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**Review Essay:**

Cheryl Glenn’s *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*

in conversation with

Anna Kirkland’s *Fat Rights: Dilemmas of Difference and Personhood*

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The stigmatization of individuals who are obese is both a pervasive and constitutive hegemonic ideology of Western thought. One of the primary competing messages in national news coverage was/is the emphasis of obesity as a problem of personal responsibility, a garden-variety character flaw, pointing to individualistic solutions rather than larger environmental or societal changes (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell). As is the familiar practice, when a person of difference is stigmatized it may also lead to their discrimination in both the public and private spheres. To be clear, discrimination is the unfair treatment of one person or group usually because of prejudice about race, ethnicity, age, religion, or gender (Wood).

Obesity discrimination is another, often overlooked, form of intolerance that is becoming more apparent with the rise of the “epidemic” ideology within American culture. The notion of obesity discrimination has spread in tandem with the obesity epidemic across America and among all population groups. Understood by many researchers of the topic that negative weight discourse is common in American society and escalating at disturbing rates, the prevalence of obesity discrimination has increased from 7% in 1995–1996 to 12% in 2004–2006, affecting all population groups but the elderly (Andreyeva et. al). Its prevalence is relatively close to reported rates of race and age discrimination, but virtually no legal or social sanctions against obesity discrimination exist.

The view that obesity stems from individual choice remains tacit. With this dominant “fault-based” paradigm, critical communication scholars should begin to consider admonishing such a standard in which the greater part of the general public are positioned within a social order and ranked below individuals of “normal” physique (statistically individuals who are overweight/obese populate the majority of US society: 66 percent of people are now either overweight or obese (Hellmich)). Unfortunately for most scholars though, this terrain is customarily uncharted (Campos). We should be entering the fray, asking provocative questions, contributing various theoretical frameworks that analyze weight discourse, thus challenging the status quo, but little research has been offered with the intent to provoke social change.

Consequently, this is what I hope to initiate by rhetorically theorizing two somewhat unrelated books: Cheryl Glenn’s *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* and Anna Kirkland’s *Fat Rights: Dilemmas of Difference and Personhood.* By placing these texts in conversation with one another, I intend to address the following questions regarding weight discourse and silence in general: What does the display of weight upon one’s body communicate? Beyond the common use of self-deprecating humor utilized to dispel weight stigmatization during impression formation, if an individual who is overweight or obese remains silent regarding her/his size, does that also convey a message? These questions will serve to guide the following analysis as I: a) identify common points of emphasis/linkage between the books; b) illuminate various rhetorical themes that may be considered for future discussion; and c) consider what’s at stake with both books in terms of weight discourse.

To begin, it is necessary to note the intense challenges that studying weight discourse in conjunction with silence will present. Obesity is a given point of reference within American culture and cannot be structured as one specific axiom. Central to this argument is the assumption that the effects and connotations associated with obesity are fluid. A complex combination of meaning is associated with words such as “fat”, “overweight”, and “obese.” Weight varies over a lifetime with contingencies such as medications and injuries; its meanings change with racialization, sexualization, and gendering; and its prevalence varies geographically. Historical practices concerning obesity, preferences of smaller body images in the media, partiality of sexual content in the media, and general allegations of ineptitude amongst individuals who are obese have all been prominent aspects of the ongoing discussion concerning “excess” weight.

Whether an academic or a nonintellectual, there is no authentic, credible space where the oppression associated with obesity can be spoken about without some sort of intolerance; therefore it is difficult to begin formulating various theories (Young). At the same time, rhetoric inscribes our language and narratives concerning weight, thereby bestowing power at a particular point in time by deciding who can speak and what gets said. For this reason, the study of rhetoric has always been considered a predominantly self-interested enterprise of investing white males with the power to speak for and over others, while at the same time denying most women, minorities, and persons of difference that same right. By addressing weight and silence from a rhetorical perspective it will pose challenges simply because these are two topics which are ever-developing and almost always completely overlooked individually in contemporary communication scholarship (let alone in concurrence with one another.) Yet, given these assumptions, we have a humanistic obligation to press forward.

Essentially, obesity cannot be studied with a deterministic lens; it must be framed within a dialectical structure of *what it is* and *what it is* *not* (Anderson). By tackling the multi-faceted and extremely nuanced topic of weight discourse, Anna Kirkland, Assistant Professor of Women's Studies and Political Science at the University of Michigan, has spear-headed an area that is receiving serious debate and has helped in initiating the legal conversation that was/is necessary in unpacking this complex matter. In Kirkland’s (2008) book entitled *Fat Rights: Dilemmas of Difference and Personhood*, she addresses the politics of civil rights by providing a conceptual framework for the current social discourse regarding difference, discrimination, and rights within American contemporary culture, and specifically the law. With *Fat Rights*, Kirkland has taken a legal perspective, using specific case studies. The product of the writing is an inspired, intuitive, knowledgeable, and reasonably accessible inquiry that should be deemed necessary reading for anyone interested in the politics of human rights issues such as obesity. The particular framework Kirkland's work posits makes it a more familiar read for a law student rather than a communication scholar, yet, fundamentally, Kirkland allows the reader to ask questions pertinent in framing the rights of all people.

Prior to Kirkland’s work, Cheryl Glenn’s (2004) *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* was also released. Glenn, a Liberal Arts Research Professor of English/Women's Studies and co-director of the Center for Democratic Deliberation at Penn State, contributed a book by which many rhetorical scholars have engaged with feminist research. Glenn’s argument allows scholars to understand that, indeed, silence is a rhetorical art which should be studied. Moreover, the reader finds that it is imperative that we continue to investigate the unseen and unspoken spaces within rhetoric. Like the spoken and/or written word, silences are an integral part of the strategies that inspire and saturate rhetoric. Glenn (2) posits: “Silence may well be the most undervalued and *under*-understood traditionally feminine site and concomitant rhetorical art.” Moreover, Glenn makes the case that silence and language function in correlation with one another, thereby spurring us to question their relationship and seek out new theoretical frameworks that may illuminate our studies of confrontation, resistance, and transformation when challenging various innate power structures. Understandably, I would concur that this is also a viable argument when addressing weight discourse.

To continue, Glenn argues that when individuals of lesser power come out of their silence, they can deploy their resistance to greater influence than they might ever have if they had spoken and been heard at the time. For those that practice a rhetoric of silence as a means of rhetorical delivery, it can be considered a vastly creative, inclusive, and empowering action. In this same inventive sense of “doing something about it”, *Fat Rights* moves beyond the commonplace silence that the majority of individuals who are obese may perform, and draws on little-known legal cases brought by fat citizens as well as significant lawsuits over other forms of bodily difference, asking why the boundaries of our antidiscrimination laws rest where they do. “Fatness”, argues Kirkland, is both similar to and provocatively different from other protected traits, raising long–standing dilemmas in antidiscrimination law into stark relief. Though options for defending difference may be scarce, Kirkland evaluates the available strategies and proposes new ways of navigating this new legal question. For example, gender and race were argued to be linked between weight and poverty (e.g. obese because they’re poor vs. poor because they’re obese.) Moreover, Kirkland posited that there is definitely a considerable wage premium difference in lieu of discrimination depending on the fluctuating/correlating weights of women and men.

Similarly, the “blame” and “choice” of weight is met in *Fat Rights* with a discussion that investigates the unjustness of functional individualism. Despite the fact that American antidiscrimination law is highly individualistic, where pockets of it still regard the person as fundamentally socially situated and group-bound, Kirkland (60) posits: “Any attempt to place blame and suggest solutions, no matter where it is rooted ideologically, must use these logics to explain the relationship between race, functional capacities, and [body type.]” Furthermore, Kirkland (74) offers a vital suggestion in reevaluating the placement of blame on individuals who are obese:

“If a rights-seeking movement like the fat rights movement were to try to reintroduce the logic if blame-shifting, advocates would have to reevaluate the underlying causes…[attention must be shifted away] from neo-liberal anxious healthism [that] critiques fat people as hapless victims… If the panicky tone of the national discussion about fat can be reduced a bit, perhaps we can think through an explanation of fatness that finds its origins in genetic predispositions and in structural changes in the ways we live rather than in the fault of the individual.”

When considering this argument, *Fat Rights* asks the first challenging questions that must be raised about adding weight to lists of currently protected traits like race, gender, and disability: What are all of the “acceptable” reasons/principles/traits of candidates for antidiscrimination laws? How do we want to intervene and/or disaggregate the social policies and stigmatization of obesity? Is body fat an indicator of a character flaw or of incompetence on the job? Does it pose risks or costs to employers they should be allowed to evade? Or is it simply a stigmatized difference that does not bear on the ability to perform most jobs? Could we imagine weight as part of workplace diversity? Taking obesity discrimination into account prompts us to rethink these basic questions that lawyers, judges, and ordinary citizens ask before a new trait begins to look suitable for antidiscrimination coverage.

Similar to the aforementioned questions that Kirkland raises regarding blame and choice, *Unspoken* also reiterates that the underlying silence involved with less powerful discourses such as those associated with weight has most often been connected to femininity, oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, obedience, and/or an absence of text/voice. This is evident when considering examples such as the adoption of the “jolly fat person”[[1]](#footnote-2) stereotype by individuals who are obese. Instead of addressing and/or employing some other sort of rhetorical method, individuals who are obese may choose to employ specific types of humor in order to avert attention away from their stigma. In doing so, she/he may silence the words or judgments of others even before they are spoken, while also strategically choosing to be silent in addressing how others perceive them. With this example we begin to see that Kirkland and Glenn are both touching on similar themes of resistance.

With *Unspoken’s* continued argument, silence is addressed in terms of its meaning and whether or not it is environmental, locational, cultural, communal, personal, self- or other-initiated, self- or other-derived, expected or unexpected, and/or consciously or unconsciously chosen. Silence is not subordinate to speech; rather, silence and speech are a complementary form of rhetoric. Glenn posits that silence is meaningful in that it contains everything beyond the invisible, powerlessness, emptiness, absence, and erasing commonly associated with it, whereas silence and speech are consistently undergoing a dialectical tension. Drawing on other research, Glenn argues that silence is a phenomenon with an ontological significance, and establishes that silence is a site of *knowing*, *composing*, and *generation*. Moreover, speech and silence are dependent upon one another and should be theoretically framed as a *reciprocal* relationship rather than oppositional. Speech often fails us, yet silence rarely does.

We can also acknowledge that weight should be framed in the same sense. Individuals who are obese silently display weight as an artifact that also communicates meaning. No matter how many disclaimers, self-deprecating acts of humor, or strategic means by which the obesity is meant to be offset, individuals who display “extra” weight cannot escape the messages their bodies display. Dialectically speaking, one is either characterized with the normative labels of: “fat” or “thin”, “unattractive” or “attractive”, “unhealthy” or “healthy.” Individuals who are obese are continually silenced or exercise silencing when navigating their size and shape. Accordingly, this exchange can be understood as a predominantly gender-specific phenomenon. Glenn and Kirkland both argue that gender is an analytical category that signifies inequities. Used in this way, gender signifies who controls discourse.

The above themes that Glenn and Kirkland address regarding power, gender, and dialectical tensions prove that we are in the middle of a fascinating period of upheaval over the politics of weight and silence. Professional and governmental assessments share a medicalized view of obesity, though there is no consensus on what “causes” it or how it might be “cured.” Talk about weight in contemporary US popular culture is dominated among elites and in the mainstream media: obesity as unhealthy, obesity as costly, obesity as driving increased rates of diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Medical researchers, physicians’ organizations, and state agencies have organized for decades around the notion that obesity is a medical problem; holding conferences, publishing standards, classifying it as a disease, researching treatments, assigning labels/measures, and developing an increasingly-influential hegemonic power structure with funds from major pharmaceutical companies. Correspondingly, silence can be (and most often is) used to preserve these kinds of ideologies whether they are in the courtroom, classroom, prison, church, etc., and can demonstrate one’s gender, respect, threats, connections, judgments, and various other symbolic/tactical strategies. Obviously the politics of weight and silence are both intensely personal and predominantly governmental at the same time.

In this vein, we may consider the unspoken power structures by which weight discourses are influenced by the absence of laws and legislation that address the fair treatment of individuals who are obese. When considering governmental law and *Fat Rights*, we must remember that obesity remains unprotected, and it is perfectly legal (except in Michigan[[2]](#footnote-3)) to discriminate against individuals due to their size, shape, and weight. As weight/size become another physical symbol by which assumptions of personhood and traits are wrongly bestowed, Kirkland offers an extremely logical analysis on the state of individuals who are obese in the US, and what we must address within the law if justice is one of our goals when assessing the rights of people of size. Kirkland spurs us to understand that science, culture, and law all coalesce when examining weight discourses.

Kirkland argues that clear discrimination against individuals who are obese has been documented in three areas: education, health care, and employment. Individuals who are obese have not been granted the special consideration of a protected class (at least not in any federal law), nor are most of the rights infringed upon by this type of discrimination considered fundamental. After all, there is no basic right in this country to education, employment, or health care (Stuart). Paralleling this position, Glenn argues that who gets to speak and who should remain silent depends on the rhetorical situation. All powerful groups need an opposing, weaker presence in order to dominate. The above situations exemplify how the processes of silence work in terms of power and punishment. In every situation where an impression is to be formed, individuals who are obese must face silence and/or silencing in lieu of their stigma, which consequently, may also result in discrimination.

To focus on the realm of work service, Kirkland provides that evidence of weight discrimination is found at virtually every stage of the employment cycle, including selection, placement, compensation, promotion, discipline, and discharge. State and federal governments as well as private employers have enacted measures that penalize and arguably disadvantage individuals who display excess weight. Economic policies (e.g. putting surcharges on the already-inflated insurance premiums paid by the overweight and/or obese), legislative remedies (e.g. requiring that children in public schools be graded on the basis of weight), and employment policies (e.g. denying health and life insurance to an employee with a BMI over an acceptable level) that rebuke individuals who are obese are as damaging as any other form of discrimination. There continues to be an ongoing debate as to which method is the most effective pertaining to specific cases of obesity discrimination in the private sector. Kirkland argues that, at this point, the Americans With Disabilities Act may prove the most promising in battling obesity discrimination in the workplace; whereas, under the act, a disability is a “physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities” of the individual affected (Stuart).

Perhaps by simply continuing to seek out better and more effective legislation regarding obesity discrimination while also analyzing the silences and/or silencing that occur, we can begin to resist the imbalanced societal and rhetorical norms regarding weight. *Unspoken* allows for us to contemplate silence and silencing as providing new methods for expanding the rhetorical tradition. We cannot assume that a verbal matrix is the only viable venue by which we communicate regardless of the measure of persuasion. Moreover, in addressing the unspoken, a rhetoric of silence joins the multiplicity of rhetorical devices which, in turn disrupts hegemonic thought. As Glenn (151) argues: “We must locate, discover, stumble upon, and then open up silences.” This should also be the main endeavor when studying and challenging contemporary weight discourses.

In discussing one particular case study, Glenn posits that we can utilize silence as respect, silencing of the self (or “stilling”), and employing the power of omission as outlets for resistance. Silencing, as it intersects with sociopolitical power structures, domination, and subordination is evident when considering the pervasiveness of weight discourse. Consequently, this demonstrates that the rhetorically effective uses of silence and rhetorical study of it adhere upon the *individual* involved in a given situation. We as indivduals all have the entitlement to rhetorical sovereignty. That is to say, we may remain purposefully silent to reserve the right, theory, and practice involved with understanding our realities as individuals who are obese. Members of a muted group will indefinitely develop rules, laws, contracts, and one’s identity to equate with cultural capital; spurring these same members to adapt, mediate, and subordinate their expressions to that of the dominant discourse and/or idiom. Moreover, as other means for resistance, members of a muted group such as individuals who are obese can use silence to: a) indicate loyalties to various aspects of culture; b) permit individuals to make sense out of events; c) act as reflection, meditation, and contemplation, assisting in thinking through uncertainty; and d) work through an argument’s timeline, agenda, context, and pivotal speaking moment. *Unspoken* truly allows for rhetorical scholars and critical scholars alike to contemplate and apply these concepts of silence/silencing to their studies of weight discourse.

*Fat Rights* also enters the conflicting discussions of the obesity debate from a new perspective: our inherited civil rights tradition. The scope is wide-ranging, covering much more than just weight discrimination and drawing the reader into the larger context of antidiscrimination protections and how they can be justified for a new group or social movement. Kirkland provides strong evidence for her argument and a clean analysis that challenges us to rethink the allocation of rights, conceptions of personhood, and what should be done concerning weight discourse. Although Kirkland’s argument may be difficult for readers who are not well-versed in legal terms and formalistic logic, the overall tone of this book is highly academic and could easily become part of a college syllabus (especially in a course focused on the social constructionism associated with weight discourse.) Clearly, the reader finds it essential to strive for a new and continued dialogue concerning the status and discrimination that is seemingly intrinsically associated with weight (especially given how easily it is dismissed and how insidious it remains.)

In conducting this particular analysis, I set out to negotiate the arguments of Glenn in Kirkland in a manner that would identify common points of emphasis/linkage between the books and also illuminate various rhetorical themes. In doing so, we have found that there are many intersections between weight discourse and silence: both exemplify complex dialectical struggles between rights, group orientation, lawfulness, difference, perception, personhood, blame, power, confrontation, resistance, transformation, and the reciprocal qualities of both obesity and silence. By closely examining *Unspoken* and *Fat Rights* I hope to have exemplified what’s at stake with both books in terms of weight discourse and silence—the challenging notion of social change and the pursuit of basic human rights.

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1. Maddox, Back, and Liederman (288) characterized the jolly fat person as: “One who appears to like life, her/himself, and other people; [yet] in turn is countered by evidence that [her/his] social image as an overweight person is strongly negative.” To simplify, the jolly fat person can be defined as an individual who is obese who uses humor as a communication tactic to compensate for her/his outward appearance. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Michigan remains the only state that has an established obesity discrimination law in terms of employment. The state's [Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/act_453_elliott_larsen_8772_7.pdf) was amended in 1976. The law specifically states that an employer shall not refuse to hire or recruit, discharge or otherwise discriminate against an individual because of weight (or religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, height or marital status). Significantly, other states can learn from the obesity discrimination cases that have been addressed by Michigan litigation and law practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)