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Publicly Fat: Narratives of Fatphobia, Diet Culture, and Intersectional Feminism

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PUBLICLY FAT:

Narratives in fatphobia, diet culture, and intersectional feminism

A Thesis Presented to
the Faculty of the University Honors Program
Northeastern Illinois University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
of the NEIU Honors Program
For Graduation with Honors

Jennifer S. Wilson
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ABSTRACT

In spite of recent advancements within the academic community—particularly within the discipline of Women, Gender and Sexualities—fatness is still overwhelmingly viewed as a singular issue rather than a complex site of social interrogation that impacts every aspect of our lives. Fatness is typically understood through the medical model of obesity and/or eating disorders, a piecemeal approach that unfairly problematizes fatness, allowing the dangers of fatphobia and diet culture to thrive as forms of oppression. In my thesis, I interrogate these oppressive systems as an intersectional issue using a framework based on Marie Matsuda’s “other question” in which she challenges us to identify multiple points of oppression by asking how *is it also when how is it also?* I use the practice of auto-ethnography, using my own personal experience living in a fat body in a fatphobic world as a site of analysis through which I attend to these concerns of oppression, including intersectional moments with race, class, and cis heteronormativity. To this end, I buttress my own experiences by looking to the treatment of fat bodies and subjectivities in popular media, as well. Ultimately, I explore how the emerging arena of Fat Studies is necessarily intersectional and can be used as a model to improve our understanding of many oppressions experienced by marginalized communities.

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INTRODUCTION

In most studies regarding weight stigma, fatness is viewed as a singular problem—either within a discussion of eating disorders or an exploration of body image, and almost always according to a medical model of obesity. There is rarely a discussion of how Fatphobia and Diet Culture interact with gender, race, class, ability, or sexuality. I have never been thin. I think I cleared 100 pounds in the fourth grade, which is when I was put on my first diet. My weight came to the pediatrician's attention when it was discovered that I gave myself a stress ulcer, over Sister Josephine and long division, that caused me to vomit daily. My parents, being confronted with my first health emergency, did as the doctor ordered and took me to a dietician. I was taught all about the food pyramid, that my plate should look, ironically, like a pie chart, that I should not drink soda except maybe the saccharine filled Tab, as a treat, and Lucky Charms was the same as eating a Hershey bar for breakfast. Except, I was nine, I was not allowed to fill my own plate, much less grocery shop, was not allowed soda except on holidays, and we only had Kix for breakfast. All I learned as a little girl was that my body was wrong, and it was my fault and my responsibility to correct.

As evident by that autoethnographic narrative that will frame this thesis, a piecemeal approach to fatphobia and diet culture allows them to continue to flourish as forms of oppression. It is of particular interest that these themes are rarely connected into a holistic, intersectional, feminist framework. Fatphobia touches every aspect of a fat person's life- their ability to access employment, healthcare, relationships, travel (both recreationally and daily commutes), dress themselves, and just live without harassment.

Ultimately, it is only when we connect the intersecting oppressions that we can begin to dismantle the systems that cause harm.

While the focus of this thesis is not on “health,” the constant stressors on fat people is detrimental. “The scientific term for this toll is *allostatic load*, meaning the cumulative effect of chronic stressors on multiple systems in the body: the cardiovascular system, the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, and metabolism.” (Harrison, 137) However, there are additional allostatic loads from race, class, gender presentation, sexual orientation and sexism. In order for fat to be the sole determination of allostatic load, this assumes the fat person is white, economically secure, cisgender, heterosexual and presumed male and enjoys all the privileges that come with those statuses. It is in the combined weight of multiple allostatic loads that we see fatness as an intersectional issue. It is a missed opportunity to challenge systems of oppression.

In what follows, I will interrogate fatphobia and diet culture, borrowing the framework of Matsuda’s “other question” to illustrate the need for intersectional analysis and discussion on the topic. “The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call “ask the other question.” When I see something that looks racist, I ask, “Where is the patriarchy in this?” When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, “Where is the heterosexism in this?” When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, “Where are the class interests in this?” Working in coalition forces us to look for both the obvious and non-obvious relationships of domination, helping us to realize that no form of subordination ever stands alone” (Matsuda, 1189). I will do this by analyzing current academic scholarship regarding fatness and the emerging field of fat studies, putting said work in conversation with auto-

ethnographic material to tease out how we are bombarded with fatphobia and diet culture in our daily lives. I will be my own text, as I personally identify as fat and have for my entire life.

I have tried to remove myself from this project many times, primarily to save myself from discomfort. I have found it impossible. “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 fat-hating beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes, and also inevitably comes to occupy a position in relation to power arrangements that are based on weight.” (Wann, xi) To not use my own experience would be disingenuous, at best. Asking me to attempt objectivity on a topic that impacts me personally is another form of oppression, as my own lived experiences matter. “The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression.” (Wall, 146) Combining my own experiences with fatphobia and diet culture through autoethnography with Matsuda’s other questions illustrates that these are not theoretical constructs, but a systematic oppression.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: MATSUDA’S “OTHER QUESTIONS”

AND THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC

Matsuda’s framework is a useful tool to investigate the intersectionality of fatphobia. This framework posits that no one form of oppression exists without the cooperation and concert of the other forms. If something is sexist, it inevitably participates in racism, classism, ableism, and so on. These “other questions” uncover the critical nature of addressing fatphobia and diet culture as forms of intersectional oppression because it is

an active arm of a white supremacist, capitalist, ableist, patriarchal system. For me, the argument that fatphobia is sexist is the most clear- female identified bodies are held to unreasonable body standards, and we know this. It is when one looks for the “other questions” that one can begin to see how deeply entrenched weight stigma and diet culture really are.

I am using my own experiences as a primary text. I rejected the idea of surveying other fat-identified people early in this process because, frankly, that research has been done-- see the work of Christy Harrison, MPH RD CEDRD, Traci Mann, PhD, Tracy Brown, RD and Sabrina Strings, PhD. Such interviews and surveys add to the trauma of living under fatphobia, especially when there is no call to change. I refuse to cause further harm to my fellow fats when my own experiences are illustrative of the culture in which we live. That is not to say that this is an easy process for me. I have had to sit in my own discomfort and understanding both how diet culture has harmed me and how I have been complicit. However, using an autoethnographic approach allows me to be my own subject, whereas conducting a survey places other people as an object. Fat people are consistently objectified and othered and I will not contribute to that. Where my own experiences are not enough, particularly in the area of race, transness and queerness, as well as disability, I will perform a discursive analysis using popular media to address these intersections. Furthermore, while the personal is political, it is also theoretical.

KEY TERMS

Who or what defines “fat?”

How do we know who is fat? In Oliver’s *Fat Politics; The Real Story Behind America’s Obesity Epidemic*, the author posits that obesity is ultimately socially

constructed. Obesity is most often “diagnosed” by using the Body Mass Index (BMI), a simple formula that divides weight by height and assesses a numerical value. Over 24.9, is overweight, over 29.9 is Obese I, over 39.9 is Obese II, and over 40 is Morbidly Obese. My BMI is 51.7, a veritable death sentence. Oliver posits that BMI was never intended to measure fat. “Interestingly, the concept of BMI was not developed with any connection to body fat. The first person to use it was not even concerned with losing weight or with health, but rather, he was interested in the laws of the heavens” (Oliver, 16). Adolphe Quetelet, a Belgian astronomer, wanted to see if the mathematical laws of probability applied to human beings, so using information from British and Scottish army conscripts (white men), he created a bell curve to determine the average size of humanity. It was never about health, or even fat, yet it is typically the first piece of information collected by a physician’s office.

This lack of clarity over the actual definition of fat is why I will specifically avoid the term “overweight” in this work. Fat can be subjective-- what I consider fat might not be the same as the next person. To say someone is overweight implies that there is a correct weight, however, the actual standards for these arbitrary weight classifications change almost annually. This will also be the only section where I will specifically reference “obesity” as it medicalizes body size, whereas fat is simply an adjective.

What is “Diet Culture?”

“In Western society in the twenty-first century, where there are rules about what to eat, there’s diet culture.” (Harrison, 59)

Diet culture is the prevailing notion that there is one acceptable body type, thin—and that body type can be achieved largely through consumerism. Initially, diet culture was reasonably easy to spot—it was about diets. However, in 2021, we have traded in diets for “wellness” and “lifestyle changes.” Per the Centers for Disease control: “When it comes to weight loss, there is no lack of fad diets promising fast results...It’s about a lifestyle that includes healthy eating, regular physical activity, and balancing the number of calories you consume with the number of calories your body uses.” (CDC.gov) How is that different from a diet, except for admitting that in order to maintain weight loss, the diet never ends? The weight loss giant Weight Watchers was so vested in distancing itself from dieting that they changed their name to WW in 2018. This was an incredible opportunity for branding. Diets are temporary but a lifestyle change implies a lifelong commitment, with a base cost of \$12.90 a month, according to their website. We follow “clean eating” and spend small fortunes on green juices, detoxes and cleanses. If one uses social media, they are encouraged to join accountability groups and to document their “journey” to health and wellness through before and after photos, usually showing their completely coincidental weight loss. This name change makes diet culture harder to spot, even though they all boil down to restrictive eating with the goal to make a body smaller.

The trouble with diet culture is threefold: it places blame on people for having higher weight, it places blame on people for being “unwell” (which is not a specific medical condition,) and masks disordered eating. Because diet culture presumes thinness or wellness can be attained by following rules, not being thin or well means that the person is the problem, not society. It implies that being fat is irresponsible and

something one can control and leaves no room for the probability that one's body is within its genetically set weight range. By tying weight to wellness, it allows the healthcare industry to overlook medical conditions by contributing every twinge or discomfort to weight. I was asked if I thought about weight loss when I went to my doctor for an ear infection. There are countless stories of fat people seeking healthcare and being counseled to lose weight instead of receiving proper treatment for conditions far more serious than my earache. Because diet culture places blame for failing to follow the rules of wellness, there can be an increased likelihood of becoming obsessed with compliance. That obsession is dangerous because there is never a time when one is not thinking about food, weight, rules, and so on. But, as long as their body falls within a normal BMI range, or is moving towards that ever-moving goal post, it's unlikely they will receive treatment for an eating disorder, especially if you are not a white, cisgender woman.

Furthermore, it is not limited to adults. According to a 2015 Common Sense Media study, nearly one in four children under the age of seven has already engaged in dieting behaviors. In 2019, WW (formerly Weight Watchers) launched Kurbo, an app designed to help teenagers follow their diet program. I have found no comparatively expansive media campaign to encourage children to just accept their body as it is. Setting children up in for profit weight loss systems isn't about health; it's about creating a lifetime customer. I was put on my first diet at 9 and decided to opt out of dieting at 45. That is 34 years of disordered eating, weight cycling, 6 different sizes of jeans since adulthood, and more money than I am willing to calculate.

What is fatphobia?

“We are horrible to look at, we are in the way, we are a joke.” (West, 91)

At the core, fatphobia is the fear or dislike of fat people. The suffix “-phobia” is often misused, as in the case of “homophobia.” People aren’t really afraid of queer folks; they just don’t like them but use the idea of fear to excuse themselves. But I believe that there is a genuine fear of fatness that is pervasive particularly in Western culture. The medical community certainly provides ample evidence for why they should be scared, as “obesity” has been listed as a contributing factor for everything from arthritis to diabetes to infertility to cancer to increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19. Moreover, fat is viewed as a moral failing, not a physical state of being or way of having a body. It is seen as being out of control, or as one of the seven deadly sins.

This is bad enough, but fatphobia is used as a method of systemic oppression. It is legal in 49 states to refuse employment or fire someone based on weight. Only Michigan considers body size to be a protected category in a law passed in 1976, though a handful of municipalities do have legislation to prevent weight discrimination.

(Time.com) Because of the size of my body, I can be denied a seat on an airplane (or required to buy a second seat.) My clothing costs more. Some of my friends have been turned away by fertility specialists, claiming their weight precludes them from pregnancy, without doing any lab work or physical examinations to support that claim. For those who think these people should just adopt, BMI is considered a criteria for international adoption, with Korea refusing applicants with a BMI over 35 and China over 40. (holtinternational.org) As intersectional feminists who believe in reproductive justice, we should be appalled that body size can be used to exclude a person from parenthood.

Additionally, fatphobia is using the excuses of diet culture to cause harm. It is blaming fat people for not fitting in airplane seats, rather than the airlines for not thinking inclusively for differently sized bodies, or for making the seats smaller to shove more people into the plane. It is including the term “no Fats, just a preference” on a dating profile. It is the CEOs of Lululemon (NPR.org) and Abercrombie and Fitch (EliteDaily.com) claiming their clothing isn’t for everyone. It is Courtney Cox in a fat suit on *Friends*. It is social media attacks on Lizzo for posing nude or nearly so in her own space. It is *The Biggest Loser*, *The 1000 lb. Sisters*, and half the primetime lineup on the cable network TLC.

HOW IS FATPHOBIA SEXIST?

“Being fat isolates and invalidates a woman. Almost inevitably, the explanations offered for fatness point a finger at the failure of women to control their weight, control their appetites and control their impulses.” (Orbach, 5)

In 1978, Susie Orbach wrote *Fat Is A Feminist Issue* and is credited with being the first to connect weight stigma with sexism. For its time, her ideas were groundbreaking. She plainly states “It [fat] is a response to the inequity of the sexes.” (Orbach, 7) What is concerning is that Orbach’s argument privileges heterosexual relationships, focusing specifically on the importance of being “attractive” to men. According to her, being fat is a choice to reject patriarchal body standards. Women who get fat, and dare to stay that way, are bucking a system that places their value solely on their attractiveness. One of the troubles of this is that it still presumes thin bodies are more attractive than fat ones and therefore better. Orbach’s work reinforces hegemonic beauty standards by treating the subjective notion of who is attractive as an objective

standard. After comedian Amy Schumer was (mistakenly) labeled as plus sized by a fashion magazine, she responded “I’m probably like 160 pounds right now and I can catch a dick whenever I want...” (Glamour UK, Women of the Year Awards speech, 6/2/2015)-Orbach places the blame for fatness in women on compulsive eating and spends the majority of the book providing advice to overcome the disorder. Notably, Orbach treated Princess Diana as a psychotherapist, presumably for her struggles with disordered eating. (BaltimoreSun.com) But just because Orbach’s argument is flawed, does not mean it is entirely incorrect.

Living in a fat body is disobeying the patriarchal rules, especially if one does so without apology. I was having dinner with my spouse and had ordered a chicken Caesar salad (the official meal of the indecisive) and a strange woman approached me to praise me for my “fresh, healthy choice.” I was obeying the rules in public by ordering a salad in a pizza/burger/bar type establishment. My dinner indicated that sure, I am fat, but eating salad, so therefore apologetic. Amusingly, a Caesar salad and a burger have close to the same calorie count, but lettuce equals healthy equals OK for fat people to eat in public.

Another way that fatness engages sexism is the idea that a woman’s job in a patriarchal society is to take up as little space as possible; fat people challenge that job description, especially when we have the unmitigated gall to feel so much as neutrally about our bodies. Men are big and strong, while women are dainty, and preferably, quiet. Being a woman who takes up space, maybe even intentionally, threatens the patriarchal structure. If a woman can be bigger than a man (or even just as big) how can his size and strength maintain power? In order to be a good fat, we have to be sorry for our fatness

and do penance publicly. As a commuter on public transportation, I have had many interactions with people who are openly disgusted by the amount of space I take in a seat on the train while ignoring thin people using multiple seats to keep their luggage clean on their way to the airport. This is indicative of the double standard of between male/female cisgender bodies. My spouse is also a large person, but his size is viewed as intimidating, and while I am certain there is a fatphobic view of him, those thoughts tend to stay private, because men are entitled to as much space as they would like to have in this world.

HOW IS FATPHOBIA CLASSIST?

“The researchers found that the average cost per kilogram (2.2 pounds) lost ranged from about \$155 for Weight Watchers to about \$546 with the Roche drug Orlistat, which is available by prescription as Xenical or over-the-counter as Alli.”

(reuters.com)

I tried to take an inventory of how much being fat has cost me over my adult life and gave up because it was so overwhelming. My closet, for example, shows that living in my body is an expensive proposition. Old Navy emails me daily with “deals” and the same shirt that was marketed to me for \$10, cost \$18.99 in my size. Every fiber of me wanted to tell them what they could do with that markup, but instead I bought the shirt because it was still cheaper than most, I could get free shipping, and I needed a white t-shirt. Target sells cheaper shirts, but mostly online and they will only ship with a \$35 order, more than tripling the amount I wanted to spend. The most dignified shopping experience I have ever had was at the Reese Witherspoon owned boutique Draper James in Nashville. My daughter and I were welcomed, the sales staff not only helped us find

what we came for, but also pulled items they thought we would like (without pressure to purchase said items) and treated us exactly the same as the smaller shoppers. Because of that experience, I have continued to shop there online, but that comes at a cost. Basic dignity should not be reserved to the people who can pay for it.

Typically, when I comment on the additional cost of my clothing, strangers on the internet suggest that I simply lose weight and my problems are solved. I am required to be clothed outside of the privacy of my home, regardless of the size of my body and the state of my diet. For argument's sake, though, let's say I decided to lose weight to buy cheaper clothing. Even if one does not follow a specific weight loss program, but instead, say, an Instagram influencer, who recommends multiple branded smoothies/juices a day, it is still out of reach for most people outside of the upper middle class. It also presumes access to a powerful kitchen appliance and fresh, preferably organic, foods. This excludes anyone living in a food desert, or people who rely on SNAP for their groceries- which is not to say that we should not work to provide access to better nutrition to those people. We just should not shame them for their lack of access by using diet culture against them. "Why is it that we're more inclined to create programs to combat obesity than ones that meaningfully address hunger? Proponents of things like a soda tax hold their plans up proudly, but never talk about why soda is such a staple in homes where food insecurity is a problem." (Kendall, 37) Furthermore, almost every diet today excludes foods like bread, pasta, and rice- staples that poor families use to stretch more expensive ingredients to do something crazy like not let their kids go to bed hungry at night.

HOW IS FATPHOBIA ABELIST?

Anyone who has been on the internet, has likely seen the photo of a fat person falling from a motorized scooter while trying to load a case of Mountain Dew into their cart. The entire Facebook page “People of Walmart” relies on stealthily taken photos of mostly fat people embarrassing themselves in the aisles of the superstore. The presumption of the commenters on the thread is that the person uses a mobility device because they are simply too fat to stroll the aisles and it is confirmed by their choice to purchase a case of sugar laden soft drinks. In 2017, Jennifer Wilkinson came forward as the person in the photo in an article in *The Mighty*. Wilkinson has a spinal condition called spondylolisthesis that causes weakness in the legs and makes her prone to falls when standing too long. She believes the photo was taken by some young girls who witnessed the fall. Rather than assist someone who fell, these young people took a photo and submitted it to a popular social media page, who published the photo assuming it was not an invasion of Wilkinson’s privacy because it did not show her face. Wilkinson did not clarify if anyone offered to help her after her fall.

While Wilkinson indicated that she very much believes in the medical model of obesity, she is also clear that her actual disability is invisible and is not the size of her body. However, comments on the photo indicated that she should not be drinking pop-- according to her, the beverage was for her spouse, which is irrelevant because she is as entitled to a can of pop as everyone else-- and that she should get up and move rather than use a scooter. Wilkinson says she would like to be able to do this, except her spinal condition precludes most typical physical activity. Because she is disabled while fat, the assumption is that her disability is her fault and that she has the ability to change it.

Because body size is viewed as a controllable variable, the presumption is that any physical manifestation of pain, discomfort, or disability is the fat person's fault. However, correlation does not equal causation: in the medical model of fat and disability, there is an assumption that weight is the cause of disability, even if there is no actual evidence to support that. This is problematic because rather than providing the needed care and assistance to fat people with disabilities, it places blame on them for being disabled. If people would just stop being fat, their bodies would work in the ableist way we have decided is acceptable and all the problems are solved.

HOW IS FATPHOBIA CIS/HETERONORMATIVE?

“The female body, then, is femininity's site for the struggle and it's vehicle for expression and coercion. Although corsets have long been banished from our everyday attire, we are faced with a more binding, more constrictive force than just strings and whalebone; we must struggle each day, each moment, within the bounds of an ideology that we can barely render visible, let alone easily resist.” (Fisanick, 106)

Almost 20 years ago, I was standing at my regular bus stop and was approached by a woman I recognized as a neighbor. We had seen each other often enough that I assumed she just wanted to kibitz while waiting for the 74 and did not think much of it. Until she looked me over and said “Look, honey, if you just lost some of that water weight, you could still get a man.” The reason this interaction stands out so vividly all these years later is because it was so strange. My neighbor regularly saw me with my spouse and 2 children, and I was very visibly pregnant with my third. The size of my body caused her to presume that the enforced heterosexist, cis-gendered dream was something I wanted and it was out of reach for me.

Fatphobia and cis/heteronormativity are intertwined. The nearly impossible to achieve body standards we live with all exist to enforce gender and sexuality binaries. While men are absolutely impacted by fatphobia, there are inherently different rules and expectations. Men are expected to be big and the so called “dad bod” has become a bit of a sex symbol, whereas women are expected to take up less space and make our “mom bods” a thing of the past before we have even fully healed from childbirth. The common sit-com trope is of the fat dad, thin mom, thin kids, and we all accept that as a comfortable norm. No one has ever suggested that if my husband lost weight, he just might find a woman. But my primary focus, as a woman, should have been to change my body to meet a cis/heteronormative relationship expectation. When we see a fat person in pop culture media, it is almost always in the context of a hetero-romantic relationship or in want of one. I truly wish I could find more media examples of queer fatness, but if fat sexuality is mostly erased, queer fat sexuality is completely removed from the conversation.

My interaction with my neighbor illustrated the heteronormative expectations placed on me and the presumption that my body size precluded me from meeting them. I was living the heteronormative dream of a cis-woman, with a male spouse and having procreative sex, but that was impossible to believe because what man could possibly want my fat body. Imagine if I had told her that I was not particularly interested in a heteronormative relationship.

HOW IS FATPHOBIA RACIST?

“Now that researchers found that Black women had among the highest BMIs in the country; their size was also evidence of disease. The association between fatness and black femininity- which had been transmuted during the height of fat-baiting against “hybrid” immigrant populations in the nineteenth century- reemerged. Yet again, Black women were to become the focus of fear, anxiety, and degradation over the size of their bodies.” (Strings, 203)

Perhaps above all else, fatphobia and diet culture are racist. According to Strings, fat was used as a way to label Black women in particular as a savage “other” from white women, citing the rise of white, protestant aestheticism. It was a useful tool to demonize the Black women, while policing the white women, pitting women against each other, causing harm to both.

As evidenced above, researchers like Harrison have discussed the physical toll— or allostatic load— that weight stigma and diet culture has on fat people. “Stress can affect anyone’s body, but Black people have a higher allostatic load score than white people, according to research published in the *Journal of National Medical Association*. Research also points to racism as a culprit, and this has been problematic long before social media amplified racial trauma to a viral level. This concept is also known as weathering.” (Esmeraldo) When added to the racial trauma, or weathering, endured particularly by Black people (though also common in Latinx and Indigenous communities who are also subject to racially motivated weight stigma), this is a combined allostatic load that could easily explain why marginalized communities have poor health outcomes, in addition to the lack of access to and racism in healthcare.

Obesity was not listed as a risk factor for COVID 19 until it was noted that more Black people were dying than white people. “Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black adults have a higher prevalence of obesity and are more likely to suffer worse outcomes from COVID-19. Racial and ethnic minority groups have historically not had broad opportunities for economic, physical, and emotional health, and these inequities have increased the risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19 for some groups. Many of these same factors are contributing to the higher level of obesity in some racial and ethnic minority groups.” (CDC.gov) While the CDC does acknowledge that systemic racism may be a root cause for poor health outcomes, it still enforces diet culture and fatphobia by referring to “obesity” as a “complex disease with many contributing factors” later in the same article. I am not aware of any other “complex disease” that can be diagnosed without significant testing, but my own doctor includes the diagnosis “morbid obesity” even when I exercise my right to refuse to be weighed. Rather than address racism in healthcare, or the fact that more Black people live in poverty and serve as “essential workers,” thus exposing them more frequently to the virus, they blamed weight. It is easier to blame a presumed personal moral failing like being fat than it is to address our white supremacist moral failing of systemic racism.

Fat, Black women carry the additional burden of being sexualized regardless of their intent. “The portrayal of black women as lascivious by nature is an enduring stereotype. The descriptive words associated with this stereotype are singular in their focus: seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd. Historically, white women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, and modesty - even sexual purity, but black women were often portrayed as innately

promiscuous, even predatory.” (Ferris.edu) In a 2019 interview with NPR’s Terri Gross, Lizzo was asked about her album cover, in which she appears nude:

“GROSS: You know, sometimes when I see somebody who's nude or who's half-nude (laughter) - largely nude on their album cover or in a photo and it's a woman - and I think, like - it sometimes bothers me 'cause I think like, oh, are you making yourself into a sex object for men? When you're doing it on your album cover, I think it's a really bold statement, and it's a statement for women. And - do you know what I mean? - because you are trying to break the mold of what beautiful is. And so you're making...

LIZZO: Yeah, but are you only saying that because I'm fat? You know what I'm saying? Because I feel like if I were a thin woman, maybe that wouldn't be the case. I feel like women who are smaller aren't really given the opportunities to be body-positive or role models either because we've been conditioned to believe that women are using their bodies for the male gaze. And I think if I were slimmer, I don't think people would look to me with the same type of like, oh, wow; she's so brave; she's doing this and representing everyone - that they would - you know I'm saying? - because I'm big.

GROSS: I know what you're saying. And I think it's just a really complicated issue for me because sometimes I feel, you know, like - I'm older than you are. And a lot of women in my generation fought against women having to display their bodies to sell cars or, you know - 'cause, like, scantily dressed women were always used to, like, sell things, you know?

LIZZO: Yeah.

GROSS: So, like, the woman was, like, the come-on for you to buy the car or buy the product or to sell the album or whatever. And it was just, like, selling women

as, like - as sexuality, period. Like, that's what you were - your sexuality, period. And now I think things are getting really redefined. And I think, you know, you're doing it as part of, like, the redefinition and part of making - I mean, I think the statement you're making is very positive and more feminist.

LIZZO: Yeah.

GROSS: ...As opposed to, like, somebody is using my body to sell something to someone.” (npr.org)

Above, the older white woman's questions are crucial to understanding Lizzo's answers. In the first question, Gross states her belief that most of the time when women pose nude, it is for men, but she sees Lizzo's album cover as being for women. This reference to the absence of the male (heterosexual) gaze implies that Gross sees Lizzo's naked body as somehow less sexual than the typical thin, white woman who poses similarly on their products. Black bodies, particularly Black, female-identified bodies are often overly sexualized, but because Lizzo is Black and fat, the white, second wave feminist stops seeing her as being overtly sexual and instead sees the moment as “feminist.” Lizzo takes her to task by explaining that this paradigm is not really fair to anyone. She is being given the mantle of being a body positive role model whether she wants it or not because it is assumed that her body is not for the male gaze, while thin women are not considered in the same way because their bodies are assumed to be for the male gaze.

In Lizzo's case, she has been forced into a body positivity role model, despite her clear statement that her goal is not to lead a body positive movement, but to simply normalize that all bodies are good bodies. Since then, her anthems “Good As Hell” and “Juice” have been appropriated by white social media influencers advocating weight loss and the comment sections on her Instagram are full of concern trolls warning her of her

doom if she does not lose weight immediately. However, when the singer embarked on a “cleanse,” spent a week juicing, and announced an intention to go vegan, many, mostly white, fat fans lambasted her for caving to societal pressures. She is in a no-win position, and it is a position we rarely, if ever, see white women.

CONCLUSION

Since I began thinking about fatphobia as a construct, I have also been thinking about my own place within fatphobia and diet culture. This has meant the obvious reaction of considering my own body, especially as pandemic life has led to sweatpants life, but also how I react to other bodies. Notably, my instinct to ask my spouse if I look “that bad” when I see another fat person in my vicinity. I have been trying to adopt an attitude of neutrality regarding my body, as many of my “positive” moments were really just comparing myself to people I saw as somehow “worse off” than me. I have been actively trying to avoid the harms of diet culture, while also admitting that this process has caused my own atypical anorexia to flare up. “One's identities do not merely fit into a neat puzzle; they can often tug and pull at each other as one navigates the intersection of privilege and marginalization.” (Mulderink) As a middle class, cis-het, white woman, who falls into the category Roxane Gay calls a “Lane Bryant fat,” I enjoy a lot of privilege, however, the intersections are messy, as the groups that privilege me, also marginalize me.

While Matsuda’s “other questions” was invaluable as a framework, there is an impossible-ness to separating and dealing with each issue individually as they are so inexorably intertwined. I cannot discuss sexism without racism. I cannot discuss the

racism without the cis/heterosexuality. I cannot discuss ableism without classism. In this way, it proves Matsuda's point that oppression does not live in a vacuum; they work in tandem to make an almost impossible to untie knot. As we learn in every WGS course, Audre Lorde cautions us that we cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. There is a reason why this essay is so critical to our framework- the danger of a feminism without intersectionality is that we will just rebuild the same systems that currently oppress us. We are given the very powerful tool of intersectionality, but we haven't yet applied it to fatness and fatphobia. Continuing to evaluate fatphobia and diet culture piecemeal is using the master's tool and the house needs to come down.

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