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**McMichael, Lonie. *Acceptable Prejudice? Fat, Rhetoric and Social Justice*. Pearlsong Press, Nashville TN. 2013.**

Katie Manthey

The current discourse around excess human body fat is nothing short of alarming; it is often referred to as an “epidemic,” and more frighteningly as a “war on fat” that needs to be “fought.” Writing in 2009, fat studies scholar Elena Levy-Navarro explains that “bureaucrats and public officials draw on our own generalized fear and anxiety, warning us that the ‘obesity epidemic’ poses the greatest threat to the national security of the United States. U.S. Surgeon General Koop has repeatedly called it the “terror within” (992-3). Despite the cultural climate, there is currently dearth of publications about fat subjectivity from an explicitly feminist rhetorical angle. In feminist rhetorical circles, we are talking about bodies and perception through the work of collections such as *Rhetorical Bodies* and discussions of embodiment in the classroom (through scholars such as Will Banks and Jonathan Alexander). Well-known feminist (but not explicitly rhetorical) work such as Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight*, Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*, and Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, for some reason, haven’t continued to generate a larger number of similar works. The time is ripe for critical discussions about how body fat carries rhetorical meaning. *Acceptable Prejudice? Fat, Rhetoric and Social Justice*, by Lonie McMichael (PhD in Technical Communication and author of *Talking Fat: Health vs. Persuasion in the War on Our Bodies*) offers an important starting point for a feminist conversation about body fat as a rhetorical subjectivity. McMichael’s work is especially noteworthy because it was published through an independent publisher--Pearlsong Press--and intended for a general audience. This book is indicative of the current conversations about fat acceptance and is one of the only texts currently available that attempts to bring together fat, feminism, and rhetoric.

One of the primary goals of *Acceptable Prejudice* is simply to make the case that fat prejudice exists. While feminist rhetoricians may not need an extensive introduction to the notion of oppression (which the book provides over the first seven chapters and continues to tease out throughout the entire book), one of McMichael’s strengths is her ability to draw attention to the fat body as a marginalized subjectivity. Citing Phul and Brownell, the author explains that “negative stereotypes include perceptions that obese people are mean, stupid, ugly, unhappy, less competent, sloppy, lazy, socially isolated, and lacking in self-discipline, motivations, and personal control” (340). She cites the medical community, the mainstream media, and corporate America as some

of the major players in perpetuating this ideology, but warns that “even progressives see a fat person as faulty rather than society as failing” (260). In order to further the argument that fat prejudice exists, McMichael contributes to work being done by other fat studies scholars, including Marilyn Wann, Esther Rothblum, and Sondra Solovay.

The “progressives” that McMichael references above include advocates for feminism and social justice (89). In the beginning of the book, McMichael states that one of her reasons for writing the book is “to hold feminist and social justice advocates who believe fat individuals do not deserve protection responsible for buying into the belief of the hierarchy...that fat is bad” (89). She goes on to explain that “fat prejudice is alive and well and being practiced on a daily basis by those who eschew all other forms of prejudice” (95). This idea runs throughout the book. In Chapter Seven, for example, she offers a subsection titled “Why Feminists Should Support Fat Acceptance” (515) where she explains that women are more affected by marketing campaigns about beauty and dieting than men, and alludes to the idea that there is often backlash from feminists in regards to fat acceptance (pointing to such popular websites as *Jezebel* and *Feministing* for examples). For me, McMichael’s understanding of feminism at this juncture is too reductive. Her point that feminists should care about fat as a critical subjectivity (my words, not hers) displays an essentialist view of gender and a limited understanding of the feminist movement—specifically the contributions to intersectional feminism by scholars, including bell hooks, whose theories she uses almost exclusively to build her theoretical framework. While her point is valid—that feminists and other “progressives” should care about fat acceptance—she doesn’t really outline what they can do differently, or acknowledge previous work in feminist studies, specifically about bodies.

The connection of fat and feminism to rhetorical studies is one of McMichael’s greatest potential contributions. I condition that statement with the word “potential,” because McMichael’s definition of rhetoric is limited. McMichael explains that, “I interpret rhetoric as persuasive acts of communication,” referencing the work of Aristotle and Jack Selzer—surprisingly not the work of her favorite (and only) theorist, bell hooks. McMichael’s work would have been strengthened by a more nuanced definition of rhetoric—specifically one that takes a cultural rhetorical angle. A cultural rhetorics approach might, for example, draw on the work of bell hooks as well as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, and Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* to show how bodies have and make meaning through and against systems of power. Another feminist/cultural rhetorics approach to fat might draw on theories of queerness and bodies, using such work as Jack Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure*, Michael Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal*, and Sara Ahmed’s *Queer*

*Phenomenology*. These would highlight the ways that bodies resist conformity to systems of power and the risk and potential change that comes with living in a nonnormative body.

Despite McMichael's definition of rhetoric, she does do cultural rhetorical work in multiple places in her book; when, for example, she explains the idea that messages are "steeped in culture" and have rhetorical agency to transmit the current ideology about body size to people. She goes on to call for a paradigm shift, offering fat acceptance through the ideas of Health at Every Size as a way to do this. McMichael also contributes to cultural rhetorical work when she addresses issues of intersectionality; fat is naturally an intersectional issue. McMichael explains that "fat prejudice is tied up with classism" (365) and explains that fat people are less likely to be hired and promoted. She also touches on the connections between race, gender, and fat oppression. In chapter 7, though, she explains her reluctance to really engage with intersectionality, explaining that it can become easy to "compare oppressions" (374):

I have walked a very fine line with this project, and I will apologize up front for any harm I may commit in writing this work. I have tried to be aware of issues involving other social justice movements...in the end, only individuals who experience the other types of oppression can truly tell me if I crossed the line...rather than looking at sexism or racism as either more or less horrific or appalling than fat prejudice, I have attempted to focus on the overall way in which oppression works, as observed by hooks (379-391).

I appreciate McMichael's forthrightness with her discomfort, but I feel like this needs to be discussed further; messy spaces of discomfort are often fertile ground for feminist work.

The areas where *Acceptable Prejudice* falls short are important for feminist rhetoricians because they are examples of how fat oppression is currently being discussed on the margins of academic culture. Despite some of the book's shortcomings, however, the author offers many contributions in this text that are very important for feminist rhetoricians to consider, including examining fat as a critical subjectivity and discussing the connections between rhetoric and fat oppression. McMichael's contributions help to continue to our conversations on the subject.

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Katie Manthey is a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric & Writing at Michigan State University where she does work at the intersections of fat studies, dress studies, and cultural rhetorics. She is also interested in graduate writing and is working toward a certificate in Community Engagement.