine covers and on television, and I couldn't deny the effect the visibility was having on me. I've never been loving toward my body; in fact, I downright hated the way it undulated and rolled with every step I took. I hated how each step would send visible waves along the surface of my body, never allowing me to hide my movements, and I constantly had to hide when I was out of breath from walking a normal distance (or, god forbid, up stairs). Where once I thought that my stomach roll that protruded out further when I sat down

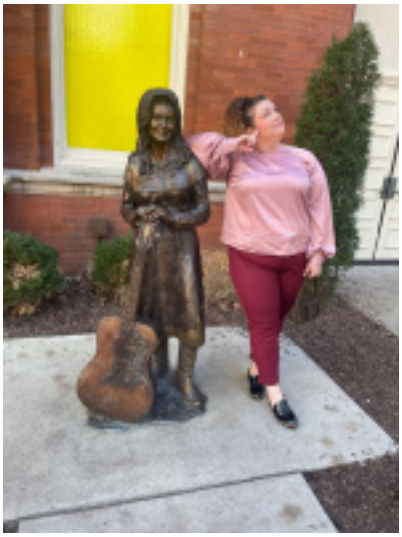


Figure 5 Rachel posing with a statue of Loretta Lynn outside the Ryman Auditorium.

was a sign of weakness, I have since tried to embrace it as a sign of… nothing at all. It's just a body, and all bodies are good bodies, right? If not good all the time, can a body–my body–actually be neutral? I've obsessed about my own body since I was five years old, and as a woman in her forties, certain elements of that obsession have grown stale. Other elements have become so ingrained I cannot see myself without them. For example, I don't care anymore about tucking in my shirt when it covers my fupa. My fupa is there, it's not going away, and I'm actually missing out (on fashion and comfort) when I cover myself up completely and hide in baggy, ill-fitting clothes. I'm also slowly embracing shorts for the first time in my adult life. Truthfully, both of these breakthroughs are still difficult to accept, but with every day, they are getting easier to enact.

Piece 5: Rachel

I've seen so many butt cheeks lately, I told my husband as I got home from work on the first warm day of the spring semester. In warmer weather, perhaps this sighting is to be expected, and I don't intend to body or fashion shame anyone for their choices, but I would find myself, once again, secretly marveling at my students' revealing backsides with something close to…jealousy. Not for their attire, but for their confidence. To be able to wear hotpants to class takes a certain amount of chutzpah that I truly didn't know my students had. When I was in graduate school taking pedagogy classes, a friend once told me that you should always "test" your outfits by turning to the chalkboard and pretending to write on it above your head. This act would help you see if your outfits were too short because when you lifted your arm, your clothes rose, too. I've considered this advice in every classroom I'm in, often opting for pants and long dresses/skirts to avoid this dilemma of exposed upper legs/backside entirely. When I stand in front of a classroom now, my confidence is mixed: I'm comfortable with my instructional material, but the material on my body feels like it will betray me at any moment. It bunches and hangs too low or is too tight, and I'm frighteningly aware of how I pull at my shirts out of habit and adjust my waistband when I stand. Of course, my students don't comment on my body, but they do comment on my outfits, often telling me they like them. These compliments tend to have an adverse effect on me, though. Instead of making me feel more confident and in control, I feel hyperaware of my students' gaze. If they can so clearly see my outfits and judge them, what else are they seeing and judging?

Figure 6 A collage with Rachel in black and white in the center. She is wearing regalia and bordering her are multiple eyes/faces to illustrate the student gaze.

Students stare at me when I'm teaching, as is to be expected, but their gaze doesn't comfort me. Instead, I feel like they are seeing through my shields, seeing me at my most vulnerable, and I just have to get through it. Or, I have to embrace it and allow my students to see me in ways that I dislike being seen, in ways that make me uncomfortable. Under the microscope of the classroom, I adopt the attitude of fake it until you make it with my confidence, but behind the closed door of my office, I crumble.

While my classrooms are always "safe enough" spaces for my students, I've never thought of extending that safety to myself. What am I supposed to do when my students' gaze makes me feel unsafe, or, at the very least, uncomfortable?

Conclusion: The Quilt

Our stories show different contexts for experiencing the fat pedagogical gaze. They show clearly how the perception of being perceived by students as fat is powerful—more powerful in our cases because there were never any moments of actual, clear verbalized negative feedback on our appearances. Internalized fat phobia prevents us from seeing the reality in front of us–that our students are just being students, staring at their professor without judgment (mostly). The question then is this: How do we, as professors, combat fat oppression in the classroom? How do we turn the perceived student gaze from something that might hurt us and the classroom space to something neutral, or even celebrated? As Katie's story shows, one thing professors can do is to talk about their bodies. Talking about the fat body and showing its experiences that are similar to the straight-sized body helps to normalize and make visible fatness. When we "present fat bodies as normative and desirable," we help to bring the student gaze, and the perception of the student gaze, into more of an equilibrium (Pausé, 2016, p.58). Though it is highly unlikely that we are the first fat bodies students encounter, we feel that it is our responsibility, as professors committed to teaching feminist social justice practices who are also the owners of those fat bodies, to move in our bodies and talk about our bodies in ways that help students see all bodies as good, powerful, and strong. For the two of us, we feel that it's our responsibility to help students understand that their gaze of fat bodies is powerful, and how they interpret that gaze can be oppressive or liberating. This, though, requires a level of acceptance and confidence in your fat body; a conscious embodiment of fat (Manthey, 2025).

For some fat professors, this embodiment is scary, dangerous even, and definitely vulnerable. But what vulnerability allows us to do–embrace, highlight, and describe–is to help us debunk old hangups about fat. When these hangups have been dissolved, embracing the fat, especially in the classroom when all eyes are on you, becomes slightly easier. Even when the fat professor embodies fat as an orientation, the work of parsing the powerful cultural assumption that fat people are bad comes with risk. As fat studies scholars in this piece have mentioned, classes that engage with discussions of size explicitly in the course material (such as Katie's "Embodied Rhetorics" and "Rhetoric of Health and Medicine" classes) are often uncomfortable for all involved. As writing professors, size as course content may show up in some places but is often not the focus of what we teach. In these cases, simply how we show up as instructors and humans is the lesson. The perceptions of the gaze will follow us, but how we react–whether in the classroom or not—to that gaze is the true measure of a fat professor.

**All images are the authors' own.*

Biography

Katie Manthey is an associate professor of English and director of the Writing Center at Salem College. Her research and teaching focus on the intersections of size, embodiment, and professional writing from a cultural rhetorics perspective.

Rachel Robinson-Zetzer is an assistant professor of English and director of the Writing Instruction Program at Northern Kentucky University. She has lots of experience being the "fattie at the front of the room," and she's still working out her pedagogical style, even after twenty-plus years in the classroom.

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