

The Vermont Connection

Volume 39 *Dear Student Affairs: Reflections on the Past and Hopes for the Future*

Article 14

4-12-2018

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Recommended Citation

Silvis, J.A. and Santos, A.J. (2018) "Get Out of That Chair: How Fat Professionals Fit in Student Affairs," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 39 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol39/iss1/14>

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Get Out of That Chair: How Fat Professionals Fit in Student Affairs

J. A. Silvis & A. J. Santos

In the authors' experiences as fat, queer, people of color, they exist in a student affairs bubble that reminds them that their bodies are abject. They are forced to sort out when is it their sexualities, their skin, or their size that is the reasoning for their silence in higher education. They force themselves to ask, "when is it about just being fat?" while questioning if their fatness can be separated from their brownness and queerness. "Get Out Of That Chair: How Fat Professionals Fit in Student Affairs" creates a dialogue and discussion about how bodies are policed in the higher education and student affairs job search processes through performative writing. It demands that "normal" bodies get out the way to finally make it about fat people and seeks to exist freely regardless of the discomfort of others.

Language Clarification

We make the deliberate choice to interweave our experiences and to make our writing reflect who we are as F A T queer people of color.

- We use F A T to demonstrate the hypervisibility of our F A T queer brown bodies.
- We use F A T to make the norm uncomfortable, as the world is often uncomfortable with who we are.
- We use F A T to "look unprofessional" and reclaim the harm the field has hosted.

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- We use F A T to celebrate the space we take and the community we have with other F A T folx.

Get Out of That Chair: How Fat Professionals Fit in Student Affairs

In 2015, I was new in many ways: I was new to graduate school, student affairs, and a steady income. Although newness was the most prominent theme at the time, I was very excited at the possibilities ahead. I navigated graduate school in the best way I knew; but I had a very hard time as a new graduate in student affairs because of my body. As a F A T person, there are many spaces that I am required to carve out for myself, and when change happens, the reality of the anti-F A T world becomes overwhelming. The liminal space that my F A T body occupied between undergraduate and graduate school was uncomfortable, and the pressures of professionalism from my new role in student affairs compounded my already present feelings of inadequacy in the field. As I moved through the field, I found comfort and empowerment in my F A T body, but that was not always the case.

By 2015, I was settling into my second year as a residence director. There was a lot of comfort in knowing who I was working with, understanding the specific details about how to do the work, and having a year's worth of cultural context. I suppose all of those "things" helped me feel comfortable, but I knew I was an outsider. I felt like an outsider every time a co-worker talked about the Weight Watcher points they were counting, even though I never wanted to join them. I felt like an outsider when I could not find anything to wear from the student bookstore, even though I was never into school pride. I felt like an outsider when I would part ways with the group of my colleagues to take an elevator, even though it meant I would not be sweaty in our meeting. I felt like an outsider every time I asked a thin student to give up their seat for me, to make available the one normal chair and desk in a room full of traditional school desks, where the desk and the seat connected. I felt even more like an outsider when I was forced into a desk made for a small child because I felt as though I was on display as the bigger student unwilling to move, since movement meant more visibility in the tiny desk. "Doing me" came at the cost of being different. I knew that some of the things I did or did not do were always going to be retold as a lack of professionalism. I wanted so badly to not give a damn as a F A T person, but that did not change the fact that I knew my F A T body would never be professional enough as is.

The interconnectedness of race, body, gender, sexuality, and profession is an area of subjectivity that begs for further exploration (Levy-Navarro & Wann, 2009). The intersection of identity and professional exploration is taken for granted in student affairs because the perception is that everyone exists as and within a politic of white, cisgender, and heterosexual. Assumptions made in the field of student affairs erase the experiences, livelihoods, and beauties of professionals that fall outside the hegemonic mold of professionalism. F A T, queer, professionals of color in the field of student affairs are used for their experience with and of marginalization but are seldom given the space, recognition, and love necessary for F A T, queer, professionals of color to thrive. That being said,

we, the authors, are here to take our space, recognition, and love for ourselves as a means of self-empowerment, liberation, and exploratory practice as F A T, queer, professionals of color.

In our efforts to be recognized, we will facilitate this conversation through a discussion of the job search process that new professionals face. Our stories will give insight, context and truth to how we navigate through our previous job searches. As we process our stories together, we also come back to provide reflection for our fellow F A T QTPOC (queer/trans/person of color) family and propose action for allies.

Bodies of Knowledge

It is a great honor to situate our conversations in Chicana Feminism. We are guided by Cherrie Moraga's "Theory in the Flesh" (1981) because it honors the political nature of our existence as F A T queer people of color. "Theory in the Flesh" allows us to explore how we feel the tension with our many identities and the colonizing powers that make it hard to exist, let alone feel liberated. We create meaning through our bodies, and this theory-creation is devised from our experiences while living in our diverse, gorgeous, and valid bodies. We are intentional when we mobilize and contextualize Muñoz's theory of disidentification (1999) within the context of the professional realm and the realm of the body. Muñoz described disidentification as the ability to transform situations of marginality into culturally rich, self- and community-empowering moments that contribute to a politic of resistance with a supremacist framework. Our ability to find or make spaces for ourselves and our bodies within a politic of white supremacist exclusion marks our disidentificatory practice. Additionally, we tell our story through adapting the undergraduate college-choice process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) to the job search process. The college-choice process focuses on three stages: predisposition, search, and choice.

.When searching for an undergraduate institution, predisposition refers to how much a student was exposed to the idea of attending college. In the case of job searching in student affairs for the first time, predisposition is particularly relevant. Whereas students are more so motivated by what their parents and previous teachers goals are (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000), new student affairs professionals, are traditionally exposed to the idea of entering the field by previous supervisors during our own undergraduate experiences. As students begin to conduct their search, they identify their own educational and occupational aspirations (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000), which mirrors the experience of the new professional during their search process.

Additionally, both students and new professionals factor in their own social and economic needs when engaged with the search process. Lastly, a choice is made by students through continued support and encouragement from their family, imagined campus experience, and outcomes while at the institution of consideration (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Similarly, new professionals turn to their loved ones, mentors, and colleagues to imagine how the new professional will thrive and develop in their potential new position.

Predisposition

I was encouraged to enter this field by F A T people. of color. Two of my mentors during my first job search were people of color and larger in size. They both talked about how it was great to show up in the office in the way they wanted to. One mentor, in particular, felt his best in basketball shorts and sneakers because it helped him lessen the divide between students and him in his role as a conduct hearing officer. He has been called sloppy and unprofessional, but he was one of the best at caring and advocating for his students. Meanwhile, another mentor, who took pride in her sexuality, would often come to work with long nails, freshly colored hair, and low cleavage tops. She often faced silence for presenting as a hard femme and Chicana but never budged. Regardless, she gave no mind and did her job extraordinarily well and was often recognized by students for her support and mentorship for women of color. As much as my mentors' experiences are upsetting to hear of, it did not stop me from coming into the field. I was more often encouraged by the fact that my mentors could present themselves authentically.

I am unsure of my gender identity, but I know that I have always connected effortlessly with womxn. I met Cherie in early 2015 while working as a graduate assistant; she was the only other F A T person in our workplace and the only F A T QTPOC professional amongst a team of 10. I felt a strong connection to Cherie and I justified Cherie's heart and experience as the reason why we were so close. In the fall of 2016, the professional staff was given departmental jackets, and Cherie's did not fit. The company that produced the jacket did not have a larger size. We spoke deeply about this moment when Cherie's body quite frankly did not fit in the work to which she was so dedicated. We cried together and saw each other for the F A T QTPOC beauty that we were. Cherie helped me understand that, in this work, your people exist.

Representation of F A T professionals is key to signifying to other F A T professionals that they can work in the field of higher education. However, representation is not indicative of counter-discourse or oppositional consciousness. Oppression occurs when someone enforces their power over another without the consent of the oppressed. This cycle of violence does not change if the number of body-diverse individuals increases, but such individuals are continually and consistently pushed to the margins, which deters upward mobility and overall representation in the field. The concept of predisposition to a politic of exclusion has caused the two of us to face adversity, but also

to force our way into the field with the goal of opening an entirely new arena of F A T QTPOC excellence. Johnson (2000) spoke to his experience as a young, black, gay man interacting with his grandmother and he cited that his grandmother helped him to theorize excellence from a perspective outside of the white supremacist politic that he was forced into his entire life. Our work is inspired by our adversity, influenced by our traumas, and advanced through our understanding of mentors like us.

Search

F A T QTPOC professionals are located at the intersection of fitting within a thin framework while navigating white spaces made for white folx by white people steeped in white supremacy. The navigation of the saturated white spaces is complicated further as the search process begins or continues and even after the search process concludes. Muñoz (1999) raised the questions of how racially and sexually marginalized folx make sense and make success within majority culture.

When I began searching my list of anxieties was longer than my list of schools. While I prepped for TPE, I remember sitting down with my supervisor, Jamila Cambridge, the womxn that was powerful, driven, intelligent, and invested in my growth, something I never experienced before, to do the emotional labor of selling myself. Selling myself on paper, in person, and the hardest of all, selling the idea of success to myself. Imposter syndrome is nothing new, and during the time of TPE, I felt the most out-of-place I've ever been. I remember my mind racing with questions I was going to ask Jamila:

- *How am I going to find a blazer for these shoulders?*
- *Belts are too tight and are made for thin people, should I wear one?*
- *Should I show my tattoos? Do I have too many?*
- *Should I wear long sleeves? I'm going to be so hot, and I sweat so easily.*
- *What if they rule me out because I have tattoos?*
- *What if I lost weight before the conference?*

The search process for any new professional is a daunting task, but with the added layer of multi-marginalization, the task feels insurmountable. The idea that exposure, and a sharp game plan, will be the most effective parts of any one's arsenal is unrealistic and almost funny. Many do not consider that as new professionals we move into student affairs, but the insidious supremacist nature of student affairs also moves into us, establishing itself and its standards. It constantly reminds us that we will never be on the inside, no matter how close we may feel we are to being accepted for who and where we are. Student affairs often juxtaposes itself against our livelihood(s), experience(s), bodies moving through our minds and our relationships within the field like a storm in the night.

Choice

I wish I figured out how to envision an institution that would not police my body, but how we police each other sits so deeply in our psyche that we do not recognize the practice as an oppressive one. When I got to the point of making a choice, assuming I got an on-campus interview, I paid attention to several things because I am questioning how my F A T body will be accepted:

- *I often feel embarrassed when I huff, puff, and sweat while the host escorts me to the next interview.*
- *Because of the restricted clothing that comes with interviewing, and because I am F A T and get winded and sore easily, I often look and ask for the elevator. I note if I hear any comments about using the elevator.*
- *When there is lunch on campus, I ponder the message around “healthy eating”?*
- *During the presentation, is there enough space for me and other folx to move freely between isles? Do current staff members have to advocate for their literal place in the room?*
- *Then there’s the point in which I have the benefits and office culture conversation with Human Resources (HR). I recall some HR professionals who emphasized their boot camp exercise groups that are only offered to staff, but what I really want to hear is about staff affinity spaces, if there are any.*
- *The last part of the night is usually dinner where I count how many people of color are in this space and watch for the locals eyes on my body that tell me if I am welcomed or not.*

The choice step is about identifying what the professional wants to get out of the experience (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). This process requires individuals to be attuned to their desires, which are deeply political and are about an individual’s right to exist (Hollibaugh, 2001). *To choose to live and work at any institution, I must consider, with intention and instinct, my livelihood. As a F A T person, that means I labor more to identify spaces that will honor my body and its needs and allow my existence to be indicative of resistance.*

Imagining Liberation for F A T QTPOC Professionals

bell hooks (1994) spoke deeply about education as a liberatory practice that has the potential to evolve into liberatory praxis. hooks discussed the epistemology and experiential knowledges that live within, between, and among us in our everyday interactions, contextualizing further how our bodies are knowledgeable, sites of oppression, and also sites of healing. Susan Stryker (2006) further contextualized and compounded the work of hooks when discussing the idea of (de)subjugated knowledges, which is a concept that consistently requires us to historicize our knowledge, then situate such knowledge within our community, whatever that community may be (pp. 12-13). The combination of hooks’ and

Stryker's epistemological perspectives speaks tremendously to the potential that the F A T QTPOC professional has as a method of resistance, achievement, and excellence within a framework of supremacy. Therefore, liberation is imagined to be possible for F A T QTPOC professionals and others, more specifically, through the experiences of coalition.

I now have a full-time position at Boise State University and am constantly challenged in my validity as a professional in the field. I moved from San Francisco to Boise knowing that my identities were going to be met with challenge, confusion, and resistance because folx like me do not work in a place like this. The emotional labor of constantly naming and renaming your position in the world is a practice that I would call identity turbulence. I use the naming of my identity as a practice of empowerment, but I have found that the pressure to name and rename my identities on other's terms is exhaustive and at times unsustainable. Unsustainable to the point where I have questioned whether or not I should speak to or about my identity:

- *Is it easier if I leave my pronouns out of this introduction because everyone else left out theirs?*
- *When I tell my new staff that I identify as a F A T QTPOC will they take me seriously?*
- *If I do not mention my identity intersections will I perceive every act of disrespect as directly related to my marginality?*
- *Why do I beg to be different?*

The F A T QTPOC professional is often “asking the other question” (Matsuda, 1991). Matsuda used a series of questions to demonstrate how to seek out the interconnection of oppression. Matsuda wrote:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ [...] When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’ Working in coalition forces us to look for both the obvious and non-obvious relationships of domination, helping us to realize that no form of subordination ever stands alone (Matsuda, 1991, pp. 1189-1190).

Similarly, F A T QTPOC ask themselves similar questions to make sense of the oppression and understand the lack of belonging.

The liberation of F A T QTPOC will come with the dismantling of heterosexist, sexist, racist, fatphobic, and ableist structures. To advocate for QTPOC amenities on and around college campuses is also to advocate for spaces for F A T people. Meanwhile, F A T professionals are in a position to build coalition with other marginalized groups. The fundamental truth is that student affairs needs to be and do better by paying attention more when they hire F A T QTPOC for their

inevitable labor, but fail to support or recognize the labor as exhaustive. We ask, that for F A T QTPOC professionals to thrive, student affairs professionals give recognition to the F A T experience and acknowledge that the structures and messages F A T QTPOC face cannot be separated. An awareness of the F A T experience needs to enter the conversation for student affairs professionals that is separate from and honors the uniqueness of other marginalized experiences. *When we can finally talk about “all of me” I will feel like I belong.*

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