Title
Fighting Fat Fear with Marilyn Wann

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If you were walking past the Dodd lecture hall on March 1st, you may have been startled to hear a group of people yelling “fat” at the top of their lungs. Usually, a single utterance, or worse, a cheerleading-style chant of the word “fat” is not a good thing—someone is probably being insulted or harassed. On this day, however, activist/scholar Marilyn Wann asked the gathered students and faculty to do just this, to shout out the word “fat” to launch the beginning of her talk, “Fighting Fat Fear During the War on ‘Obesity.’” Wann’s talk was the third and final talk in the Center for the Study of Women’s Winter 2010 Faculty Curator lecture series, “Gender and Body Size,” curated by Professor Abigail Saguy, Department of Sociology at UCLA.

For Wann, “fat” is the most neutral descriptor available and one that she embraces in her own self-description. “Fat” does not automatically carry the judgment that words like “overweight” or “plus-size” do; these words imply...
that there is an ideal of which individuals are in excess. “Fat” is also devoid of the connotations and consequences of a word like “obese,” a category created and perpetuated by insurance companies, the medical industry, and government agencies to classify individuals as unhealthy and unworthy.

Wann has not always identified with the word “fat.” Her transformation into a fat activist was sparked by what she refers to as her “really bad day.” On the same day that she was denied health insurance coverage because she was considered “morbidly obese,” a man she was interested in admitted that he was embarrassed to introduce her to his friends because she was fat. These two events led Wann to “come out” as fat. As Wann herself noted in the talk, the notion of “coming out as fat” seems counterintuitive. “It’s not as if it’s a secret,” Wann quipped, gesturing towards her body. Wann’s
invocation of the language of coming out, however, speaks to the profound personal and social difficulties most people have accepting, much less celebrating, their body size. Body size is often viewed as a transient state of being, a temporary state perpetually on the cusp of a diet-driven transformation. According to Wann, most people think to themselves, “This isn’t really me. In the future, I will be different.” This way of thinking is perpetuated by a multibillion dollar weight loss industry that encourages individuals to think of themselves as a constant work-in-progress, just one New Year’s resolution shy of “the real me.”

Since Wann’s “really bad day,” she has become a leading member of the fat activist movement, becoming a board member of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), publishing the zine Fat?So! and a book of the same name, as well as performing with the Padded Lilies, the Phat Fly Girls, and the Bod Squad. She received national attention in 1999 when she organized a protest of a franchise fitness club at their San Francisco location, a story she recounted during her talk. The fitness club ran a billboard advertising campaign featuring a space alien with the words, “When they come, they’ll eat the fat ones first.” In protest, Wann and other fat activists carried “Eat me” signs, handed out lollipops, and conducted their own aerobics class outside the gym. Their activities drew attention from both local and national media as well as from city officials. In response, San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors called for hearings to examine the

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Marilyn Wann's website (http://www.fatso.com) for people who don't apologize for their size.
issue of weight discrimination, which led to the adoption of a height/weight anti-discrimination ordinance, making San Francisco one of only a few cities to have such an ordinance.

The San Francisco gym protest is indicative of Wann’s general approach. If Wann is involved, there’s a good chance that fun and humor are going to be involved, too. Indeed, the most striking aspect of her lecture was the amount of laughter that consistently filled the room. It is no small feat to take a subject that has a tendency to generate a great deal of anxiety and turn it into a source of inspiration, humor, and joy. This directly relates to the principles of Wann’s “Health at Every Size” philosophy: “Love your body, eat well, and go outside and play.” This philosophy sounds a lot better than the principles of punishment and denial that typically accompany discussions of weight, eating, and exercise. Don’t like celery sticks? Then don’t eat them. Eat vegetables you do like. Hate running? Don’t do it. Do activities that you do give you pleasure. Most importantly, love your body—it’s the only one you’ve got and your love for it shouldn’t be conditional. As Wann asks, “If you can’t be at home in your body, where are you supposed to go?” Given the energy in the room after Wann’s talk, I wouldn’t be surprised if some attendees join the front lines alongside Wann. Her version of “go outside and play,” after all, sounds like a pretty good time.

Anna Ward is a PhD candidate in the Department of Women’s Studies at UCLA. With Professor Abigail Saguy, she is co-author of the article “Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma,” forthcoming in Social Psychology Quarterly and her article “Pantomimes of Ecstasy: BeautifulAgony.com and the Representation of Pleasure” is forthcoming in the journal Camera Obscura. She is the recipient of a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Humanities at Swarthmore College.

Note: You can view a video of Marilyn Wann's talk on UCLA's YouTube channel.
Credit: Photo of Marilyn Wann by L. Garber.