

**How About FAT:**  
**The Fat Body and its Intersections in Pop Culture & Media**

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### Introduction

My interest in Fat Studies began spring semester of my sophomore year while taking the class “How Queer is That?” This was the first time I had ever read about fatness in an academic context, in Caleb Luna’s piece “On Being Fat, Brown, Femme, Ugly, and Unloveable,” and the first time I talked about fatness in a class. Luna writes about how fatphobia functions and its relation to desirability, “Because so many fat people in the U.S. are poor and people of color, and because the personal is political, valuing and desiring thin, white bodies becomes a (less than) subtle investment in white supremacy and class privilege.”<sup>1</sup> It was monumental for me to read about how my own body has been affected by societal marginalizations. From that moment on, I knew I was going to write my thesis on Fat Studies.

I want to define the methods and approaches which I will be using throughout this paper. While this paper is influenced by American Studies, Women’s Studies, Queer Theory, Disability Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Media Studies, the main lens through which I view my work is Fat Studies. Similar to some of the other disciplines listed above, Fat Studies is not merely an academic discipline. I view Fat Studies dually as an analytical lens but also a radical politic of the body. Licia Carlson says, “disability studies... is both critical and productive” because it “[critiques] definitions and practices that devalue disability,” while it is also “committed to the development of a positive disability culture identity, and politics.”<sup>2</sup> I see this quote as applicable to fat studies as, similarly, I do not want my work to exist purely in the realm of the academic and the theoretical. By laying out the theoretical underpinnings of our oppression, I hope my work is useful to fat people as a roadmap to liberation, thus combining academia and activism.

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<sup>1</sup> Caleb Luna, “On Being Fat, Brown, Femme, Ugly, and Unloveable”

<sup>2</sup> Licia Carlson, “Institutions,” *Keywords for Disability Studies*, 109



In the introduction of the landmark text *The Fat Studies Reader*, Sondra Solovay and Ester Rothblum define Fat Studies as the following:

In the tradition of critical race studies, queer studies, and women's studies, fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body. The field of fat studies invites scholars to pause, interrupt the everyday thinking about fat (or failure to think), and do something daring and bold. Learners must move beyond challenging assumptions; they must question the very questions that surround fatness and fat people.<sup>3</sup>

I see this quote as defining my work and my perspective on fat studies. My goal in this paper is to embody this definition of fat studies, to question why fatness is viewed the way it is, how this manifests in culture, and how knowing this information takes away fatphobia's power. For me, learning about the origins of fatphobia, specifically as laid out by Sabrina Strings in *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia*, and the notion that the slim ideal is a social construct and many of our views of fatness are purely based on racism and religious sentiment, led me to love myself and my fat body. Why should I feel bad about my body because some devout Protestants decided that slenderness was closer to godliness? I hope that my writing henceforth will help fat people realize that fatphobia and the notion of the thin ideal are nonsense and that we should not have to deal with society's bullshit about our bodies. Doing fat studies work is inherently political and self-relational, which Marilyn Wann writes about in the foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*:

If you participate in the field of fat studies, you must be willing to examine not just the broader social forces related to weight but also your own involvement with these structures. If you do fat studies work, you yourself are always already part of the topic. Every person who lives in a fat-hating culture inevitably absorbs anti-fat beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes, and also inevitably comes to occupy a position in relation to power arrangements that are based on weight. None of us can ever hope to be completely free of such training or completely disentangled from the power grid. None of

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<sup>3</sup> Sondra Solovay and Ester Rothblum, "Introduction," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 2

us is responsible for the whole belief system. But if you undertake to do fat studies work without also acknowledging and addressing your own position in relation to weight-based privilege and oppression, you risk undermining your ostensible efforts with your own unexamined and counterproductive assumptions.<sup>4</sup>

This is why, throughout this paper, I will be talking about my personal experiences with fatphobia as well, drawing upon the traditions of critical ethnography and theorizing of the self, in order to examine my own beliefs and role in the systems I will be discussing. This is not only an academic undertaking but a journey of self-discovery.

In chapter one, I will theorize the fat body, specifically its connection to disability, capitalism, health, morality, and sexuality. I will be drawing upon Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to examine how fatness is constituted through other identities while also affecting how other identities are marginalized in concert with fatness, such as disability, gender, race, and queerness. In chapter two, I turn my attention to the world of pop culture and celebrity, arenas that are heavily influenced by the forces I write about in chapter one, especially capitalism. In this chapter, I specifically focus on the two pop music icons Lizzo and Adele, as, for women entertainers, their body is their currency. Examining Lizzo and Adele and how they are perceived in the media illuminates how fatphobia functions in society, and especially how fatphobia is both gendered and racialized. Finally, in my conclusion, I will draw upon my own lived experience of fatness to further theorize fatphobia and will discuss how I try to love my body in a fatphobic society.

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<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Wann, "Foreword: Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution," xi-xii

## Chapter 1: Theorizing the Fat Body

### **Is Fat a Disability?**

Because this paper makes substantial connections between fatness and disability it is crucial to begin by drawing a distinction between examining fat studies through disability studies and asserting that fatness is a disability. While the goal of this essay is not to argue whether or not fatness is a disability, it is important to address certain valid arguments that consider it as one. Consider Charlotte Cooper's "Can a Fat Woman Call Herself Disabled?" where Cooper navigates her relationship with fatness and disability, writing:

Many fat people suffer poor self-esteem, we grow up fearing our own bodies in shame, public ridicule and social ostracism, and the cultural fear and hatred of us can ruin our lives. I believe that self-defining as 'disabled' enables us to take ourselves seriously and demand that others do also... Disabled people are disabled not by the fact of their impairment, but by disabling prejudice and discrimination. Many survivors do not call themselves disabled, however, if one experiences events that are *disabling*, is not that person or group then *disabled*? I consider the experience of being fat in a fat-hating culture to be disabling which, in addition to my impairment and the similarities I share with other disabled people, such as medicalisation and restricted civil rights, suggest to me that I am disabled.<sup>5</sup>

Cooper points out the similarities between the fat and the disabled experience which, in her view, would justify an identification of fatness within disability. Being fat in a fatphobic society can be disabling, a line of reasoning that could be applied to other marginalized identities as well.

Despite this reasoning she still feels some discomfort at the notion of calling herself disabled due to her fatness:

Yet I still experience a gnawing sensation that 'disabled' is a group to which I cannot belong; obviously, there are no membership cards to this group and no one has told me (yet) that I cannot 'join.' However, my desire to self-define as disabled raises uncomfortable issues of disabled identity and hierarchy, passing, definition, exclusion, and disabled attitudes towards 'normality' and able-bodied people.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Cooper, 33 & 39

<sup>6</sup> Cooper, 40

As Cooper describes here, there are many issues to consider when discussing fatness as a disability. Her position on the relation between fatness and disability could also be extrapolated to other identities whose marginalization could be considered disabling (such as Black people).

My aim in this paper is to examine the parallels between these two identities as, as LeBesco describes, there are “many points of convergence in fat politics and disability politics: shared goals of access; eradication of prejudice, discrimination, and harassment; open forms of cultural expression; and recognition of dignity and happiness,” which makes thinking the two together a productive avenue of analysis.<sup>7</sup> I want to draw from Julie Avril Minich’s call in “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now,” for “an approach to disability studies that emphasizes its mode of analysis rather than its objects of study.”<sup>8</sup> Minich describes that the methodology of Disability Studies “involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations,” a methodology that suits study of the fat body as well.<sup>9</sup> She wants to broaden the methodology of Disabilities Studies as its “scrutiny of normative ideologies should occur not for its own sake *but with the goal of producing knowledge in support of justice* for people with stigmatized bodies and minds,” which would surely include fat people.<sup>10</sup> Looking at disability and fatness together, though still as separate identities (despite arguments to be made to the contrary), produces a productive politics and reveals many parallels between the way both identities are marginalized. This is a politics encouraged by many disability activists, such as Joseph Grigely, who argues for a “proactive disability studies... that is focused not just on attaining rights and accommodations for people

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<sup>7</sup> Kathleen LeBesco, “Fat,” 84

<sup>8</sup> Julie Avril Minich, “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now,” 3

<sup>9</sup> Minich, “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now,” 3

<sup>10</sup> Minich, “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now,” 3

with disabilities but also on developing dynamic, interactive, and collaborative projects that challenge the tyranny of ‘normal’ in all areas of social and political life.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Health At Every Size**

Fat Studies is a burgeoning academic field that examines the fat body, fatphobia, and the medicalization of the fat body. Many of the more mainstream works in Fat Studies focus on the issue of the medicalization of the fat body as “unhealthy” and work to undo this stereotype by declaring that you can be healthy at any size. The Health at Every Size movement builds upon the notion that the alleged health risks of being fat are incorrect and that one can, as the name suggests, be healthy at any and every size. The Health at Every Size approach prioritizes “emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being, without focusing on weight loss.”<sup>12</sup>

While I still find the Health at Every Size framework helpful, especially for those starting to enter Fat Studies or Fat Activism, I want to consider how placing health at the forefront of Fat Acceptance can be problematic. Arguing that fat people should be accepted because they too can be healthy is not the way to go about fat acceptance; it falls into the same vein as assimilationist gay rights activism, arguing for acceptance by positioning themselves as similar to straight people. Health at Every Size also works against people with chronic illnesses or disabilities who could never be considered “healthy” by our societal standards. Some people, including some fat people, will never fit into the normative model of what it means to be “healthy” and that is perfectly fine. Those people should be accepted too, not just the “healthy” fat people. Da’Shaun L. Harrison, in their book *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, problematizes this notion of health. He discusses how the ideal notion of health is extremely

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<sup>11</sup> Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, “Disability” in *Keywords for Disability Studies* citing Grigely, Joseph. “Stuff.” Paper presented at “Blind in the Museum” conference, Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, March 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Deb Bugar, “What is ‘Health at Every Size’?” 42

racialized and can never be achieved by Black people, as well as other marginalized peoples, and was, in fact, created to oppress Black people:

According to the World Health Organization, health is the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not just the absence of disease or infirmity. As I interpret it, this means that for one to be healthy, they must not only be non-disabled but must also be in an environment that allows for them to feel mentally secure, psychically safe, and socially well. As such, this means that Black people—especially those of us who exist with multiple marginalized identities—are always already unhealthy because we are already unsafe... In fact, for “race” to be constructed, the Slave had to exist—and had to exist as the antithesis of health—so that European physicians, anthropologists, and other eugenicists could determine what sets the Slave apart from... the Caucasian.<sup>13</sup>

As Harrison describes, marginalized peoples will never be healthy because they are marginalized: racism, fatphobia, ableism, etc. make people unsafe which, by the definition of the World Health Organization, would make them unhealthy. Instead of positioning fat people as close to the “norm” of thinness and healthiness, a norm constructed to oppress, we should question why that is the norm in the first place. I want to dig deeper and examine why society has this investment in health and the notion of fat as unhealthy. The best way to examine this notion is to examine the fat and disabled body through the lens of Foucault’s biopolitics and its relation to capitalism (as I argue both identities are marginalized analogously).

### **The Fat/Disabled Body, Health, & Biopolitics**

Foucault writes that “one of the characteristic privileges of the sovereign power [is] the right to decide life and death.”<sup>14</sup> This ability to decide life and death through a variety of means, including war and the death penalty, has been termed biopower. Foucault, then, argues that this biopower is not as simple as merely killing and sparing lives but has evolved to allow the state to

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<sup>13</sup> Da'Shaun L. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, 33-34, citing Preamble to the Constitution of WHO as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19 June-22 July 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of WHO, no.2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 135

control lives through other means, not just death (the wielding of this control being termed biopolitics). He describes the two poles around which the biopolitics of the state has developed:

One of these poles—the first to be formed, it seems—centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines*: an *anatomo-politics of the human body*. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls*: a *biopolitics of the population*.<sup>15</sup>

These two poles prescribe two roles to the body: that of the worker and that of reproduction (to eventually create more workers). The state then developed new and utilized existing apparatuses to enforce its biopower and these two roles for the body, such as the school, the army, the healthcare industry, and capitalism itself (as he writes, “bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not, have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes”).<sup>16</sup> The evolution of the body into a worker was crucial to the evolution of capitalism as we know it.

Fatphobia is inherently tied to the state’s weaponization of its biopower, as fat bodies fall outside the uses for the body ascribed by biopolitics (the ability of bodies to fit into these normative models ascribed by the state being termed biovalue). Fat bodies are assumed to be lazy and non-productive under capitalism and are therefore marginalized in our society. This perceived unproductivity goes against the state’s investment in the optimization of bodies as workers and reveals why so many state apparatuses marginalize the fat body.

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<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 140-141

For example, schools promote the ostracization of fat students through gym classes, fitness tests, and fatphobic teachings on “health.” Additionally, the healthcare industry uses the measure of body mass index (BMI) to dismiss the health concerns of fat people, telling them to just lose weight. Marilyn Wann discusses the harm of BMI as a regulatory tool, as it is an arbitrary number, writing that “in 1998, the BMI cutoff points that define ‘overweight’ and ‘obese’ categories were lowered; with that change, millions of people became fat overnight.”<sup>17</sup> She elaborates that the cutoffs were made the “conveniently memorable BMIs of 25 and 30,” furthering the notion that these are almost arbitrarily decided numbers; even though it is alleged that these numbers have meaning, as “the ‘overweight’ line was supposed to indicate the weight at which people face increased risk of disease (morbidity), and the ‘obese’ line was supposed to indicate the weight at which people face increased risk of death (mortality),” even though the validity of these risks are disputed by researchers.<sup>18</sup> Christine Byrne details the racist origins of BMI, as when it was initially created in 1832 by Belgian mathematician Adolphe Quetelet, then called the ‘Quetelet Index,’ “the scale was created using data from predominantly European men to measure weight in different populations.”<sup>19</sup> While Quetelet designed the scale to be used as a population-level metric, it was reintroduced as an individual health metric in the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> Sabrina Strings details how applying the Quetelet Scale on an individual level promotes racism:

It is racist, and also sexist, to use mostly white men within your study population and then try to extrapolate that and create norms and expectations for women and people of color... They have not been included in the initial clinical analyses, and therefore their actual health outcomes cannot be determined by these findings.<sup>21</sup>

BMI is therefore a problematic metric as it is essentially an arbitrary measure, designed to

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<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Wann, “Foreword: Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution,” xiv

<sup>18</sup> Marilyn Wann, “Foreword: Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution,” xiv

<sup>19</sup> Christine Byrne, “The BMI Is Racist and Useless. Here's How to Measure Health Instead.”

<sup>20</sup> Christine Byrne, “The BMI Is Racist and Useless. Here's How to Measure Health Instead.”

<sup>21</sup> Christine Byrne quoting Sabrina Strings, “The BMI Is Racist and Useless. Here's How to Measure Health Instead.”



quantify white male bodies in the 1800s, which was supposed to measure populations, not an individual's health.

BMI is just one tool used to ostracize and justify the mistreatment of fat people. While BMI is used to shame individual fat people in the medical-industrial complex, societally, the biggest tool of the state to regulate fat bodies is the "Obesity Epidemic," which is a total misnomer as it implies one can "catch" obesity, presumably an association created to imply one can cure it as well. The satirical news site The Onion satirizes that fact in their article "Report: Scientists Still Seeking Cure For Obesity" where they write:

Many obesity sufferers have expressed frustration over the medical community's inability to cure them. "I came down with obesity two years after I got married," 41-year-old Oklahoma City resident Fran Torley said. "I know it was hard for my husband to watch me suffer from this disease. When he caught obesity a year later, he got so depressed, he couldn't do anything but sit on the couch. Some days, we sit and watch television from dawn till dusk, hoping for news of a breakthrough."<sup>22</sup>

Despite the ridiculous misnomer of the Obesity Epidemic, that The Onion points out, it still has such a hold on our society. Eric Oliver narrates the double bind of the obesity epidemic as, "in calling our growing weight an 'epidemic,' we have created a disease out of a physical symptom that, in turn, we are unable to treat."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The Onion, "Report: Scientists Still Seeking Cure For Obesity"

<sup>23</sup> Eric J. Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story behind America's Obesity Epidemic*, 11

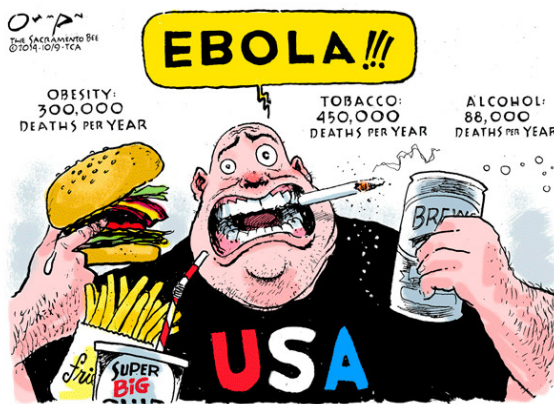


Figure 1, *Ebola v.s. Other Threats*, by Jack Ohman



Figure 2, *U.S. Reaction to Ebola Much Greater Than to Obesity Though Only One is Epidemic*.

The idea of Fatness as an epidemic is so potent that during a real epidemic, Ebola in 2014, some people were more focused on why we were not fighting obesity rather than why we were fighting Ebola (as can be seen in figures 1 and 2). Figure 1 tries to minimize the threat of Ebola by putting it in the context of the alleged amount of death from obesity, tobacco, and alcohol. Figure 2 alleges we are overreacting to the Ebola epidemic when the obesity epidemic is much more imminent. Both of these cartoons use flawed logic as obviously one cannot catch obesity, which as discussed above is an arbitrary metric, and Ebola is far more dangerous than any alleged risks associated with obesity

There has been a similar narrative with the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one video from TikTok, a video sharing social media app, shows a man with a blank expression in front of an 'Impeach Biden' flag, listening to "Little Dark Age" by MGMT, with the caption "Imagine if the US Government enforced the CDC's weight guidelines like they did with masks and [vaccines]."<sup>24</sup> The video then cuts to another person responding to this caption and mocking the

<sup>24</sup> @chefboyarcleav, "#stitch with @logan\_manhart." (The caption originally read v4ccines instead of vaccines as many TikTok-ers believe that including certain words, like profanity or those associated with hot button issues, will cause their videos to be suppressed by the platform and not shown to people so they resort to misspelling words, like this user has done with vaccine, to prevent this suppression)

first person by saying “Hey, new flash buddy. You can’t catch fat.”<sup>25</sup>

The illegitimacy of the obesity epidemic is irrelevant to the state though, as the state’s investment in the alleged obesity epidemic can directly be tied to its weaponization of biopolitics and the perceived lower biovalue of fat bodies. It’s not just the state that benefits from the obesity epidemic, it is also the medical-industrial complex, as there is a lot of money to be made from medications, surgeries, and other alleged cures, as well as the diet industry, gyms, exercise equipment companies, and so many more. With so much profit to be made off the obesity epidemic, it’s no wonder that the messaging around obesity is so potent.

The obesity epidemic and fatphobia are also instrumental to the state as a disciplining force against non-fat people. Because fat people are expected to be detrimental to capitalism and productivity, the state focuses on creating systemic oppression for fat people, which further cultivates societal exclusion, in order to discipline others while continuing to exclude fat bodies. Da’Shaun L. Harrison writes that “Health, in name and in action, has always existed to abuse, to dominate, and to subjugate. The medical industry, the healthcare industry, and the diet industry all exist to maintain a culture intended to “discipline” those whose bodies refuse to—and, for many, simply cannot—conform to the standards of health.”<sup>26</sup> The standards of health were designed to exclude fat people, therefore fat people can never be accepted in a society where “health” is the chief goal above all else.

Notions of health have also been weaponized against disabled bodies, asserting the individual’s role in their disability. Julie Avril Minich describes how neoliberalism is responsible for the narrative of personal responsibility in health care as, “neoliberalism codifies the idea that health status results from personal choices, a notion of the body as personal property whose care

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<sup>25</sup> @chefboyarcleav, "#stitch with @logan\_manhart."

<sup>26</sup> Da’Shaun L. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, 37

is an individual (not public) responsibility.”<sup>27</sup> She provides a specific example of this insidious neoliberalism and the wielding of biopower in her discussion of healthcare legislation:

For instance, despite the successes of the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) in making health care available to people without insurance, the law relies on discourses of individual choice and autonomy. It expands employers’ ability to offer “wellness incentives” that purportedly encourage healthy behaviors but... discriminate against people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. The ACA thus encodes into law the perception that it is an individual’s responsibility to maintain him/her/themself in a state of maximum able-bodiedness.<sup>28</sup>

The healthcare industry has intertwined personal responsibility and health leading disabled people and fat people to be ostracized for the alleged choices they made to end up being disabled or fat.

## **Capitalism**

This same weaponization of biopower used against fat people is also used against disabled people. Marta Russell and Ravi Malhotra describe this weaponization, writing that “Industrial Capitalism... created not only a class of proletarians but also a new class of ‘disabled’ who did not conform to the standard worker’s body and whose labor-power was effectively erased, excluded from paid work.”<sup>29</sup> Just as fat people did not meet the norm of a standard worker body, disabled people were also excluded from this norm. They further describe:

Just as capitalism forces workers into the wage relationship, it equally forcefully coerces disabled workers out of it. Disabled workers face inherent economic discrimination within the capitalist system, stemming from employers’ expectation of encountering additional production costs when hiring or retaining a nonstandard (disabled) worker as opposed to a standard (non-disabled) worker who has no need for job accommodations, interpreters, readers, environmental modifications, liability insurance, maximum health

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<sup>27</sup> Minich, “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now,” 2.

<sup>28</sup> Minich, “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now,” 2, citing Carrie Griffin Basas, “What’s Bad About Wellness? What the Disability Rights Perspective Offers About the Limitations of Wellness,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 39, no. 5 (October 2014): 1035-1066.

<sup>29</sup> Marta Russell and Ravi Malhotra, “Capitalism and the Disability Rights Movement,” 3. Citing Marta Russell, “Disablement, Oppression, and the Political Economy,” *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 12, no. 2 (September 2001): 87-95.

care coverage (inclusive of attendant services), or even health care coverage at all.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the barriers to entry that prevent disabled people from finding jobs prohibit fat people from getting jobs as well (i.e. environmental modification and the perception that fat people will require more health care). Unlike with the Americans with Disabilities Act (which still does not prevent all discrimination against disabled people), there are no federal protections against discrimination based on weight. While it may seem counterproductive to bemoan the fact that fat and disabled people cannot be exploited by our capitalist system, it must be acknowledged that, unfortunately, we all must participate in this capitalist system in order to survive. The ableism present in capitalism has led to only 19.2% of disabled people being employed while 28% of disabled people live in poverty.<sup>31</sup> There are parallel barriers for fat people, as a survey of 1000 employers with recruiting responsibilities done by Crossland Employment Solicitors found that 45% of employers were less likely to recruit an “obese” candidate.<sup>32</sup> When asked why they would not recruit obese candidates, they gave reasons that reinforced stereotypes about fat people, such as “I feel that obese people don't care much about themselves, so why would they care about my business,” and “they’re lazy.”<sup>33</sup> Others said, “Obese workers are unable to play a full role in the business,” and “They wouldn't be able to do the job required,” reinforcing the narrative that fat people have a lower biovalue and are unable to meaningfully contribute to society.<sup>34</sup>

Though capitalism may exclude disabled and fat people from the traditional form of exploitation (work), other methods of exploiting these people have been developed. Russell and

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<sup>30</sup> Marta Russell and Ravi Malhotra, “Capitalism and the Disability Rights Movement,” 4. Citing Marta Russell, “Disablement, Oppression, and the Political Economy,” *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 12, no. 2 (September 2001): 87-95. and Marta Russell, “Backlash, the Political Economy, and Structural Exclusion,” *Berkeley Journal of Employment and Labor Law* 21, no. 1 (2000): 349.

<sup>31</sup> Marta Russell, *Capitalism & Disability: Selected Writings by Marta Russell*. 173

<sup>32</sup> Crossland Employment Solicitor, “Employers' Attitude to Obese Candidates.”

<sup>33</sup> Crossland Employment Solicitor, “Employers' Attitude to Obese Candidates.”

<sup>34</sup> Crossland Employment Solicitor, “Employers' Attitude to Obese Candidates.”

Malhotra describe this process, writing that “entrepreneurs and rehabilitation specialists have made impaired bodies of use to the economic order by shaping disablement into big business and turning the disabled body into a commodity around which social policies get created or rejected according to their market value,” and how this process has resulted in the corporatization of nursing homes (as they guarantee revenue due to Medicare and Medicaid) and in-home care.<sup>35</sup> Disabled bodies are seen as valuable under capitalism only as consumers of ability-related products or as commodities, in that money can be made off of them through health care costs.

Comparable exploitation of fat people can be seen through the development of the diet industrial complex. The global market for diet and weight loss products (including diet food and beverages as well as services such as gyms and fat replacers) is projected to be worth \$254.9 billion in 2021 and is projected to reach \$377.3 billion by 2026.<sup>36</sup> There is a plethora of money to be made in policing people’s bodies and making it seem like they must spend money to slim down or prevent themselves from becoming fat. This occurs even though dieting and weight loss programs have been proven to be ineffective. Pat Lyons describes a study from the National Institute of Health that found that “90-95% of participants in all weight loss programs failed to attain and sustain weight loss beyond two to five years.”<sup>37</sup> He further comments that “if dieting was a drug to improve health, no doctor would prescribe it given its high failure rate.”<sup>38</sup> Despite these low success rates, the diet industry is still raking in the cash as the fear of becoming fat is so salient in our society. Fat people are so ostracized, socially and societally, that globally we are willing to spend over \$250 billion to try to prevent more fatness and get rid of the fatness we currently have.

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<sup>35</sup> Marta Russell and Ravi Malhotra, “Capitalism and the Disability Rights Movement,” 5 citing Gary Albrecht, *The Disability Business: Rehabilitation in the United States* (London: Sage, 1992). and Marta Russell, *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the End of the Social Contract* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998), 81–83.

<sup>36</sup> Research and Markets, “Global Weight Loss Products and Services Market 2021-2026.”

<sup>37</sup> Pat Lyons, “Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the ‘Obesity Epidemic,’” 77

<sup>38</sup> Pat Lyons, “Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the ‘Obesity Epidemic,’” 77

**Fat Time: “It's Bad Bitch O'Clock, Yeah, it's Thick-Thirty.”<sup>39</sup>**

In Lizzo's newest song, “About Damn Time,” she sings the quote in the title above, proclaiming a fat time of sorts, as the time is thick-thirty (a pun off of six-thirty). While Lizzo is proclaiming this time to embrace fatness, I think a deeper analysis of fat time, drawing on J. Jack Halberstam's concept of queer time, helps explain the fatphobia exacerbated by the capitalist system.

Halberstam defines the queer subject as one that embraces “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”<sup>40</sup> They argue that queer people, then, exist outside of the norms of society through queer time, a differentiation from “straight time,” which is governed by reproductive futurity, wealth accumulation, and capitalism. Queer time places an “emphasis on the here, the present, the now,” and allows for the “potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing.”<sup>41</sup>

Fatness also exists outside of the norms of straight time and exists parallel to queer time. As discussed previously, fatness exists outside the norms of capitalism as fat bodies are seen as unproductive and therefore useless. Additionally, just as queer time exists outside the prescribed norms of futurity, Elena Levy-Navarro writes that “the fat would implicitly fit this group precisely because they are seen as refusing to live their life according to the imperative of ‘health,’” further elaborating that, “in this sense, the fat are queer in our culture exactly because they are seen as living a life that is ‘unhealthy,’ and thus a life that is presumably defying the imperative to cultivate maximum longevity.”<sup>42</sup> Simply put, because our society prioritizes

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<sup>39</sup> Lizzo, “About Damn Time,” 2022

<sup>40</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies,” 6

<sup>41</sup> Halberstam, “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies,” 2

<sup>42</sup> Elena Levy-Navarro, “Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go from Here?,” 17

futurity, and fat people are seen as having no future due to the alleged health problems associated with fatness, they are queer subjects living on queer time.

Fat time, similar to queer time, exists as a way to embrace not fitting into the dominant narratives of society. Halberstam writes that since “success in a heteronormative, capitalistic society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation... maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards.”<sup>43</sup> What they call “the queer art of failure,” I similarly embrace as “the fat art of failure,” a radical body politic that embraces not fitting into societal norms and rejects the alleged futurity afforded by thinness.

### **Morality & Politics**

Fatphobia and ableism are often based on arguments of morality, that fatness or disability is the result of some moral failing on the part of the person. That is why society feels it imperative to search for a “cure” for the fat/disabled body. If there is a cure or a way to prevent disability/fatness, it must then be the fault of the disabled/fat person. Even beyond the search for a cure, morality is still frequently weaponized against fat and disabled people and used to support/defend fatphobia and ableism.

One arena where we can see morality around fatness mobilized is that of politics. Kivan Bay articulates this notion, writing, “Too often I feel like socialist or otherwise anti-capitalist groups still lean too heavily on fat antagonism to make their points, and this, to me, is counter to the idea of being anti-capitalist.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2-3

<sup>44</sup> Kivan Bay, “Capitalism Hates Fat People.”



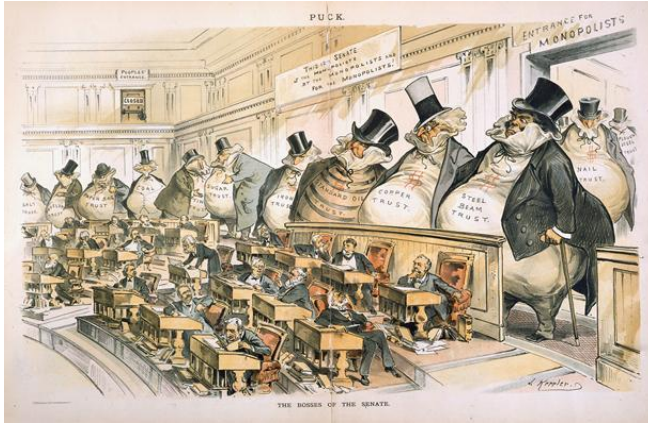


Figure 3, *The Bosses of the Senate*, 1889



Figure 4, *Jabba the Trump: A Comic and Coloring Page!*, 2019

As can be seen by figures 3 and 4, fatness has been a common feature in political messaging from the 1800s to the modern day, articulating this historical narrative of fatphobic anticapitalism that Bay describes. Figure 3 draws upon the stereotype of the corporate fat cat, depicting capitalist greed through excess fatness, drawing upon the notion of fatness as a moral failing and furthering the narrative that fatness is the enemy. Though at this time fatness was tied to wealth, as poor people could not afford enough food, the excess of their bodies in this image is clearly fatphobic and meant to be viewed in a negative light. Two of the most prominent examples of fatphobia in leftist political messaging today comes from depictions and discussion about Donald Trump and Chris Christie. I want to make clear that I am not defending these men's actions, but despite differing values, no one has the right to ridicule someone based on their weight. Figure 4 depicts Donald Trump drawn as the overweight slug-like alien Jabba the Hutt holding a McDonald's cup (one example of such imagery as you can find many examples of Trump as Jabba the Hutt online). What I find most troubling about this image is its accompanying coloring page, as the artist, Christopher Keetly, writes, "I thought some people

might like to have it as a coloring page! I loved coloring books when I was a kid,” implying that this image should be given to children which would just further ingrain fatphobia into children.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 5, “The Emperor Has No Balls” LA, 2016 Cast resin sculpture on plaster base by anonymous art collective INDECLINE<sup>46</sup>

Another example of the fatphobia leveled at Trump (coupled with ableist undertones) is the statue in figure 5, “The Emperor Has No Balls.” The artist who made this statue said the following about the guidelines he was given by INDECLINE, the art collective responsible for the piece and its public display across various cities: “It, of course, had to have no testicles. They wanted him to have a very small manhood, and they wanted it to look like something that a president would have sculpted.”<sup>47</sup> This statue of Trump plays into many fatphobic tropes regarding the masculinity of fat men; representing him with a micropenis and no testicles furthering the stereotype of the desexualized and emasculated fat male body, as well as that of the eunuch and castration. In addition to promoting fatphobia, this statute is also promoting

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Keetly, “Jabba the Trump: A Comic and Coloring Page!”

<sup>46</sup> INDECLINE. “The Emperor Has No Balls - LA (2016).”

<sup>47</sup> Elisabeth Garber-Paul, “Meet Anarchists behind 'Emperor Has No Balls' Trump Statues.”

ableism in its assumption that the lack of testicles in a man, called anorchia, is universally embarrassing and emasculating.



Figure 6, “Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, and his wife, Mary Pat, enjoy Sunday afternoon at Island Beach State Park, which is closed to the public because of the state government shutdown.” Photo taken by Andrew Mills

Figure 6 shows Chris Christie at the beach during a government shutdown. When this scandal happened, most of the reactions were less focused on politics and more focused on body shaming Christie. Chrissy Stockton chronicled some reactions to this image, sorting through the comments on an article about the incident from the New York Times: “He was slow roasting those ham hocks he calls legs,” “He needs to buy a Homer Simpson mumu or something. I’m tired of seeing his gunt,” “Get a trebuchet or a forklift or a fleet of helicopters or whatever and remove his corpulence from office!” and “(Yes, I know I’m fat-shaming. No, I don’t care, because f\*ck him.)”<sup>48</sup> Christie was similarly ridiculed for wearing tight baseball pants during a charity baseball game. In a Reddit post discussing the picture (figure 7 below), which was tagged NSFL (Not Safe for Life),<sup>49</sup> Reddit users commented on Christie’s body writing, “That front butt

<sup>48</sup> Chrissy Stockton, “When You Call Trump Fat, You’re Actually Calling Me Ugly.”

<sup>49</sup> NSFL is a play on the phrase NSFW which stands for Not Safe for Work, which is used to tag posts that are inappropriate or explicit, i.e. one you would not want to view publicly in a workplace. NSFL goes one step beyond NSFW in that viewing this content would not be appropriate for any circumstance, reinforcing the notion that Chris Christie’s body is grotesque.

is looking fabulous in those pants,” “He's got the body of a cafeteria lady,” “is that a camel toe i see? [sic]” and “His fat pussy appears to be eating his pants.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly to the statues of Trump, the fatphobia against Christie relies on the emasculation and humiliation of fat men.



Figure 7, “Chris Christie in a baseball uniform [NSFL]” from the subreddit r/pics posted by user u/jesuz, image originally from *Complex Original*

Again, we see fatness standing in for the wrongs of a politician. Instead of focusing on the actual moral failings of his policy, criticism of his policy is ascribed onto his body. Stockton chronicles how harmful this language can be to fat people writing:

I thought of the ways my internal dialogue sounded just like the commentary surrounding the Chris Christie story. *People think my thighs look like ham hocks. People hate looking at me and wish I'd hide my body so they wouldn't have to see it...* To be a fat person in

<sup>50</sup> u/jesuz, comments from u/lemonhead0607, u/BeaniePradford, u/letloosestartliving, and u/iamBillCosby, “Chris Christie in a baseball uniform [NSFL],” Reddit

the midst of all of this, trying to convince myself that I am worthy while existing in this body, is a fight I lose.<sup>51</sup>

When people use fatness as a way to bring down people they disagree with, it implies fatness is a bad thing; this can cause fat people to internalize these messages of negativity against fat politicians which makes them feel bad about themselves and their own fatness. Disagreement with a person's politics does not grant you license to be fatphobic.

In a similar vein, misidentification of body with politics can be seen in how disabled people are treated, specifically Republican congressman from North Carolina, Madison Cawthorn and Republican congressman from Texas, Dan Crenshaw. Cawthorn is disabled as a result of a car crash and uses a wheelchair. His disability leads to many people critiquing him for his disability, not his politics. In a tweet, Cawthorn wrote, "Retweet this if you stand with Trump [American flag emoji]," to which the most popular reply is "you sure about that standing part? Imfao" with a picture of Cawthorn in his wheelchair (two other popular replies read "Giggles at the irony." and "Again with the 'stand' stuff").<sup>52</sup> Instead of focusing critique on Cawthorn's support of Trump or his role in the January 6th insurrection, people are focused on making fun of Cawthorn's physical disability.

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<sup>51</sup> Stockton, "When You Call Trump Fat..."

<sup>52</sup> Madison Cawthorn, et al. "Retweet this if you stand with Trump"





Figure 8, Pete Davidson making fun of congressman Dan Crenshaw in the Weekend Update segment of *Saturday Night Live*

Another example of this phenomenon can be seen in Episode 4 of Season 44 of *Saturday Night Live* where Pete Davidson was making fun of politicians (pictured in figure 8). When talking about congressman Dan Crenshaw, who lost his eye in an explosion while serving in Afghanistan, Davidson remarked, “You may be surprised to hear he’s a congressional candidate from Texas and not a hit-man in a porno movie,” later adding, “I’m sorry, I know he lost his eye in war or whatever.”<sup>53</sup> Again, we see critiques of Republican politicians resorting to ableism or fatphobia instead of critiques of their actual policies. Davidson was forced to publicly apologize to Crenshaw, who appeared in the following episode of *Saturday Night Live*. Focusing critique of these people on their bodies, whether they be fat or disabled, reinforces the notion that being fat or disabled is a negative thing.

### **What Can Fat Studies Learn from Disability Studies?**

Like fat bodies, disabled bodies are analogously perceived to have a lower biovalue and are policed and ostracized through lack of accessibility, obsessions with finding a “cure,” and straight-up eugenics. Kathleen Lebesco describes a “new consumer eugenics movement aimed at

<sup>53</sup> *Saturday Night Live*, Season 44, Episode 4, “Jonah Hill: November 3, 2018.”

abolishing aberrations seemed socially or aesthetically undesirable (but far from life threatening)” by using prenatal tests to screen for disability or other perceived ‘abnormalities’ to possibly end a pregnancy, as they perceive a disabled life to be one not worth living (a new eugenics that Lebesco also argues promotes the search for a fat gene/a genetic cause for fatness).<sup>54</sup> These perceptions of fat and disabled bodies inform the medical models of fatness and disability, which see fatness and disability as things that are wrong with someone’s body, and therefore need to be treated/cured. For example, I once went to the doctor because I had a sore throat and a cold and needed antibiotics. As the nurse was performing her screening (taking my temperature, checking my pulse, etc.), she took my blood pressure, which was a little high. As soon as she saw that number, her focus instantly shifted from my actual illness to my weight. She insisted that I should lose ten pounds to lower my blood pressure and gave me diet advice, inquiring if I ate a lot of pasta. When I asked, “but what can I do about my sore throat?” she responded, “well I’m not worried about that, that’ll go away on its own. Your blood pressure though, you definitely need to lose ten pounds, which should be easy for a young man like yourself.” She was so laser-focused on my weight that once I left she had to call me back and say, “After looking at your chart and symptoms some more, I realize I should give you some antibiotics,” even joking once I came back that she was “perhaps a little too focused on my weight and pasta consumption.” The medical model is inherently problematic and further marginalizes fat people, preventing them from getting the care they need by locating most of their illness solely in their body.

Fat studies should embrace the social model of disability as an alternative to the harmful medical model. The social model of disability dismisses the perceived limitations of disabled people’s bodies and instead focuses on how society has been designed to only be accommodating

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<sup>54</sup> Kathleen LeBesco, “Quest for a Cause: the Fat Gene, The Gay Gene, and the New Eugenics,” 65

to a certain type of body. Disability activist Eli Clare describes it as such: “Disability, not defined by our bodies, but rather by the material and social conditions of ableism: not by the need to use a wheelchair, but rather by the stairs that have no accompanying ramp or elevator.”<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, a disability justice framework says that “all bodies are unique and essential, that all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met,” and that “we are powerful not despite the complexities of our bodies, but because of them.”<sup>56</sup> These constructs should also be applied to fat bodies and to fat studies. Fat people’s bodies are not the issue; the way society is constructed to oppress fat people is. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha says that the focus of disability justice is “less on civil rights legislation... and more on a vision of liberation that understands the state was built on racist, colonialist ableism and will not save us, because it was created to kill us.”<sup>57</sup> Utilizing the social model of disability and a disability justice framework provides the basis for a truly radical, liberatory, intersectional, fat politics, as it accepts everyone regardless of their positionality to health.

These social models emphasize the body as just that: a body, not a tool of capitalism, but a person deserving of accessibility and love. Some body positivity and fat acceptance movements describe themselves as “designed to promote dignity so that people of size have equal access to opportunities” while not glorifying obesity because “of course, fat people aren’t trying to encourage more people to become fat; they’re trying to live a life with dignity.”<sup>58</sup> This is problematic because it reinforces the notion that skinny is the norm and still reinforces some shame around the fat body. A truly radical body politics based on the social model of disability allows fat people to not feel ashamed and to actually be proud of their fatness, as the problem is

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<sup>55</sup> Eli Clare, “Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies: Disability and Queerness,” 360

<sup>56</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, 21

<sup>57</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, 21

<sup>58</sup> Evette Dionne, “Here’s What Fat Acceptance Is—and Isn’t”



with society, not their body. Fat people should not have to ask for acceptance or dignity while acknowledging that they would never want anyone else to be fat. Fat people should be allowed to be proud of their fatness, to be happy that they're fat, and adopting a disability studies approach makes it easier to embrace these ideals.

### **Access & Accessibility**

Another area where Fat activism and Disability activism converge is that of access. Bess Williamson describes access as the movement to “reform architecture and technology to address diverse human abilities.”<sup>59</sup> While accessibility is crucial for people to be able to physically access places it also has benefits beyond just access. Increased accessibility “can suggest a much broader set of meanings linked to a more inclusive society with greater opportunities for social and political participation... Access implies social potential not dependent on correcting the disabled body, but instead made possible through institutional and material change.”<sup>60</sup> Creating access both for the disabled and for the fat body creates the conditions for social and political inclusion. The fight for access is not just necessary for accessing spaces but is integral to the fight against ableism and fatphobia.

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<sup>59</sup> Bess Williamson, “Access,” 14

<sup>60</sup> Williamson, 14-15



Figure 9, Photo of me kicking over an inaccessible chair in Rockefeller Hall at Vassar College taken for a Zine on fighting inaccessibility, photo taken by Alison Gormley

The movement for accessibility, crucially, demands accessibility, not as an afterthought, but to be put at the forefront of designing spaces. Fat activist and advocate for body liberation J Aprileo writes about their demands for accessibility:

I demand better treatment. I demand that the world change for me. For us. I demand respect and acknowledgement of my existence. There should be a plan for me. I demand to be thought of when creating spaces. I don't want to be an afterthought anymore. The world can evolve and improve. We can make space for everyone.<sup>61</sup>

Access is a basic human right, and fat and disability advocates passionately argue for accessibility and the right to be planned for. Even at Vassar lack of accessibility is a huge problem. Many of the chairs on campus are extremely inaccessible to me as a fat person

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<sup>61</sup> J Aprileo, "Why Care about Fat Accessibility? A Response to a Reader."

(including the chair I am kicking over in figure 9 above). In Vassar's recently released 2022-2024 Accessibility Plan one of the most immediate changes they pledge is to "retrofit the doors at the Bridge for Laboratory Sciences to use push-button paddle openers," so that the building is accessible for people who cannot pull the doors open. On its own, this change seems purely beneficial but we should ask why these doors were not made accessible in the first place? The Bridge for Laboratory Sciences is the newest building on Vassar's campus, construction was finished on the building in 2016, and it costs the college \$90 million; how could a building built so recently, which cost so much money, lack such basic accessibility?<sup>62</sup> As Aprileo writes, we must demand accessibility be at the forefront of design to avoid such glaring errors as the ones present with Vassar's Bridge for Laboratory Sciences.

### **Hypervisibility, Excess, and Fear & Interest**

Both the fat and the disabled body inspire fear and also interest as they are both viewed as anomalous in relation to the perceived "norm" in our society. Fear, in this context, refers to the fear of becoming fat or disabled, which is informed by the capitalist work ethic discussed above. Becoming fat or disabled seems like a death sentence, as capitalist systems would have you believe that fat and disabled people are too lazy and are incapable of working and the health care industrial complex would have you believe there is no escaping imminent death from being fat or disabled. This fear is amplified by the notion that people can easily become fat or disabled and that in some cases this is a certain fate, what Robert McRuer describes in his book *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* as the "disability yet to come," the notion that "If we live long enough, disability is the one identity we will all inhabit."<sup>63</sup> Fatness can also be viewed through this lens as there is a substantial fear of becoming fat and the idea that once you get

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<sup>62</sup> Jamie Morgan, "Vassar College – Integrated Science Center."

<sup>63</sup> Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, 200

older you will “give up” to some extent and accept fatness, a horrifying notion that causes people to spend countless hours and often immense amounts of money to prevent fatness through exercising, starving themselves, and expensive surgeries. People’s investments in fatphobia and ableism stem from both their fear of becoming these things, both because they see how these people are treated on an individual level and also a societal one, but also from their fear of no longer being the dominant norm. Body norms and fatphobia affect both fat and non-fat people alike. We all feel pressure from society about our bodies but instead of fighting with fat people against these harmful norms, society has convinced people that fat people are the enemy, not body shaming. The diet industry, medical-industrial complex, and capitalism pit fat and nonfat people against each other, creating the conditions for fatphobia to flourish. While fear may seem obvious based on how demonized being fat or disabled is in our society, I now want to move on to the more elusive *interest* in the fat and disabled body. Amy Farrell historicizes this interest writing:

Since the early 19th century, the fat person—particularly the extremely fat person—had served as a spectacle in British and American urban and traveling amusements, such as fairs, circuses, and later, vaudeville. Their interest lay precisely in their oddity, in the way they differed from the size and look of ‘normal-sized’ people. Extremely fat people were seen as a form of human grotesquery.<sup>64</sup>

The othering of the fat body has been informed by the spectacle of its excess in relation to the “normal” thin body. This excess is also mirrored in how Black women’s bodies are viewed in our society. Janell Hobson draws attention to this phenomenon, describing how “a history of enslavement, colonial conquest and ethnographic exhibition [which] variously labeled the black female body ‘grotesque,’ ‘strange,’ ‘unfeminine,’ ‘lascivious,’ and ‘obscene,’” has “[created] trajectories of normalcy and dominance that perpetuate black women’s ‘outsider’ and ‘disabled’

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<sup>64</sup> Amy Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, 32

status. Hence, their ‘disruptive’ bodies provide further justification for their devaluation and discrimination.”<sup>65</sup> This circular nature of oppression also applies to fat and disabled people: they are marginalized because of their non-normal appearance and their non-normal appearances justify their marginalization.

### **De/Hyper-Sexualization**

Another dimension of the fear/interest in the fat body is the dichotomy of the simultaneous de/hyper-sexualization of fat bodies. One of the most prominent historical examples of this dichotomy is that of Saartjie Baartman, given the name the Hottentot Venus by her white owner. She was a fat (according to Eurocentric beauty standards), Black woman from South Africa who was exhibited across Europe and promoted as “an erotic and scientific curiosity, a veritable ‘ethnographic freak show.’”<sup>66</sup> While being exhibited as a sort of sideshow freak, visitors “came both to gawk at her proportions, especially her posterior, and to experience the sensory pleasure of touching her.”<sup>67</sup> People’s reactions to the Hottentot Venus perfectly demonstrate the dichotomy of de/hyper-sexualization attached to the fat body (which I will discuss further in chapter 2 in relation to Baartman and Lizzo).

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<sup>65</sup> Janell Hobson, “The ‘Batty’ Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” 87 & 89

<sup>66</sup> Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, 91, citing Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, 72

<sup>67</sup> Sabrina Strings, 93



Figure 10, *Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus*. by Frederick Christian Lewis

While being marketed as a ‘freak’ and something to be gawked at, she was also described as ‘erotic’ with people paying to touch her. Going back to interest and fear even though people are afraid of becoming fat themselves (informed by disgust at anything deviating from the norm) there is an, often erotic, interest in the fat body, though this interest is often a fetishization as opposed to true desire.

This dichotomous relationship between fatness and sexualization persists to this day, saliently identifiable through the act known as “hogging,” “a practice in which men prey on women they deem fat or unattractive to satisfy sexual desires or compete with their peers.”<sup>68</sup> This

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<sup>68</sup> Ariane Prohaska and Jeannine Gailey, “Fat Women as ‘Easy Targets’: Achieving Masculinity Through Hogging,” 158

horrific practice shows that sexual desires can be enacted on fat bodies but there can never be true desire of fat bodies in a culture that has deemed them ugly.

A similar dichotomy of de/hyper-sexualization can be seen in gay male culture. This dichotomy appears most prominently in spaces of gay male relationships through the duality of “No Fats, No Femmes” combined with the chub/chaser dynamic. The phrase “No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians, No Blacks, No Latinos,” or some combination of the five, has populated gay dating apps since their inception (sometimes disguised as “prefer masculine, fit or ‘normal’ men” or written symbolically as “no rice, no chocolate, no beans”). Fatphobia is rampant in queer communities, especially on dating apps, but this sits in contrast to the chub/chaser dynamic, where a skinny man is attracted to fat men, most often fetishistically. Once again, the desire of fat people can only be hypersexualized (fetishized) or nonexistent.

This same de/hyper-sexualization can be seen with disabled people who are fetishized but also seen as nonsexual beings. Disabled people are affected by multiple systems that enable this dichotomy, “from forced and coerced sterilization to institutional surveillance that limits privacy, there are multiple systems that pathologize, control, and punish the sexual explorations and expressions of disabled people. Common paternalistic assumptions hypersexualize and/or portray disabled people as hypervulnerable.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Porn: I Want It FAT Way**

Sami Schalk examines how fat and disabled people are fetishized in porn while remaining something to be ashamed about desiring, by looking at the Adult Video News (AVN) awards:

Unlike other fetishes with separate categories such as "Best Transsexual Release," "Best MILF Release," or "Best Foot/Leg Fetish Release," fatness (referred to as "BBW," the abbreviation for Big, Beautiful Women) and disability (referred to only in the specific

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<sup>69</sup> Loree Erickson, “Out of Line: The Sexy Femmegimp Politics of Flaunting It!” 322

instance of "midgets") are only mentioned on the AVN Award Category Description website as examples of films which fall under the "Best Specialty Release, Other Genre" category along with "wrestling" and "stocking fetish" (Adult Video News). Clearly fatness and disability are not viewed, even by the super sex-positive AVN, as award-worthy sexual matters, and as Rainey (2011) so aptly puts it: "When a fetish is excluded from the menu at AVN, it is clearly depraved" (p. 41).<sup>70</sup>

AVN's conflation of fatness and disability as fetishes, akin to wrestling and stocking fetishes, further dehumanizes these already marginalized identities. They are already fetishized in society at large, but even in porn, they are seen as shameful and lesser than MILFs or feet fetishes.<sup>71</sup>



Figure 11, A still of *WANT*, directed by Loree Erickson, a pornographic film that "weaves together sexually explicit images with everyday moments and scenes of the ableist world."

Disability scholar Loree Erickson is working against the narrative that disabled people cannot be sexual beings through her work as a disabled porn star:

I wouldn't be making porn right now if I weren't so pissed off. I would not be making porn if I hadn't struggled for most of my life to be recognized as a sexy and sexual being, or if the world wasn't so fucked up. But making porn is one of the best things I've ever done. On a political level, it allowed me to make a movie that would not only offer a

<sup>70</sup> Sami Schalk, "Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification with/in Disability Studies," citing Adult Video News, A. (2011). AVN - 2012 AVN Awards Category Descriptions Retrieved from <http://business.avn.com/articles/video/2012-AVN-Awards-Category-Descriptions-447632.html> and Rainey, Sarah Smith. 2011. *Love, sex, and disability: the pleasures of care, Disability in society*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

<sup>71</sup> MILF is an acronym that stands for "Mother I'd Like to Fuck," referring to a sexually attractive older women



moment of recognition of how sexy queercrrips could be, but also a way to tell others how I wanted to be seen. Making this video allowed me to take up space and reconceptualize what is sexy.<sup>72</sup>

Erickson is working against the norm of what is considered sexy in her movies, by gaining visibility for disabled people as sexual beings. Erickson is continuing the legacy of feminist porn makers such as Candida Royalle who made porn through a feminist lens. She discusses the impetus that drove her to make feminist porn in the following quote:

After a few years of working as an actress in adult films, I began to write for men's magazines and review adult movies. That was when I started looking closely at the films and was horrified to see how sexist they were. So I began to think about making porn movies that were aimed at women, and which couples could share together. I felt that adult entertainment could be very valid and life-enriching, but it wasn't being done with that in mind.<sup>73</sup>

Diverging from feminist anti-porn movements, Royalle found that making porn could be empowering, “It is often taken for granted that women get into porn because they are victims or prostitutes or self-destructive. It's very hard for this culture to accept that women could choose to do this as a job, which was certainly the case with me and many other women.”<sup>74</sup> Just as there is an assumption that women in porn are victims, some may assume that disabled/fat porn is purely fetishizing, and just as Royalle’s work works against the first notion, Erickson’s work works against the second. Erickson’s film, *WANT* (pictured above in figure 11), works against fetishization as it is not solely a porn film but is also, as Erickson says, “grounded in storytelling, embodied testimony, video and other participatory crip methods that are informed by transformative justice, queer theory, disability justice and radical access” and “works to get people hot and poses an insightful, complex, honest, and sexy image of disability.”<sup>75</sup> *WANT* does

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<sup>72</sup> Loree Erickson, “Out of Line: The Sexy Femmegimp Politics of Flaunting It!” 324

<sup>73</sup> Candida Royalle, “Porn in the USA,” 24.

<sup>74</sup> Candida Royalle, 25

<sup>75</sup> Loree Erickson, *WANT*, PinkLabel.tv

not ignore the ableism present in the porn industry and the world at large, but actively tackles these issues as part of the film.

Fat people have also talked about the radical ways in which they view fat porn. Writer and blogger Tasha Fierce writes:

I've found that watching porn with fat women in it [is] a very good way to learn to appreciate and love your body, and to reinforce the idea that we are capable of enjoying sex just as much as thin women. When I began watching porn with fat women who had bodies like me, it was challenging to see those women's bodies as attractive sometimes—and meeting that challenge is a very important step on the fat acceptance path.<sup>76</sup>

Fat bodies are so desexualized in society that viewing them in pornography can be liberating in showing that fat people can and do enjoy sex. While some may argue that fat porn is fetishizing, Fierce argues that fat people deserve to be fetishized too and how this fetishization can feel empowering for some:

I've heard fat girls say they think fat fetishism is creepy, that they feel objectified, that they feel the person with the fetish doesn't like them as a whole person... but that doesn't mean that other fat girls don't enjoy engaging in fat fetishism and seek out people with said fetish, and it doesn't mean they're wrong for doing so. Yes, usually when you're dating or looking for a relationship you want to avoid people who aren't interested in you as a person, but we shouldn't condemn fat fetishists and the fat girls who love them if they choose those relationships. It's just another form of self-love, really, because if you can accept someone finding the very thing about you that society sees as unappealing attractive, you're really living fat acceptance. That's a positive thing.<sup>77</sup>

In a society that is determined to undermine your sexuality, fetishization can be a powerful weapon against that desexualization. In “Locating Aesthetics: Sexing the Fat Woman,” Samantha Murray advocates for “[thinking] about fat bodies having sex, fat bodies engaging in uncontained pleasures of excessive flesh,” which is crucial because “our culture codes these imaginings as

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<sup>76</sup> Tasha Fierce, “Sex and the Fat Girl: The Joys of Fat Porn”

<sup>77</sup> Tasha Fierce, “Sex and the Fat Girl: The Joys of Fat Porn”

disgusting, perverse, perhaps an underground sexual fetish for kinks wanting to be dominated and smothered.”<sup>78</sup>

Audre Lorde, in “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” from her seminal work *Sister Outsider*, argues that, “the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.”<sup>79</sup> Lorde further writes, “When I speak of the erotic, then I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.”<sup>80</sup> I argue that Erickson and Royalle are harnessing this power through their work. Even though Lorde argues that “pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling,” I argue porn with a feminist lens and porn that highlights fatness or disability to fight against fatphobia and ableism do harness the power of the erotic.<sup>81</sup> Fat and disabled people are reclaiming their personhood through pornography, as erotics can be read as the highest form of self. Pornography can be liberating for those whose sexuality has been dismissed and denigrated and can allow them to claim erotics and claim themselves as sexual beings.

## Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have analyzed the ways that fatphobia and ableism intersect through examinations of health, capitalism, morality, access, and de/hyper-sexualization. This extensive analysis shows that we should continue examining fatness and disability together as it reveals interesting connections between the two and allows us to create both deeper theory as

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<sup>78</sup> Samantha Murray, “Locating Aesthetics: Sexing the Fat Woman,” 239

<sup>79</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53

<sup>80</sup> Audre Lorde, 7

<sup>81</sup> Audre Lorde, 54

well as a radical politics of the body. In chapter two, I intend to deepen this structural, theoretical analysis while also grounding it further in the real world through an examination of pop culture and media.

## Chapter 2: A Tale of Two Fatphobias: Lizzo & Adele

In this chapter, I will be building off of the theoretical underpinnings I wrote about in chapter one and examining them in the realm of celebrity and popular culture. Through the case studies of Lizzo, Adele, and various other pop culture and celebrity moments I will further examine the otherization of fat people, especially the dichotomy/paradox of the de/hyper-sexualization of fat people and the racialization and exoticization of fat people of color.

### **The “Trap Door”**

This chapter draws upon the theorizing in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* of visibility as both a blessing and a curse to examine how fat people are viewed and “accepted” in society. Though this book is specifically talking about trans visibility I find the theorizing useful in conceptualizing fat visibility as well. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton theorize the contradiction of an increase in anti-trans violence alongside an increase in trans representation and visibility:

This is the trap of the visual: it offers—or more accurately, it is frequently offered to us as—the primary path through which trans people might have access to livable lives. Representation is said to remedy broader acute social crises... [but] one must also grapple and reckon with radical incongruities—as when, for example, our “transgender tipping point” comes to pass at precisely the same political moment when women of color, and trans women of color in particular, are experiencing markedly increased instances of physical violence.<sup>82</sup>

This incongruity can also be seen in representations of fat people. While body positivity movements have brought greater body diversity into the mainstream, they have not led to a widespread decrease in fatphobia. I see this contradiction present in Judith Bennett’s theorizing of the Patriarchal Equilibrium in her book *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*. Bennett writes that “there has been much change in women’s lives, but little

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<sup>82</sup> Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, “Known Unknowns: An Introduction To Trap Door,” XV-XVI

transformation in women's status in relation to men," further arguing that "Patriarchal institutions [have] adapted remarkably well to the conflicts, contradictions, and confusion they produce."<sup>83</sup> Similarly, though body positivity movements have changed perceptions among fat people of their own bodies, they have done little to change societal fatphobia.

To this point, these body positivity movements have not affected fat people equally; it is important to ask which fat bodies are deemed acceptable by the media and allowed to be body positive in these campaigns. The answer is mainly white women that are marginally fat. This is not to gatekeep who gets to identify as fat, it is only meant to acknowledge the limits of the body positivity movement as it is currently employed to accommodate a "thicc" body, i.e. the more easily sexualized acceptable big butt and curvy waist that still follows the traditional hourglass figure. Ramanpreet Bahra conceptualizes this dichotomy of the "good fatty" versus the "bad fatty," through the concept of shapeism, a term she coined with James Overboe, which deems some fat bodies good and some bad dependent on the placement of fat on their body.<sup>84</sup> While the good fatty has the "thicc" body described above that can still be seen as sexy, the "bad fatty" is seen as a spectacle due to the excess of their fat and its undesirable placement.

While body positivity has become mainstream, fatphobia is still pervasive in our culture. The most prominent example of this is the constant backlash Lizzo receives for her body positivity and refusal to be ashamed of being fat and Black. The reaction to Adele's weight loss also provides an interesting case study as many body positive activists felt betrayed by Adele's weight loss. The reactions to both Adele and Lizzo show our culture's focus on the body, whether fat or thin. Contrasting Lizzo and Adele, however, shows the racialized aspects of fatphobia, especially relating to desire and sexualization. This chapter is grounded in

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<sup>83</sup> Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, 79, 80

<sup>84</sup> Ramanpreet Annie Bahra (PhD Student and Graduate Teaching Assistant at York University), Personal Communication (Zoom call with author), April 26, 2022.

intersectional theorizing, looking at how fatness intersects with gender and race. Looking at Lizzo, and her championing of both fat pride and Black pride, shows how fatness and race intersect, not only for Lizzo but for everyone. Through examining these two musical icons I want to develop a deeper understanding of how fatphobia works in our culture, media, and society.

### **Lizzo: The “Rumors” Saga**



Figure 12, still from the music video for “Rumors” by Lizzo featuring Cardi B

Lizzo, an American singer, songwriter, rapper, and flutist, frequently faces backlash for embracing her fatness but also just for existing. One of the most potent examples of the backlash Lizzo receives can be seen in the reaction to her song “Rumors” and its accompanying music video (pictured above in figure 12) which she released with Cardi B on August 13th, 2021. Throughout the song, Lizzo is unabashedly proud of her Blackness and her body. She begins the song with the lyric, “They don't know I do it for the culture, goddamn.”<sup>85</sup> In this lyric Lizzo is asserting her Black identity and its role in her music, she has elaborated on this lyric saying, “I’m not making music for white people, I’m not making music for anybody. I’m a Black woman

<sup>85</sup> Lizzo (featuring Cardi B), “Rumors”

making music, I make Black music. Period.”<sup>86</sup> She further asserts the influence of Black people with the line “Black people made rock and roll, yeah,” which is accompanied in the music video by an image of a figure who is presumably supposed to resemble Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a fat Black woman who is known as the ‘Godmother of Rock and Roll,’ on a vase.<sup>87</sup> She also champions body positivity throughout the song confidently singing, “I am body goals, yeah,” undermining the notion of the skinny body as the ultimate body, asserting that her body and every body can be a body goal.<sup>88</sup> She continues this theme of body positivity in the pre-chorus where she also explicitly states the message of the song, fighting against rumors and hostility meant to take her down and break her spirit:

Why you spendin' all your time tryna break a woman down?  
 Realer shit is goin' on, baby, take a look around  
 If you thought that I was ratchet with my ass hangin' out  
 Just wait until the summer when they let me out the house, bitch.<sup>89</sup>

In these lyrics Lizzo is addressing the media and the public’s constant attacks against her, especially around her weight.

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<sup>86</sup> Lizzo “Lizzo Instagram LIVE - August 15, 2021” *Youtube* video posted by “olivia !!”

<sup>87</sup> Lizzo (featuring Cardi B), “Rumors” & Lizzo Music. “Lizzo - Rumors feat. Cardi B [Official Video]”

<sup>88</sup> Lizzo (featuring Cardi B), “Rumors”

<sup>89</sup> Lizzo (featuring Cardi B), “Rumors”





Figure 13, Lizzo twerking in a thong at a Lakers game, photo taken by Allen Berezovsky for Getty

The lyrics about her “ass hangin’ out” is most likely in reference to the scandal she faced after twerking in a thong at a Lakers game (pictured above in figure 13). The alleged scandal of her outfit can be boiled down to racism and fatphobia, as Aurielle Marie writes, chronicling the response to Lizzo’s outfit:

The image of Lizzo shaking her bare ass at a basketball game quickly went viral, and with that came heaps of criticism. I watched hundreds of people weigh in on Lizzo’s *right* to wear clothing she owned in a public place... *Who the fuck does Lizzo think she is?*, people asked, *she knows better than to show her ass like that*. Another commented *Why do bitches like Lizzo think they can wear whatever they want?*... Sure, most of us don’t wear dresses that expose our ass via a circular cut out. But if it were a slim white woman wearing the outfit, would we be having the same discussion about her worth, her morals, and her value? Would people have asked who “bitches like” that think they are?... People are not mad that Lizzo showed her backside, they hate fat bodies and the Black girls housed in them. And they hate us even more when they can’t control us, limit our social mobility, or dictate when and where [we] are allowed to celebrate who we are and how we look.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Aurielle Marie, “Lizzo’s Outfit Isn’t Why People Are Mad - Hatred of Fat Black Women Is.”

By referencing this scandal in her song *Rumors*, Lizzo is questioning why people are so focused on her body and her actions while also asserting that it will not hold her back or stop her from expressing herself as a proud fat Black woman.



Figure 14, still from Lizzo's Instagram livestream addressing the backlash from "Rumors"

Despite the message of the song, Lizzo still faced immense backlash following the release of "Rumors" and addressed it via Instagram Live. Through tears, Lizzo discussed how draining being constantly attacked purely for her body and skin color is:

I'm seeing negativity directed at me in the weirdest way. People saying shit about me that just doesn't even make sense. It's fatphobic, and it's racist, and it's hurtful. If you don't like my music, cool. If you don't like 'Rumors' the song, cool. But a lot of people don't like me because of the way I look.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Lizzo, "Lizzo Instagram LIVE - August 15, 2021"

The hatred Lizzo receives has little basis in her music; it comes from her identity and her refusal to be ashamed of being fat and Black. Countering these negative messages Lizzo continues by saying:

But what I won't accept, is y'all doin this to Black women over and over and over again, especially us big Black girls. When we don't fit into the box that you want to put us in, you just unleash hatred onto us, it's not cool. I'm doin this shit for the big Black women in the future who just want to live their lives without being scrutinized or put into boxes. I'm not gonna do what y'all want me to do ever, so get used to it. But what I will do is make great music and be a great artist and continue to uplift people and uplift myself.<sup>92</sup>

She highlights that she is not alone in the hatred she receives. Societally, Black women, especially fat Black women, have been intensely marginalized and Lizzo's work attempts to work against this marginalization through pride, her body on display throughout her music videos, and highlighting those that came before her, highlighting Sister Rosetta Sharpe and collaborating with Missy Elliott on "Tempo." Lizzo succinctly identifies where some of this fatphobia and racism comes from when she talked about her desire to "focus on positive comments" instead of the negativity: "your negativity, your internalized self-hatred that you project onto me with your racism and your fatphobia, I don't have time for it."<sup>93</sup> A root cause of fatphobia is fear of becoming fat, as it has been demonized as one of the worst things you can be in our society. Hatred towards Lizzo is based on self-hatred and internalized fatphobia. This hatred also comes from Lizzo's identity, being at the intersection of misogyny, racism, and fatphobia. Da'Shaun L. Harrison, a fat disabled Black man, writes that "if one is fat and Black, they are always already illegible, animalistic, and undesirable... We have breath in our lungs, but existence, or who does and does not exist, is determined by people unlike us, for whom white supremacy—and more specifically, anti-Blackness—and cisheterosexism remain at the helm."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Lizzo, "Lizzo Instagram LIVE - August 15, 2021"

<sup>93</sup> Lizzo, "Lizzo Instagram LIVE - August 15, 2021"

<sup>94</sup> Da'Shaun L. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, 85

Because Lizzo is fat, Black, and a woman she is seen as subhuman. While white fat women can still claim some sense of personhood (as I will describe later with Adele), that same opportunity is not afforded to Lizzo as her Blackness overshadows any sense of personhood.

**Expectations: “I am body goals, yeah”<sup>95</sup>**

While people’s rampant fatphobic and racist remarks about Lizzo are obviously harmful, the way she is positioned in the body positivity movement can also be harmful. She is constantly praised as people’s fatspiration (to borrow from the problematic thinspiration) and seen as brave for how she embraces her body.<sup>96</sup> People who idolize Lizzo for her body positivity can fall into the trap of essentializing her, solely focusing on her body and not her talent (just as the hate commenters from “Rumors” did). Just because she is confident and fat does not mean she has to lead the movement for body positivity, and though she does advocate for body positivity publicly, we cannot expect her to be perfect at all times.

Lizzo’s positioning in the body positivity movement has led to the public looking far too deep into her actions. In “Rumors” while commenting on her ‘scandals’ and the “shit on the internet” about her, she mentions “[her] smoothie cleanse and [her] diet.”<sup>97</sup> This line refers to a ‘scandal’ where Lizzo posted a TikTok about doing a juice cleanse, specifically JJ Smith’s 10-day smoothie detox, as she had drunk a lot of alcohol and eaten a lot of spicy food in the past few weeks.<sup>98</sup> She then faced a lot of backlash for promoting unhealthy dieting strategies and allegedly trying to lose weight despite advocating body positivity. While cleanses like these can promote harmful ideologies and diet tips, the backlash to Lizzo’s TikTok was wildly overblown, leading to her having to make another video addressing the scandal. She begins by talking about

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<sup>95</sup> Lizzo (featuring Cardi B), “Rumors”

<sup>96</sup> I also find it ironic that spell check is trying to change fatspiration to fitspiration as apparently there are endless ways to idolize thin people.

<sup>97</sup> Lizzo (featuring Cardi B), “Rumors”

<sup>98</sup> Lizzo, “Watch me do JJ smith’s 10-day smoothie detox...” TikTok.

posting the video in the first place, saying, “I would normally be so afraid and ashamed to post things like this online because I feel like as a big girl, people expect if you’re doing something for health you’re doing it for dramatic weight loss and that is not the case.”<sup>99</sup> She then reiterated that it was purely done because she had a stressful month, full of alcohol and spicy foods, and wanted to feel better, and that she achieved that goal: “I feel and look like a bad bitch... That’s it. I’m a big girl who did a smoothie detox... Every big girl should do whatever the fuck they want with their bodies.”<sup>100</sup> Because Lizzo advocates for body positivity, people now assume they have a right to ownership over Lizzo’s body and what she does with it. Any change to diet or exercise regimen is taken as an attack on body positivity and is assumed to be precipitated by a desire to be skinny.

Not all people who find inspiration in Lizzo essentialize her. For instance, Sami Schalk, Assistant Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who was previously cited in this paper, talks about her love of Lizzo and its relation to Pleasure Activism, which Adrienne Maree Brown describes as the “[assertion] that we all need and deserve pleasure, and that our social structures must reflect this... we must prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression.”<sup>101</sup> In 2019, Schalk posted a viral video with the hashtag, #twerkwithlizzo, which led to her twerking live on stage with Lizzo during a concert (pictured below as figure 15), an experience she discusses in the following quote:

I get pleasure from listening to Lizzo’s music — from her embrace of self-love, body positivity, and individuality as a multi-talented fat black woman. I also get pleasure from twerking, the act of moving your bigs to shake your butt quickly because it makes me feel good about my body and dancing skills. Pleasure is the way I love and take care of

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<sup>99</sup> Lizzo, “Big girls do whatever u want with your bodies!!!!...” TikTok.

<sup>100</sup> Lizzo, “Big girls do whatever u want with your bodies!!!!...” TikTok.

<sup>101</sup> Adrienne Maree Brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* as quoted by Sami Schalk in “When I Twerked Onstage with Lizzo, It Was an Act of Political Defiance”

myself. And to publicly love a body that the world says I should be ashamed of is a political act of defiance.<sup>102</sup>



Figure 15, Professor Sami Schalk (in the purple) twerking onstage with Lizzo during a concert

Lizzo herself talks about the radical power of twerking in her 2021 TED Talk “The Black history of twerking -- and how it taught me self-love.” In this talk, she says that twerking taught her to appreciate her body: “Through the movement of twerking, I discovered my ass was my greatest asset... The better I got the more I fell in love with what I had because, damn, my ass could do magic.”<sup>103</sup> Lizzo then talks about how twerking is a form of Black power and resistance by historicizing the origins of twerking:

Modern-day twerking derived from Black people and Black culture. It has a direct parallel to West African dances like mapouka. Traditionally, mapouka was a dance for West African Women to be used as a celebration of joy, religious worship, or a dance to do at a wedding... Black women carried these dances across the transatlantic slave trade to the ring shout and what became the Black American Church, into the hips of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith when they sang the blues, into the bounce of Josephine Baker’s banana dance. From jazz dance to jitterbug, from shake ya tailfeather to shake ya thang to that thang thangin. Black people carried the origins of this dance through our DNA,

<sup>102</sup> Sami Schalk, “When I Twerked Onstage with Lizzo, It Was an Act of Political Defiance”

<sup>103</sup> Lizzo, “Lizzo: The Black history of twerking -- and how it taught me self-love | TED,” *Youtube* video posted by “TED”

through our blood, through our bones. We made twerking the global, cultural phenomenon it has become today... I want to add to the classical etymology of this dance because it matters. Black people will not be erased from the creation, the history, and the innovation of twerking.<sup>104</sup>

Lizzo sees her own twerking through this historical lens as carrying on the traditions of her ancestors. She explains how twerking is crucial to her existence as a fat Black woman and to the surviving and thriving of fat Black women everywhere:

For me, twerking is not a trend. My body is not a trend. I twerk for the strippers, for the video vixens, for the church ladies who shout, for the sex workers. I twerk because Black women are undeniable. I twerk for my ancestors, for sexual liberation, for my bitches... because I can, because I know I look good. I twerk because it's unique to the Black experience. It's unique to my culture, and it means something real to me. I twerk because I'm talented. Because I'm sexual, but not to be sexualized. I twerk to own my power, to reclaim my Blackness, my culture. I twerk for fat Black women, because being fat and Black is a beautiful thing. I twerk because it's as natural to me as breathing. Black women invented twerking, and twerking is part of the revolution. We've been doing it, we're going to keep on doing it because we have and always will be the blueprint.<sup>105</sup>

Her twerking is activism, it is a political act to reclaim her fat Black body as beautiful, sexual, and powerful. She twerks for everyone who has been shamed for their sexuality or for their bodies not being acceptable, in order to create a different world, one of acceptance and liberation.

While Lizzo's unabashed body positivity is an inspiration to many, we must remember that she is still a person and should not be expected to make sure every person feels good about themselves. She is allowed to make her own choices about *her* body, something that seems to have been forgotten with Adele, as I will discuss in the next section.

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<sup>104</sup> Lizzo, "Lizzo: The Black history of twerking -- and how it taught me self-love | TED," TED

<sup>105</sup> Lizzo, "Lizzo: The Black history of twerking -- and how it taught me self-love | TED," TED



**Adele: “I’m sorry if [my weight loss] has made anybody feel terrible”<sup>106</sup>**



Figure 16, Instagram post from Adele on her birthday

The picture that launched a thousand Instagram comments. On May 6th 2020, Adele posted a photo on Instagram (figure 16 above) thanking people for all of their birthday well wishes. What seems to be an innocuous enough post caused an internet uproar as Adele had lost weight since the last time she was in the public eye. We see the usual fatphobic responses to her weight loss: talking about her “glow up” (meaning extreme makeover for the better) and posting before and after pictures saying “this is the same Adele - What’s your excuse?”<sup>107</sup> Whenever a celebrity loses weight it is used as an opportunity to shame and denigrate fat people for not doing the same.

Interesting, however, was the response from body positive activists and fat people who looked up to Adele. Many responses were not directed at Adele herself and instead emphasized

<sup>106</sup> Kaitlin Vogel, “My Body Was on Another Planet’—Adele Gets Real with Oprah about How and Why She Lost Weight,”

<sup>107</sup> Louis Staples, “Yes, It’s Fatphobic to Praise Adele’s Weight Loss in Her Latest Instagram Photo – Here’s Why.”



how the responses discussed above affected individual fat people. One Twitter user wrote, “please know that every time you make a big deal about someone’s extreme weight loss and act like it makes them the hottest person and so much better than before, you are communicating to your friends and any fat people and bigger people that they’d be better skinnier and smaller.”<sup>108</sup> Other responses, however, evoked a feeling of betrayal at Adele supposedly abandoning the body positive movement. Their responses were directed at Adele specifically, expressing disappointment with her, saying that she “‘sold out,’ ‘[fell] for the lies of the diet industry’ and ‘[gave] into misogynist messaging about body shape.’”<sup>109</sup> These responses, similarly to the explicitly fatphobic responses, can be read as problematic, as in both instances Adele is being looked at as only a body, which is all too common with fat people who are essentially boiled down to just their body. The hypervisibility of the fat body renders fat people as only their bodies and nothing else.

I, at first, felt this same sense of betrayal when I saw Adele’s weight loss and the many news sources congratulating her for it, as many times celebrities who supposedly believe in body positivity begin saying fatphobic things after losing weight. For example, Rebel Wilson, who recently lost 60 pounds during her “year of health,” said the following on Instagram: “Thanks for all the love so far on my ‘Year of Health’ journey – when I was reaching for the candies last night after dinner I thought to myself ‘hmmmm...better not’ and had a bottle of water instead x 8kg’s to go until I hit my goal – hopefully I can do it by the end of the year x.”<sup>110</sup> While we should not shame Rebel Wilson for the choices she has made in regards to her own body, it may be harmful for people to see someone who had previously been proudly fat now counting

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<sup>108</sup> Elly Belle (@literElly). “please know that every time...” Twitter

<sup>109</sup> Flic Everett, “Fatphobia? Why Adele Losing Weight Triggers Toxic Reactions”

<sup>110</sup> Rebel Wilson’s instagram as quoted by Jennifer O’Connell, “Rebel Wilson’s ‘Unrecognizable’ Weight-Loss Photos Are Toxic and Depressing.”

calories and shaming themselves for wanting chocolate, especially given the problematic tips she is endorsing that could be triggering for those with past/present eating disorders.



Figure 17, A picture from an Instagram post from Rob McElhenney showing his weight gain and subsequent loss

While Rebel Wilson makes weight loss seem easy, just ditch that chocolate bar for a bottle of water, one such actor who did acknowledge the ridiculous effort needed for weight loss was Rob McElhenney, who gained and then lost a lot of weight for his character Mac on *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. He sarcastically remarked on the nature of weight loss in the caption of an Instagram post (pictured above as figure 17) writing:

Look it's not that hard. All you need to do is lift weights six days a week, stop drinking alcohol, don't eat anything after 7pm, don't eat any carbs or sugar at all, in fact just don't eat anything you like, get the personal trainer from Magic Mike, sleep nine hours a night, run three miles a day, and have a studio pay for the whole thing over a six to seven month span. I don't know why everyone's not doing this. It's a super realistic lifestyle and appropriate body image to compare oneself to. #hollywood.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Rob McElhenney, (@robmcclhenney), "Look, it's not that hard..." *Instagram*

As discussed in Chapter 1, long-term weight loss is a near impossibility and McElhenney emphasizes the ridiculous restrictions and the immense amount of resources necessary to lose weight. This is rarely included in the discussions around celebrity weight loss. Without a ridiculous amount of money and privilege, long-term weight loss is nearly impossible due to the excessive amount of resources necessary: expensive equipment, personal trainers, restrictive diets with expensive healthy foods, the list goes on and on. This acknowledgment, however, was not present in discussions about Adele's weight loss, and Adele's commentary about her weight loss journey.

Seeing her before and after pictures being shared online made me upset, like we had lost another leader of the body positivity movement. Adele herself addressed this perspective in an interview with Oprah saying, "I'm sorry if [my weight loss] has made anybody feel terrible... I feel bad that it's made anyone feel horrible about themselves, but it's not my job to validate anybody about their weight...I've got my own problems!"<sup>112</sup> This is key to remember; in some instances, we are forcing this label of body positivity guru onto celebrities who do not want it. Just as many of us want to just live in our bodies, so does Adele! She is more than her body, fat or skinny, and still has the same values: "My body's been objectified my entire career... It's not just now. I understand why it's a shock. I understand why some women especially were hurt. Visually I represented a lot of women. But I'm still the same person."<sup>113</sup> If people looked up to Adele when she was fat, why should that change now that she lost weight? Just because Adele's body no longer looks a certain way does not mean she cannot feel positive or proud of her body. Just as Lizzo was hurt by the hate she received, Adele was also hurt by the reaction to her weight loss, "The most brutal conversations were being had by other women about my body... I was

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<sup>112</sup> Kaitlin Vogel, "My Body Was on Another Planet'..."

<sup>113</sup> Kaitlin Vogel, "My Body Was on Another Planet'..."

very disappointed with that. That hurt my feelings.”<sup>114</sup> No matter what, fat or skinny, conversations, especially those about women, are centered on the body. We are all boiled down to our bodies which determine our worth.

Psychologist Elisabeth Shaw examines this phenomenon and people’s investments in celebrity’s bodies in the following quote:

If the celebrity is carrying more weight, there’s this lovely validation that you can go against societal norms and still be hugely loved and successful. It provides a lot of hope for fans that you can have it all... When the celebrity decides to change aspects of their life that the fan has been invested in, it can feel like a real betrayal because of the construction of that ideal.<sup>115</sup>

This theorizing explains the intense reactions to both Lizzo and Adele and the intense scrutiny of their every action. People see themselves in the celebrities they look up to, and, rightfully or not, feel affected by their actions. This creates an expectation for any celebrities who express any notions of body positivity to be role models for everyone always, which is entirely unfair and takes away from their personhood.

Although I theorize Lizzo and Adele together in this way, it is interesting to examine how these two women differ in how they discuss their bodies. Lizzo constantly talks about her body and her experience with fatness, while Adele never really talked about those things until after she had lost weight and disavowed being a role model. Adele was allowed to exist as a fat person, while Lizzo is required to address it in everything she does, which I argue is because of race. As a white person, Adele never had to make her weight and her body a subject. Lizzo, on the other hand, cannot *not* talk about her body because her racialized fat body is all society can see her as. Fat white women, especially those that fit somewhat into normative standards of beauty, such as having a curvy hourglass shape, can have their whiteness overpower their fatness. Black fat

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<sup>114</sup> Kaitlin Vogel, “My Body Was on Another Planet’...”

<sup>115</sup> Elisabeth Shaw quoted by Cassandra Green, “Do We Have a Right to Feel Betrayed When a Celebrity Loses Weight?”

women have to constantly reckon with their bodies and how they are immensely stigmatized in our society, a pressure that leads Lizzo to have to focus her brand and her public identity on body positivity, whether she wants to or not. While people who talk about Adele are more likely to focus on her voice and her music, both pre and post weight loss, conversations about Lizzo most commonly focus on her body and her identity, as opposed to her talent. I see Lizzo and Adele perfectly summing up the “bad fatty” versus “good fatty” dichotomy discussed in the beginning of this chapter. Adele, as “a good fatty,” never indulged in her fatness; she was frequently buttoned up and never made her fatness a topic of discussion, even though it mostly aligned with societal body standards for a “good fatty”. Lizzo, as a “bad fatty,” never hides her body and is proud of it, despite some people’s protestations that it does not align with their standards of beauty. Lizzo has made her body and body positivity part of her identity as an artist (something she had little choice in as a fat Black woman) while Adele never made her body a topic of discussion.

### **Adele & Lizzo: Desire, Sexualization, & Race**

Looking at the way Adele and Lizzo are perceived in the public eye reveals how fat women are desired and sexualized and how that desire/sexualization is affected by race. Though both women are/were fat, and there are memes that discuss people’s attraction to both of them, the content and the underlying messages to these memes are clearly racialized.



Figure 18, a popular meme format arguing that Adele was always hot and did not become hot when she lost weight, and that that argument is rooted in fatphobia

To put it most simply, Adele is desired (see figure 18 above) while Lizzo is sexualized (see figures 19.1, 19.2, and 19.3 below). Looking at figure 18, Adele is described as hot, regardless of her weight. In this description of her as hot, the focus is placed on her face after and before losing weight and the desire is for her beauty and face. Looking at figures 19.1, 19.2, and 19.3, Lizzo is sexualized and is also not present physically in the video (except through the weights that are supposed to represent her body). Instead of focusing on the face, the focus for Lizzo is on her body and the ability for men to use it sexually. Whiteness is so overpowering it can overcome the beauty standards and Adele can be read as attractive while being fat. In Lizzo's case, being at the intersection of fatness, Blackness, and womanhood, she can only be sexualized as the eroticized and exoticized other.



Figures 19.1, 19.2, and 19.3, TikToker @charliewhitefit asking Siri how much Lizzo weighs so he can practice thrusting her weight, in a sexually suggestive manner

While the meme about Adele rests on reading her as attractive (hot) both as fat and skinny, the TikTok about Lizzo rests on reading her as sexual. Some of the “body positive” reactions to Adele’s weight loss, other than the ones of betrayal discussed above, focus on declaring she was beautiful before just as after. Instead of asking why celebrities have to be beautiful and why we are focusing on Adele’s body and beauty instead of her talent, people are focusing on refuting the comments about Adele looking hot now and saying she *always* looked hot.

When Lizzo is discussed, in relation to desire and attractiveness, her body is seen as the exoticized and eroticized other. I see echoes of the treatment of Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus, in the treatment of Lizzo: Baartman’s body being seen as a spectacle, her large posterior seen as simultaneously offensive but also alluring. In her poem fictionalizing the experience of Baartman, poet Elizabeth Alexander writes about Baartman’s body constantly being on display, “I am a black cutout against / a captive blue sky, pivoting / nude so the paying audience / can

view my naked buttocks.”<sup>116</sup> Lizzo’s fat Black body is often made a spectacle in this same way, both by those who condemn her for displaying her body and by those who call her ‘brave’ for showing any amount of skin as a fat person, despite society’s disapproval. Alexander further writes about Baarman and her experience being examined, writing, “He complains / at my scent and does not think / I comprehend, but I speak / English. I speak Dutch. I speak / a little French as well, and / languages Monsieur Cuvier / will never know have names.”<sup>117</sup> Just as Baartman’s knowledge is ignored because of her body, Lizzo’s immense talent is often put to the wayside due to the myopic focus on her body.



Figure 20, the cover of Lizzo’s 2019 album *Cuz I Love You*

Some may argue that Lizzo is inviting this sexualization through her outfits and frequent embrace of nudity. I read this not as an invitation to sexualization, but as a reclamation of the fierce power of the erotic, as defined by Audre Lorde, quoted in chapter one. Lizzo is reclaiming her body, and by virtue of her statue in the public eye, the bodies of all fat people, as sexy, as

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<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, “The Venus Hottentot”

<sup>117</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, “The Venus Hottentot”



erotic, and as beautiful, in a world determined to make us feel like they are not. Jael Goldfine, for Paper Magazine, wrote about the importance of the album cover of Lizzo's 2019 album *Cuz I Love You* (figure 20 above): "Fat, and especially fat and Black bodies are rarely treated with such care by photographers, let alone on album covers that will sit on Target and Walmart shelves," also writing that in the photo "Lizzo projects supreme confidence and self-ownership, with just a little of the defiant Lizzo spirit in her gaze."<sup>118</sup> Images like Lizzo's album cover are rarely seen in society, especially in a positive light. Seeing the image of Lizzo's nude body projecting so much power could be transformative for someone walking by and seeing it on a shelf at a store, as Goldfine describes.

As part of a study on fat women's sexual empowerment and body acceptance, Jeanine A. Gailey interviewed fat women about their body image. Many of them discussed activities that have given them a more positive view of their own bodies. One interviewee, Katrina, joined a belly dancing troupe which "has helped her self-esteem tremendously," as "people line up after the performances to talk to her and that they typically tell her how beautiful she is."<sup>119</sup> Gailey further writes that Katrina "now appreciates what her body does for her and she feels more attractive than she did prior to learning to belly dance."<sup>120</sup> Lizzo's outfits, dancing, and her career more broadly follow this same notion of embracing one's body leading to self-acceptance. I argue that Lizzo, being in the public eye, is not just garnering self-acceptance but is helping fat people across the world feel accepted too, at least I can say she is helping me feel that way.

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<sup>118</sup> Jael Goldfine, "Lizzo Dropped Her Gorgeous Nude Album Cover,"

<sup>119</sup> Jeanine A. Gailey, "Transforming the Looking-Glass: Fat Women's Sexual Empowerment through Body Acceptance," 60

<sup>120</sup> Jeanine A. Gailey, 60

## Lizzo Comparisons: Race & Size

Lizzo is often compared to other celebrities in ways that reveal how her experiences are affected by her race and her fatness. Figure 21 below was tweeted in response to Lizzo's viral video of her boarding a private jet while promoting her new shapewear line YITTY. YITTY markets itself as a size-inclusive body positive shapewear line, dedicated to "allowing women to feel unapologetically good about themselves again" with sizes ranging from "6X to XS," purposefully putting the bigger sizes at the forefront.<sup>121</sup> Despite Lizzo's proclamation of radical self-love regarding the brand, "I want you to be able to look at yourself in the mirror and feel fucking confident and say: 'I love you, I want to treat you well, you deserve this,'" she still faced hate for wearing her brand's shapewear.<sup>122</sup>



Figure 21, a tweet comparing Lizzo and Olivia Culpo, former Miss Universe from 2012, and their outfits while boarding a plane, Lizzo a private jet and Culpo at a public airport.

<sup>121</sup> "About Us," Yitty

<sup>122</sup> "About Us," Yitty

One Twitter user compared Lizzo's outfit to the outfit of former Miss Universe Olivia Culpo, a black sports bra and bike shorts, when she was asked to cover up in order to board an American Airlines flight. While Olivia Culpo's situation is a gross act of policing women's bodies, the Twitter user does not bring it up in order to protest policing of women's bodies in general. Instead, they use it to police Lizzo's body: how could Lizzo's outfit be allowed when this poor innocent white woman was forced to cover up? Besides the fact that Lizzo was boarding a chartered private jet and Culpo was boarding a public flight, this tweet shows how Black women's, and especially fat Black women's, bodies are deemed inappropriate and are intensely policed in our society. This Twitter user was not alone in expressing outrage over Lizzo's body; many of the responses to Lizzo's video were intensely fatphobic and racist.



Figure 22, a tweet comparing Lizzo to Jill Scott, another fat Black woman

The above image (figure 22) shows another tweet comparing this picture of Lizzo boarding a plane to another woman, this time another fat Black woman, singer and actress Jill Scott. This Twitter user is shaming Lizzo for showing her body, claiming that fat women are not desired by men because they have no class. When this Twitter user says they have “no class,” she really means that fat women must acknowledge that their bodies are undesirable and must be ashamed of them in order to be attractive to men. By showing off her body and being proud of it, Lizzo, therefore, has no class and cannot attract a man. It is also important to note that this Twitter user specifies that this is why men will not date them; Lizzo’s body can be sexualized but she is not a viable candidate for a relationship because of her fatness, and specifically her refusal to be ashamed of it.



Figure 23, Lizzo and Rihanna wearing similar sheer dresses; Lizzo faced a lot of backlash over this outfit while Rihanna was praised for her dress

Another instance of Lizzo’s body being compared to other celebrities can be seen in figure 23 where both Lizzo and Rihanna wore similar dresses but only Lizzo faced backlash over the outfit. Fans were quick to point out the hypocrisy of the responses to the two outfits writing,

“if rihanna wore lizzo’s outfit the blogs would be gagged, but hey [sic]” and “Lizzo is not the poster child for yalls expectations. Every other woman in that party had their ass out.”<sup>123</sup>

Even Rihanna, the skinny person Lizzo’s outfit was compared against, has been subject to fat-shaming. Barstool Sports published an entire article dedicated to fat-shaming Rihanna titled, “Is Rihanna Going to Make Being Fat the Hot New Trend?” In the now-removed article, ‘reporter’ Chris Spags bemoaned Rihanna’s alleged weight gain worrying that it signaled “a world of ladies shaped like the Hindenburg” where “all the hottest girls look like the humans in ‘Wall-E.’”<sup>124</sup> Spags further laments Rihanna’s weight by issuing this warning: “It’s time to worry if you’re not a guy who fancies himself a chubby chaser,” a statement playing into both sides of de/hyper-sexualization of fat bodies, viewing them as sexual objects but not one he would want to have sex with.<sup>125</sup> Black women’s bodies, regardless of fatness, are intensely scrutinized in the public eye, with fatphobia being wielded against them no matter what size.



Figure 24, Rihanna’s meme response to being fat-shamed

<sup>123</sup> Staff Reporter, “If Rihanna can rock it so can Lizzo say fans,” Report Focus News

<sup>124</sup> Chris Spags as quoted by Maria Fischer, “Popular Bro Site Fat Shames Rihanna and Writes Worst Apology Ever”

<sup>125</sup> Chris Spags as quoted by Maria Fischer, “Popular Bro Site Fat Shames Rihanna and Writes Worst Apology Ever”

Rihanna responded to the fat-shaming with a meme, (figure 24 above), that only further holds up skinny as the ideal and fatness as a condition to, at best, tolerate, in hopes of one day achieving thinness.

Lizzo comments on this phenomenon in her upcoming song “Special,” the titular track from her upcoming album which she performed on *Saturday Night Live*, “Woke up this morning to somebody in a video / Talking about something I posted in a video / If it wasn't me then would you even get offended / Or is it just because I'm black or heavy?”<sup>126</sup> In these lyrics she points out the hypocrisy, just as I have laid out in this chapter, in the fact that she is criticized for the same things other celebrities do; the only difference in these situations being her race and her weight.

### **Skinny Legend: Iconic or Injurious?**

The term “Skinny Legend” provides an interesting lens to analyze fatphobia, especially in online spaces relating to pop music. Lizzo and Adele are commonly roped into this discourse, although not equally, as I will discuss later. Dictionary.com describes a Skinny Legend as follows:

*Skinny legend* is a term of endearment for a celebrity, usually a woman, whose fans consider them to be flawless but underappreciated. It's also a meme where fans photoshop their idols to appear impossibly stick-figure thin. The phrase in its primary sense isn't meant to promote eating disorders or physical thinness. However, many people do use it to talk about being thin or wanting to be.<sup>127</sup>

The phrase began with a tweet about Christina Aguilera and rose to prominence in its usage to describe pop diva Mariah Carey, photoshopped to ridiculous proportions for the meme (pictured below in figure 25).

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<sup>126</sup> Lizzo, “Special,” 2022

<sup>127</sup> “Skinny Legend.” Dictionary.com.





Figure 25, Mariah Carey photoshopped to ridiculous proportions for the Skinny Legend meme, Slaven Vlastic / Stringer (Getty)

Obviously, this trend is supposed to be read as humorous, and the “skinny” of the “skinny legend” is not a body goal. In its absurdity the skinny legend meme satirizes the notion that skinny equals better; by calling our ‘faves’ skinny legends regardless of body size we are stripping this notion from its possibly problematic meanings. But this satire is not always effective, as trends can rapidly change meanings as they travel across the internet. The notion of the skinny legend became muddled when one Twitter user tweeted “anyone that tells you an iced coffee is not an acceptable meal replacement is simply a hater that doesn't want you to be skinny remember that.”<sup>128</sup> This led to many Twitter users condemning the trend as triggering to those with eating disorders and said the trend promoted disordered eating.<sup>129</sup> Even if the phrase skinny legend was coined with the idea of making fun of body goals, especially for celebrities in the public eye, because skinny legend is a positive term it is still furthering the subconscious association between skinny and good.

<sup>128</sup> Tweet from user @stylestruly on April 20, 2018 as quoted by Josh Lee, “Does the ‘Skinny Legend’ Meme Promote Eating Disorders?”

<sup>129</sup> Josh Lee, “Does the ‘Skinny Legend’ Meme Promote Eating Disorders?”

It is crucial, then, to examine who is given the title of skinny legend. It frequently seems that the title of skinny legend is given in earnest to skinny celebrities, while given sarcastically or ironically to fat celebrities, such as Disney Channel star Raini Rodriguez, a frequent target of the skinny legend meme. Rodriguez actually had to disable comments on her Instagram because of the overwhelming amount of people calling her a skinny legend. When someone on Twitter said she should embrace the attention, she responded, “Oh, you mean the constant harassment from people online? The vulgar language? The inappropriate memes? The bullying comments everyone is constantly posting on my [Instagram] pics of friends/family? Naw man, I’ll choose to embrace the POSITIVE attention, not this stuff y’all think is funny.”<sup>130</sup> While Raini Rodriguez being called a skinny legend bordered on harassment, Adele, on the other hand, was given the title of skinny legend by fans on Twitter after posting the now-infamous photo showing her weight loss, (one example tweet is pictured below as figure 26). Instead of bombarding her with disingenuous proclamations of being a skinny legend, Adele was being called a skinny legend specifically *because* she was skinny: her body was the focus, not her talent. While some would argue that Rodriguez was being called a skinny legend because of her talent, she did not see it that way, as evidenced by her tweet.

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<sup>130</sup> Raini Rodriguez (@Raini\_Rodriguez), “Oh, you mean the constant harassment from people...” Tweet





Figure 26, a tweet calling Adele a skinny legend post weight loss from the same day she posted the picture showing her weight loss

Lizzo, however, has somewhat denounced the title of skinny legend. Responding to a tweet saying her collaboration with Missy Elliott, “Tempo,” is only for fat people (“Sorry Skinny Girls This one ain’t for y’all #ThickGirlsOnly”), Lizzo said, “IF U CAN BE A SKINNY LEGEND WHILE LISTENING TO MARIAH / YOU CAN BE A THICK BITCH WHILE LISTENING TO LIZZO / LOVE TO ALL BODIES.”<sup>131</sup> Instead of embracing the term skinny legend, Lizzo advocates embracing the idea of being a ‘thick bitch.’ Instead of propping up the underlying notion that skinny is good, Lizzo props up fatness and thickness as desirable characteristics.

<sup>131</sup> Lizzo (@lizzo). “IF U CAN BE A SKINNY LEGEND...” Tweet

## Conclusion

Da'Shaun L. Harrison, in the conclusion of their book *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, writes about the fat Black body, the oppression it faces, and how we move beyond it:

I see the Black fat body not as a cage, but rather as a thing that has been caged. A thing, a Beast, bound by the structures of the World. And so, then, I echo and employ the words of the late Maya Angelou who wrote of why the caged bird sings. If that caged bird is the Beast, trapped and taunted by the idea of freedom, then like it, the Black fat sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still; we sit on graves of dreams not yet seen. In those dreams, which may never resurrect, there's a place—not the World—where we live and breathe as beings not bound by identifiers and qualifiers predicated on anti-Blackness. Where we are not Black or white, not thin or fat, not cis or trans, not queer or straight, not bound or unbound. In that place, the caged bird is not freed from its cage; in that place, the cage never existed for the bird to ever be bound by.<sup>132</sup>

I see Lizzo's music as working toward this goal of liberation for fat people and for Black people through her unabashed love for herself and for others. Despite the near constant backlash she faces, she continues to love herself and to spread her message of love to others. In the unreleased song "Special," the titular track from her upcoming album, Lizzo sings:

So, I thought that I'd let you know, oh  
In case nobody told you today, you're special  
In case nobody made you believe, you're special  
Well, I'll always tell you the same, you're special  
I'm so glad that you're still with us  
Broken, but damn, you're still perfect<sup>133</sup>

Lizzo's songs are protest anthems, against fatphobia, against racism, against misogyny, against anything designed to make us feel less than. Lizzo embodies Sonya Renee Taylor's definition of liberation as "the opportunity for every human, no matter their body, to have unobstructed access to their highest self; for every human to live in radical self-love."<sup>134</sup> I will end this chapter with

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<sup>132</sup> Da'Shaun L. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, 109

<sup>133</sup> Lizzo, "Special," 2022

<sup>134</sup> Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*, 116

Lizzo's own words discussing her 2015 song "My Skin" and its accompanying music video, and how she sees her work as fighting for liberation, despite the hate she constantly receives:

We are reduced to our stereotypes. We ALL are. But black stereotypes have made us the pariah of the privileged. 'My Skin' is a stance against the racial profiling of ALL ethnicities and the blind hatred that poisons our perceptions. I performed in this music video being fully aware of the consequences. The amount of shame people place on others' bodies has evolved beyond the quiet murmurs behind backs. 'Body shaming' and hateful, stereotypical slurs are flippantly exchanged on social media and Youtube comments. This video will be seen, scrutinized, laughed at, hated, loved, but most importantly appreciated. My afro-hair, fat, muscle, bone and melanin are not a punchline—I was born in it, and I will proudly wake up in it everyday. This is a summoning of bodies: all shapes, sizes and shades to unite in their pride, and wear their skin like the gift it is.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Lizzo as quoted by Kim Taylor Bennett, "'My Blackness Is My Largest Assumed 'Accessory': Lizzo Breaks down Her Video for 'Skin.'"

### Conclusion: Fat's All Folks!

One question I have been asking myself throughout this process is, how can I deconstruct fatphobia and write about fat acceptance and activism without confronting my own internalized fatphobia? What does it mean to write about fatphobia, fat studies, and fat activism as a fat person with a tenuous relationship to my own body and my own self-image? How do I write my thesis after having a breakdown trying on shorts that fit last year but don't fit now? Or after being told Men's Wearhouse doesn't have any suits that fit me and that I need to go to Destination XL? When every episode of RuPaul's Drag Race has seemingly endless fatphobic jokes about the big girls?

In chapter one I wrote about the phrase "No Fats, No Femmes," and its usage on queer, mostly gay male, dating apps. The usage of this phrase, as well as the unspoken thoughts it symbolizes, embodies one way that fatphobia and queerness intersect. On these dating apps, people refuse to acknowledge their fatphobia and femmephobia, as well as their racism (often including "No Asians, No Blacks, No Latinos" in their bios as well), and instead write these off as "just being preferences." However, you cannot argue that oppression is a preference, as fat people, femme people, and people of color are marginalized at large by society. These "preferences" are not just preferences; they are an internalization of the larger, oppressive systems in society. Gay people hide behind this label of preference in order to oppress queer people who are additionally marginalized. The immense amount of fatphobia in queer spaces has serious consequences for queer people, especially fat queer people. The National Eating Disorders Association reports that "Gay males [are] seven times more likely to report bingeing and 12 times more likely to report purging than heterosexual males," and "among males who have eating disorders, 42% identify as gay."<sup>136</sup> These intense body image issues in the queer

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<sup>136</sup> National Eating Disorders Association, "EATING DISORDERS IN LGBTQ+ POPULATIONS"

community has led to the usage of the term “Gay Fat,” a term that refers to the impossibly high standards for bodies that are accepted in the gay community as it takes much less to be considered fat as a gay person.

The only “acceptable fat” in the gay community is that of the bear, a fat or muscular man with lots of body and facial hair. Caleb Luna writes about bears as acceptable fats, saying “the beard provides a confirmation of masculinity to offset the feminization of fatness,” femininity I discussed previously when writing about the emasculation of male politicians in chapter one.<sup>137</sup> While the notion of bears as acceptable fatness definitely excludes femme presenting fat people, it also excludes fat men of color, who are often stereotyped as non-masculine. Popular bear dating site Bear411 has repeatedly been accused of denying access to Asian men, who are stereotypically perceived as feminine, even if they meet the criteria for entry: dating bears and being fat and hairy.<sup>138</sup> Caleb Luna further writes about how racism, fatphobia, and femmephobia intersect under colonization in the world of dating for gay people:

Colonization indoctrinates us into the romantic idolization of thinness, whiteness, and masculinity—in ourselves and others... Under colonial constructions of beauty and desire, being fat and brown and queer and femme means being ugly. It means feeling unlovable, being unlovable, and no one disagreeing. Being fat and brown and colonized means to value, desire, and prioritize romantic love—a love that doesn’t want you, that will never have you, and to not know how to liberate yourself from the belly of that beast.<sup>139</sup>

At the end of his piece, Luna calls for an embrace of the ugly and for moving beyond the concept of ‘beauty,’ which they argue is an inherently exclusionary idea. While this is a noble cause, it is difficult to read about how society has deemed your body ugly and unlovable; I just want to be loved for who I am.

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<sup>137</sup> Caleb Luna, “On Being Fat, Brown, Femme, Ugly, and Unloveable”

<sup>138</sup> Bill Church, “The Forbidden Truth About Bear411 Revealed By An Old Pro”

<sup>139</sup> Caleb Luna, “On Being Fat, Brown, Femme, Ugly, and Unloveable”

Though my thesis thus far has problematized media and focused on examples of fatphobia in media, and in society more broadly, I now turn my focus to media that embraces fatness and inspires me to do the same.



Figure 27, image from season 3, episode 1 of *Shrill*, showing Annie, played by Aidy Bryant, yelling at a fatphobic doctor

In season three, episode one of the show *Shrill*, inspired by Lindy West's novel of the same name, Annie, the main character, sees a new doctor while at an appointment for a pap smear. This new doctor, after finishing Annie's examination, offhandedly says, "You should think about gastric bypass. You're at a good age for it," to which Annie responds, shocked, "I'm sorry. Think about what?" The doctor calmly reiterates she should think about "Getting bariatric surgery. For your weight. It's not healthy and that might be the most realistic solution." Annie questions, "Okay, um, but we didn't do, like, any blood work or anything today. Isn't that something maybe you should look at before you recommend a major surgery?" to which the doctor answers, "I don't need to do bloodwork to know that your overall health will be improved by losing weight. It's just a fact," while handing Annie a pamphlet titled "Smaller Body, Bigger Life: Bariatric Surgery and You" with a picture of a woman holding a scale and an apple. Annie

responds, “Okay, Well I’m not interested in the surgery,” to which the doctor says, “Okay. Have a good day.”<sup>140</sup> As I wrote about in chapter one, fatphobia in the medical field is a rampant problem, one that I have personally faced.

After her appointment, Annie is sitting in her car when that same doctor exits the office. Annie rolls down her window and yells, “Hey, that was fuckin’ fucked up! You’re gonna look at me for ten minutes and tell me to cut my stomach out? How is that medically ethical? You’re a bad person. You’re a bad fuckin’ person. Fuck you. Fuck you!”<sup>141</sup> This radical proclamation, however, is made in vain as we then see the doctor is wearing headphones and did not hear what Annie yelled at her, a revelation Annie does not take kindly to, screaming “fuck” as the episode cuts to the end credits. The rage Annie shows in this scene is the exact same rage I feel in the doctor’s office when being called obese or having my symptoms being ignored because of my size. Though the doctor does not hear Annie, I still found it liberating to see someone vocalize the immense frustration I and many other fat people have at the way we are treated in doctor’s offices.

Jason Whitezel’s book *Fat Gay Men: Girth, Mirth, and the Politics of Stigma*, details Girth & Mirth groups, groups for fat gay men, and the various events they hold. Reading about these spaces that are free from fatphobia and the stigma of general society has greatly inspired me to hope that one day these spaces will not be anomalies. The men at the events held by Girth & Mirth are described as, “freedom fighters, in the sense that living well is the best revenge.”<sup>142</sup> These fat gay men “resist the belief that others could deny them such fun because of their weight and size,” embodying the notion that one’s existence can be political.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *Shrill*. 2021. Season 3, Episode 1, “Ribs.”

<sup>141</sup> *Shrill*. 2021. Season 3, Episode 1, “Ribs.”

<sup>142</sup> Marilynn Wann as quoted by Jason Whitsel, *Fat Gay Men: Girth, Mirth, and the Politics of Stigma*, 62

<sup>143</sup> Whitsel 62



Figure 28, a still from the music video from Lizzo's newest song, "About Damn Time"

Though I have problematized some of the ways Lizzo is viewed as fatspiration, I still find love for myself and my body through her music. In her newest single "About Damn Time," music video pictured above (figure 28), Lizzo proclaims, "I'm way too fine to be this stressed."<sup>144</sup> Lizzo is proclaiming that fat people are hot and that we should not have to be worried about the societal forces that may say otherwise; these are words to live by. When Lizzo recently hosted *Saturday Night Live*, she ended her monologue with this message of positivity:

No, but really, I do love myself. Everybody should love themselves. At every show, I tell my audience the same thing, and I'll tell y'all too. I love you, you are beautiful, and you can do anything. I'm living proof of that. I used to live in my car, and now I'm up here hosting *Saturday Night Live*.<sup>145</sup>

Watching Lizzo truly inspires me and makes me feel good about myself, which is why I chose to write this thesis about her.

Positive media portrayals of fat people, like those that Lizzo provides, are crucial in the fight against fatphobia. A study from the Rudd Center at Yale University found that viewing positive media portrayals of fat people causes people to view fat people more positively (and

<sup>144</sup> Lizzo, "About Damn Time," 2022

<sup>145</sup> Lizzo, *Saturday Night Live*, S47 E18



although this study's use of the term "obese" is problematic, the research is still valuable for showing the importance of media representation):

Participants who viewed the positive images of obese persons responded more prosocially toward the obese person featured in the image than those who viewed the stigmatizing images... Participants preferred the positive images and expressed more anger about seeing the stigmatizing images. Furthermore, participants who viewed the positive images were less likely to assert that the image elicited negative perceptions of obese people than those who viewed the stigmatizing images.<sup>146</sup>

Studies like these prove that viewing positive portrayals of fatness and creating positive media representations of fatness can help fight against fatphobia.

While these pieces of media give me hope and make me feel good, I still struggle with body image. In episode one of Lizzo's reality show "Watch Out for the Big Grrrls," one of the dancers auditioning for Lizzo, Sydney Bell, says that "self-love is taught" and loving yourself is a practice; there's no end-point where you are done and have achieved self-love.<sup>147</sup> So maybe I do not always know the answers to the questions I posed at the beginning of this conclusion. But what I do know is that I try every day to love myself, to love other fat people, and to eradicate fatphobia. I believe writing this thesis has helped me to do these things and I hope it will inspire you to do the same as well. I will leave you with some mantras from Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self Love* that I have embraced on my journey into the liberative potential of fat studies:

I love my body  
I am a vessel of radical self-love  
My body is my ally  
I have the body I need to live the best life<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Rebecca L. Pearl, Rebecca M. Puhl, and Kelly D. Brownell, "Positive Media Portrayals of Obese Persons: Impact on Attitudes and Image Preferences," 7

<sup>147</sup> Sydney Bell, *Lizzo's Watch Out for the Big Grrrls*. 2022. Season 1, Episode 1, "Becoming 100% That Bitch."

<sup>148</sup> Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology: A Guide to Radical Self-Love*, 102

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