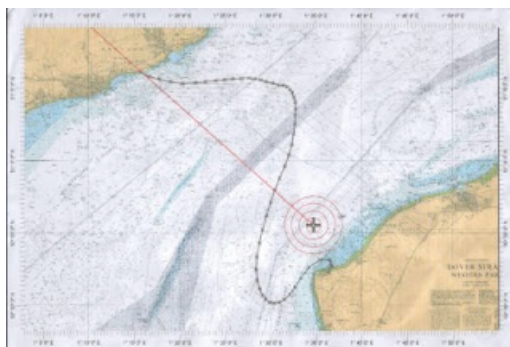


**'You can't be too vain to gain if you want to swim the Channel': marathon swimming and the war on obesity**

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In the contemporary context of a 'war on obesity', sport and physical activity are habitually cited as an essential element in 'fighting fat' – a proposal guided by the assumption that fatness and health and fitness are mutually exclusive, or where one is seen as a cure for the other. This has been incorporated into the Olympics Legacy Action Plan, which directly posits increased physical activity as an anti-obesity strategy. From this perspective, then, the fat body cannot be a sporting body, but can only become a sporting body by becoming thinner - not least because socially privileged traits such as self-discipline are strongly associated with the production of sporting bodies, but are conventionally treated as antithetical to fatness. What does this mean, then, for the sport of marathon swimming, which actively *demand*s the acquisition, or minimally, the maintenance, of body fat as a performance advantage? How are legitimate sporting identities constructed, contested and embodied in such a seemingly paradoxical context?



Marathon swimming refers broadly to open water swims of 10km and over, but this paper focuses on what might be considered the 'ultra' domain of marathon swimming. In iconic terms, this is represented by the English

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Channel – 21 miles across at its shortest point, with an average crossing time of over 13 hours (but would also include other long swims – Catalina Channel, Round Jersey, Cook Straits etc). This paper refers specifically to those swims governed by ‘Channel rules’ (a nostalgic, but now modernised nod to the conditions of the first English Channel swims): that is, where swimmers swim without a wetsuit, and wear only a regular swimming costume, latex or silicone cap, and goggles (Webb didn’t have goggles or cap, and had a woolen suit; the nostalgic reproduction of the original conditions instead focuses primarily on the key conditions of swimming without artificial assistance in relation to buoyancy or insulation...although debates around authenticity flare up regularly and vociferously within the wider community). It is in this non-wetsuit context that the maintenance and acquisition of body fat becomes a performance necessity (alongside other acclimatization activities). The seeking out of body fat, then, renders the marathon swimming body an anomaly among ideal-type sporting bodies.

When I first encountered the marathon swimming community as a swimmer, and then also as a researcher, my initial response – as someone coming from within critical obesity studies / Fat Studies – was one of political optimism. The swimming body, I speculated hopefully, offered a platform for challenging conventional assumptions about the mutual exclusivity of fit and fat that I’d been exploring in other parts of my work on the contemporary attack on obesity. But the reality of swimming fat is much more complicated than my rather naïve first assessment, and this paper argues that while at first glance, purposeful swimming fat appears to be a repudiation of the conventional values of fitness and fatness, closer inspection reveals an approach to body fat that is simultaneously comprised of a profound allegiance to the rhetorics of bodily discipline and control, and antipathy towards fat, *and* the (contingent) valuing and celebration of fat (and, in some cases, a re-valuing of the fat embodiment).

This paper draws on three years of ESRC-funded multi-sited auto / ethnographic research into the process of becoming a Channel swimmer – a project which grew out of my own decision to train for a Channel swim, which I eventually

completed in September 2010. In this paper, I want to argue that the apparently contradictory embrace and repudiation of fat within the swimming community is held together through the concept of



‘heroic fatness’ – that is, like the ‘brave’ actor who gains weight for a role, fatness figures as an undesirable but necessary act of bodily discipline and sacrifice in the service of the swimming endeavour. In this way, heroic fatness produces the very values that it seems to contradict. However, heroic fatness is also neither universally available nor achievable, leading to far more ambivalent modes of fatness than the heroic ideal. This unsettling of the certainties of heroic fatness provides a productive lens through which to explore the disjunctures and ambiguities between prevailing knowledges and practices around both fatness and sport. To illustrate some this complexity, I’m going to look very briefly, firstly, at the construction of heroic fatness; and secondly, at the ‘ambivalent fatness’ that arise of the disjunctures and exclusions that heroic fatness produces (I’m not going to say much more about the research methodology because of lack of time, but I would be happy to answer questions later).

### **Heroic Fatness**

Although there are considerable uncertainties within the community about how much body fat is enough, a singular certainty emerges within the dominant narrative of marathon swimming: that fat is an *undesirable necessity*. This is encapsulated in the commonly circulated maxim: “You can’t be too vain to gain if you want to swim the Channel” – a phrase which presumes fatness to be aesthetically problematic and undesirable.

Especially for those swimmers coming to the sport from other endurance sports such as marathon running, or Ironman triathlon, the concept of purposeful weight gain was an anathema to their sporting identities. Simon, for example, was an experienced and accomplished endurance athlete and climber whose

relatively lean body had made him vulnerable to the cold – a problem experienced during training, and then in an initial unsuccessful Channel swim:

“...The thing is, I was fit enough to swim, but it just seemed so gloriously unfair that with swimming, it does not...well with Channel swimming...it is almost the opposite, isn't it, because in other sports, the fitter you are, the leaner you are, the more muscular you are, you know, equals improved performance. [...] It just seems so alien to me to be on the one hand just banging out as much swim time as possible, but on the other hand, you know, eating 5 doughnuts a day....”

As he was talking, he gestured an exaggeratedly round belly and blew out his cheeks to make a 'fat face'.

There is a moral element to this disrupted sporting identity too, since fatness is commonly associated with having 'let yourself go'. 'Heroic fat', then, has to be distinguished from its unheroic counterpart in order to resist this attribution. On a training camp in Malta, for example, a swimmer pointed out a man, holidaying on the beach with his family, whose rounded stomach hung heavily over the waist band of his shorts. The swimmer remarked laughingly: "He'd make a good Channel swimmer". The 'joke' finds its humour in a presumed shared recognition that the body fat of the swimmers and the non-swimmers on the beach may be materially similar, but is symbolically different. The non-swimmers have 'let themselves go', but the swimmers have purposefully made fat happen. This distinction is also reliant on the presumption of weight loss once the swim was over. Heroic fatness has to be a provisional state, incorporating both the acknowledgement of fat as contingently necessary but undesirable, *and* identification with socially valued traits of self-discipline and bodily control (through weight management). As one male swimmer noted: "[the fat] is okay because it's not who I am". For all the monolithic anti-fat rhetoric of the 'war on obesity' then, not all fat is equal, and heroic fatness is dependent on the careful moral distinction between fatnesses.

### **Ambivalent fatness**

Significantly, the discourse of heroic fatness is the specific reserve of those who are not fat at the start of the training process. Instead, swimmers who already have sufficient (or more than sufficient) body fat to enable them to swim can never have heroically fat bodies, since *being* fat and purposefully *getting* fat (and then lean again) are symbolically distinct. As one male swimmer in Dover who self-identified as fat commented quietly to me on the beach as we watched a group of male swimmers loudly slapping and wobbling the (recently acquired) fat stomach of one of them: “It makes you wonder what they must think of me”. Heroic fatness is also far less available to women, in part because their bodies are already seen as ‘naturally’ endowed with fat, and also, because of the much narrower boundaries of acceptable body size for women. There is no readily available affirmative lexicon for female fatness for swimmers, and I witnessed none of the public physical comedy around body fat among women that was evident among (some of) the men. There is nothing heroic about fatness for women.

These exclusions open up spaces for a much more ambivalent mode of fat embodiment that constitutes a quiet challenge to heroic fatness, and by extension, to the values of the ‘war on obesity’. This can be seen, for example, in moments of critical awareness of the variety of body types involved in marathon swimming and the impossibility of reading either performance or health status from body size and composition. As one female swimmer who identified as overweight for large parts of her life noted: “My heart rate is really good, my resting heart rate is phenomena. My blood pressure is low. Well, you know, you swim and swim and swim...”. “I might be fat”, noted another female swimmer, “but my body is amazing. Just amazing. Look what it can do.” These experiences mark a changed awareness of what the fat sporting body could signify beyond constraining dominant narratives of fatness as synonymous with ill-health and moral failure. Consequently, while these stories often opened with confessions – “I know I’m fat, but...” – they signal moments of reflexive awareness of the limitations of assumptions about body size as a meaningful proxy for health and fitness. This awareness is prompted by the contradictions emerging between the

dominant understandings of fat, and their own embodied experience of it as physically and symbolically empowering.

Those experiences also led many of the swimmers to re-evaluate their own habitual eating and weight management practices – especially for those who had long histories of engagement with the weight loss industry in all its inadequacies (and this refers mostly to women, who are the primary users of all weight loss programmes and interventions). While for many, the end of the swimming season marked the re-ignition of the fight against fat, some of the female swimmers experienced a fading of adversariality with the body. Melissa, for example, highlighted the difference that swimming had made to her experience of fatness:

“I’ve been this fat before...unhappily so. You know, very unhappily so. You know, in a depressed state, hating my body. Whereas now, you know, I’m ambivalent about losing it.”

While far from a whole-hearted embrace of fatness, this is a far cry from both her former unhappy fatness, and from the ideal-type heroic fatness. She also noted that the opportunity to eat freely had raised a critical awareness of just how unhealthily ‘obsessed’ she would become about food when she was dieting. Another female swimmer told me that she had weighed herself every day throughout her adult life – a practice which she had stopped while gaining weight for a swim because she couldn’t face seeing the numbers rise. She told me that she now look back on her daily weigh-ins as having been ‘a bit psycho’ and had now abandoned the practice, post-swim.

These experiences, then, reveal much more ambivalence around fatness than heroic fatness allows for, signaling the uneven and unpredictable nature of the experience of fat sporting embodiment. The contemporary ‘war on obesity’ is characterized both by its insistence on a uniformly negative experience of fatness, and of obesity as *the* priority problem to be solved. These more ambivalent responses, while not stepping entirely outside of the

problematization of the fat body, resist this centralization and presumptions of uniformity in ways that are (sometimes, and in some ways) experienced as individually empowering.

### To conclude...

I have argued that the field of marathon swimming is comprised of an allegiance to the values of bodily discipline and control, an antipathy towards fat, and the contingent valuing and celebration of fat. These contradictory aspects are held together through the concept of 'heroic fatness', whereby fatness is an undesirable necessity, bravely but provisionally borne, before being eliminated through dieting after the swim is over. However, I have suggested that in the cracks that emerge between the dominant knowledges, values and practices that underpin heroic fatness and the lived experiences of the swimmers themselves, alternative more ambivalent fatnesses emerge that offer a more differentiated, layered account of marathon swimming embodiment.



The key implication of this, for me, is in relation to anti-obesity and sport policy. Most significantly, it demonstrates very clearly that for all the rhetoric of the 'war on obesity', not all fat is treated equally, with a strong moral dimension to categorizations of acceptable and unacceptable fat, as we can see in this picture – a photograph of the banner displayed at the entrance to the National Obesity Forum conference in 2009, demonstrating clearly the implicit gendered and classed nature of those categorisations and assumptions. This matters when (some) individuals and groups are subject to medical and social

interventions on the basis of the presumed unifying certainty that 'fat kills'. And related to this, not all fat is *experienced* equally, but rather, is uneven and unpredictable, produced in interaction with dominant values, but not determined by them.

Marathon swimming is a minority sport, but the normative values that constitute the sport are also those of the wider social and cultural context within which it is practiced. Further, those same values are intensified and made visible by the anomalous sporting embodiment demanded by the sport itself. As such, even while seeming to disregard norms of body size, composition and practice, marathon swimming speaks directly to those values in ways that challenge how we think about whose bodies count, both as fit bodies, and as bodies that fit.