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# Expanding the Dialogue: The Need for Fat Studies in Critical Intercultural Communication

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EXPANDING THE DIALOGUE:  
THE NEED FOR FAT STUDIES IN CRITICAL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

by

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A Research Report  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts

Department of Communication Studies  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
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RESEARCH REPORT APPROVAL

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THE NEED FOR FAT STUDIES IN CRITICAL INTERCULTURAL  
RESEACOMMUNICATION

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Hannah R. Long

A Research Report Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of Communication Studies

Approved by:

Sandra Pensoneau-Conway, Ph.D., Chair

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH REPORT OF

HANNAH R. LONG, for the MASTER OF ARTS degree in COMMUNICATION STUDIES, presented on OCTOBER 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: EXPANDING THE DIALOGUE: THE NEED FOR FAT STUDIES IN CRITICAL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway

In this paper, I argue that critical intercultural communication, as a discipline, can benefit from an inclusion of fat studies within its literature and analysis. Reciprocally, fat studies can also benefit from this relationship and the questions that would be raised for both fat studies and critical intercultural communication by such a juxtaposition of the areas of study. In particular, I employ my experiences as a fat, U.S. American woman to situate my own embodied knowledge as a way of understanding, in concert with literature reviews of fat studies and identity research within critical intercultural communication. I also utilize muted group theory and intersectionality to suggest specific ways that fat studies can be applied within communication studies, and critical intercultural communication specifically.

Keywords: *fat studies, critical intercultural communication, bodies, identity*

## DEDICATION

To all of the fierce fat folks out there—you are why I do this and you are why this research matters. I am glad you all exist.

To my beloved puppy Daisy Joan—you pulled me through this process in the short time you were with me. I know a special kind of love because I knew you. Thank you for sharing your life with me. I love you forever.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

I was eight years old when I went on my first diet. It was 1998, Weight Watchers® was all the rage and my mom who was a member encouraged me to start charting my “points.”<sup>1</sup> She told me it would be a fun activity for us to do together; I did not know any better at eight years old. I spent the better part of that year precisely measuring food and obsessively jotting down the contents of every single item I brought to my lips. At eight years old, I became an expert at mental math because all I did was add up calories and points in my head. Up until then I did not consider that I needed to watch what I put into my mouth; I just thought that food was delicious, like most kids. But my mother warned me that the women of our family gained weight easily, so it would be a lifelong struggle for me to maintain a healthy body weight<sup>2</sup>. I wanted to be healthy and thin, because at that point in my life I saw those as mutually dependent categories. I didn’t understand that one’s health was not directly correlated to one’s body size. I remember my mom sitting down with me, after our first week on the program together, and she asked if I was feeling better now that I was keeping track of what I was eating. She claimed that she was feeling “much better” and so I agreed. She smiled and told me that she was glad. Not many things I did

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<sup>1</sup> Weight Watchers has you chart what you eat by assigning each food item “points.” Points are based on fiber, calories, and fat. Instead of counting calories, you count points. You have a certain number of points that you can eat each day, and as you lose weight, you gradually are allowed to eat less points. The idea is that once you learn what is in your food, you will be more conscientious about portion control and what goes into your food. Essentially, you are counting calories without really counting calories.

made my mother happy, or so I perceived as a young child. Therefore I figured if I did well it would make her proud of me, and so I went on my first diet when I was eight years old.

That diet was only the first in a long series of food restriction attempts that I have made. In fact, I have spent most of my twenty-five years of life on a diet<sup>3</sup> in some form. Eventually, around high school, I lost weight, and finally arrived at that “perfectly balanced size” that the BMI charts, media, and my mom asserted I was supposed to be. Although my arrival to that state of “perfection” was disordered and unhealthy, my mother was ecstatic that I had “shown some self control.” So much so that she took me shopping, for I was finally deemed worthy enough to have nicer clothes bought for me. Otherwise, I was only allowed to wear clothes from Goodwill or Wal-Mart, because they were inexpensive, “temporary” clothes while I worked to get to the body size I was supposed to maintain forever. When my body looked like what she wanted it to look like, I was allowed to use it to express myself, at least, through clothes. I had finally arrived at the ever-so-sought-after thin ideal, but at 16, I still felt inadequate and unattractive. That’s when my disordered eating began to become much more serious.

As I grew older, my body continued to change, as is expected with puberty. I gained the weight back, and then some, as almost everyone who diets does (Harding & Kirby, 2009). My mother started making comments, though subtle at first, about my need to restrict my intake. She would shame me and police my food, sometimes even taking food out of my hands, all in an attempt to cut my caloric consumption. My friends at the theatre company I was involved with encouraged my food restriction and told me that if I wanted to make it as a performer, I needed

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<sup>2</sup> Her definition of a “healthy body weight” was one based on BMI and what Weight Watchers classified as a “goal weight.”

to be thin. Since I was homeschooled from ages 11 to 18, these were the main influences that I had about how to see my body. I believed them. I'm still working on not believing them. In fact, the last time I saw my parents I was told that "The only thing you've never disappointed us with are your smarts," after my parents lectured me on the ways I was "killing myself" because I was fat; my graduation with a master's degree wasn't as valuable of a celebration because I was fat. This sort of communication is violent, because as Brown (2015) comments, "The family that wants their fat daughter to be thin constitutes a threatening environment" (p. 198).

My entire life has been filled with discourse surrounding bodies, and my body specifically. I have been policed, chastised, praised, and manipulated concerning various aspects of my embodied existence. Now here I am, at 25 years old, and much larger than the BMI scales and doctors tell me I should be. I'm morbidly obese<sup>4</sup>, according to those scales (Obesity, 2012), but what those scales don't consider is the journey that my body and I have had. I've been everywhere from a women's size 6 to a 26. I've alternated between starving myself and completely gorging. I've had unhealthy eating patterns and incredibly privileged and healthy ones. I have embodied various levels of ability and disability. In this body I have been a student, an athlete, a dancer, a performer, a lover, a caregiver, and a teacher. My body holds the stretch marks of a life lived and loved and coped with through food, and this does not make me a bad person. My body does not dictate my morality or worth as a person, nor does it "doom" me to a life of loneliness and isolation.

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<sup>3</sup> By diet, here I mean a deliberate attempt to restrict and control my eating habits in an attempt to lose weight or modify my body size.

<sup>4</sup> Morbidly Obese, according to the scales, indicates a Body Mass Index (BMI) that is significantly greater than what is expected for your height.

My narrative is not unique; I have heard many women echo similar stories (Brown, 2015; Lockard, 2015). As Wotasik (2014) mentions, “It is hard to embrace self-acceptance when you feel isolated and alone” (p. 135). This to me stresses the importance of sharing these stories. I did—and sometimes still do—feel isolated and alone. But doing this research and doing this work has afforded me the opportunity and privilege to listen to these stories. Bodies are a complicated thing, and being woman-identified additionally complicates that. Women are already subjected to endless scrutiny about their appearance, and being a larger woman in U.S. American society is a difficult positionality to embody. The larger cultural narratives further propagate these feelings of isolation and devaluation. Everything is crafted in a way that privileges the bodies that take up less space: seating in public spaces, public transportation, clothing manufacturing, medical science, media stereotypes, housing, car seats, and the list goes on. When it is difficult for your physical body to literally take up space, it is hard for you to psychologically and politically do so as well.

To embrace one’s larger body, to claim being fat, and to see one’s fatness as a central component of one’s identity in a non-inherently negative way is a radical act. Identity itself is difficult and complex, and often I struggle with how to position myself within critical intercultural communication particularly in regards to my varying identities. As a White, middle-class woman, my interests are often represented and respected within the field at large, and so I grapple with where to position my voice. I also am fat, queer, and disabled, and am constantly negotiating what these intersecting oppressions and privileges mean for me as a critical scholar. I figure that this conflict, or this constant dialectical shifting in how I see my place within the field, is a given when doing critical research, at least, if one is to attempt reflexivity. It’s even trickier to find this balance when one is constantly critically considering

their identity (and others' identities), since identity is constructed in relation to others (Pensoneau-Conway, 2012) and is formed and embodied in different ways depending on the circumstance. However, considering the content of this project, I find it ethically necessary to situate my position within the subject matter and the field. My body is implicated in this work, and I am explicitly invested in the outcome.

In this project, I argue for the inclusion of critical fat studies within critical intercultural communication studies. I will highlight myriad reasons as to why body size should be considered in identity discourse as well as how critical intercultural communication can connect reciprocally to fat studies research. I also engage Muted Group Theory (Ardener, 2005; Kramer, 2005) and intersectionality (Chavez, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991) to further examine a literature review of fat studies and research on identity within critical intercultural communication. Through this, I offer the following central research questions:

- 1) How could critical intercultural communication benefit from an inclusion of fat studies?
- 2) How can fat studies be integrated into communication studies?

## CHAPTER 2

### SITUATING FAT STUDIES

#### **Situating Fat Studies within Scholarship**

Bodies, and in particular cisgender women's bodies, have long been the subject of much feminist discourse (Bordo, 2003; Brumberg, 1997; Butler, 2011; Soloway & Rothblum 2009). Issues related to reproduction, "realistic" body campaigns (like Dove and Lane Bryant)<sup>5</sup>, and being able to make choices about our bodies have been some of the avenues pursued. These are important discussions, and have allowed for women and feminist discourse to expand the conversation. However, feminist discussion, as with most of popular culture, has long been lacking in discussing the issues of larger bodies within U.S. American culture. There has of course been bodily discourse but the research has left a gap. While the discourse is beginning to catch up, there is still a lot left to be accomplished, especially in regards to communication.

Body size, particularly as it pertains to the context of the United States, is a significant factor in the way that individuals are perceived (Farrell, 2011; Wann, 2009). In particular, people with larger bodies face different types of assumptions and discrimination than do people with thinner bodies. People with larger bodies are assumed to be lazy, unintelligent, and unattractive (Bailey, 2010; Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2010; Farrell, 2011; Gruys, 2012; Wann, 2009; Wotasik, 2014); morality and humanity are assumed by the space one's body occupies. The diet

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<sup>5</sup> Dove had a very popular in campaign to "help women's body image" often revolving around "Real Beauty."

Lane Bryant recently released a campaign called "I'm No Angel" (2015) in resistance to the Victoria's Secret "Angel" campaign. Lane Bryant's advertisement features several women who

industry, which is also massively pervasive, is completely inescapable in all public spheres, reinforcing the idea that fat bodies are bad and that we need to get rid of the fat that makes them bad (Farrell, 2011; Wann, 2009). Doctors notoriously fat shame people who occupy bodies of a certain size (Pantenburg et al., 2012). Most of fat folks' health problems are assumed to be due to one's weight, as opposed to other factors like illness, ability, or cultural shame and ostracism (Chastain, 2015). Even early women's suffrage movements, like many other media representations, villainized fat bodies by associating bad virtues with whose bodies take up more space (Farrell, 2011). The messages society sends about fat bodies are clear: Undesirable, ugly, and offensive. When those messages are continuously filled with such violent negativity towards larger bodies, it is no surprise that so many people are unhappy with how they corporeally take up space.

Body size also impacts the interpersonal connections one is able to make (Farrell, 2011), the places one can go (Hetrick & Attig, 2009; Huff, 2009) and the way that one views the rest of their identities (Ahern, Bennett, & Hetherington, 2008; Farrell, 2011). Due to the obsession that U.S. society has concerning bodies (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012), it is no surprise that these limitations exist; however, it is surprising that body size is not considered as often in contexts of identity and other related research.

As a self-identified fat woman in U.S. American society, I've noticed the way that communication has functioned in relation to my body. Having once embodied thin privilege and witnessing how I was communicated with then versus how my body is communicated to now is a significant and jarring distinction. I have never been content with the way that my body takes up

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read as plus sized models claiming their bodies are "real bodies" and arguing that they don't need to be an "Angel" to be beautiful.

space, but others have never so negatively commented on it until I moved to Carbondale, Illinois. While living in Carbondale, I experienced more street harassment than ever before in my life, even compared to when I was thinner and living in more populated areas. The harassment was always accompanied by an adjective that describes my weight: “Hey fat bitch! Let’s have a look at you!”, “Ooh mama look at that thick ass!” and so on.

As Diversi & Moreira (2009) state, “Privilege, more often than not, is taken for granted” (p. 49). The expectation that fat bodies are not deserving of love, attention (Hopkins, 2012), and sometimes, even basic human decency, has become all too apparent to me in light of my bodily expansion. Grotesque looks, unavailability of attractive and flattering clothing (Gruys, 2012), and public transportation that literally does not allow space for one’s body to sit, are all daily difficulties of negotiating the world in a larger body. Even when I go to lunch or do work in public with one of my close male friends, who is thinner and very typically attractive, the looks that I receive, mostly from women, are always ones of disgust or shock. When I drew my friend’s attention to these looks, his face saddened, and he said he had noticed the looks, but hadn’t initially coded them as such. Surveillance and disapproval are a constant presence in the existence of many different types of bodies, but in particular there are ideas about who fat people can love and how fat people can be loved (Miller, 2015), and a thinner, attractive guy with a fat woman is not commonly seen as one of those ideas. Fat bodies are made to be seen as undesirable, and incommensurable with those who benefit from thin privilege.

Fat bodies represent a manifestation of one of the fears of those who are thinner and benefit from that privilege—the fear that someday they, too, might become fat, and be treated the way that they treat fat people. As Murray (2005) comments, “The fat body is discursively constructed as a failed body project” (p. 155), and in some cases, “failed citizens” (Bailey, 2010,



p. 448). Fatness signifies excess, lack of discipline, and a lack of conforming to the particularly praised thinner body standard of contemporary times. Fat bodies are not, in popular discourse, praised as a “good body.” This emphasis on a particular “good” body of a “good” citizen embraces a classist and neoliberal construction of what it means to be a proper U.S. American (Bailey, 2010), and further shames those whose bodies transgress what is considered to be “good.” Fat hate is a widely enjoyed phenomenon. As Wotasik (2014) remarks, “I have heard fatness condemned from church pulpits, from the White House, on sitcoms, and in conversation with peers” (p. 134).

When I was thinner, I never had to deal with the anxiety of stereotype and space in regards to my body size. I never had to worry about whether I would fit into a chair, or whether the chair would have arms. I didn’t have to worry about how I was going to pay attention in my night class because I couldn’t fit comfortably into the desks. I didn’t have to worry about whether I would look “unprofessional” at a conference because I couldn’t afford suitable dress clothing or fashionable clothing (Miller, 2015). I didn’t have to worry about affording a plane ticket because I had to either buy two tickets or fly first class to fit (Lockard, 2015). I never had to endure the embarrassment of being turned away from an amusement park ride because my body was not what the creators of the ride had in mind when they designed the seating. These are things that largely go unnoticed to those with thin privilege, and often, these experiences are viewed as suitable consequences for those of us who could not “control” ourselves and deserve to suffer for our supposed iniquities. Blame is placed on the individual for their choices, instead of considering the systemic ways that fat bodies are often not supported, or the class, racial, ability, and gender intersections that affect how fat bodies can exist.

Additionally, being fat is expensive. Often to make accommodations for one's body size, things have to be purchased in extra-large or plus size versions of the "real" thing. Even the fashion industry doesn't design for larger bodies. Clothes are designed up until size 12, and then any size beyond just becomes larger without consideration for variation in bodies. Many of my colleagues comment on the fact that I often "dress well." These comments often come with a look of surprise that I attribute to my size. While I do enjoy getting dressed up, as a fat body, I must maintain the perception of "taking care of myself"; one has to avoid being perceived as the lazy fat body, especially in a field that places emphasis on appearance and productivity. A presentation that could be read as lazy can have ramifications for my career and personal relationships.

Research on fatness is largely positioned on a binary. On one end, the health and medical literature frames fatness as obesity, as an "epidemic" problem (Bailey, 2010; Brewis et al., 2011), and one that contributes negatively to one's health in the extreme (Wann, 2009). Some even argue that the rhetorical choice to refer to the larger percentage of adults with higher body mass as an "epidemic" is a way to incite fear and an idea that "fatness is catching if you do not take the appropriate steps to inoculate yourself against it" (Bailey, 2010, p. 448). Also, framing fatness as an "epidemic" causes alarmist calls to action and signifies fatness as an enemy needing to be destroyed or a disease needing to be eradicated.

To the larger culture, some have argued that fat people signify insatiability and excess (Bailey, 2010). Fat folks who do not constantly work to diminish their size are often accused of "glorifying obesity" and promoting "unhealthy lifestyles," when in fact many fat folks do make choices that would be considered healthy. The massive success of the diet and weight loss industry is indicative of that prejudiced signification and thought process. Reality shows such as

*The Biggest Loser*, and *Extreme Weight Loss: Love Can't Weight*, highlight the spectacle of weight loss as entertainment. These shows function as entertainment because they allow the audience at home to fat shame the contestants while cheering on their dramatic transformation to become "attractive." These shows also function as a cautionary tale marking larger bodies as a hazardous potentiality to the viewership, reinforcing the idea of fat bodies as undesirable. Consider the Disney movie *Wall-E*, for example. *Wall-E* is set in the future, and intended to serve as a warning to us now, to ponder how the ways that we live our lives currently will impact the lives of individuals in the future. While the main surface level critiques that *Wall-E* makes are largely concerned with capitalism and environmental efforts, there is a critique of consumption that extends to human representation. Significant to this discussion is the portrayal of the human race that is represented in the film. People are almost exclusively all fat bodies, who glide around on futuristic motor scooters, slurping food through a straw all day, and constantly engaging in the media in front of their face. This portrayal reinforces the negative stereotypes of fat bodies: lazy, unmotivated, attractive, and "addicted" to food.

On the other end, the fat acceptance movement is concerned with more liberationist approach (Murray, 2005), framing fat as a part of one's identity, and not something that should connote any value about one's health, morality, or intelligence (Brown; 2015; Farrell, 2011; Harding & Kirby, 2009; Wann, 2009). Marilyn Wann, a self-identified fat scholar based out of San Francisco, is credited for being one of the leading figures in bringing the Fat Acceptance movement to the forefront. Known for her "Yay!" scales, which display a positive adjective

when one “weighs” oneself<sup>6</sup> and the book *Fat!So?*, Wann (1998) takes an approach that all bodies are good, regardless of the lipid tissue that frames their figure.

One of the communities that has been working to integrate the medical perspective with that of some fat activists has been the Health At Every Size (HAES) movement. With HAES, bodies are not judged on their health by the size that they are, but rather the focus is placed on pursuing enjoyable physical activity. Particularly, for those who are working on recovering from various ways of disordered eating, or those who carry negative connotations to exercise, the HAES movement presents a more psychologically beneficial way of framing physical activity. In other words, exercise is pursued for health and pleasure as opposed to weight loss. The difficulty with the HAES movement in its application is finding health practitioners and exercise establishments that embrace the commitments of HAES. So much of the medical-industrial complex functions off of the hegemonic constructions of fatness and health that it can be hard to teach practitioners to change their thinking. My own father, who is a family doctor, refuses to look at any research on fatness and fitness because he was trained to think that those concepts are mutually exclusive. HAES has great potential to help change the assumptions that comprise much of the knowledge in the medical-industrial complex, but like with any idea/movement that seeks to change the problematic ways people have been taught, it will undoubtedly take time and a significant amount of work. For example, when I went to a therapist and he asked me if I had heard of HAES I was so ecstatic to hear someone else, especially someone in an administrative and medicalized setting, be a proponent of HAES. I’ve only ever had one medical doctor not

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<sup>6</sup> I had the opportunity to participate in events that featured these scales twice. 1) During a body positivity day at my undergraduate institution, I stepped on a scale in front of dozens of people, a particularly large fear of mine, and received the adjective “sexy” and 2) During a body positive

instantly fat shame me, and I cannot communicate how freeing it is to not instantly be judged with verbal communication by those in healthcare contexts. This fear of judgment is often what prevents fat people from seeking care; dreading the weight conversation, or the attribution of all illness to one's fat, can lead to sometimes deadly consequences.

While fat studies is a fairly new field, there has been a significant amount of research, largely quantitative, done in regards to the phenomenon of "fat talk." Borrowing Arroyo & Harwood's (2012) definition, "Fat talk refers to the ritualistic conversations about one's own and others' bodies (e.g., 'I'm so fat!' 'No you're not; I'm the one who is fat!')" (p.167). Fat talk also functions as a referent for feelings (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003). Coming from personal anecdotal experience, particularly within femme women culture, there is this expectation of continuing the cycle of fat talk. This cycle starts when a person in the group will comment negatively on something about their body. This is followed by another individual countering the previous statement with an additional statement putting down their body, and so forth; the cycle is infinite. Fat talk is a very explicitly communicative phenomenon, and the choice of whether or not to engage in fat talk is also a communicative act. To not find a flaw with one's body, or to be okay with how one's body looks is a transgressive act, both politically and socially. This is why fat studies scholars have more recently begun looking at how we discursively construct our bodies. After all, if we believe that language constitutes our realities and our identities, this move towards discourse is no surprise. So often, people who are fat are expected to be "apologetic of our size, and seen as trying to change our size" because "we are given a sort of approval" (Wotasik, 2014, p. 131) in those moments. We are given a pass for our

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seminar led by Marilyn Wann and Jeanette Miller at the 2014 conference of OSCLG where I "yayed" (as Wann says) "Fine."

bodies because we are working on making them “not fat.” Our weight loss, or even our desire for weight loss, is seen as our apology to the world for having to deal with gazing upon our deviant, undesirable fat bodies.

Fat talk is often particularly powerful when it is engaged in by those closest to us, specifically our families. In her study centering fat female college students, Brown (2015) found that when families were unsupportive of their daughters because of their fatness, their performance as students suffered:

While much of the diet talk was couched in terms of health concerns and was perceived by study participants as coming from a place of genuine care, some families teased or bullied their fat daughters about their weight. No matter the impetus for the body disparagement, it led these young women to question their self worth. Because they were fat, they were, many perceived, somehow defective or less capable. Not only did dieting and fat talk affect their self-image; in some cases, it affected or continues to affect their academic performance. (p. 194-195)

When fat folks can shift the conversation from diet talk/apologetic talk to a more positive and humanizing space, there becomes possibility for fat bodied individuals to create their selves the way they wish. This is demonstrated within the fat positive community specifically as the idea to reclaim the word “fat.” To reclaim is to “take back,” and so often, the word fat is used negatively. The process of reclaiming of one’s self-concept allows for self-definition. Through this act of discourse and discussion, we challenge the social status quo and can create the potential to bring about change, even on a micro level.

Fat studies research emerged out of research in queer theory and other marginalized areas (Hopkins, 2012) seeking to engage in more equitable ways of being. Fat studies was created to

address a gap in the research. Fat studies, along with critical weight studies and other similar methods of inquiry, offers real and metaphorical space for fat bodies to be seen as “real people who are of value rather than seeing them only as fat people who are a threat to the moral order of society, a risk to health services and a burden on the public purse” (Hopkins, 2012). However, like other interdisciplinary theories and concentrations, fat studies lacks a permanent home. Often, the literature that it is placed within falls into women’s/gender studies and sociology research, which are areas that critical scholars tend to draw literature from. However, based on the considerations and types of inquiries that are made within fat studies, such as bodily representation(s), discursive formation of identity, and theorizations on exclusion and belonging, I posit that there is space for it within the focus of critical intercultural communication.

### CHAPTER 3

## SITUATING CRITICAL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Communication studies, as a discipline, is able to consider a variety of different research questions. Because of the wide scope of possibilities, communication studies is more than able to accommodate the type of research that is done within fat studies. Communication research already is concerned with questions of bodily epistemology and nonverbal communication, as those things greatly impact how we are perceived by others and affect our communication with them; we communicate and engage with others in our physical bodies. As students are taught in any introductory course in communication, “We are never not communicating,” and so it is fitting then for communication, especially critical communication, to challenge and deconstruct the normative narrative of what a body is supposed to be like, look like, and communicate like. Bodies are crucial in how we form knowledge about communicative phenomena and we cannot isolate our minds from our bodies. Our minds, our identities, our bodies and our selves are all connected. Therefore, if we are making room within the field for critical conversations about bodily knowledge and bodily regulation, we must also consider the impact of body size within and among these conversations.

As Nakayama and Martin (2007) mention, intercultural communication began as a way to help White U.S. Americans communicate better abroad so that the U.S. would have a better perception by the rest of the world—U.S. American imperialism served as the impetus. Research focused on what types of gestures or phrases to utilize or avoid so that the U.S. American ambassadors for the Foreign Service Institute would not offend leaders in other countries (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). Research in the early work of the field was primarily



functionalist, and concerned with how Europeans differed from U.S. Americans, since the field emerged around the time of the Second World War. U.S. efforts were out of convenience and self-interest; this basis for the beginning of the field is therefore not without racial and national implications.

Despite the problematic origins, intercultural communication has managed to engage in meaningful scholarship that challenges those early assumptions and motives. Recently, there has been a shift towards more interpretive and critical perspectives on intercultural communication in particular. Critical intercultural communication, as a field, has been around for roughly my lifetime, often marked by Leeds-Hurwitz's (1990) article in which she deconstructed the history of the Foreign Service institute and intercultural training. Several authors added their input over the years, challenging the ways that women and feminist commitments are represented in intercultural communication (Gonzalez & Peterson, 1993), tracing intercultural communication's use of political and economic structures (Moon, 1996), problematizing the idea of culture as nation-state (Ono, 1998), taking a more dialogic approach to intercultural communication (Martin & Nakayama, 2000), difference and inequality (Cooks, 2001), and then finally challenging the discipline to consider their analyses from a critical standpoint (Halualani, Mendoza & Drzewiecka, 2009); Mendoza, 2005; Starosta & Chen, 2003.

Over the years, critical intercultural communication, as a field, has grown to accommodate a number of issues that are widely considered to be issues of culture and identities. Critical intercultural communication often engages in topics that have "much at stake for real people and having real consequences" (Halualani & Nakayama, 2013, p.5). Recent scholarship has centered the experiences of transgender bodies (Chavez, 2010; Cram, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Nuru, 2014), differing levels of ability (Fassett, 2010; Morella-Pozzi, 2014), experiences of

marginalized racial groups (Calafell, 2007; Griffin, 2012; Hess & Sobre-Denton, 2014) and experiences of queer bodies (Alexander, 2010; Chavez, 2013) and queer bodies of color (Muñoz, 1999). While these are necessary inclusions, intercultural communication, and in particular, critical intercultural communication, could benefit from even more work concerning identities.

Historically, the concept of identity has been used as a way to categorize difference and sameness, to foster community, and to mark individuality (Gilroy, 2004). Several theories about identity exist in the discipline. Overall, identity is most commonly theorized as complex (Gilroy, 2004). Others conceive of identity as constructed out of self-conception (Imahori & Cupach, 2005) and self-conception in relation to others and culture (Kim, 2007; Ting-Toomey, 2005). For others still, identity is formed more intersubjectively (Pensoneau-Conway, 2012). This places more focus on reciprocal relational ideas. Whichever way that one conceives of identity, it is crucial to understand its impact in how we communicate with ourselves and others.

As Pensoneau-Conway (2012) states, “Broadly, our identity is a way to understand our personhood; it’s the meaning we make of our sense of self” (p. 34). Our sense of self arises from the ways that culture ascribes meaning to our bodies (Pineau, 2002). Our bodily identity, then, could be theorized as the way we understand our personhood and make sense of self through our corporeal flesh bodies in relation to space and the world around us. Identity can also be theorized as “an effect of our belongings” (Carillo-Rowe, 2013, p. 218), here signifying our cultural locations. In other words, I now claim an identity for myself as a “fat feminist” because I feel a belonging to a particular community in which that identity is not a disparagement, but rather, a source of pride and a way to understand my personhood in relation to others.

In the past, fat studies has been analyzed and applied through health communication, since many of the ways that fat people have to navigate the most explicit routinized oppressions

are relegated to doctors' offices and other settings of the medical-industrial complex. Although many arguments do not specifically talk about fat bodies, and even less commonly in a non-negative way, there is more research done on how cisgender women navigate health settings. Women are assumed to be more concerned with health and well-being, and this is reflected in the literature, regardless of body size. Therefore, more of the research that can be referenced bears the perspective of cisgender fat women. These studies are useful; there is much to extrapolate within health communication for fat studies. However, in regards to the questions I am concerned with I would argue that fat studies is also immensely applicable to critical intercultural communication as well. As Cooks (2013) states

Communication and culture are viewed as socially constructed in these studies, and thus intercultural interaction is positioned as a dynamic field through which cultural discourses and identities are privileged, maintained, challenged, and so on. (p. 117)

Certainly fat people signify a culture; access to particular resources, common understandings about the ways that others read our bodies, shared discourse about the everyday performativity of "fat," shared language choice, and online communities separate us from the macro culture(s). The body serves as an epistemological site because fat bodies are rendered through their absence of access; thin bodies are marked by inclusion. Fat bodies learn where they belong because of where they literally cannot belong—prohibition from occupying spaces granted to thinner bodies.

With that exclusion and HAES in mind, I started a body-positive swimming group during my first year in graduate school. I was looking for a space where I could learn to associate exercise with good things for my body as opposed to punishment and weight loss, as well as a

place to not feel the judgment of working out as a fat body. I used to swim for years, and have always enjoyed the activity, so I figured that was a good place to start. My goal for the group was to allow others, and myself, a space to be free to engage with our bodies in the water. I was excited because several of my fellow graduate student friends joined me. Unfortunately, after a couple of sessions, one of the participants started talking about the progress of his summer fitness (though he really meant weight loss) program. He shared how much weight he had lost and the others congratulated him. In that moment, the space I had tried to create was no longer a safer space for fat bodies. It had become the space that I wanted to avoid.

One of the more significant ways that fat folks seek to establish community and culture is with inclusion in the creation of body/fat positive spaces, as mentioned above. The co-creation of body positive spaces serves as a form of ritual. By making specific choices in language and conduct, the members of these spaces agree to not talk about weight loss, negative discursive construction of bodies, and labeling of bodies as “bad”; a body positive space seeks to allow for the co-constitution of a space where all bodies are good. For some members of the community, this is the first occasion where they are able to talk about/engage with their bodies in a way that views them and their bodies as valuable. A body positive space also seeks to provide a safer space for fat bodies to exist without discrimination, at least within the confines of the group. That group then creates a particular culture within the larger assemblage of fat folks. If we agree that fat bodies constitute a culture, then interaction between fat bodies and thinner bodies would constitute intercultural communication. Therefore, there should be a space for fat bodies to exist within intercultural communication.

## CHAPTER 4

### APPLICATION OF INTERSECTIONALITY & MUTED GROUP THEORY

#### *Intersectionality*

In her essay on the need for intersectionality in intercultural communication research, Chavez (2013) suggests that often it is the intersections that make for a richer and more holistic understanding of the function(s) of identity, particularly within various cultural contexts. Drawing on the early work of Crenshaw (1991), Chavez argues that intersectionality can address many of the issues that critical intercultural communication research currently has in dealing with identity. Particularly, Chavez stresses the importance of interlocking identities and allowing space for us to be “activist-scholars” rather than separating parts of who we are. By embracing an intersectional approach, we are able to see more of people and theorize identity in ways that does not engage in “purity logics” of separatism and exclusive belonging.

It is impossible to talk about how fatness manifests in identity without considering the intersectional implications. No one person is ever solely “fat,” but rather, is fat and White, fat and gay, fat and disabled, fat and Black, etc. The ways that one is treated are always multiplicative; we are never just one aspect of identity at once. I am never just fat, but rather, I am a fat, White, queer, disabled woman, and those aspects of my identity all factor together simultaneously. The ways I navigate my fatness as a queer woman is different than the ways that straight women might navigate a larger body; the ways that my fat White body navigates space is different than fat folks of color; and so on. There are moments where parts of myself are more salient, but I can never only see myself in one way. In this section, I talk about how three specific aspects of identity influence the ways that fatness complicates identity: gender, race, and queerness.

## *Gender*

There are a bevy of ways that one can experience gender, which can be a difficult thing to manage in a society that enforces a gender binary that privileges those who perform a gender that matches their sex assigned at birth. I identify as a genderqueer woman who performs femininity. For me, I have fairly typically experienced hegemonic cisgender womanhood, and am mainly read as a cisgender woman, so my experience of fatness has been modulated through that body and those accompanying experiences. Most of the literature concerning fatness and gender also centers on the experiences of cis women, and so it can be difficult to engage with gender perspectives outside of cisgender bodies. Even the articles that reference fat men are often about fat men who identify with Bear culture (Santoro, 2014). This is a place where there is obvious need for further discussion and research beyond this project.

My experiences with gender, coupled with the quantity of research centered on fat women, provide the basis of most of my gender analysis of fat intersectionality. However, I have argued for a shift in the literature. Being a fat woman represents a unique set of challenges, particularly in a society that places so much emphasis on the physical manifestations of our selves. Complicating fatness with gender, it is no surprise that fat women habitually experience health settings in the way that they do. Historically, women's bodies have often been treated in patronizing and awful ways, from a lack of agency in reproductive choices to disbelief about symptoms of a heart attack due to physician assumptions about "women's health." Consider the origin of the condition of hysteria. The condition was popularized by Sigmund Freud and other scholars who believed that (cisgender) women suffered hysterical symptoms—from nervousness, weakness, and difficulty sleeping, to a general disinterest in activities one usually enjoyed (Maines, 1999)—because their uterus did not stay in place, but rather "wandered." Never mind

that women were significantly oppressed and devalued in society at large as well as the home, but rather, their general disinterest came from their wandering uterus. Hysteria was labeled an “epidemic,” similar to obesity, because it was happening on a large scale and was vastly misunderstood. It is interesting to note, however unsurprising, that this “epidemic of hysteria” was occurring at the same time as the women’s suffrage movement. Women’s voices are noticeably absent in the literature on hysteria and hysterical treatment. Regulating women’s bodies and silencing their voices go hand-in-hand, since the process of regulation itself creates a continuation of forming women as victims (Foucault, 1978; Opplinger, 2008); people cannot focus on their oppression if they are more concerned with their health and other basic physiological goals essential to preserving life. This is especially poignant to fat folks—our oppression and our health are often directly implicated.

While this literature is important, fat studies and intercultural communication both need to make a more conscious effort to include conceptions of womanhood that are not limited to people who identify as cisgender. Even the current *Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication* does not include conceptions of gender fluidity and gender outside of the binary or work concerning bodies of size. In other words, there needs to be a more open idea about how fat bodies might express womanhood, or how fat bodies might not conform to a particular set of gender expectations. For fat folks who do not conform to specific gender expectations, surely there are ways that that double oppression functions to isolate, both within and outside of the fat community. Even clothing choices, which often are a significant part of gender expression, are very limiting for fat bodies. Because it is hard to find quality clothing that fits in general, it can be almost impossible to actually find clothes that one feels reflect how they conceive of their self-concept.

These are critical considerations. However, being fat and struggling with gender identity and expression is just one aspect of life for those in bodies of size. The intersections of multiple identities make this embodied reality difficult to negotiate. In particular, being fat is read differently and treated differently based on so many other things, but race especially changes how a fat body can exist in this world.

### *Race*

One of the more glaring omissions from much of the fat studies literature has been fatness and race; most of the literature on fatness tends to be very specific to the experiences of White bodies (Farrell, 2011; McCalphin & Tango, 2014; Wilson, 2009). In their study on ethnic identity and body image, Baugh et al. (2010) found that sometimes, fatness is complicated based on how one identifies with their ethnicity; some folks claim to have more positive views of larger bodies based on their ethnic orientation (DeBraganza & Hausenblaus, 2008; Gruys, 2012). McCalphin & Tango (2014) address this idea as a common and problematic thing they hear from White women, which I will return to later in this section.

Perhaps some of the reason for the focus on White women within fat studies, beyond the obvious and infiltrating aspects of White privilege, is because of the way that the media represents women in general. The “ideal” woman is often thin, young, feminine, cisgender, able-bodied and White (DeBraganza & Hausenblaus, 2008). Most research on body image has also centered on the way(s) that White women deal with their bodies (DeBraganza & Hausenblaus, 2008), which further reinforces the need for an expansion in considerations of race within fat studies. Some authors have noted that the rules for discourse are even different depending on ethnic affiliation (Gruys, 2012; Hopkins, 2012).



In the newest handbook for fat acceptance literature, McCalphin & Tango (2014) discuss the need for women of color in size acceptance activism. In their essay, the authors provided a literature review on the research surrounding women of color and bodies or size as well as including narratives from women of color that related to ideas of forced assimilation, leadership, invisibility, and intersectionality. The authors comment on the fact that in order to actualize social change in regards to inequalities and oppressions based around identities, “the intersectionality of all resistance movements must be incorporated into rendering all oppressions obsolete” (p. 139). McCalphin & Tango also stress the double oppression that occurs for women of color, and that to analyze oppressive systems such as fatphobia and racism, one cannot ignore sexism, queer issues, ableism, and so on. It is important to incorporate the issues of women of color into the dialogue, because as McCalphin & Tango state, “we realized that despite our quite different backgrounds we share a very common WOC experience of having the body hatred we experience from our cultural communities dismissed by a number of fat white activists” (p. 141). This invalidation of experience typically occurs for these women as being told they (women of color) were “lucky to be born into a culture that desired fat women” (p. 141). These sorts of conceptions further exoticize and eroticize images of women of color, and in particular, these ideas function off of tokenizing stereotypes. This is not an uncommon occurrence for the women of color in the narratives shared, who instead note that “The myth that black and Latino men desire fat women keeps being shoved in our faces as a sort of white woman oppression Olympics designed to insinuate we fat WOC have it so much easier” (p. 143).

### *Queerness*

As fat studies has a great deal of its origins to credit to queer theory, it is also important to think about how queer identities complicate and inform fatness. Due to the myriad ways that

queerness can exist and how privilege plays into representation, there is not a great variety of research on fat bodies who are also queer. For example, specifically within fat studies there are more narratives documenting the experiences of cisgender women's bodies, but again, there are queer fat women who are willing and able to write their stories, but do not have access to disseminate them in a scholarly context.

Some authors, as mentioned above, have asserted that within their particular queer communities, being a fat queer woman is less difficult than being a fat straight woman. However, the queer community at large is more divided. In his study on fat politics, Hopkins (2012) interviews several participants who mention that they think being fat is okay, as long as they are also not gay. My experiences as a fat queer woman have both challenged and supported this statement. I have found that because of the way that women internalize the hegemonic standard of thinness, sometimes that ideal carries over into relationships with other women, romantically and otherwise, regardless of orientation. Other relationships with queer folks have proven to counter that finding, and in my relationships with men, this has also proven to vary. The research on queer fat men largely highlights how the homonormative standard of a White, thin young body is purported as the standard for men to achieve. As mentioned earlier, this research is focused mainly on Bear culture, which is often heavily tied to masculinity (Santoro, 2014). In other words, there is less consistent research and experience for the intersecting identities of gender, body size and sexuality/queerness.

As McCalphin & Tango (2014) state, "Any movement that doesn't have representation from everyone impacted by that marginalization may win a battle or two but fails to win the cause" (p. 144). This to me is the defining point of the argument for utilizing intersectionality in the way it can and has been utilized in critical intercultural communication. We need to consider

the multiple layers of oppression and privilege that inform the everyday embodied performances of fat. The lack of research that includes body size serves as an indicator that incorporating such work would be a benefit. In doing so, critical intercultural communication would also enrich and nuance the discourse of fat studies simultaneously.

In order to provide another window of analysis, in conjunction with intersectionality I also turn to Muted Group Theory as a way of investigating the everyday lived embodiment of fat folks.

### **Muted Group Theory**

Groups that have been the object of discrimination and ostracism within society have often faced difficulties in articulating their concerns to the larger public. Women, queer folk, and people of color often are forced to fight for their voices to be heard amongst the broader master narrative. With the way(s) that fat folk are often positioned within contemporary culture, I would also include people of size within that list of groups that are often “muted” in voicing their lives for others to hear.

According to Littlejohn & Foss (2011), Muted Group Theory has its origins in anthropological research, as explored by Edwin and Shirley Ardener. The Ardeners were anthropologists who were interested in looking at how women in Cameroon construct reality through their everyday lives. Ardner and Ardner originally proposed the theory in the later 1960s, and since then it has been disseminated and extrapolated in a variety of ways. Essentially, at its core, Muted Group theory is concerned with equality within a social context (Ardener, 2005). Ardener (2005) also makes the distinction that “the theory...is concerned at least as much with *what* people say, and when they speak, and in *what mode*, as with *how much*”

(p. 51). It is also important to note that the muted groups and the dominant groups function in a mutually parasitic relationship; they occur as “simultaneities” (Ardener, 2005, p. 52).

Cheris Kramerae’s involvement in the theory led to its early application to communication studies, and therefore, her work is foundational in understanding its position within communication theory. The assumptions of Muted Group Theory for communication are that English is a “[hu]man-made language” and that it “embodies the perspectives of the masculine more than the feminine,” while supporting “the perceptions of white middle-class males. Men are the standard” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 148). In other words, Kramerae argues that men use language to dominate women, so that women’s voices become less present, or “muted” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 149).

Since the preliminary application, there have been many further uses of the ideas behind Muted Group Theory in communication contexts, as it can arguably apply to any group that is not in a hegemonic position of dominance within the context of language and culture. One could therefore then utilize Muted Group Theory in relation to fat bodies. In the United States we live in a society that privileges the thinner body and thin experience, by using “thin-centric language.” Additionally, our larger cultural conversations embody the perspectives of the thin more than the fat. We also use fat bodies as comic relief, or to embody something that is undesirable and something to be avoided at all costs, therefore “muting” the voices of those who are fat and who don’t hate themselves, as many fat acceptance activists vocalize.

This discussion of fat talk is important in regards to Muted Group Theory because of its emphasis on language and discursive construction of identity. In their study exploring the consequences and causes of fat talk, Arroyo & Harwood (2012) found that fat talk correlates with a desire to be thin and dissatisfaction with one’s body. In other words, “people who are less

satisfied with their bodies tend to engage in more fat talk conversations” (p. 181). The authors then issue a call to communication scholars to consider the implications of their research and to further develop the implications; the gap in the research is very explicitly noted here.

Additionally, Calogero, Herbezo, & Thompson (2009) found that the more women have their bodies talked about, whether positively or negatively, the more dissatisfied and more surveilled women feel about their bodies and their selves. Fat talk further “perpetuates the overvalued ideal of thinness and shared revulsion of fat” (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003, p. 386).

Discursive formations of bodily identity are clearly impacted by such endeavors as fat talk, and further impact the general cultural conceptions of fat bodies.

This need for discursive space is part of the onus for the reclaiming of the word fat. Instead of identifying as other terms such as “obese,” “heavy,” “overweight,” or “large,” to use the word “fat” as an identity descriptor is to take a word that has often been used towards bodies that are larger as a source of derision and hate and transform it into a label of pride. This reclaiming of “fat” is similar to the way that the word “queer” has been reclaimed within the LGBTQ community. By discursively taking back a word that has been used to silence or shame bigger bodies, fat folks challenge the ways that others and themselves talk about and to their bodies.

Applying Muted Group theory to this reclamation, by employing a word that has been used by those in the dominant speaking groups as a means of derision towards those with larger bodies, folks who choose to use the term “fat” are allowing themselves to take up linguistic space. These dialogic changes often occur on small levels and have implications for the larger macro culture. I have noticed that when I began a shift in my own discourse to eliminate fat talk and body negativity from my conversations, others have often followed suit or commented on

the change, allowing for a space of dialogue. This is a way to begin to change the ways that fat folks are allowed to exist. If we are allowed to take up verbal space, then we start to carve out opportunities for ourselves to take up physical and political space. In this manner, Muted Group theory allows for a mode of understanding what it means to be a fat person in this particular linguistic culture. Our voices are muted when we are not represented. By challenging the thin-centric and fatphobic nature of our cultural conversations, we raise the potential of providing fat folks with spaces in which they can be heard.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FURTHER EXPANSION

To argue for an inclusion of fat studies within the broader disciplinary conversation is not to erase or diminish the other intersections of identity that are already commonly theorized or implicated within the larger body of research, and within the even larger context of the field of communication. Rather, to argue for the inclusion of body size, and more specifically fat studies, is to expand the current dialogue and consider a more holistic image of how people navigate within the world. Broadening the intersections to consider body size in relation to other identity markers like race, gender, class, and ability is a way to ensure a more holistic picture of one's identity, particularly when there are often very real and tangible consequences to this aspect of people's identities.

The way that we talk about individuals can create the way they see themselves. As a society, the United States engages in a great deal of fat talk, which, in light of Muted Group Theory, does not allow fat people space to truly articulate their voice within the larger cultural dialogue, especially pertaining to bodies. Fat bodies are not deemed worthy of love and care, since the onus of blame is often placed on fat bodies for getting into the shape they are in (Wann, 2009).

I have also argued for a more specific inclusion of fat studies within critical intercultural communication, as the area of fat studies itself is often without a specific disciplinary home. I believe that communication studies, as a field, can benefit from the inclusion of fat studies within the disciplinary conversations. After all, we engage in the world and within culture in the bodies that we physically occupy, so to ignore the communicative implications of the ways our bodies are read would be irresponsible. As Chavez (2010)

expresses, “Until we can have a dialogue across lines of difference when those not marginalized have a primary voice, and those with privilege listen, no legitimate social change can be expected” (p. 30). Specifically, fat studies would flourish within the field of critical intercultural communication because of the ways that fatness can be read across situations. As mentioned earlier, a large portion of the fat studies literature is based on the experiences of heterosexual white women. By introducing fat studies to critical intercultural communication, the paradigmatic assumptions and values of critical intercultural work would challenge and encourage fat studies to grow as an area of study.

I embarked on this project as an attempt to suture some of the wounds that have been enacted onto me over the years of living in a fat body. Through encountering the literature and engaging in discussions with friends and colleagues, the act of writing this work provided me a space where my voice, my experience, and my body was valid, both within the world and within my discipline. I wrote this document for eight year old Hannah, to tell her the things I wish I had known 17 years ago.

Your body does not dictate your worth, food is not the enemy, and people who matter will not love you any less at a size 26 than a 6. The way that people engage with you as a larger body will be different, but the world will not end. You are allowed to enjoy food, and you are allowed to exist without hating yourself.

It has taken me 17 years to be able to recover enough to write these words and in most moments, believe them. I still have moments where I engage in self-hate, where I do not want to get out of bed and deal with my fat body, and where I have unhealthy thoughts towards food, but I also have moments where I love myself, and where I am excited to get out of bed and grab a meal with friends. I will always have a complicated relationship to my body and to food, but I



am confident in saying that because I discovered fat studies, I now exist in a space where I am not consumed with the hatred of my body.

Fat studies has been instrumental in repairing my relationship to my body. This, to me, is why this research is vital, and why this research needs to continue. Change often enacts on small levels first and then ripples out to the larger culture. Fat studies research has the potential to be that ripple of change—one body at a time. By combining the potential that fat studies possesses with the already established power of critical intercultural communication, I believe that we can dramatically shift our conversations as well as our conceptions of bodies and provide a space where everyone, regardless of body size, feels valued and free to live their lives.

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