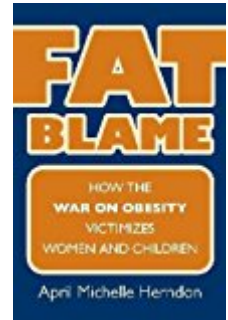


April Michelle Herndon. *Fat Blame: How the War on Obesity Victimizes Women and Children.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014. x + 203 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1965-8.



Reviewed by M. Lynn Rose

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Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Fat Blame is a brilliant synthesis of disability studies, fat studies, and gender studies. Using the best methodologies of interdisciplinary studies, and grounding her conclusions in rhetorical analysis, Herndon produces a frightening montage of fatphobia in the United States. She exposes what lies behind the scenes of seemingly straightforward campaigns against obesity. A skilled writer, Herndon makes this ground-breaking piece of interdisciplinary scholarship accessible and compelling.

The introduction, titled “The Mother of All Wars,” begins with descriptions of cases in which children as young as three years have been taken from their homes on court orders because they have been determined to be obese, and their home atmosphere to be dangerous to their health. Herndon then moves from case studies to American attitudes in general: fat is an enemy of the state. The introduction consists of eight elegant segments, each a demonstration of the ways in which fatness is portrayed as a danger. Fatness no longer transgresses the boundaries of aesthetics

or morality (that is, fat people are no longer at risk of being judged merely ugly or lazy); obesity has become an epidemic. In 2003, the U.S. surgeon general compared obesity to Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction, concluding that the former was more dangerous than the latter. In the introduction’s closing paragraph, Herndon states simply that what the United States is doing in its battle against the enemy is not working. The introduction sets the tone for the book: there is no apologia or rationale for fatness; in other words, the book is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Whether or not the reader accepts, rejects, or is neutral about fatness is not the issue: this is a journalistic account of the casualties from the United States’ perception of fatness as an enemy.

Chapter 1, “Children First: Maternal Ideology in the War on Obesity,” takes up mother-blaming, or, more precisely, blaming female bodies as potentially dangerous chambers: “women who are both fat and pregnant live under scrutiny” (p. 37), much as HIV-positive pregnant women have been portrayed as selfish women, endangering their fe-

tuses because they are unable to control their desires. Fat studies and disability studies merge especially well with the section “A New Kind of Eugenics?” in which Herndon discusses the early twentieth-century breeding and sterilization campaigns. She goes on to show how interrelated body mass index (BMI) has become with both prenatal testing and IVF treatments, and speculates that “obesity is so freighted with meaning as to trump smoking as a concern” (p. 52). Smoking, though, is not as easily policed as weight, which is constantly visible. Fat women are, in general, unwelcome in health clinics, and fat pregnant women doubly so, thus making them less likely to seek prenatal care. Like discrimination against women with AIDS, attitudes about obesity endanger the health of both mother and child.

“There’s No Place Like Home,” the title of chapter 2, is subtitled “Fatness and Family in the Courts.” Examining state intervention in the name of protecting children from obesity, Herndon undertakes a deep reading of three court cases involving the removal of obese children from their homes. Focusing on parenthood and the home environment that the parents provide, she points out that childhood obesity has become linked with parental abuse and neglect. The most compelling component of this chapter is the comparison Herndon makes between the portrayal of parents of fat children as flawed and the blamelessness of parents of thin children. To illuminate fatphobia, Herndon invites the reader to “try to imagine a world in which a very thin teenager is removed from her home due to her low body weight” (p. 66). This chapter is especially interesting in terms of disability studies in the way that it highlights terms from the court records, such as “psychosocial dwarfism” (pp. 72, 74) and the claim that a mother lacks “natural abilities” (p. 72). Most notably, Herndon gracefully analyzes a very complicated court case, “a juxtaposition of two bodies that both arguably fall outside social norms”: the mother of a fat child was “very obese”; the father

was described in the court records as “confined to a wheelchair” (p. 69).

“Public and Private Shame,” the third chapter, is a combination of skilled cultural analysis and responsible investigative journalism: “Using Children as Message Boards” is its subtitle. Among other images, Herndon focuses on the stories behind a Strong4Life advertising campaign that featured Maya, a young teen of color, as a warning about the dangers and shame of fat, and the ugliness behind Nike’s “Find Your Greatness” campaign, featuring Nathan, a fat middle-schooler who served as “inspiration” by, according to the advertisements, throwing on a pair of Nikes and just doing it. Behind the scenes, Nathan had to stop filming to vomit as a result of a sudden change from immobility to extreme activity; Maya’s blog (since removed) expressed her remorse over succumbing to the temptation of eating a piece of graham cracker. Herndon sums up the chapter by presenting the I STAND counter-campaigns that promote health at every size, and a poignant comment: “Surely, everyone can agree that we should support all children and work toward making a world where they needn’t feel guilty for eating a piece of graham cracker or feel compelled to run until they vomit in order to prove themselves great” (p. 109).

Chapter 4, “What if the Cure is Worse than the Disease?: How We Treat Children in the Age of Obesity,” is a detailed description of weight-loss surgical intervention procedures and the medical knowledge, and lack thereof, behind them. Herndon describes the many varieties, and complications, of such surgeries. The connection between weight-loss surgery and gender is unsurprising; the very limited understanding about interactions between weight-loss surgery and pregnancy is outrageous. Herndon goes on to discuss the issues of consent, aesthetics, and, in “Outcomes,” leaves the reader with the chilling note that the age at which adolescents receive weight-loss surgery is becoming lower.

Fat Blame culminates with “A Cramped Room,” a collection of short conclusions, ending with “The Final Word.” In this summary and socio-political assessment, Herndon underscores the danger of victim-blaming, and closes where she began, by acknowledging that the United States might indeed be in the middle of an obesity epidemic. But the “obesity epidemic” was created, named, and sustained by discrimination against women and children, and the weapons that are used against it are the weapons that make every one of us a target.

In engaging so many interdisciplinary topics, some important work is bound to be omitted. Disability historians will find the coverage of eugenics accurate enough but superficial, based on secondary material. Scholars of disability studies will wonder why Tobin Siebers’s comments on the Smile Train, a charity that offers its services to children with cleft palate, are absent, especially in Herndon’s discussion of Operation Smile (pp. 135-136). Siebers’s comments on the Smile Train specifically, and his work on disability and aesthetics in general, underscore and extend Herndon’s arguments.[1] Less startling in its absence is Alice Domurat Dreger’s *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal*, which also echoes Herndon’s views. Herndon does include reference to a later essay from Dreger, which highlights the absence of *One of Us*. [2]

Fat Blame is a refreshing contribution to scholarship about the constructions of body image and their social ramifications. Despite the disheartening portrait it paints of how human beings have come to treat each other, the reading is easy and compelling, reminiscent of any of Susan Douglas’s most sparkling work. *Fat Blame* is an excellent choice for many purposes, from leisure reading to using in any level of university study, and its low price is a nice bonus. Herndon is a superb speaker, with witty, disquieting reflections about her own amazing life. Appropriately, she keeps her personal life nearly invisible in this work, but

one hopes that an autobiography—an embodied account of these scholarly arguments—will follow this work ... and soon.

Notes

[1]. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

[2]. Alice Domurat Dreger, *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

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