

Ambivalence in encounters with my big fat Greek closet

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ABSTRACT: Both fat people and queer people diverge from the norms that control who is perceived as societally normal versus abnormal. While literature on the closet has encapsulated the experiences of the two subject positions as distinct entities, limited scholarship examines the relationship between fatness and queerness vis-à-vis the closet. Drawing on fat studies, queer theory, and autoethnography, I critically examine my encounters with the closet both inside and outside of Greece. Reflecting on my experience as a queer fat boy/man who spent a great deal of his teenage and early adult life in Greece and the United Kingdom, I weave together stories and emotions embodied in different spatiotemporal contexts and problematize notions of gender, sexuality, fatness, agency, and Greekness. This article considers how a subject may react to and negotiate the tensions that arise when multiple identity markers intersect, overlap and/or collide. It also revisits the undertheorized concept of ambivalence through a queer lens, in order to propose fresh strategies and ways of inhabiting bodies, identities, and spaces.

KEYWORDS: ambivalence; body; closet; fatness; Greece; queer.

INTRODUCTION

During the last few decades, the burgeoning field of fat studies has witnessed a plethora of scholarly works exploring the cultural, historical, and political aspects of the ways in which fatness and fat people are depicted and treated (LEBESCO 2003; MURRAY 2007; ROTHBLUM and SOLOVAY 2009). The relatively recent academic shift from strictly biomedical narratives to sociocultural understandings of the body, coupled with fat activists' commitment towards changing anti-fat bias and celebrating size diversity has illuminated the complex contradictions inherent in discussions around the politics of fatness in both the private and public spheres.

In his seminal monograph entitled *Narrating the Closet*, Tony Adams (2011: 9) illustrates how “the closet functions as a perpetual, constitutive metaphor that prohibits a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ) person from living as an out person everywhere, all the time”. Adams's research opens up a variety of interesting issues around the

experience of living inside the closet; yet, his conceptualization remains strictly germane to queer experience.

Recent literature, however, has expanded the closet space, making room for a variety of other stigmatized subject positions. For Saguy and Ward (2011), the politics of the closet, endemic in LGBTQ discourses, also applies to fat individuals. Yet, while coming out as an LGBTQ person marks the revelation of an identity that is hidden and invisible, coming out as fat does not constitute an act of disclosure. As the authors explain (2011: 65), “coming out as fat involves a person who is easily recognized as fat affirming to herself and others her fatness as a non-negotiable aspect of self, rather than as a temporary state to be remedied through weight loss”. Thus, instead of revealing, fat activists take pride in publically pronouncing their body and reclaim fatness as a means of destigmatization strategy. Just as fat activists borrow the grammar from the LGBTQ community and come out, fat theorists also highlight their connectivity with queer theorists; given the fact that the fat body is potentially uncontrollable, versatile, and excessive, queer theory is useful in providing alternative narratives on the fat discourse and revisiting the closet metaphor.

As many gender scholars point out, coming out constitutes the climactic point of identity formation (ABES and JONES 2004), a rebirthing experience (PLUMMER 1995), and a rite of passage (VAN DER MEER 2003). On the other end of the spectrum, the closet is implicitly construed as a dark, claustrophobic, and shameful space, and as a condition which coincides with immaturity, immorality, secrecy, and dishonesty (HOPCKE 1993; MEYER and DEAN 1998).

Research suggests that members of fat activist groups and the LGBTQ movements strategically employ essentialist positions in their attempts towards gaining political and legal rights (e.g., BALL 2006). For example, studies have revealed how queer and fat activists voice an out-and-proud self, in order to affirm who they are, thus signifying their transition to a “fixed” identity (e.g., MURRAY 2005; NASH 2008). While these collective efforts are implemented to challenge the oppressive nature of heteronormativity and thin normativity, they may also lead in solidifying new boundaries of identity and similarly inflexible categories of knowledge.

Scholars adopting a Foucauldian perspective liken the experience of coming out to the act of confession; while the confession may provide the speaking subject with agency, and with the possibility to voice a “true”

discourse about themselves, at the same time, it ensures their entry “into complex nets of self and social surveillance” (KOTZE and BOWMAN 2018: 4). Under this light, those queer and fat subjects who discover and express their sexual and fat identities, unavoidably ensure their own transformation into objects to be measured, assessed, and regulated.

In her groundbreaking article “Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity, and violence against women of color”, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) examines developments in political organization, and the role that a number of movements have played in the life of different members of various identity categories in America. She argues that “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (CRENSHAW 1991: 1242). Drawing on black feminism, Crenshaw (1989) recognized the limitations of the single-axis paradigm of identity in research and political activism, and developed the concept of intersectionality in an attempt to stress how different axes of subordination cut across one another.

Building on Crenshaw’s theory, Patricia Collins (1990) introduced the idea of the matrix of domination, claiming that multiple oppressed identity statuses produce distinctive social realities and interlocking systems of oppression, depending on the individual’s social positioning in the matrix. The wealth of literature available on intersectionality, as well as the ongoing engagement with the topic reveal that scholarly and activist debates on multiple axes of subordination are still relevant and provide fertile ground for critical examination.

For instance, in the introduction to the special issue of *Fat Studies* entitled “Reflective intersections”, Pausé’s article (2014) examined the ways in which fat studies research has incorporated intersectional lenses unfolding the interrelationship of fatness with other socially stigmatized categories and demonstrating the fluidity and ambivalence of embodied identities.

The concept of ambivalence, according to Edgecomb (2017: 32), originates from Freud’s psychoanalytic notion of ambivalence, where “one [impulse] tries to overcome the other through an act of repression”. The place and role of ambivalence, however, has recently been under examination in other disciplines (PIDDUCK 2009; JOHNSON 2015). The sociologist Deborah Gould (2009) problematizes ambivalence by investigating the relationship between LGBTQ radical activism and the adherence to assimilation politics. For Gould (2009: 12), queers experience ambivalence as “a contradictory

constellation of simultaneously felt positive and negative affective states about both homosexuality and dominant, heteronormative society”. One of the most important revelations in Gould’s work is that the interplay between social acceptance and resistance to norms is more ambiguous than we are sometimes led to believe. Queers may wish to belong while at the same time reject those rules that marginalize them. Such an understanding renders ambivalence itself a force that sets aside concrete identity mappings and allows queer subjects to move freely between antithetical identities and desires, without being forced to take a certain side.

Applying the concept of ambivalence to fat activist groups, however, can potentially trigger different reactions. Unlike the queer movement, fat acceptance advocates, focusing around a politics of experience, often retain an unambiguous positionality towards the fat body (LUPTON 2013; NASH and WARIN 2017). In these narratives, a fat individual ought to be decisively and permanently fat, out and proud to avoid being suspected of adherence to thin normativity and betrayal of the fat movement. Yet, as Kathleen LeBesco (2003: 95) has commented, “fat people often manifest a sense of ambivalence about their bodies”. Indeed, compelling intersectional scholarship has brought to light the personal, intimate, and affective experiences of living ambiguously and moving in and out of multiple closets (LEE 2017; WILLIAMS 2000).

Building on previous scholarship, I articulate my ambivalent and complex encounters with the closet, both inside and outside of Greece. Reflecting on my experience as a queer fat boy/man who spent a great deal of his teenage and early adult life in Greece and the United Kingdom, I place personal stories within broader social discourses in an attempt to diversify and geographically fortify a field of research which is still in its infancy outside the United States (see APOSTOLIDOU *et al.* 2016; COOPER 2009).

Following a group of feminist queer scholars, I am interested in examining how the relatively undertheorized concept of ambivalence might serve as a “tool” to conduct cultural critiques: I critically explore my negotiations with the closet inside and outside of Greece, before and after the so-called Greek crisis, in order to revisit and revise notions of gender, sexuality, fat embodiment, agency, and cultural identity.

In the present manuscript, I explicate how the queer/fat closet and coming out constitutes relational phenomena—“phenomena for which others may hold a person accountable in a variety of ways, at a variety of times,

and in a variety of places” (ADAMS 2011: 36). *In contrast to the traditional view of coming out as a linear and one-off affair, I view the closeted and out identities as unfixed, malleable, and open.* Being a fat queer man, and a PhD student in gender and queer studies has influenced my sense of self, as well as the ways I conduct research. In my search for a methodology that would adequately capture my experience of navigating through academic theories and personal stories, I turned to autoethnography.

As a form of qualitative research and writing, autoethnography combines the researcher’s subjectivity within a particular cultural setting and “offers a way of giving voice to a personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological research” (WALL 2008: 38). For Muñoz (1999: 82), autoethnography is “a strategy that seeks to disrupt the hierarchical economy of colonial images and representations by making visible the presence of subaltern energies and urgencies in metropolitan culture”. Following this line of reasoning, I argue that autoethnography is an approach that can potentially disturb canonical systems of knowledge, and give voice to subject positions that often remain unheard in mainstream social research. In this light, autoethnography constitutes a political and intellectual tool that may unearth and bring to the fore lived experience, vulnerability, and polyphony in academic research and writing.

Among the variety of formats available to write autoethnographically, I align myself with a group of researchers who use autoethnographic vignettes in their work (HUMPHREYS 2005; PITARD 2016). Autoethnographic vignettes serve “as a means of enhancing the representational richness and reflexivity of qualitative research” (HUMPHREYS 2005: 840), but, most importantly, invite “readers to relive the experience through the writer’s or performer’s eyes” (DENZIN 2000: 905). In their productive tensions between embodied biography and critical social theory, vignettes “are constructed as plausible, vivid examples of situations which are intended to be effective in generating conversations, ideas, group discussion” (RADESJO 2017: 8). Vanessa Matthews (2018), for instance, employed autoethnographic vignettes to narrate her breastfeeding experience; split between the identities of mother and researcher, Matthews defies conventional social scientific preoccupations, and employs two different voices to explain how the disrupted performances of her gendered body challenge and reconfigure urban public spaces, as well as her own subjectivity.

Much like Matthews, the vignettes I selected for this article aim to

provide a glimpse into the ambivalent stances that my fat queer body has occupied in different spatiotemporal contexts. These excerpts are inspired from diary notes, translated from Greek to English, and based on actual events that took place during my earlier years. Writing about past experiences in the present moment, though, poses “epistemological conundrums [which] emerge from the manifold and shifting/shifty perspectives of stories told after a lapse of time and where different contexts and changed circumstances afford multiple interpretative vantage points” (RICKARD 2014: 353). William Tierney (1998: 62) argues that “intense moments of personal experience tell us something not so much about the “real” but about how individuals remember what they perceive to be the real”.

My intention through these vignettes is not to relay “legitimate” and “objective” findings, nor to provide a generalizable image of what it means to be queer, Greek, fat, and male in Greece and the UK. In the process of writing about/through the self, I take inspiration from George Marcus’s (1998) cautioning against the controlling conventions that established the social scientific authority of the ethnographic genre. Far from an attempt to circumscribe the space and potential of my object study, in this paper I produce texts, which are “many sited, intertextual, always open-ended, and resistant to theoretical holism, but always committed to cultural criticism” (MARCUS 1998: 567). The academic and personal, distant and at times informal language identified throughout the following pages illustrate the multiple planes of identity I used to occupy and still do. Through this venture, it is my hope to expose the power and potentialities of the closet in all its messiness, shed light on a plurality of inner voices, and suggest different ways of living inside our bodies and in-between identities.

PRE-CRISIS GREECE AND THE CLOSETED SUBJECT

I was born and raised in Athens, Greece. For as long as I can remember, I have liked boys and food. Although I kept my preference for people of my own sex private when I was younger, my girth has always been visible, making a loud enough statement without my consent.

In school I was fat, or, at least, fatter than other boys my age. In my family circle, however, I never received any negative comments or criticism. My experience within the familiar familial context suggests the potentially distinct ways that different social spaces regard bodies, as the following vignette illustrates:

Vignette 1: It is my uncle's birthday, and I go to his house to help my aunt with the preparations for dinner. After a couple of hours, the first guests begin to arrive, including my cousin. We kiss each other and she stays in the kitchen with us. At some point, my uncle enters the kitchen only to see me in front of the sink, while my cousin is sitting and chatting with my aunt. He scolds me for washing the dishes, saying that this is not an acceptable activity for real men. Furthermore, addressing my cousin, he points out that she has *fuskosi* (swelled up), to remind her that she has probably gained weight, and asks her to finish the dishes. When he leaves the kitchen, I do not know what to say (Age 10).

About twenty years have passed since this experience, yet whenever I enter the kitchen in my aunt's house, the memory of this relatively insignificant incident still remains alive. So does my uncle's voice. There is power in the words. Speaking about fatness has the ability to affect fat individuals in diverse ways. The markedly distinct responses that different bodies elicit can be explained on the basis of the unwritten "laws" that govern gender within the family context. Influential studies in the U.S. (RALEY and BIANCHI 2006; SAGUY and WARD 2011) bring to light differential treatment and expectations, depending on the gender of the family members, and demonstrate that fat stigma weighs more heavily on women than on men. In my case, while I received a warning for not performing my gender role "properly", my fat identity remained intact, on the basis of my patriarchal privilege as a cisgender and straight-until-proven-otherwise teenager.

Affective forms of corporeal encounters, however, vary across time and space, particularly when the body's flesh is on display. As Deborah Lupton (2013: 75) highlights, "going out into public spaces can be confronting for fat people, as they feel the assessing gazes of others upon their bodies, particularly in places such as beaches and swimming pools". The exposure of the flesh can potentially exacerbate a person's body insecurities and self-image; this is even more the case when the environment in which body parts are revealed is competitive. In Windram-Geddes's (2013) interviews with PE teachers and female pupils in Scottish primary and secondary schools about health and fatness, girls expressed fears and feelings of fatness in their encounters with the swimming pool water and other discursive spaces of sports. Since childhood is the time period during which we begin to understand our embodiment, the way others receive our corporeality plays a vital role in the relationship that we build with ourselves (HORTON and KRAFTL 2006). In the following vignette, I highlight my initial encounters

with the swimming pool and the feelings of discomfort I experienced as a fat member of a competitive swim team:

Vignette 2: Swimming is really entertaining and I have met very nice people on my team. I have worked hard and my effort appears to have been rewarded. Yesterday, I was “upgraded” to a competitive swim team, and today I have visited my coach’s office to discuss our next steps and goals. There are days like today when I feel so confident about my body, so happy with my physical appearance. The door opens and my coach enters his office.

He tells me that he is aware of the progress I have made so far, yet he emphasizes the need for more discipline and hard work. If I want to stay in the new team, I have to lose weight and intensify my workout. Later that same day, I see my dietician; she calculates my body mass index (BMI) and sounds disapproving while telling me that based on my sex, age, and height, I have to lose at least 15 kilos (Age 13).

Despite its widespread and longstanding adoption as a measure of adiposity, numerous scholars have pointed to the use of BMI as a pseudoscientific framework to measure body fat or health (ERNSBERGER 2012; JUTEL 2001). Back in the time, although I could not possibly be aware of the existence of such studies, I was still wondering: How could a simple mathematical operation using my height, sex, and weight detect if I am healthy or not? Despite these dissident voices in my head telling me that something was not right, I did not dare to stand against medical discourse. Besides, the rest of the guys on my team were within the “healthy weight range” and I was the only one to stand out for the wrong reasons. I experienced feelings of guilt, exposure, and complete failure. Many times I went on extreme diets for drastic weight loss. Many times I skipped meals and reduced food portions to the minimum to make my fat body smaller. In the end, I could not help but binge eat.

Vignette 3: I am at Luna Park with a friend of mine from high school. I have known this friend for many years, and I have never managed to tell him how much I like him. I am convinced that this is the right time and place to make my confession. We wait in the queue for the rollercoaster. When our turn comes, the woman who validates the tickets looks at us and asks that I sit alone in a car, adding that it is for my own safety. I am gently harassed because of my fatness and humiliated in front of so many people, but I comply with her instructions. No matter how much I want to express my feelings to my friend, I no longer feel that I can take the risk of coming out as queer (Age 16).

The preceding story illustrates how fatness invades public spaces and redefines the boundaries between normalcy and aberrance. Drawing on Julia Kristeva, Lesleigh Owen (2015: 2) notes how “the concept of the abject captures the horror, fascination, terror, and titillation of fat bodies as they live, breathe, and represent”. Indeed, seeing the story from a distance, the words of the Luna Park employee appear to exude feelings of fear and repulsion at the sight of my fat body, while at the same time they deny my agency. While the woman at Luna Park justified herself on the grounds that she was pursuing what was in her best interest to ensure the safety of the park visitors, including mine, her action still constituted a form of microaggression and an act of discrimination.

The vignette shows not only the repercussions of being fat in a thin-centric world, but most importantly, how symbolic violence passes unnoticed even by the victim of violence (BOURDIEU 2001). Such occurrences, however, can be even more distressing when combined with hostile reactions from strangers. The vignette that follows illustrates the social construction of beauty inside and outside the LGBT community and the politics of exclusion in dating apps, which at times leave people like me on the margins:

Vignette 4: Yesterday, I created an account on a famous gay dating app. After uploading a picture showing my face from a flattering angle, I receive a bunch of messages from men and I start chatting with some of them. A guy who looks interesting and funny asks me on a date and I say yes. Towards the end of our conversation, and after having set a time and place to meet, he asks for other pictures and I agree to send him more. In a few minutes, he replies back to me saying: What’s wrong with you? I say no fatties, can’t you read? (Age 19)

The vignette above demonstrates the intricately woven web that is power, body normativity, and gender identity, affirming Samantha Murray’s (2007: 364) argument that the normatively thin body, even in its absence, inhabits “not only a space of power and influence,” but also acts as an entity “projecting onto our perception” a “backdrop of normalcy that structures our readings of certain bodies as either normative or aberrant”. Furthermore, it echoes the findings of Tom Penney (2014) and Laura Thompson (2018), whose studies in digital environments found that straight women and gay men often receive harassing messages on dating apps, which reify fatphobic, homophobic, and/or misogynist discourses.

This message, along with others that followed, somehow contributed to my repositioning to the fat/queer closet. I deactivated my account on that app and convinced myself that I would never meet someone who would find me attractive. In the meantime, I finished school and enrolled at the university. Parallel to my studies, I was working as an English teacher at a foreign language institute. My life, split between work and university studies, left little time for socializing. My fat body was there, but I did not have time to think about it. During the third year of my bachelor's degree, I received an email from the university, which invited students to express their interest in spending a semester at Manchester Metropolitan University, as part of an exchange program. While I was studying English literature at the time, I had never really considered the possibility of living in the UK. Without second thoughts, I applied and, in a week, I was accepted into the program and preparing to move.

UNITED KINGDOM AND THE AMBIVALENT SUBJECT

I went to Manchester in 2009 and, since then, I have lived in different cities in the United Kingdom. Andreas Onoufriou (2010), in his research about the politics of masculinity and homosexuality, quotes a research participant who points to the strict heteronormative system which is prevalent in Cyprus and links it to many gay men's decision to emigrate to more LGBT-friendly countries, such as France and the United Kingdom. Trying to untangle the thread of my life, I can now sense how trapped I felt in Greek culture and longed to escape to an "exotic elsewhere" that would provide me with the possibility to start my life anew.

When starting my Master's, I could not believe that a small city such as Bath could have such a vibrant LGBTQ community at the university. Within this safe space, I chose to be open about my sexuality, but hide my Greekness. This decision was due partly to the fact that Greece was a country where I never felt confident enough to live and behave as I desired. Furthermore, the advent of the financial crisis reinvigorated a return to a stereotypical and negative discourse officially voiced by Europe's media towards Greeks. Generally speaking, the United Kingdom had traditionally been a dynamic country destination attracting a high number of Greeks wishing to study and/or find employment. Within this new crisis-led migration, however, being Greek in the UK acquired different connotations and became associated—at least in certain social circles—with

particular characteristics, such as laziness, lethargy, and unaccountability. As a result, not only did I have to defend myself for being fat and a priori lazy, but I also had to bear the burden of being an indolent Greek in a foreign country. Out of a sudden, my Greek and fat identity did not only intersect, but actually reinforced each other rendering me doubly marginalized, doubly liminal. With this in mind, I consciously abstained from becoming a member of the Greek university community, and I did not socialize with many Greek friends.

A “problem” with the closet, however, according to Samuel Chambers (2009: 34), is that it constitutes a space that individuals cannot “fully inhabit or fully vacate”. Despite all of my attempts, my strong accent combined with my dark skin and body/facial hair usually betrayed me. In those social interactions where I could not avoid admitting I was Greek, I assumed the function of cultural representative of Greece in the UK, answering questions about the financial condition of people in my country, and the experience of being a “poor Greek in the United Kingdom”. At other times, however, the discussion would shift from the effects of austerity to conventional topics such as Greek cultural heritage, food, and famous touristic destinations.

Suddenly, my Greekness was outside the context of Greece and had taken a variety of dimensions, to the point that it even overshadowed other identities. I did not accept and take ownership of my fat body during all this time. When others talked about junk food and pastry, I craved to share the type of recipes and meals I enjoyed cooking and consuming; yet most of the times, I hesitated to take part in these conversations. Even when my friends and I would go out to restaurants for dinner, I ordered from the low calories menu, stating I was on a diet. By doing so, I was trying to hide in plain sight, implying that my fat body was only temporary, that I was a compliant and good fatty, and that I was already on my way to Thin-land.

While encounters in many public and semi-public spaces were often accompanied by stress and anxiety, in the following I describe a different experience in the semi-public space of a gay club in London:

Vignette 5: One night, I was dancing at a club with my friends when a man looked at me, smiling. I returned his smile clumsily and then turned back to look at my friends out of timidity. I felt embarrassed because I guessed that he must have been smiling at someone else or had placed a bet on me. After a couple of minutes, he came closer and started a conversation. He thought that I was Spanish,

but when I revealed myself as Greek, he looked at me passionately, touched my beard, and kissed me. “I should have known! You are a genuine Greek bear... and a very cute one.” Although I was overly excited and flattered, a part of me could not trust this person (Age 23).

In the above instance I articulated ambivalence between the desire to relax and enjoy another body’s company on the one hand, and the fear of unworthiness and self-rejection on the other. As a result of predominantly negative attitudes towards my obesity, I have not developed particularly empowering images about myself, and I am not the only one. In her insightful study of fat women’s sexual and dating experiences in the US, Jeannine Gailey (2012) revealed the existence of sexual self-rejection in fat women due to fat phobia. In a similar vein, Jason Whitesel’s research (2014) on an international big gay men’s social club spotlights how fat gay men experience body shame and negative self-perception, even in safe and welcoming environments.

Despite an initial difficulty convincing myself that I was not a fat victim of “hogging”¹ (see GAILEY and PROHASKA 2006), the aforementioned encounter in the club constitutes the driving force that altered my relationship with my Greek fat/queer body. For many queer men like myself, the space of the gay club is imagined as a site where only thin, masculine, and toned men are welcomed. While the club in London was undoubtedly occupied by such bodies, it simultaneously gave room to fat individuals who derailed from “the hard and slender masculine body images presented by the health and beauty industries as ideal, even normalized” (BEATTIE 2014: 117). What therefore became clear to me through this experience is how deeply embedded I was in the very oppressive and restraining discourses from which I wished to set myself free.

Over time, my conception of being fat and queer began to change. I have even reconsidered my relationship with my cultural identity; besides, my Greekness has served as an effective icebreaker for dates with men, and for networking. Now, instead of occupying a stable identity at all times, I experiment with those culturally available categories and roles as an active agent.

¹ I learned the concept from Jeannine Gailey and Arianne Prohaska who examine hogging as a practice initiated by individuals or groups of men who target overweight or obese women for sexual encounters. In contrast to fat fetishists, men who participate in hogging practices are not necessarily sexually interested in obese bodies; they aim to exploit a fat person’s stereotypical low self-esteem or to derive amusement for themselves and their friends by engaging in sexual activities with individuals who are overweight (GAILEY and PROHASKA 2006).

The form of ambivalence I propose, reminiscent of Rosi Braidotti's (1994: 6) notion of nomadism, constitutes "a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge". Living in between "languages" and inhabiting different identities may be difficult at times; yet, it can also usher the individual to a better understanding of the self as a project under construction. In an attempt to explore ambivalence in the closet experience and reveal alternative ways of occupying identities, Tony Adams argues (2011: 132):

By recognizing and embracing the possibility of always residing in paradox, a person can work to make interactional peace regarding same-sex attraction, a peace knowing that a definitive state of relational certainty can never be achieved, regardless of what is said or done.

Adams's account of sexuality holds considerable promise for alternative visions of subjectivity. Indeed, taking into account the central role that coming out and the closet play in Western culture, Adams effectively rejects the concept of a singular knowable identity, which is achieved through coming out, and opts for more ambiguous and contingent ways to live the closet. This distancing from dualistic logics, which obligate the subject either to come out or stay in the closet, allows him to envision politics as always open, ongoing, and never fully stable.

Exploring the queer potential of ambivalence may provide fertile ground for the exploration of the queer/fat closet across different times and spaces. Elbie van den Berg argues that the closet is a dangerous, fabricated notion (2016: 27) with the power to impose certain lifestyles and ways of being upon different bodies. While acknowledging the closet debate as well as the theoretical standpoints of both assimilationists and neoliberalists, van den Berg steps beyond this dichotomy and proposes an alternative approach to the closet; she suggests that making sense of the closet through predetermined hegemonic criteria and fixed understandings of identity expression might not be very productive. Instead, it is more useful to examine the closet through a phenomenological/agentive approach. When the attention is shifted from preconceived notions of embodiment to how identity "as lived and experienced is to be understood in terms of, and within the limits of, what it reveals in experience" (2016: 27), it becomes easier to understand

the value of subjectivity and human experience in interrogating the closet. Thus, although the experience of the closet has been associated with devaluation, pathology, and stigma, a phenomenological/agentive understanding of the closet may provide disenfranchised subjects with an opportunity to understand the matrix of social relations in which their marginality is situated and even “produce their own representations of themselves” (2016: 27). Van den Berg, among other gender theorists and fat activists, gives prominence to personal opinions and feelings. In this way, her work demonstrates that the openness and inclusivity of ambivalence may serve as a useful tool in opting for new agentive ways of being queer, fat, and ultimately human.

I recently pondered the changes that my body has undergone over the years. My body weight has oscillated between almost “normal” and fat several times. By extension, my dress size has been large, medium, extra-large, large again, and so on. Sometimes, I still feel bad about my weight and I engage in healthy nutrition plans. Other times, however, I feel pretty confident about my shape and size, and even flaunt my fat. In May 2019, after spending two months of “voluntary isolation” to focus on my doctoral thesis, I met some of my best friends who were quick to notice my body changing. In the past, weight loss compliments would have made me extremely happy. At the moment however, I do not necessarily see weight loss and thinness as something to celebrate or brag about. My body weight is close to “normal” now but I cannot promise that I will not gain kilos anytime soon. Neither can I guarantee that I will not commit myself to a diet or hide my sexual or cultural identity in certain circumstances.

According to Hongwei Bao (2013: 139), “identity categories may have been set up before we enter into them; yet it is how people live all these identities in their everyday lives that makes these categories more flexible and less restrictive”. In a similar direction, LeBesco’s work (2003, p.13) proposes a shift away from unambiguous body politics and encourages more playful and joyfully noisy ways of performing our multiple identities in our daily reality. Borrowing Bao and LeBesco’s ideas, if the act of coming out and staying in the closet are as frightening and oppressive as we let them be, why not start to soften these seemingly solid categories? It is perhaps discomfoting not to take the road more often traveled. Nevertheless, I find it energizing to see myself as an ambivalent agent and inscribe pathways of living and being that transcend the norm for a change.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I followed the recent academic discussion of the “closet” and attempted to examine a gap in the scholarly literature that exists at the intersection of body studies and queer theory. Deploying personal experience and an autoethnographic approach, I recounted formative events from my teenage and early adult years, while living in Greece and the United Kingdom. Through the employment of autoethnographic vignettes, I explored my negotiations with the closet across different spatiotemporal settings.

These moments of the past do not represent all queer fat men, nor are they intended to proffer a picture of queer and fat politics in Greece. Instead, they illustrate my body’s spatial and affective encounters with the closet. In the last part of the article, I concluded with a call for qualitative scholars to employ intersectional perspectives on fatness and engage in more personal, intimate, and visceral ways of approaching their research, thus “fattening” the space for unforeseen and surprising knowledge gaps that “traditional” research methods may not be able to fill.

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