Undisciplined Bodies:

Race, Size and Sexuality in U.S. Media and Culture

by

Caleb T Luna

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Committee in charge:

Professor Abigail de Kosnik, Co-Chair
Professor JuanaMaría Rodríguez, Co-Chair
Professor Mel Chen
Professor Brandi Wilkins Catanese

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Abstract

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor Abigail de Kosnik, Co-Chair
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Our bodies are multiply marked, and so often speak *for* us from aesthetic scripts which have been historically crafted. My dissertation, "Undisciplined Bodies: Race, Size, and Sexuality in U.S. Media and Culture," takes up fatness and its intersections as one exemplary embodiment to explore the question: which history is told through the roles in which our bodies are cast? I situate fat embodiment in the contemporary moment within the historical production of bodily aesthetics through race, colonization and the erotic. I look to cultural performances and discursive valuations of body size to trace the negotiation of power by both fat and non-fat embodied subjects. Centering racial and gender minoritarian subjects, I tend to how fatness performs and is performed—even in its own absence— across mediums and by a variety of social actors. I use 'size' as an entry point to consider the necessarily relational positioning of fat and non-fat bodies, offering a framework for analysis.

Chapter one, "Bold, Bright and Tight: Fat Queer Media and Fat Aesthetics" traces my own identarian development through the fat queer media icons I encountered. It connects the influence of media to quotidian interventions and theorizes what I term fat aesthetics. In my second chapter, "'When He Fuck Me Good I Take His Ass to Red Lobster': Beyoncé, Fat Erotics and Collective Liberation," Beyoncé's sonic and visual work offers an entry point to locate one artist's response to histories of racial abjection. I use the lyric from her song "Formation" quoted in the title as exemplary of what I term fat erotics. I argue her simultaneous engagement of Modern Black Nationalist aesthetics in the song offers an entry point to coalition for non-Black fat activists specifically. My third chapter, "Let's Get Sickening: Queers of Color, Size and the Performance of Health Aesthetics" studies fat embodiment and disordered eating in the context of the hit reality television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I then close read a conversation from season 9 in which two contestants of color, Valentina and Shea Couleé, articulate explicit genealogies between their own histories of disordered eating and the aesthetic demands of a gay male sexual and social life. I place pressure on these practices, while historicizing them within larger projects of racial formation, sexual disciplining and social belonging not often otherwise offered to queers of color. In "Our Beautiful Gainer Goddess: Mark Aguhar on the Aesthetics and Erotics of Power Exchange," I explore a performance by the late artist Mark Aguhar as a fantasy restaging the colonial encounter in which the artist uses contemporary scripts of power exchange to access pleasure and agency within a historicized body.

My primary intervention makes fat embodiment legible to other scholars and activists of embodied difference, integrating analyses of size into coalitional anti-oppression movements.

While I focus on fat embodiment as a case study to unpack the co-constitutive processes of discourse and oppressive materialities, in addition to cultural production that both reflects and responds to the questions at hand, I am adamant that this process is by no means unique to the fat body. I conceptualize this phenomenon as analogous to the processes of racializing, gendering and sexualizing of the body that concern Ethnic and Gender Studies—along with their many subfields—insisting that these inquiries are, too, questions of the body. I push these fields to consider how tending to the somatic complicates an analysis of race, class, gender and ability for each particular social actor.

for the fat queers who came before me,
for those who will come after,
and for me.

Table of Contents

Introduction
The Aesthetics and Erotics of Race, Size and Sexuality

The election of Donald Trump to the United States presidency in 2016 set the stage for extreme right-wing political views to re-emerge to the surface of U.S. politics. One of the earliest examples of the unmasked white supremacy, antisemitism, anti-Blackness, Islamophobia and more that drives the political right was a two-day rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Lasting from August 11-12, 2017, media reported the "Unite the Right" rally drew factions of right-wing groups such as neo-Nazis, white nationalists and Ku Klux Klan members[1] to protest the attempted removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee.[2]

In the early afternoon on the second day of the rally, white nationalist James Fields[3] barreled his vehicle through counter protestors, injuring 35 and murdering 32-year-old Heather Heyer. Heyer's status as a white woman did not protect her from white supremacist violence as she, through the performance of counter protesting, aligned herself against white nationalism. Her death was met with a cruel glee by white supremacists; the following morning editor of the right-wing website The Daily Stormer and neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin published an article titled "Heather Heyer: Woman Killed in Road Rage Incident was a Fat, Childless 32-year Old Slut."[4] Anglin's use of his political news website highlights the role of media in the circulation of ideology. His framing of Heyer as necessary collateral for the white nationalist movement as a white woman who was both "fat" and "childless" (yet, somehow, still a "slut") reveals the connections between the aesthetics and erotics of race and their deployment through size and sexuality.

In their essay "Fucking failures: The future of fat sex," fat and queer theorist Francis Ray White theorizes fat embodiment as a symbol of the death drive for its failure to successfully perform heteronormative reproductive futures. We see this in Anglin's framing of Heyer as a failure of white nationalist femininity; her fatness and/as race betrayal through counter-protesting made her expendable to the white nationalist project. The white nationalist degradation of fat embodiment echoed centuries of compulsory thinness as integral to the U.S. Nation-state building project, culminating in the declaration of the Obesity Epidemic in 1999.

Food scientist Charlotte Biltekoff situates this declaration within subsequent Bush-era framings of fatness as both a failure of U.S. citizenship and threat to national security in her book *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health.* Fat embodiment continues to be problematized at the presidential level under President Obama. The now former First Lady Michelle Obama launches her First Lady campaign project Let's Move!, which focuses on the eugenicist project of "eradicating childhood obesity within a generation[5]" in 2009. Democrats, liberals and leftists alike go on to weaponize President Trump's own fatness against him as either

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[1] Joe Heim et. al, "One dead as car strikes crowds amid protests of white nationalist gathering in Charlottesville; two police die in helicopter crash," https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/fights-in-advance-of-saturday-protest-in-charlottesville/2017/08/12/155fb636-7f13-11e7-83c7-5bd5460f0d7e_story.html.

[2] Stolberg, Sheryl Gay; Rosenthal, Brian M. (August 12, 2017). "Man Charged After White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville Ends in Deadly Violence," https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html.

[3] Peter Szekely et. al, "White nationalist James Fields convicted of murdering Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, Virginia," https://www.rawstory.com/2018/12/white-nationalist-james-fields-convicted-murdering-heather-heyer-charlottesville-virginia/.

[4] Tom Boggioni, "White nationalist website banished by host GoDaddy after vile post about Charlottesville victim Heather Heyer," https://www.rawstory.com/2017/08/white-nationalist-website-banished-by-host-godaddy-after-vile-post-about-charlotteville-victim-heather-heyer/.

[5] See "Learn the Facts!", https://letsmove.obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/learn-facts/epidemic-childhood-obesity.

a joke or indication he is unfit to be in office. But fat embodiment as a site of concern in both aesthetics and erotics has been present in the Western hemisphere since the first contact of Spanish conquistadors.

Anthropologist Veena Das's monograph *Life and Words: Life After Violence* examines the fundamental question: "What it is to pick up the pieces and to live in this very place of devastation?" (6). Theorizing on how the trauma of violence becomes ordinary to every day life, here I am taking seriously Das's invitation to consider "certain regions of the past and create a sense of continuity between events that might otherwise seem unconnected. Unlike objects around which we can draw boundaries, it is not easy to say when an event begins and when it ends" (108). The 'events' I am calling attention to here exist within another temporal structure: settler colonization of the Americas. Both aligning with and diverging from Das's framework, Patrick Wolfe identifies settler colonization as an "invasion" with the temporality of "a structure rather than an event" (402). This regime produces multiple events within a larger structure that speak to one another in manners not immediately evident.

Contra to a contemporary understanding of racial fatphobia as a recent phenomenon, given rise to by beauty magazines, diet industry profits, and celebrity culture, fat abjection has its roots as a product of racial abjection, with a long history in the colonizing of the Americas that predates the founding of the United States itself. Das argues "the event attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary" (1). To understand the events of the present we need to situate them within the devastation of colonization.

Racializing Fat Embodiment

In her monograph *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492-1700,* historian Rebecca Earle argues racial anxieties of the conquistadors have expressed themselves in performances of eating since contact. Reading the archives of Spain's earliest conquistadors in the 15th century, she finds concern over their bodily production and its subsequent capacity to weather illness. This practice proves pivotal in establishing and sustaining a racial dichotomy of supremacy when engaging with the Taíno—the first Indigenous peoples Columbus encountered in the present-day Dominican Republic. She writes:

> colonisation was as much a physical enterprise as an economic or ideological one. . . . ideas about food and bodies underpinned the ways Europeans understood the environment and inhabitants of the new world. For early modern Spaniards food was much more than a source of sustenance and a comforting reminder of Iberian culture. Food helped make them who they were in terms of both their character and their very corporeality, and it was food, more than anything else, that made European bodies different from Amerindian bodies. Without the right foods Europeans would either die, as Columbus feared, or, equally alarmingly, they might turn into Amerindians (2-3)

The earliest settlers were focused on reproducing European diets in the colonies in an effort to reproduce European embodiments: to consume the appropriate foods to produce a body that can withstands the embodied challenges of carrying out colonization and genocide. For the conquistador, corporeal difference was not merely one of aesthetics but, quite literally, life and death. Food consumption as it related to bodily production was as much about maintaining a European corporeality as about ensuring an immunity in the New World that would ensure survival, where colonizers experienced so many of the lands' Indigenous inhabitants succumbing to death and illness. For them, the demise proved the innate inferiority of the body of the Native,

rather than the introduction of new diseases to the land and its people or the impacts of colonization on them both.

The colonial fear of the other and aesthetic desire to produce and maintain whitened bodies as a performance of supremacy shaped the imperial project throughout its colonies. The settler body has always been one cultivated to withstand and reproduce violence, violence which produces a crisis and blame its victims for their consequences. Colonial logics that reduce health and longevity to individualized habits visualized through body size—particularly in communities of color—rather than the impacts of ongoing colonization and durational experiences of racism endure. As I expand on in chapter three, we see this development most explicitly through the AIDS crisis and subsequent declaration of an Obesity Epidemic. Performances of concern at the rates of obesity in community of color, as well as well attempts to discipline us become perpetual restagings of the colonial encounter.

While Earle does not address fat embodiment specifically in this context, she does illustrate that racial "caste difference, although ostensibly concerned with ancestry and genealogy, was profoundly performative" in this time, where "[e]ating, like drinking (too much. . . .), also played an important role in enacting caste identity" (8). Earle identifies the production of the aesthetically European body through disciplined food consumption, and the imagined relationship of this practice to embodiment[6] to be integral in the nascent stages of the formative era of the race relations that structure our contemporary world. Here, a compulsory orientation towards thinness was born as a central tenet of white supremacy and the presumed innate superiority of white embodied subjects. This was achieved partially through disseminating ideas of food ingestion as it relates to racial bodily production and, by extension, racially beautiful bodies—as well as what constitutes beauty itself, under an unmarked white supremacist and colonial gaze.

Sociologist Sabrina Strings's 2019 monograph *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia* surfaces the how this epistemic logic of colonization is conterminously produced in Enlightenment-era England, where thinness becomes a signifier of the rational (and, by extension, beautiful) white thinker:

> Indulging in food, once deemed by philosophers to be a lowbrow predilection of slow-witted persons, became evidence of actual low breeding. It bespoke an inborn, race-specific propensity for [. . . .] an unbridled desire to meet the demands of the flesh. . . . behavior . . . .deemed wholly uncharacteristic of the rational thinkers sitting atop the new racial hierarchy (Strings 84)

'Reason' reveals itself as a technology of racial hierarchy in the historic conflation of fatness as indicative of an over-reliance on sensual pleasure, conflating both "unbridled" aesthetics and erotics with an imagined primitive breeding.

Throughout her text, Strings bridges the production of race and size in Europe throughout the age of discovery, as well as their integrity to the foundation a national identity for the United States. She argues that "[t]he phobia about fatness and the preference for thinness have not, principally or historically, been about health. Instead, they have been *one* way the body has been used to craft and legitimate race, sex, and class hierarchies" (6, emphasis mine). Strings artfully details the production of fat abjection as a colonial racial project of anti-Blackness that

[6] Objectively, two subjects can perform the same diet and exercise habits and have radically different corporeal productions, based, partially, on racial genetics; the fiction of contemporary diet culture, dating back centuries, is that we have complete autonomy over the production of our bodies.

was deployed along many avenues. Misogynoir in particular is a major technology through which fat abjection is channeled.

Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman is an Indigenous South African woman and historical figure that is central to the proliferation of these ideas. Baartman belonged to a people called the Khoikhoi, who was born enslaved. In the shift of colonial occupation of South Africa from the Dutch to the British, Baartman was trafficked by a Scottish Surgeon named Alexander Dunlop and transported to Europe to be put on display in human zoos in London and Paris (Strings 90). She was billed as the Hottentot Venus between 1810 and her untimely death in 1815.

What made Baartman such a figure of awe and disgust to Europeans was her body size and shape, having been perceived to have large hips, buttocks, breasts and genitals. Baartman's fatness—and, specifically, her proportions—were presented to Europeans as archetypical of Black embodiment, an aesthetic indicative of her alleged primitivity. Strings finds the sedimentation of the Black feminine in the colonial imaginary is being produced with the early race science literature. "[I]t was becoming part of the general zeitgeist that fatness was related to blackness. Thus, it was treated as evidence of barbarism, of a nonwhite affliction" (Strings 97-98). She was put on display as a grotesque figure of difference, exemplary of Blackness, and central in the marriage of fatness and Blackness in the white imaginary.

African-American cultural historian Harvey Young underscores that "conceptions of blackness are projected across individual bodies [. . . .] an *idea* of the black body materially affects actual bodies" in his 2010 book *Embodying Black Experience*. Through Baartman's exemplary story, we see how *ideas* of fatness as Blackness begin to disseminate, particularly in relationship to producing racialized genders. A painting used to declare and promote Baartman's arrival in Europe is featured on the cover of Strings' book, highlighting the lasting impression of media cultures and their central role in disseminating these ideas.

In her monograph *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, Amy Farrell reads literature from prominent race scientists in the 19th and 20th century. Here, she finds that Henry Ginck's 1923 text *Girth Control: For Womanly Beauty, Manly Strength, Health and a LongLife for Everybody* includes a ranked scale of humans. "At the very bottom of the scale of civilization were the Hottentots, which was the Western, denigrating name given to the Khoikhoi people of South Africa"—the tribe from which Baartman hails (64). Through the figure of Hottentot Venus, fatness becomes conflated with a larger racial inferiority cast onto both the Black and Indigenous body, of which Baartman is both.

Although body size diversity—in both height and weight—is common around the world, and not all Black or Indigenous people are now or have ever been fat, the ontological truths of this broad-based thinking in stereotypes is quite irrelevant; what is clear is that *ideas* of both Blackness and whiteness structure *ideas* of fatness in the current historical moment. The fiction of this idea does nothing to undermine its power and utility in the project of white supremacy. This was an obsession necessitated by anti-Blackness, by an *idea* that African people—in their vastly heterogenous bodies in terms of height, weight, size, shape, skin color, hair styling, eye color, native tongue, etc.—are innately inferior in the white imaginary. Anti-Blackness also operates through ideology. *Ideas* of Blackness, specifically, are both much more ubiquitous and subtle than they might seem and are perpetuated by non-Black people even in the absence of Black embodied subjects.

A depiction of 'barbarism' translated onto both colonized peoples and globally, where their fatness (real or imagined) was weaponized against them as evidence of their racial inferiority. Farrell goes on to explore how these origins are diluted through their attachment to broader categories of a gendered racial inferiority—even amongst white subjects. She finds that "much of the writing in this time period described in detail the fatness of 'primitive' peoples and

of all women, using that trait as evidence of inferior status. Fat became clearly identified as a physical trait that marked its bearers as people lower on the evolutionary and racial scale—Africans, 'native' peoples, immigrants, criminals, and prostitutes" (64). Thus, Anglin's emphasis on Heyer's fatness and its implicit connection to 'slut'tiness has roots in racial scientific thought that continues to express itself in all directions of the political spectrum.

Compulsory Thinness

In contrast to the imagined fat racial primitive, thinness was produced as a white supremacist aesthetic standard for beauty. As "[r]acial theories have linked fatness to blackness in the European imagination. . . .they also linked thinness to whiteness" (Strings 98). As this phenomenon acclimates more intently into dominant culture, it becomes distanced from its specific origins to translate into all communities. In a virtual interview with journalist Sonali Kolhatkar on her show *Rising Up with Sonali*, Strings articulates simply that thinness becomes evidence of "good racial breeding."[7] As I expand upon in chapter three, thinness becomes compulsory even and perhaps, especially, among people of color, as a disidentificatory strategy to escape other forms of racial abjection.

Thinness as white beauty aesthetics was only possible and necessary in response to the prior correlation of fatness with Blackness and Indigeneity in the white imaginary, circulated by white European artists, philosophers, scientists and academics. The primacy of aesthetics in constructions of fatness is evidenced in its location in Strings's study, which begins with a chapter titled "Being Venus"—as in, the Roman goddess of beauty. It traces the phenomenon of European efforts to taxonomize—and, in doing so—construct, beauty. Through the writings of early race scientists, Strings finds aesthetics are deployed to naturalize racial hierarchies and ultimately justify their role in colonization, enslavement and genocide. Strings maps their efforts to articulate distinctions between the allegedly superior Anglo-Saxon and the emphasis on women's embodiment in racial formation.

The second chapter, "Plump Women and Thin, Fine Men" continues interrogating European efforts to define beauty through visual cultures. Here, Strings examines the Renaissance painter Peter Paul Rubens, whose work is often cited as evidence of a different time where fatness was considered desirable for its alleged beauty. In doing so, Strings finds that, for Rubens, more than plumpness, paleness was necessary for beauty to be legible on a fat woman's body (51). In other words, the narrative erased from the mythic past where fatness *could* have been beautiful is the necessary presence of whiteness. *If*, in this context, white fatness is imagined as beautiful for its implication of abundant resources in a context of scarcity, then, by the same token: contemporary constructions of thinness's beauty rely on its narrative scarcity within an obesity epidemic. Either way, power underlies the erotic. Nonetheless, it is significant that a text tracing fatness and anti-Blackness begins with questions of beauty, underscoring the primacy of aesthetics in the production of both fat stigma as well as racial formation.

Settler Sexuality: Colonization as the Public Health Crisis

Strings goes on to survey the development of United Statian national identity in its nascent years. With thorough archival research, she details how Protestant ethics of temperance as indicative of moral fortitude and sexual discipline codify thinness as "a superior aesthetic ideal for white Christian women" (122). There is a particular emphasis on disciplining heterosexual

[7] See *Rising Up With Sonali* "Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia", https://vimeo.com/337858096.

white women into norms of restriction and the bodies they are presumed to produce as evidence of racial supremacy . Thus, appropriately disciplined eating as the performance of the production of the racialized white body became imperative. Specifically, it became a standard for white Anglo-Saxon Protestant women as aesthetic exemplars of the supremacy of their race wherein thinness signals evidence of their capacity for Protestant notions of restriction and moderation, in both gastronomy as well as sex. The correlation of the aesthetic and the erotic continue to sediment.

The processes Earle and Strings describe situate thinness—in addition to whiteness, heterosexuality and Christianity—as integral to what Scott Morgensen calls the biopolitics of settler sexuality. In his 2011 book *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*, Morgensen terms settler sexuality as "defined by attempting to replace Native kinship, *embodiment*, and desire within. . . .the heteropatriarchal sexual modernity exemplary of white settler civilization" (23, emphasis mine). The capacious experience of embodiment expands settler sexuality from a project of disciplining embodiments which fail the burgeoning racial, gender and sexual stratifications to include analyses of size as well as ability.

Settler sexuality sexually and racially disciplines subjects into white supremacist hetero- and cisnormative racial, gender and sexual categories. Scholars of queer theory and colonialism especially might consider how the social privileges of thin embodiment were introduced and enforced alongside and as *part of* settler sexuality. I build on Strings through reading the AIDS crisis and Obesity Epidemic together to demonstrate how the biopolitics of settler sexuality have shifted to new technologies to discipline racial and sexual others to death, and further the project of aestheticizing beauty as health, particularly for gay men.

Researchers now know the virus that causes HIV/AIDS to have been present in the U.S. since the 1970s.[8] However, it is not registered until 1981, when the first deaths attributed to what will later be framed as the AIDS epidemic are recorded in Los Angeles.[9] This is the same year my parents have just had their second child and my mother becomes pregnant with their third in Houston, Texas. RuPaul André Charles is a 21-year-old struggling artist in Atlanta Georgia. Over the course of the next two decades, the virus ravaged communities around the globe.

The initial state response to the needs of those who had been touched by the virus took the form of what queer theorist Leo Bersani describes as "criminal delays in funding research treatment, the obsession with testing instead of curing, the singularly unqualified members of Reagan's (belatedly constituted) AIDS commission, and the general tendency to think of AIDS as an epidemic of the future rather than a catastrophe of the present" (198-199). Because the slow response to treatment was informed by a presumption that the disease was targeting those in the lower echelons of the population, even as those whose lives were taken by the slow response of the state to the epidemic exceeded the category of gay men, they were still byproducts of the biopolitical process in their imagination as outside to norms of settler sexually.

The letting die of minoritarian sexual, social and racial subjects in the context of the AIDS crisis is merely the latest installment of the ongoing genocide of Indigenous people and cultures and, with them, a particular kind of gender and sexual diversity that was heavily targeted for eradication through the disciplinarian colonial projects. Thus, we can think of the biopolitical response to the AIDS crisis within the biopolitical settler colonial project that is the United States, broadly. In other words: colonization *is* the public health crisis.

The biopolitics of settler sexuality continue to perpetuate defining narratives of "health"

[8] See "History of AIDS," https://www.history.com/topics/1980s/history-of-aids.

[9] See "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS," https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline.

and longevity as the reward for proper care—"safe" (read: heteronormative) sex, a balanced diet and regular movement for all populations. With these vague guidelines, the knowledge about both health and unhealth become performative as what Das defines as rumor, which "occupies a region of language with the potential to make us experience events, not simply by pointing to them as to something external, but rather by *producing them in the very act of telling*" (108, emphasis mine). The rumor of health naturalizes colonization in its telling through rewriting the impact colonization has had—particularly on Black and Indigenous subjects, as well as their ancestors—and assumes health is accessible to *any* one under the conditions of colonization.

Health as rumor, especially in regard to fat embodiment, is addressed in fat Black liberationist JerVae's e-book, *The 6 Laws of Fatphobia*. The fifth law is defined as "unknown source citation," or a repetitive knowledge of seemingly common sensical 'facts' which begin to dissolve under pressure (5). Following this rumor *as* law of health shifts responsibility for care away from the state and even community, and to the individual. Those who are fat and those who are HIV-positive become seen as victims of their own lifestyles. For fat bodies, it is their imagined or real own lack of discipline to eat "right" and exercise. For HIV-positive folks, it is "the imagined or real promiscuity for which gay men are so famous" (Bersani 210)—their sexual undiscipline—that their disease is attributed to.

AIDS and Aestheticizing Health

In the 1980s in the United States gay and bisexual men are especially susceptible to risk of HIV transmission. The specter of HIV begins to inform how they view their bodies and body size, especially in relation to their own health and longevity. In his book *Muscle Boys: Gay Gym Culture*, independent scholar and gym trainer Erick Alvarez expands on the relationship between the visual markers of HIV and body size:

> 'Wasting,' defined as involuntary loss of more than 10 percent of baseline body weight, is caused by fatigue, diarrhea, and loss of appetite and occurs usually because of an infection due to the underlying HIV disease. It was such a common feature of AIDS that it soon became an AIDS-defining illness. Wasting, it became clear, was one of the most threatening feature of AIDS, for as the wasting transpired, the loss of protein occurred not only in the muscles but also in the organs, making them unable to function, eventually taking the life of the person infected. (140)

In contrast to the physical markers of illness on the body, expressions of fat embodiment to some degrees and within certain contexts become folded into dominant narratives and ideologies of what a 'healthy' body can look like. Like with Rubens's paintings, this is one more historical moment where fatness can be seen as desirable.

Gay historian Les K. Wright argues that "[t]he rise of a bear community is inseparable from the AIDS epidemic. This includes the first broadly accepted sexualization of abundant body weight" (15). But bear communities have not always been safe havens for all fat queer men. Contra to its "body positive" reputation, Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael I. Loewy expand on bear culture's exclusionary parameters in their contribution to *The Fat Studies Reader*, "Double Stigma: Fat Men and Their Male Admirers." They explain that, in bear subcultures, "the emphasis is generally on the hirsute and stereotypically masculine qualities of the bear. This way, bears avoid the stigma of being fat, which is associated with laziness, self-indulgence, and stereotypically feminine traits like softness" (147). Essentially, bear cultures rely on body hair as a marker of masculinity that supersede the feminized abjection of fatness. Further, body hair patterns are

incredibly racialized; while some ethnicities have a difficult time growing body hair, others are abjectified for having 'too much' or 'wrong' patterns of body. Whiteness continues to be the unmarked privileged aesthetic. In contrast, abjectly racialized and feminized formations of fatness continue to be excluded. While the rise of bear communities parallel the shifting body norms of the AIDS crisis, fat men had already been organizing for alternative spaces to size-exclusive gay bars since the mid-1970's, with national organizations formalizing in 1985 (Pyle and Loewy 145).

Wright goes on to claim "in the early days thin equaled sick or dying from AIDS, while fat equaled healthy, uninfected" (15). This statement is further complicated by the undeniable reality that fat people undeniably *did* contract the HIV virus. A study published in 2013 by Wanda Lakey, et al., followed subjects over a ten-year period from 1998-2008 and found that "HIV-infected persons had a lower prevalence of pretreatment overweight/obesity" *and* that weight gain commonly followed treatment. So while fatness did not *necessarily* mean "healthy, uninfected," it could have signified a successful antiviral treatment (435). For those who were fat at time of seroconversion, wasting might have functioned differently, or been a slower process, obscuring the presence of the virus. Further, weight loss is frequently praised in fat subjects, even if it is due to illness, and this may have been true in the context of the AIDS crisis as well. Nonetheless, bear and chub communities begin to cohere in this time.

Nonetheless, Wright's statement reiterates this understanding in relationship to the erotic potential of both those who are HIV-positive (unhealthy) and those who are fat (healthy). Fatness can produce a desired body seemingly only *through its contextual and comparable status as healthy*. So while aesthetics of health and eroticism have shifted over time, they are frequently racialized, gendered, and with a size limit. Wright's attempt to provide a recuperative reading of how the impact of AIDS on the queer male body influenced a fat positive backlash continues to rely on parameters around race and masculinity, and limit fatness as a marker of health for its erotic potential.

When research confirmed that it is the loss of lean muscle that is the fatal component of wasting, HIV-positive men began attending the gym in droves in a desperate attempt to build enough lean muscle for their bodies to survive the disease (Wright 141). But this practice not only built up their bodies to survive the disease; it also produced their bodies as the masculine ideal which would come to be so privileged in these communities. Alvarez continues: "In a strange twist of fate, the frail and weak would build themselves into rock-solid, strong men. . . .Before long they were being noticed and admired by other men, desirable once again, sometimes more than ever" (144). Ironically, indeed, the treatment for this life-threatening disease gave those who practiced it a new lease on quotidian as well as erotic life.

San Francisco-based multimedia artist Daniel Goldstein has been living with HIV since 1984. His *Icarian* series, first exhibited at Foster Goldstrom Gallery in New York in 1994, is some of his earliest work to address the subject of HIV/AIDS.[10] In this series, Goldstein takes the leather coverings of various exercise machines from popular San Francisco gyms where men developed their bodies into icons of health as an erotic ideal for its canvas.

In profiling Goldstein's *Icarian* series, art historian and journalist Robert Atkins posits that "[u]ntil recently, the goal of exercises performed on these machines was the creation of the attractive and healthy body. But AIDS has severed the link between these twin concepts. For the HIV-infected the goal is likely to be the creation and maintenance of the attractive, healthy-looking body as a signifier of normality in the face of a frighteningly abnormal condition."[11]

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[10] Jason Lahman, "Effulgence of the Effigy: The Medicine Bodies of Daniel Joshua Goldstein," http://magazine.art21.org/2011/12/20/effulgence-of-the-effigy-the-medicine-bodies-of-daniel-joshua-goldstein/#.YuiF1-zMJ24.

[11] Atkins, "Robert Akins on Daniel Goldstein," http://www.queer-

Through Atkins' description, we see the conflation of aesthetics of attraction, health, and normality. This is the phenomenon I am describing as an aesthetics of health: a transference of health status from biological markers to a *look*, easily visible not only through a lack of facial lesions, but also a bodily morphology that resists association with disease.

Anthropologist Lisa Stevenson's study on the approach to a suicide epidemic in Inuit First Nations provides a useful framework to consider approaches of settler Nation-sates in the Americas have responded to public health crises of their own making. Her analysis translates to the ways the State and medical establishments have engaged with the bodies of both fat people and HIV-positive people. It also provides some insight into how one biopolitical population might internalize their status. "Eliminating disease in [queer male] communities involved a process of reeducation of the patient's desires: the patient needed not only to want to get well, but also to want to be the kind of subject or self that got well. As a result, patients must painstakingly learn to become hygienic, orderly, and dutiful subjects" (Stevenson 52). In what Stevenson refers to as "the psychic life of biopolitics."

The specter of the ongoing AIDS crisis feels more apparent in the increasingly common circulation and engagement with PrEP (Pre-exposure prophylaxis), a highly effective preventative measure against HIV transmission taken in the form of a daily pill. Queer men, non-binary people and trans women, as well as Black and Latinx populations broadly continue to be the communities considered most 'at risk' and targeted by HIV prevention organizations and non-profits. This location forces especially queers of color to confront the legacy of the AIDS crisis through the "ordinary recess" of consuming a pill daily.

In the devastation of the AIDS crisis, this ethical subjecthood requires the quotidian task of striving toward, achieving and maintaining this healthy HIV-negative, muscular, even perhaps limited inclusion of the healthy fat body. Through these twinned epidemics in quick succession, there was a reeducation of desire towards life, and desire towards a particular type of erotic queer male body. Efforts to conform to settler sexual aesthetics of health in exchange for state protection are tentacles of the devastation of AIDS on both the individual and collective queer male body. This moment heightened anxieties around health status. Health was aestheticized through bodily morphology, which was then eroticized.

Affect and Eroticism

In 1996 the number of new HIV diagnoses in the U.S. declines for the first time since the declaration of the epidemic. However, AIDS remains the leading cause of death for African Americans.[12] Due to its close proximity to the 1970s, many involved in the gay liberation movement, as well as the generation that grew up amongst it, were among its victims, leaving a dearth of elders in queer and trans communities. Queer artists, icons and cultural workers who died of HIV and AIDS-related complications by this time include: Klaus Nomi, Michel Foucault, Rock Hudson, Ricky Wilson (founding member and guitarist of one of my favorite bands, the B-52's), Gia Carangi, Liberace, Sylvester, Alvin Ailey, Robert Mapplethorpe, Keith Haring, Freddie Mercury, David Wojnarowicz, Dorien Corey, Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, Félix González-Torres and more.[13] This is also the year RuPaul reprises her role as Ms. Cummings in *A Very Brady Sequel*. He is 35—the age I am at time of writing—and his status as one of the most

arts.org/archive/show1/goldstein/atkins.html.

[12] See "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS," https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline.

[13] See "Famous People Who Died of AIDS," https://www.ranker.com/list/famous-people-who-died-of-aids/reference.

culturally visible queer icons of my childhood pulsates with the absence of our ancestors.

While settler sexuality had been instituting and formalizing a classed, racialized heterosexual supremacy and compulsory thinness beside one another for centuries, they begin to dovetail at the intersections of size and queer male sexuality in the last decades of the twentieth Century. In 1999, The settler organization The Center for Disease Control and Prevention formally declares the obesity epidemic, on the heels of the AIDS crisis. This year, Margaret Cho will film her special *I'm the One That I Want*; *Will & Grace* will conclude its first season; RuPaul will star in the cult classic *But I'm a Cheerleader*; Destiny's Child will release "Say My Name"; and I will begin my final year of middle school.

Under both the AIDS epidemic and the Obesity Epidemic the form of life emphasized is a collective desire for health as a response to collective death. Those of us who were born amidst the devastation and after are tasked with the difficult labor of attempting to make sense of our presents and futures. Settler sexuality's association of disease with ill health and early death (either with HIV or obesity) bolsters the affective atmospheres of serophobia, queerphobia, and fatphobia, while producing social norms as well as our subjectivity in relation to them. The 'phobia' in either, from particular a valence, might be a transference of a fear of death itself.

For queers living and creating life in the space of devastation of the epidemic the internalization of aesthetics of health as erotic comes to hold a larger meaning. Regardless of our own embodiments, we develop investments, obligations and dedications to normativity as a promise that in return the world will reward us not only with social hierarchy and the privilege that comes with it, but in the case of queers of color—life itself. Indeed, it seeds a deep concern over our capacity for health, longevity and belonging.

In addition to negative affects, affective atmospheres also produce positive ones. It casts the erotic male body as the aesthetically healthy male body: one which puts forth a concentrated effort to produce and maintain lean body mass—either as management of its HIV status, or a performance of health that refuses the possibility of infection. More than a subjective 'attraction,' aesthetics of 'health' underlie who is *safe* to be attracted to—or not—in line with shifting ideals of settler sexuality. This conception of the diseased body applies not only to those who are HIV-positive, but also to those who are immediately deemed unhealthy through a brief overview of body size.

The approach to management of the HIV epidemic seamlessly translates to the neoliberal management of a healthy body. This is a body that relies on and reproduces aesthetic cues to signal not only health, but a proper form of citizenship and participation in the national project—particularly as queer subjects who are desperate to stay alive despite their precarious position under biopolitical regimes of life. In other words, 'health' becomes a lifesaving aesthetic performance which is then eroticized for its relative safety in the context of viral infection.

As subjects experiencing the natural outcome of being cast as sensually indulgent and racially abject in the biopolitical approach to the AIDS crisis by the settler state, the obligation to perform aesthetics of health becomes an even stronger imperative. Compulsory thinness is updated; in addition to a symbol of "good racial breeding," it signals health and beauty, particularly for those who are already racially or sexually abject.

Compulsory thinness is a survival response to a culture deeply and violently antagonistic toward fat people. This is a paradox fat activists have long struggled with: how to resist messaging and, at times, mandates to alter our bodies in extreme and impossible manner for social belonging. Weight loss is prescribed to people of all sizes as catch-all cures for every ailment from lack of energy to being desired publicly.

Fat activist and writer Kate Harding terms this The Fantasy of Being Thin,[14] wherein producing a thin body is synonymized as the inevitable solution to all life's ailments—particularly for fat folks who are barred from participation in social life through fat stigma and the social and material barriers it produces. Thinness becomes a shorthand for all dreams coming true, for both fat and thin people. After all, no matter one's current weight, the cultural assumption is that losing five pounds, for example, is not only achievable, but desirable and even admirable. For us, this manifests in a cultural orientation towards thinness that many people never interrogate as abnormal, produced, or otherwise out of line with perhaps their truest and deepest desires. It is merely accepted as fact.

Compulsory thinness is an understandable response to attempt to evade the aforementioned challenges, revealing itself to be what queer and affect theorist Lauren Berlant would define as cruel optimism—an "affective attachment to what we call the 'the good life,' which is for many a bad life that wears out the subjects who, nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it" (18). This remains true for subjects of all sizes, races, genders and sexualities who remain attached to it through. In chapter 3, I discuss compulsory thinness in relation to disordered behavior for queers of color.

Aesthetics and Erotics

Humans have been using media, including visual cultures, to communicate messaging since nearly the beginning of human history. The oldest known three-dimensional depiction of a human body that exists is a statue called the Venus of Willendorf. Dated to approximately 24,000-22,000 BCE, the limestone statue was discovered in contemporary Austria in 1908 and depicts a nude fat Black woman with a round belly and buttocks and pronounced breasts and vulva. As professor and dean Andrea Shaw Nevins names in her monograph *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*, the statue was carved by Grimaldi man, "black Homo sapiens migrants and the first inhabitants of Europe" (10). Nevins theorizes that the moniker "Venus" was bestowed upon the statue to situate it within a genealogy of artifacts from Western culture depicting women—and erase its Black origins. For Nevins, the emphasis on beauty as power comes from white patriarchal efforts to control women (11). While the statue has been accepted as a figurine of beauty, we truly do not—and can never—know what it meant to the Grimaldi people who carved it.

Through the projects racializing beauty and settler sexuality, aesthetics and erotics reveal themselves as primary arsenal tools to abjectly fat embodiment. Outside of European race scientists, a predominant sphere for these ideas to circulate in early 19th century U.S. cultural identity became women's magazines, which at the time would have been targeting middle class Anglo-Saxon Protestant women (Strings 138). In its nascent stages, women's magazines were the primary vehicle for these messages. These visual and aesthetic images of European beauty standards migrated from art and magazines into all other forms of popular media such as film and, television.

In his book *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* filmmaker and cultural studies scholar Tan Hoang Nguyen examines how media cultures reflect and shape Asian American masculinity and sexuality. He argues "[i]t is through the mass media such as film, television, video, and the Internet that one learns, recognizes, and resists one's racial, class, gender, and sexual positionings" (24). This dissertation builds on Nguyen to examine how discourses of size circulate through media in the 22nd century. Throughout, I use 'size' as an

[14] See Kate Harding, "The Fantasy of Being Thin," https://kateharding.net/2007/11/27/the-fantasy-of-being-thin/.

analytic to underscore the shared yet differential impact of fat stigma on all bodies. I examine how minoritarian subjects negotiate aesthetics and erotics to access pleasure, resistance and survival amidst the devastation of colonization.

Multiple historical frameworks must come together to understand the continuity between these fragmented events within a structure. Throughout this dissertation I read disparate events such as racial scientific discourse; European art history; women's magazines; my own life span; television sitcom and queer cinema history; a fun night out; the Obesity epidemic; the AIDS crisis; *RuPaul's Drag Race*; eating disorders; Beyoncé's career; sex acts and more as tentacles of colonization as a structure and the events within. I sketch a narrative history of how minoritarian subjects negotiate the production and execution of power in race, size and sexuality on and through our bodies.

I use my own life span from the late 1980's forward as a temporal frame and is marked by narratives, to varying degrees, of my personal relationship to the events or objects explored in each chapter. I include mine and my family's history in an effort to flatten presumptions of distance and demonstrate the persistence of events. Mapping my own memories of these cultural moments allows me connect dominant aesthetic and representational practices and their impacts on the quotidian ways that fat stigma is lived and experienced as a queer and racialized subject.

My first chapter, "Bold, Bright and Tight: Fat Queer Media and Fat Aesthetics," is an autoethnographic interrogation that thinks fatness and queerness together through my own encounters with fat queer icons who shaped me: Margaret Cho, Beth Ditto and the drag queen Divine. I unpack how their respective media shaped both my fat and queer identities and allowed me to live more freely in the world. Finally, I articulate what I call fat aesthetics as a technology for fat queer life and joy.

In my second chapter, "'When He Fuck Me Good I Take His Ass to Red Lobster': Beyoncé, Fat Erotics and Collective Liberation," I examine the cultural production of Beyoncé, named by Rolling Stone magazine as "the world's greatest living entertainer[15]." I read three of her songs to examine how one Black woman negotiates how misogynoirist tropes of Black women's embodiment and beauty culture. Building on Audre Lorde, I define fat erotics as a spectrum of pleasures ranging from refusing abjection to engaging in sex acts. I argue Beyoncé's engagement with them alongside the Black liberatory messaging in her song "Formation" offers insight into how subjects of all sizes do and can engage in fat aesthetics. It also provides a coalitional possibility for people of all races and sizes to participate in struggles for collective liberation, inclusive of size and centering Blackness and Indigeneity.

Chapter three, "Let's Get Sickening: Queers of Color, Size and the Performance of Health Aesthetics," focuses on the hit television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* to examine how fat stigma and disordered eating appear in queer cultures. I read the AIDS crisis, beginning in 1981, alongside the Obesity Epidemic, declared in 1999, within the context of the biopolitics of settler sexuality to examine how compulsory thinness has developed in gay male communities over the last half century, bridging aesthetics and erotics in gay male communities that continue to persist. Finally, a season 9 conflict between contestants Eureka, Sasha Velour, Shea Couleé and Valentina offers an entry point to put Lauren Berlant's theory of lateral agency in conversation with queers of color surviving the devastation of colonization.

My final chapter, "Our Beautiful Gainer Goddess: Mark Aguhar on Race, Size and Power Exchange," close reads a digital performance by the late multimedia artist Mark Aguhar. Aguhar's performance piece "Daddy loves feeding me treats" is one example of simultaneous fat aesthetics and fat erotics with BDSM scripts and choreographies of feederism across power

[15] Jonathan Bernstein et. al., "The 70 Greatest Beyoncé Songs," https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-beyonce-songs-1378620/.

differences of race, size and gender. I draw heavily on Khadji Amin's theorization of modern pederasty as the status of a Western modernity built upon power differentials to varying scales, from the personal to the structural. Amin's framework offers insight into the historical resonances in the erotics of colonized subjects, as well as reading of power exchange against the grain. Most importantly, Aguhar models how minoritarian subjects can use aesthetics and erotics to subvert majoritarian scripts of power.

Whereas much of the focus of Fat Studies thus far has centered around how fat stigma impacts primarily cis heterosexual white cis women, Strings and Farrell make evident the centrality of increasing associations of Black and Indigenous embodiment with moral depravity and irrationality under colonial race science. I build on this canon in conversation with queer theory, Black feminist thought, queer of color critique, Native Studies, Performance Studies and more. Using the historical foundations of thinness as a white nationalist project as a lens, I examine minoritarian life in the United States from the 1970's forward. Clustered around categories of race, size, sexuality and gender, the subjects in this study run the gamut. As much as I focus on fat, queer people of color, I also engage with white and heterosexual actors to illuminate the shared impact of colonial processes.

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Chapter 1
Bold, Bright and Tight: Fat Queer Media and Fat Aesthetics

Media teaches us who we are and—perhaps more importantly—what we *can* be. Growing up I looked to the cultural artifacts surrounding me for a glimpse of affirmation, reflection and, above all—answers as I struggled with identifying and articulating my sexuality. I was lucky enough to have grown up in an era with queer leading characters through the hit sitcom *Will & Grace*, which originally aired for six seasons from September 21, 1998, to May 18, 2006, paralleling my middle through high school years. The show followed its title characters—a gay lawyer and his Jewish interior designer best friend who cohabitate in Manhattan—along with Will's gay best friend, Jack, and Grace's assistant, Karen. It was undoubtedly groundbreaking in its representation. In 2012, then-Vice President Joe Biden cited the show as a catalyst for his evolving opinions on same sex marriage, saying it "probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody has ever done so far."[1] While I did not watch it on its original run, *Will & Grace* was ultimately syndicated, allowing it to reach my suburban Houston television. However, growing up in the rural suburbs to working class Tejanx parents, the show's race, class and body politics often felt more alienating than affirming. A specific arc from its fifth season exemplified the challenges I encountered attempting to formulate my queer identity as a fat, working class person of color in suburban Houston.

Originally airing between January and March of 2003—my junior year of high school—the "Fagmalion" episodes mirrors a common trope of the ugly duckling, while also being instructive of the expected aesthetic and erotics performances of gay men. The episodes are clustered into two, two-part episodes. In the first two, Karen introduces Will and Jack to her cousin Barry, who has recently come out of the closet. Will and Jack feel burdened by the task of shepherding a newly out gay man into the community, and regularly make negative comments about Barry's undesirability—a lack of sex appeal they related specifically to his aesthetics. They introduce him to a gym routine, give him a makeover and begin to educate him on gay divas. The second two episodes in the arc focus on romantic feelings that Will begins to develop for Barry after his makeover and end with Barry deciding he wants to explore dating as a single gay man, instead of attaching himself to Will too quickly upon coming out.

The episodes functioned as pedagogical tools that ultimately delimited what gay male culture and gay men do and look like: white, wealthy, trendy, urban, gym-going diva worshippers. I struggled to identify outside of diva worship. As a young teen in a time of sexual questioning, I concluded that I could not be *gay* if *gay* was synonymous with the white, wealthy, urban, and thin characters in *Will & Grace*, who were still relatively groundbreaking in their representation. While this arc offers a clear example for this messaging, it is not contained to these episodes or this television show by any means. As fat and queer theorist Kathleen LeBesco identifies, "queer circles generally provide little refuge from the sizeism that permeates mainstream culture, and in fact foster anti-fat bias to a great extent, especially among gay men" (2004, 89). In what follows, I reflect on the fat queer icons I ultimately encountered in my own self-fashioning and their lasting impact on my identarian performance, which I term fat aesthetics.

[1] David Eldrige, "Biden 'comfortable' with gay marriage, cites 'Will & Grace,'" https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/may/6/biden-will-grace-educated-public-about-gays/.

Margaret Cho

I was first introduced to Korean American actress and comedienne Margaret Cho through renting two of her stand-up specials from the local Hollywood Video in my hometown of Conroe, Texas. It was the fall of 2003—my senior year of high school—and my best friend was a fat white and Korean American straight woman named Mary. While I was not yet formally out, I functionally lived very much in a 'glass closet.' Mine and Mary's relationship mirrored the gay man/straight girl kinship that represented in *Will & Grace* and was where I could access affinity with the characters across the race, class and size differences.

My older brother recommended the special to us. Non-fat but queer himself, I'm sure he understood the affinity both Mary and I would feel toward Cho, as well as her comedy. He was right; not only did Cho project a radicalized queerness back to us, in her material Mary saw her own mother in Cho's imitations of hers. In retrospect, Cho's comedy provided a model for me as a fat, queer, person of color who, at the time, wasn't quite sure what to do with any of that.

Cho opens her 2000 special *I'm the One That I Want* with a series of bits about gay men and how much she loves them, self-identifying as a "fag hag" and declaring "I love the word 'faggot' because it describes my kind of guy" (4:56-5:03). Growing up in the deeply homophobic home of an Evangelical Catholic mother in suburban Houston, Texas, I had never heard someone speak of queerness so candidly, and especially not so positively. Even *Will & Grace* was quite chaste in its sexual representation, portraying characters that, while openly gay and flamboyant, were still depicted as largely asexual in practice in its early seasons especially.

She ends this bit by asking the audience: "Do you know anybody who's straight anyway? It's so *weird*, it's so subversive to be straight!" (9:33-9:39) While the joke surely feels true to 1999 San Francisco—where Cho grew up, and where the special is filmed—at the time, my brother and I were the only queer people I knew personally. Revisiting the special to reflect in this chapter, the sentiment of the joke feels far truer to the life I live today, surrounded by out and proud, loving and (in-)fighting queer people. I don't know if that would have been as true without this lighthouse of hope beaming through the homophobic fog surrounding me.

Beyond Cho's unabashedly pro-queer approach, her comedy is peppered with jokes about her sex life and promiscuity. After telling the story of sleeping with a passenger on an Olivia Cruise[2] she headlined, she reflects on spiraling about her identarian label after the experience: "Am I *gaaaaay*? Am I *straaaaaight*?? And then I realized… I'm just slutty. Where's *my* parade? What about *slut pride*?" (19:42-20:17). Each joke was punctured by laughter, cheers and applause from the audience, offering insight for my sheltered and closeted self into different geographies and temporalities where not just queerness, or even sex itself—but what I identify in chapter two as 'fat erotics'—is celebrated and encouraged. In her stand-up routines, not only did Cho shatter the attachment to the few clean and clear identarian labels available to me, she modeled a queer sexuality I might identify with as a fat person of color. These adolescent insights offered an elsewhere where I might be able to live authentically, images I had not yet seen in other forms of media. Indeed, implicit in her story is the truth that she *was* desirable, contra to the other cultural narratives that denied that reality—including the sexually reserved *Will & Grace*.

The special largely focuses on Cho's experience as the 23-year-old star of the first Asian American family sitcom *All American Girl*, which ran for one season from September 14, 1994, through March 15, 1995. Cho relates to her audience not only the pressures of being a minoritarian racial subject competing in U.S. media markets, but the specificity of the Asian American family sitcom. She reflects on her vulnerability and insecurity as someone who did not

[2] A famous lesbian cruise line.

grow up seeing "Asian people on television—oh, except on *M.A.S.H.*, sometimes" (34:23-34:28). Mirroring the cultural alienation she references, she also confesses her mother's fear for Cho's visibility in the entertainment industry due to the racism she had experienced as an immigrant. Cho's mother did not believe that the U.S. entertainment empire would be welcoming to Asian actors, and rightfully so. Cho felt desperate to prove to her mother that the same racism she had encountered upon arrival was assuaging within her lifetime, enough that her daughter could find success. Cho says that with her television show offer, she felt "acceptance" for the first time.

But this acceptance turned out to be conditional and with some unexpected condemnation from other Korean Americans. Cho shares the stories of Korean American family groups who protest her shows and a 14-year-old Korean American girl who writes into a newspaper to say that seeing Margaret Cho on television makes her "feel deep shame" (55:94-55:96). She rationalizes this by saying she understood: "I guess this was because they had never seen a Korean American role model like me before, you know? I didn't play violin. *[laughter, applause]* I didn't fuck Woody Allen" (56:05-56:66). The special is peppered with jokes referencing the tropes of Asians, Asian Americans and Asian/American women Cho is confronted with on her journey, invoking orientalist aesthetic figures such as Mulan, Long Duk Dong and the gong. In doing so, she calls out racism, confronts it, and undermines its power to wholly steal the joy of people of color.

These are the tropes that seem to still shadow her career, evidenced by the network hiring an "Asian consultant" due to Cho not "testing Asian enough" with Asian audiences. The consultant gave her tips like eating with chopsticks and putting them in her hair when she was done with them. Her stories reflect other experiences of Asian American cultural alienation, saying "people did not understand the concept of Asian American" (59:32-59:36). This is most poignantly represented in Cho's story about a morning show host asking her to speak to "our viewers, in your native language" (59:10-59:13)—assuming it was something other than English. Though I am not Asian American, as the descendent of Mexican immigrants and detribalized Natives, the feeling of being an outsider in your homeland resonated with me as a mestizo in Texas. These were the most impactful memories of cultural figures speaking candidly about race and racism and their very real consequences for minoritarian subjects in the U.S. They offered a possibility of cross-racial understanding, empathy and solidarity against racisms.

Media cultures have always been primal sites of discourses of body, especially for women in the '90's—the period Cho is reflecting on, and the height of the 'heroin chic' era. Cho's special exposes and challenges the body standards presented to those whose careers hinge on their ability to conform to them. East Asian women are especially pressured into petite figures which are central to straight white men's fetishization of them. After an executive told Cho the network was concerned about her size—specifically, the size of her face—they hired a trainer to work her out from 7-11am six days a week. She says "I lost weight. Through diet, through exercise, but mostly through fear" (36:30-36:36) underscoring not only the affective drive but the real, material stakes of thinness particularly for multiply marginalized subjects. She specifies that she lost thirty pounds in two weeks, leading her kidneys to collapse on the set of *All American Girl*. She responded by scaling back her workouts to five days a week and celebrating when her pilot was picked up.

The racial undertones of these expectations are gestured to in her joke, "I was so consumed with the idea of fitting in, of being thin like the other Hollywood actresses. I wanted to be skinny like the *Friends*. *[angrily]* Why couldn't I be skinny like the *Friends*!!" (51:01-51:10). While not explicitly referenced here, *Friends* is an interesting reference point. First for its

infamous legacy of whitewashing the formula made popular by the all-Black cast of *Living Single*,[3] as well as depicting a racially homogenous (and predominantly white) Manhattan. Most relevant to Cho's point is the extreme thinness of its women leads—specifically, Courtney Cox and Jennifer Aniston—and rampant fatphobia with the character of "Ugly Naked Fat Guy" as well as Monica's ex-fat[4] story line. While the thin whiteness of the *Friends* largely floated as self-evident at its time of airing, hearing an Asian American woman express frustration at her inability to replicate white women's beauty aesthetics provided me keen insights into the high stakes of thinness for people of color.

Media had been central to formalizing white supremacist aesthetics of thinness as beauty for women for hundreds of years, and by the mid 1990s, Margaret Cho's own body was leveraged against her as pivotal to her success as a stand-up comedienne and television leading lady. Undoubtedly, there are thousands upon thousands of similar stories across every industry from entertainment to the academy. As she concludes *I'm the One That I Want*, Cho quips "And then the show was cancelled, and replaced by Drew Carey. 'Cause he's so skinny" (65:37-65:50). While Carey is not thin, he is a white, cisgender heterosexual male, offering up an anecdotal insight into the raced and gendered modes of fat stigma, which ultimately cost minoritarian subjects material wealth, in addition to large-scale cultural success—and even belonging.[5] It would be another twenty years before the next Asian American family sitcom was greenlit; *Fresh Off the Boat* premiered in 2015, and centered on the chubby eldest son of Taiwanese immigrants who move from D.C. to Florida.[6]

While Cho's experiences of queerness, sexuality, race and racism, and fatphobia on her special were resonant and instructive for me, what proved most impactful was the fact that it was the first discussion of size I encounter that did not reify weight loss as a neutral and holistic solution. In that performance, she speaks to the very severe harm inherent to and potential consequences of the pursuit of weight loss and offers an alternative: an absolute rejection. She ends *I'm the One That I Want* by railing against the racist, sexist standards women are pressured into through mainstream media and its acolytes. "It's so wrong that women are asked to live up to this skinny ideal that is totally unattainable. *[applause]* For me to be 10 pounds thinner is a full-time job. And I am handing in my notice and I am walking out the door!" (83:57-84:17). With this, she not only points to the very real *labor* of thinness—part of its symbolic value in contemporary culture—she also offers permission to opt out of what we now call 'diet culture', particularly for people of color who labor to conform to white supremacist aesthetics of thinness.

Cho's 2002 follow-up special *Notorious C.H.O.* revisits these themes. Echoing the impact of media on fashioning our self-image, she regales a story that the only television she was allowed to watch growing up was beauty pageants, a pedagogical experience to learn what women are meant to look like—the way I first watched *Will & Grace* to learn how to be gay. The other pedagogical act was her father's attention waning or waxing with her weight loss. She confesses:

> It taught me that if you are thin, then you are lovable. And I just wanted to be loved. So from the age of 10 I was anorexic and bulimic, and I almost died from it. Until one day, I just said:

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[3] See *Gayest Episode Ever*, "The *Living Single* Girls Throw a Lesbian Bridal Shower," https://open.spotify.com/episode/4dtI2EXkZikwOkSa78VbIH?si=7010824035d44995.

[4] I write about *Friends* and Monica's ex-fat character as part of a larger sitcom television trope that perpetuates false narratives of weight loss, including the idea that, for fat people, our lives begin only *after* we have lost weight. See "The Sitcom Trope About Fat People That's Way More F*cked Up Than You Might Think," https://everydayfeminism.com/2016/08/sitcoms-tropes-fat-people/.

[5] *The Drew Carey Show* runs for nine seasons with its own fat woman co-star, Carey's clownish nemesis Mimi (played by Kathy Kinney), ending in 2004 with 233 episodes.

[6] *Fresh Off the Boat* ran for six seasons with 116 episodes, ending in 2020.

> what if this is it? What if this is just what I look like, and nothing I do changes that? So, how much *time* would I save if I stopped taking that extra second every time I look at myself in the mirror to call myself a big, fat fuck? How much *time* would I save if I just stopped taking that extra second every time I look at a photograph of myself to cringe over how fat I look? How much *time* would I save if I just let myself walk by a plate-glass window without sucking in my gut, or throwing back my shoulders? How much *time* would I save? And I save 97 minutes a week. I can take a pottery class! (1:13:12-1:14:25)

Here, Cho draws explicit lines between white supremacist ideals of womanhood, the media and the labor of thinness. With a rejection of adopting the labor of shaming herself she surfaces all the potentiality that waits on the other side of accepting one's body for its truth in the punchline of "a pottery class." She goes on to call out both the production of bodily insecurities as well as the financial incentive—particularly in "women's and gay men's culture" (1:22:50-1:22:54)— by asking the audience, "you know when you look in the mirror and think 'Ugh, I'm so fat! I'm so old! I'm so ugly!'? Don't you know that's not your authentic self? But that is billions upon billions of dollars of advertising, magazines, movies, billboards, all geared to make you feel shitty about yourself so that you will take *[applause]*—so that you will take your hard-earned money and spend it at the mall on some turn-around cream that doesn't turn-around shit!" (1:23:00-1:23:39). Here, Cho shines a light on media's role under capitalism: dispersing political and cultural messaging which produce our bodies as problems to be solved with products to be purchased. Further, she points to the statistically-inevitable failure of long-term weight loss efforts.

Cho concludes that show with a monologue about what a lack of self-esteem will rob from minoritarian subjects across race, sexuality, size, and gender. She insists that "for us, to have self-esteem is truly an act of revolution. And our revolution is *long* overdue." (1:24:19-1:24:32). This politicized refusal of oppression—not just permission but *encouragement* to accept myself for I am, in all the multiple intertwining identities I embody— was the earliest formative moment I had as a young adult still figuring out who I was. Through the unsuspecting medium of comedy and her own life story, Cho deputized her audience to accept ourselves for who we are and empowered us to move through the world with the confidence of knowing we are deserving of more than we have been offered. Along the way, I encountered other fat queer icons that shaped my identity and politic.

Beth Ditto

By 2006, I was two years out of high school and freshly out of the closet. I had been pushed out of community college twice and was working full time at as a bookseller at Borders Books & Music in Houston, Texas. Freshly out of the closet, I was eager to live the small-town-queer-moves-to-the-big-city dreams that had been promised to me by the media objects I encountered. My store had a large contingent of queer employees, who invited me into the local queer bar scene and by extension queer community for the first time. While we were all queer, they were also predominantly white and I was by far the fattest of the group. I began to be disillusioned by experiences of racism and fatphobia within the queer nightlife spaces I, perhaps naively, had hoped to be welcomed into with open arms. Even more so, I was disillusioned by the lack of recognition from those around me who all wanted our sexualities to be a shared experience that could transcend our otherwise differential experiences of race, class, size, gender, ability, country of origin, and more.

It was around this time I discovered the Gossip, a punk band from Portland, Oregon, and their fat white singer named Beth Ditto. I had never seen—or possibly considered—that there

could be a space for fat people in punk, the way I had never seen or considered that there could be space for fat people *anywhere*. I was immediately taken with the Gossip; their clear riot grrrl aesthetic paired powerfully with Ditto's vocals, making the band an incredible sonic experience. It was the Bush era, and the Gossip joined the cacophony of punk and queer artists voicing discontent with endless war, homophobic legislation, and the foundation and foreshadowing of the post-9/11 fascism that has since risen in many Western countries, including the U.S.

The lyrics of the title song from an album at the time, *Standing in the Way of Control*, released in 2005, spoke deeply to me: "It's part *not giving in*/And part trusting your friends/You do it all again/But you don't stop trying. . . .Because we're standing in the way of control/We will live our lives. . . .Survive the only way that you know" (emphasis mine). This is undoubtedly an anthem for the underclass to resist majoritarian pressures to 'fit in,' for queer punks to find solace and solidarity with one another, against the State and its agents. But the lyrics that refuse surrender in service of living authentically against majoritarian aesthetics and values lent themselves to a deeper reading for me. This was particularly true after a cultural education through Margaret Cho that sketched connections between capitalism and fat stigma. By this point, I had made the conscious decision and *choice* that I would not allow wealthy people to gain even more wealth through a negative relationship to my body; or, in other words, "not giving in" to the normative pressures of majoritarian culture.

Other lyrics from another single on the same album, "Yr Mangled Heart," also lent themselves to a fat-positive reading. While the first two verses and choruses detailed an unsatisfying romantic relationship, the bridge stuck out to me. Here, Ditto's vocals rose above the music to a near screech as she repeats "I don't want the world, I only want what I deserve" three times over. The exhaustion of asking for what one 'deserves' as a fat person who is often, if not always, overlooked or denied it, mirrored Cho's call for a "revolution" of self-esteem that was "long overdue." Once again, these lyrics amplified my own social experiences creating an opportunity for identifications with this cultural figure across lines of race and gender.

As I fell more in love with the Gossip, I researched their history, and Ditto's specifically. I was inspired by the ways she infused punk aesthetics and values into her own resistance of diet culture and fatphobia. I read stories about her forcing herself to throw up on men who harass her on the street or at one of her shows. In the images I found of the band performing, I was enthralled by her fat body flushed red with the vigor and energy of performance. Her size became highly visible in photos of the band performing in basement shows and small clubs with Ditto foregrounding the stage sometimes wearing just her underwear or in various states of undress in the tradition of riot grrrls and female punksters. But Ditto's fat body visibility landed differently than the nakedness of the thin white women who historically front punk bands in the style of the Gossip. It was not only a resistant to patriarchal norms, but to compulsory thinness which pressures fat bodies to hide and shrink.

Ditto's performance of her own fat body carried queer undertones that aligned with punk subcultures larger resistance to social norms. This is best demonstrated in a headshot of Ditto, a fairly simple image: a black and white landscape photo of Ditto from the neck up. She is staring defiantly at the camera, with her dark bangs framing her face and covering her left eye, and the rest of her hair pulled up behind her head. She is wearing a simple, light-colored shirt with an evidently hand-cut wide neckline and a deep V-neck that allows the top of the left cup and strap of her black bra to peer out. Her fat upper arms fall out of the short sleeves unapologetically. On the right shoulder of the shirt, written in Sharpie, are the simple words: "PUNK WILL NEVER DIET." Encountering this photo of Ditto as a young adult allowed me to begin to understand the radical potential of clothing and style, and how I might strategically perform my own body as an act of resistance.

With her big hair, heavy eyeliner, tight and bright dresses, and chunky earring and jewelry, Ditto performs what Gender Studies professor Jillian Hernandez terms "aesthetics of excess" in her book *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment.* While, for Hernandez, these aesthetics of excess are highly racialized, they are also about "embrac[ing] abundance where the political order would impose austerity" (11). While Ditto is a white woman who grew up in Arkansas, Hernandez's analysis of excess translates onto both Ditto's fat body as well as her queer femininity. As discussed in the introduction, fatphobic tropes rooted in anti-Black conceptions of sensual indulgence exceed the immediate population. As demonstrated by the response to Heather Heyer's death, fatness on white women signals both an abject racial performance—a failure of whiteness—which aesthetically situates them in proximity to Black and Indigenous women. Further, as JuanaMaría Rodríguez notes in her book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, aesthetics of excess can also define queer femininity, or queer femmes who "make gender a spectacle of deliberate design" (2). A queer femmeness like Ditto's engages traditional norms of femininity in excess of heterosexual norms and toward queer and feminist ends. When engaged on fat people, aesthetics of excess collide with what I term fat aesthetics, which I expand on at the end of this chapter,

Divine

A survey of fat queer cultural icons of the era would not be complete without a discussion of Divine. As a young queer unaffiliated with higher education institutions, I actively sought out queer aesthetic artifacts to immerse myself in queer culture and history. Part of this self-education came through the work of queer cult classic film director John Waters, who I had already been partially exposed to while growing up through my brother. While I loved fat, teen-pregnant Ricki Lake in *Crybaby* when I saw it as a young person, it wasn't until I revisited *Hairspray* that I truly fell in love with Tracy Turnblad, the fat white anti-racist activist who falls in love with *and* gets the guy in the end. The drag queen Divine, née Harris Glenn Milstead, co-starred as Edna Turnblad, Tracy's fat mother, whose diet pills hoped to counteract the mild agoraphobia she had developed along with her fat body. This was Divine's last role, as she tragically passed away shortly after its nation-wide release. Divine had spent her professional career attempting to cross over into mainstream success as a male actor, and her untimely death was made all the more tragic by her close achievement of this goal.[7]

In a 1990 conversation titled "Divinity" and included in the 2001 anthology *Bodies Out of Bounds*, Michael Moon and Eve Kosofky Sedgwick ruminate on the convergence of fat and queer identarian activism in Divine. Moon notes, "As a huge [*sic*] man who repeatedly created the role of 'the most beautiful woman in the world,' Divine seems to offer a powerful condensation of some emotional and identity linkages—historically dense ones—between fat women and gay men. . . . This combination of abjection and defiance often produces a divinity-effect in the subject, a compelling belief that one is a god or vehicle of divinity" (2001, 295). As implied here, Moon and Sedgwick's conversation rests on the seemingly disparate embodiments of fat women [of any sexuality] and gay men [presumably exclusively thin, in their formation]. Nonetheless, the transgressive potential of a simultaneously fat, queer embodiment is well articulated as the "combination of abjection and defiance."

Divine's modest career as a disco singer in addition to her drag performance, acting, and socialite status provide some context into her cultural interventions that perform this divinity.

[7] She had been offered a recurring role as a male actor on the Fox sitcom *Married With Children*, which then never came to fruition. See the 2013 documentary *I Am Divine.*

Her music bridges lo-fi punk sounds with disco beats and transgressive lyrics. Songs from her 1984 album *The Story So Far* include "You Think You're a Man" speak directly back to patriarchal masculinity with a chorus that lambasts "You think you're a man but you're only a boy/You think you're a man, you are only a toy/You think you're a man but you just couldn't see/You weren't man enough to satisfy me." Here, Divine subverts gender tropes when, as a drag queen, she challenges the masculinity of presumably normative men for their inability to satisfy her sexually. Masculinity lies not in physical markers or heteronormative sexual prowess, but in the ability to provide pleasure to a fat (gender)queer body. This song challenged the erotic disempowerment I had experienced in gay bars coming of age as a young queer in Houston, which would be repeated in queer parties in New York, Montreal, San Francisco and beyond.

Further, the track "I'm So Beautiful" simultaneously refuses fat and queer abjection with its chorus that insists: "I'm so beautiful/You gotta believe it, I am beautiful/I'm so beautiful/Can't you see?/Look at me!/I said/I'm so beautiful/Well, everybody's welcome to his point of view/We're all beautiful/Can't you see?" The song—perhaps unknowingly—calls back to the racial construction of beauty as exclusionary to even white subjects who fail white supremacist beauty standards. Instead, she claims her own beauty for herself and everyone—even if others can't see it. In this reclamation of beauty, Divine is challenging dominant erotic aesthetics that exclude her as a fat person, drag queen and feminine gay man. While I am critical of an individualized neoliberal fat politic that claims beauty for oneself and ends there, at the time this served as an important intervention to the larger homophobic and fatphobic culture that would deny beauty to fat and even queer subjects. Eventually, I would be lucky enough to experience the tentacles of Divine's cultural interventions in the space of the gay bar.

Fat Aesthetics: Performing Divinity

I began graduate school in 2016, and this is the memory that comes flooding back. I am out with friends: hair drenched with sweat, face flushed, a drink in one hand and the other in the air, with my flesh-full body behind me dancing, vibrating, and jiggling to the music. We are at a monthly queer dance party in downtown Oakland called Hella Gay, hosted at a bar that normally caters to the general heteropublic. One night a month, it becomes flooded with queer bodies, the dance floor packed so tightly at times that we are no longer individual bodies dancing; rather, we become one intertwined mass, moving in motion. It can be one of those spaces (you know the ones I'm talking about) that feels as if we have finally answered Emma Goldman's call, wherein *dance* and *revolution* become the same, or perhaps the rally before final transcendental action. Surely, at last call we will take the streets, and tomorrow the world will wake up anew.

This particular night, there was a concert at a venue across the street, and the dance floor was consequentially peppered with the surplus concert-goers who mistook our rebellion for their after party. Although this party, like most queer spaces I have been in, was dominated by thin bodies, there were a handful of other fat partygoers. Despite the very real and pertinent risks of entering the gay bar space as a fat person, fat queers continue to disrupt the homogenous body of the queer party space by insisting on our presence and inclusion as rightful members of the community. But as I looked around, I was struck by what felt like a clear distinction between the fat partygoers who had come for Hella Gay and those who had merely wandered over from the concert across the street—that is, between those who are queer identified (or at least in queer community) and those who were not. In short: our divinity. The divinity is reflected in the fat queers all around me, in our cut-off short shorts, fishnets, crop tops, brightly colored and patterned clothes, dyed hair and elaborate haircuts, purses and bags in the shape of donuts and other fatty foods, clothing that showed off stretch marks, fatty upper arms, luscious cellulite-

adorned thighs, rolls of beautiful and tender fat on our bellies, sides, and backs. We performed fat embodiment that is not shamed into shying away from the divinity of our own flesh, instead aiming to draw *even more* attention to our fatness.

Our divinity is part of what I call fat aesthetics as an umbrella term for cultural tropes of fat embodiment. Fat aesthetics are politically neutral and can be enacted toward positive and empowering or negative and abjectifying ends. Whereas sitcoms I grew up on such as *Friends* and *Will & Grace* regularly deployed fat aesthetics as an object of ridicule and abjection, people like Margaret Cho, Beth Ditto and Divine embrace them as forms of empowerment. In the context of a queer club, our fat aesthetics felt juxtaposed against the bodies of fat partygoers who had come from the concert, adorned in clothing that fat folks in heteronormative communities have historically been more effectively disciplined into wearing. They dressed in long and loose garments that hid their fat bodies, with their hair pulled back or styled blandly and shirts with a three-quarter sleeve so as not to show the fat upper arms. They hid their bodies under shapeless and oversized ensembles in modest colors and busy patterns meant to *minimize* and *distract*, with zipped-up hoodies even inside the sweltering hot club. They weren't wearing anything mesh, sheer, shiny, ripped, cut, torn, accessorized boldly, bright, tight or anything else that fat aesthetics celebrate.

Visually, it was abundantly clear who among us was performing divinity, this "combination of abjection and defiance," and who was not; their embodied performances stagnating at the abjection that has been thrust on them by white supremacist aesthetics. In other words, the fat queers around me were enacting LeBesco's analysis that "queer theory encourages us to play with our selves and to make a joyful noise in the doing" (2001, 82). For me, it is not the queer theory I would come to read in books and essays throughout my formal education, but the queer theory I encountered in quotidian life through comedians, musicians, and visual cultures such as film, television, and clothing. As I danced, lost in the heat of other queer partygoers and starting my own journey into graduate school, I wondered about the fat queer icons that had help my fellow partygoers. Was Margaret Cho's rejection of norms buried deep in their psyche, too? Did Beth Ditto also inspire the confidence to step outside in a sleeveless shirt, again and again? The embracement of not just our bodies, but also the foods imagined to have produced them, as joyful and pleasurable is a divine intervention—even more so for those of us who are people of color, whose fat, racialized bodies queer settler aesthetics of beauty and inclusion. It is this divinity I have come to understand that allowed me to transcend the possibilities fat bodies had been offered and encouraged me to incorporate my body and its intimidating and discomforting size into a fat aesthetic that challenges dominant Western notions of normativity, shame, modesty, respectability and the whiteness that shapes all of these concepts. And this divinity, underscored by a queer politic that resists oppressive norms, is much, much more than merely aesthetics.

Like Cho, Beth Ditto, Divine and myself, these fat aesthetics were deployed as part and parcel of a larger femme politic. Queer femmes know our aesthetics are not merely about covering our bodies for the night; in their book of essays *Care Work*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarsinha argues that "Our femme armor is a way to protect ourselves" (197). As demonstrated by fat queer femme Ditto's "PUNK WILL NEVER DIET" emblem, clothing is about how we strategically respond not only to fatphobia, but racism and queer- and transphobia. LeBesco argues that when fat people "disdain 'blending in' in favor of cobbling together a look from the scattered resources available and become more brave about appearing in ways that defy the 'tasteful' inventions of the commodifiers of corpulence, fashion *is* revolutionary; its newfound ability stymies fat oppression" (2004, 73). The same revolution Cho argued was "*long* overdue." But challenging these norms can open our bodies up to violence. Clothing that makes a fat body fatter (or simply

unashamed), that breaks gendered and sexual norms, that signals queerness, and so on, comes with its own risks. And sometimes we risk it. Sometimes we make our own possibilities.

Emboldened by our fat aesthetics, fat queers have the freedom to play, resist, and fuck with colonial raced, classed, and gendered norms that tell us to shrink, to be small, to be quiet, to not draw attention to ourselves. Each time our bodies spill out of rips and tears, under crop tops, tight clothing stretched desperately across the expanses of our bellies or thighs, caught in between our rolls, or we style our cellulite as accessory, we perform ruptures to the racial and gender conventions of what we can and should be and do. Queerness calls us to brandish our boldness on our bodies. It hails us to an embodied resistance to beauty aesthetics that rely on whiteness, light skin, thinness, muscularity, masculinity, able-bodiedness, an absence of scars and blemishes, the *right* amount of body hair, and so on. Queerness says *fuck that, and while we're at it fuck you.* Fatness reminds us that *we don't exist for you, and neither do these bodies.* Fat queerness says *we're disturbing to you because you need to be disturbed.* Queerness resists heteronormative structures, producing alternative potentialities that extend to bodies and to aesthetics. Fat queers perform fat aesthetics as an extension of a queer politic that resists dominant modes of sexual disciplining.

But these resistive aesthetics can be and are engaged by people across the spectrum of size. In the next chapter, I examine how superstar Beyoncé negotiates racist and sexist aesthetics that have shaped Black women's location in popular culture for centuries. In doing so, I offer an entry point to coalition for non-Black fat activists.

Chapter 2
'When He Fuck Me Good I Take His Ass to Red Lobster': Beyoncé, Fat Erotics and Collective Liberation

Like most of our formative moments, I remember where I was when Beyoncé came into my life. It is the fall of 1999, and I am beginning my last year of middle school in Grangerland, Texas, approximately 45 minutes north of Houston. Gathering in the cafeteria in the liminal space between the busses arriving and classes beginning, a friend tells me about a new song she had just heard on the radio that I *must* listen to. The song is "Say My Name," the third single released from girl group Destiny's Child's second album, fronted by local Houston legend Beyoncé Giselle Knowles. As I age I continue to follow Beyoncé's career, listening to her most recent album *Renaissance*—released on my 36th birthday—as I write this. In this chapter, I use selections from her 25-year career to trace one Black woman's response to white supremacist aesthetics bodily through her artistry.

From "Baby Got Back" to "Bootylicious": Black Women and Beauty at the Turn of the Century

The legacies of anti-Black aesthetics intrinsic to settler sexuality persist in the contemporary U.S. Black women in particular remain under perpetual surveillance for how their bodies conform to Western aesthetics of beauty. Their bodies remain a site of seemingly public concern, having been politicized through cultural discourse from Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman to rapper Sir Mix-a-Lot's 1992 single "Baby Got Back." That song succinctly articulates the racial dynamics of body size, especially the butt. It opens with a monologue by a young woman with a Valley accent, meant to indicate a white racialization, exclaiming "Oh my God, Becky, look at her butt, It is so big!" The speaker invokes the European viewers who undoubtedly had a similar reaction to Baartman. She goes on to pathologize the woman, saying "she looks like one of those rap guys' girlfriends" and "a total prostitute," using the same metrics early phrenologists did in efforts to link body size and aesthetics with socially Blackened subjects. Finally, the monologue makes explicit the connections between body size and racialization: "her butt, it's just so big! Uh, I can't believe— it's just so round, it's like *out there*. I mean, uh, gross, look—she's just so *black*." Sir Mix-A-Lot goes on to rap about his aesthetic and sexual appreciation for "big butts"—to a degree. Reinforcing the hierarchies of size and women's bodies as objects solely for the pleasure of men, he repeatedly emphasizes a small waist as a necessary companion to a big butt. Despite its patriarchal messaging, in 1992 "Baby Got Back" formed one of the few cultural objects that challenged the compulsory thinness that Black women are hailed into. In 2014, rapper Nicki Minaj samples "Baby Got Back" in her song "Anaconda," a rap dance anthem which undercuts the male gaze of the original song in praising her own "big fat ass." But before "Anaconda" reclaimed the big butt for Black women, there was "Bootylicious."

A decade after "Baby Got Back," Destiny's Child released "Bootylicious" as the second single from the band's third album *Survivor* in 2002.[8] The song affirms Black women's bodies against the male gaze. The trio—including Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams—challenge the listener: "can you handle, handle me?" Responding to two centuries of racial abjection and specifically the emphasis and gaze of Black women's derrieres, the singers inverse the onus to conform to colonial beauty standards. The chorus underscores this shift, as it repeats "I don't

[8] Destiny's Child would go on to release two more albums, in addition to a #1's compilation, before disbanding in 2006.

think you're ready for this jelly/I don't think you're ready for this/'Cause my body too bootylicious for ya, babe." Rather than assuming the responsibility of being small enough for the listener, they refuse the abjection placed on their bodies and insist someone's inability to appreciate is demonstrates a lack on their part, not on the singer's—and, by extension, all Black women. The song is released in a bit of a cultural turn from the 'heroin chic' thinness of the 1990s to the aesthetic appreciation of curves, ushered in partly due to Beyoncé herself.[9]

"Pretty Hurts": Resisting Aesthetics

Beyoncé returns to responding to the burdens of beauty standards placed onto women with her 2013 visual solo album *BEYONCÉ*. This is her fifth solo album, and one that shifted the music industry forever. Instead of following a traditional promotional format of announcing an album and releasing a lead single, Beyoncé simply released a full album unannounced at midnight on December 13, 2013, along with music videos for each of the 14 tracks. On a personal note, this was highly inconvenient and distracting, as I was in the Doe Library at its moment of release, attempting to pull an all-nighter to study for finals in my third semester at the University of Texas at Austin. At the industry level, Beyoncé would rightfully identify this as this moment she "Changed the game with that digital drop/Know where you was when that digital popped" in her feature on Nicki Minaj's 2014 single "Feeling Myself."[10]

The visual album opens with the track "Pretty Hurts," whose lyrics offer an indictment of the pressures placed onto women to perform beauty. The first verse after the first chorus is the most explicit in its targets: "Blonder hair, flat chest/TV says, 'bigger is better/South beach, sugar free/Vogue says, 'thinner is better.'" These four lines quickly gesture to the raced and sized norms that burden women especially: "blonder hair" as a performance of whiteness and the tension between some media cultures in the 2010s beginning to insist on certain kinds of curves and aesthetics of temperance circulated through women's magazines such as *Vogue*. While these words would ring true coming from any singer, they are differently impactful coming from Beyoncé, who is arguably influential in shaping them by this time. It reads as a bit of a revelation of the impossibility of the standards: that even when one arguably benefits from beauty aesthetics, that comes with its own sacrifices. Shattering the assumption that beauty brings with it a relief from all of life's problems, the song encourages the listener to focus on their 'soul' rather than their body, ending by asking them: "Are you happy with yourself?"

The visuals of the video lend themselves to a deeper reading as well. The video exceeds the time limit of the song, acting as more of a short film. It opens with melodic piano undertones as Beyoncé and other contestants prepare for their pageant. There are multiple moments which gesture to the pressures of compulsory thinness, as one model whose ribs are visible from her back grabs extra skin on her stomach, and another struggles with a dress that won't close. As the song progresses, we see Beyoncé fabulously styled as she is poked and prodded by stylists, her body is critiqued, she exercises in a waist trainer and heels, shoves pills into her mouth, and even rushes into a bathroom stall to throw up, suggesting disordered eating.

The short film is interspliced with moments where the audio of the song is paused for dramatic moments. In one, Beyoncé, as Miss Third Ward—a historically Black neighborhood in Houston where Beyoncé grew up—approaches the microphone and is asked by the pageant host

[9] This shift was also supported by non-Black women with curves—most notably, Jennifer Lopez and Kim Kardashian. The praise their bodies received has been established as appropriative, particularly in contrast to the critiques especially dark skinned Black women face for their bodies.

[10] Sam Sanders, "Beyoncé Really Did Change the Game With That Digital Drop," https://www.vulture.com/article/beyonce-2013-self-titled-album-impact-into-it.html.

"what is your aspiration in life?" Miss Third Ward repeats the question in an effort to stall before answering "to be happy." The music returns in a crescendo and we see models continue to critique their bodies in a mirror, Miss Third Ward exiting a bathroom stall while wiping her mouth, and receiving Botox from a plastic surgeon.

Andrea Shaw Nevins opens her 2006 book *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies* with an analysis of how beauty pageants perpetuate anti-Blackness, most notably through insisting "the contestants' physiological blackness must be ideologically effaced to render them as acceptable players in the beauty game" (3). She gives examples of Black contestants navigating weight limits, colorism, texturism and even adjusting any accent they may have in a "spoken performance of whiteness" (3). It is noteworthy that the two academic monographs that examine fat embodiment and Blackness both begin with a conversation of beauty, revealing the primacy of aesthetics in both anti-Blackness as well as fat stigma.

The "Pretty Hurts" video comments on this; while Beyoncé herself performs white supremacist aesthetics with her light hair in the video, she is still awarded runner up. The winner of the pageant is played by a model named Diandra Forrest, a Black woman whose albinism is styled to imitate whiteness. Director Melina Matsoukas frames the videos conclusion as a reasonable depiction that one can try their hardest and still fail,[11] which is definitely in line with the song's message. However, Forrest's albinism-as-whiteness metaphoric styling is reminiscent of the impossible and shifting metrics in beauty pageants that Black women especially are measured against that Nevins speaks to.

"Formation" and Modern Black Nationalist Aesthetics

I take my title from the lead single "Formation" for Beyoncé's 2016 album *Lemonade*. Beyoncé released the single and video unannounced on February 6th, 2016. It was the beginning of the last year of the Obama Era, and three years into the Black Lives Matter movement. Beyoncé is twenty years into her career, and promoting her first album since the self-titled visual album, with its historic unannounced release. She is comfortably in her own realm and increasingly engaging what GerShun Avilez terms "aesthetic radicalism" (12). In his book *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*, Avilez outlines how artists adopt what he terms Modern Black Nationalist aesthetics for "its demands to reimagine the social world and Black identity" (14). The visuals of the video show an engagement with the critiques and demands of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The video opens with Beyoncé standing atop a police vehicle half-submerged in flood waters, gesturing both to the endemic of state-sanctioned executions by police as well as Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the predominantly black city New Orleans in August 23, 2005. Similar to the AIDS epidemic, then-President George W. Bush carried out the biopolitical response of neglect to a crisis, which killed and displaced thousands. In 2020, the population of New Orleans was still approximately 20 percent less than its population pre-Katrina[12], indicating the layered extent of the event.

Critiques of police violence persist in the video; as it flashes through scenes of Beyoncé and her dancers interspliced with scenes of quotidian Black life, including a young Black boy dancing in front of a line of adult, mostly white[13] police officers dressed in riot gear. The boy is

[11] Jocelyn Vena, "Beyonce's 'Pretty Hurts': Find Out How The Video Was Supposed To End," https://www.mtv.com/news/ktz5pm/beyonce-pretty-hurts-video-alternate-ending.

[12] "Hurricane Katrina," https://www.britannica.com/event/Hurricane-Katrina.

[13] Pointedly, they are the only white people in the video.

wearing a long-sleeved sweater with its hood up, visually gesturing to Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black boy who was hunted and murdered by vigilante George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida on February 26, 2012. On July 13, 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges, inspiring the Twitter hashtag #BlackLivesMatter which evolved into a social movement.[14] In the final scenes of the boy in the "Formation" video, he lifts his arms up and the police respond by lifting theirs up in turn, reminiscent of the protest slogan "Hands Up, Don't Shoot." In the next shot, the camera pans across graffiti which reads "STOP SHOOTING US" before cutting back to Beyoncé now lying face up on top of the police car as it becomes submerged in flood water.

Beyoncé performed the single live on the Super Bowl halftime show the day after its release, February, 7th. Beyoncé regularly fills her stages with other Black women as dancers, back up singers, musicians and more, and this performance is no different. Here, the camera pans up to an all Black woman marching band variously wearing all-black outfits of pants, leather jackets and gloves, sunglasses, berets and wide brim hats. They part to reveal Beyoncé herself wearing a black long-sleeved leotard over fishnet tights with stylized gold bullets wrapped across her chest in an X. Her dancers wear all-black outfits of boots, tights, high-waisted shorts, long-sleeved crop tops and berets over afros. Beyoncé brings the radical aesthetics of the Black Panthers to the most-watched annual American television event.

The song begins with Beyoncé announcing her Creole heritage with pride, and moves into declaring the love for abjectified Black features in her family: "I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros/I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils." While Beyoncé herself is light-skinned (later in the song, she claims "yellow-bone") and arguably and contextually benefits from U.S. beauty aesthetics, daughter Blue Ivy's "hair" and her husband Jay-Z's "nose" have regularly been objects of anti-Black ridicule by users on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. The sentiment mirrors the "Black is Beautiful" slogan, which Avilez describes as one example which "embodies this rhetorical focus of nationalist thought" focused on a "celebration of phenotypic African features in the public sphere" (9). In these lyrics, Beyoncé is refusing the race science that abjectified ideas of Black aesthetics.

Fat Erotics for Liberation

After the first chorus, Beyoncé declares "When he fuck me good/I take his ass to Red Lobster." Angela Y. Davis locates responding to misogynoir through sonic traditions to be a Black Feminist tradition in her monograph *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism.* Here,[15] in the Black feminist tradition of Blues singers, Beyoncé articulates her own pleasures and desires on her own terms, relishing in the sensual indulgence of food and sex and food *as* sex.

The lyrics presents a double meaning in the context of anti-Black casting of fat embodied subjects as sensually indulgent. As Sabrina Strings outlines, this expressed in a perceived

[14] In his 2016 book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor situates this movement within a genealogy of the Civil Rights protests of the 1960's. Inclusive of this genealogy is more recent rebellions from the Winter of 2014 through Spring of 2015 after the murder of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri. For Taylor, these rebellions respond to much more than the specific state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings. Rather, they are responsive to hundreds of years of Black abjection in the afterlife of slavery.

[15] Davis argues that, after emancipation, sexuality was a primal site of independence that Black women in the U.S. had for perhaps the first time. Black women used blues music to express their sexuality in ways that were much more explicit in comparison to their white counterparts. This was also a way in which Black women were able to perform agency over their sexuality on this side of the Atlantic in ways that had not been available in generations of the sexual violence that accompanied colonization and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Taking this opportunity, they used music to explore not just the bliss of love, but domestic violence, same-sex relationships, and their own interest and pleasure in sex.

overconsumption of both food and sex. Coding of all who share fat and racial abjection as sensually indulgent persist in at least one grammar of Western modernity—psychoanalysis. Sharon Mazer summarizes the psychoanalytic pathology of fatness as an implication that "[u]nchecked eating is unchecked sexual appetite. By implications, to violate the social constraints against gluttony imperils the provisions against voracious sexuality as well" (Mazer 267). An ironic compulsion is born in this phenomenon: the compulsion to restrict eating as a performance of sexual purity, to produce a sexually desirable body, to attract sexual partners.[16] But, like Beyoncé does here, there are fat communities who lean into this sensual indulgence as well.

In addition to the cultural nods, the lyric also gestures to feeder/gainer dynamics. Feeder/gainer communities are a sexual subculture where one or both parties derive sexual pleasure from feeding another and watching their slow progression to fatness (or more fatness) over time. Conversely, a gainer is one who derives sexual pleasure from being fed and gaining fat, or more fat, over time. This is not a fixed binary, and in any given couple dynamic one might play the role of both feedee and feeder, or only one. Further, while these communities run parallel to chub/chaser communities—and certainly, there is some overlap—they do not always overlap. Nor are performances of eating always necessarily citing these choreographies.

Feederism falls under the category of what I term fat erotics, which includes a spectrum from fat heterosexuals having vanilla sex to, as explored in chapter 4, fat pornography and kinks sucks as feederism and race play. I build on fat Black lesbian feminist mother warrior poet ancestor Audre Lorde's theorization of "the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives" (53). I echo Lorde's insistence that the erotic is inclusive and necessarily extends beyond sex acts, a kind of power rooted in a deep reverence of sensual pleasure that ripples out to every area of our lives once we harness it—no pun intended. In touch with the erotic—with the depths of pleasure possible—we become less and less willing to comply with oppressive forces in our lives, including aesthetics. As detailed in chapter 1, fat erotics are also found in fat aesthetics, in a pleasurable sweaty dance in a slutty outfit.

The dynamic implied in "Formation"—a meal as a reward for a satisfactory sexual experience—exemplifies a kind of fat erotic that can be deployed by subjects of any size, such as Beyoncé and, implicitly, Jay-Z. It implies that food is not only a reward for sex, but one earned for sex done *well*. Like feederism, it extends the erotics of the otherwise restricted temporality of the sex act to a post-coital outing, inviting the taste receptors of the body to experience pleasure as a companion to the other erotics. Here, Beyoncé deploys fat erotics as part of her reclamation of Black pleasure. Like fat aesthetics as discussed in chapter 1, this evidences fat erotics can and are deployed by non-fat subjects toward various ends. In Beyoncé's engagement, they show the shared the pleasures that fat and non-fat people tap into with differential consequences for subjects at different layered embodiments, including race, gender, size, and sexuality. The differential outcomes of feederism as fat erotics when engaged by fat subjects is explored further in chapter 4. But Beyoncé's engagement in fat erotics as a non-fat subject is not unidirectional. Rather, it highlights the necessary shared commitment to Black liberation fat activists as all races must adopt.

It is worth noting that one of the earliest articulations of the fat liberation movement can be traced to the fat feminists and lesbians in the 1970s. Veterans of and inspired by the Civil Rights movement, a group of multiracial fat women founded the first fat activist group in the

[16] As a racialized and gendered constraint, this compulsion lands very differently for communities across lines of race, class, gender and sexuality —with middle class, heterosexual white women bearing the brunt of these burdens. See Strings, Kirkland.

United States, the Fat Underground.[17] "The Fat Liberation Manifesto"—the inaugural document outlining the points of fat liberation—was published in November 1973, by Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran. The influences and overlaps between fat liberation and other liberation movements of the time—Black, gay, and women's—seems most apparent in the third point of the seven-point Manifesto, which reads: "WE see our struggle as allied with the struggles of other oppressed groups against classism, racism, sexism, ageism, financial exploitation, imperialism and the like." We can assume 'allied with' indicates a dedication to the freedom of all of these groups. While not explicit, an aspirational awareness of the intersecting and overlapping nature of fat oppression across lines of race, class, gender, age, and nation is evident in these early documents. Feminists and lesbians have long been positioned to elucidate fat oppression as a byproduct of patriarchy, heterosexism, capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy, aligning their primary goals with larger political projects.

Beyoncé's artistry, while Black-centered, is available to everyone as part of popular culture. This allows her Black-empowerment messaging to reach more than Black audiences, and her non-Black audience must not trivialize, overlook or pretend to not be implicated in it. One does not have to be fat to be fat positive; one does not have to be Black or Native to be invested in and laboring toward Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty. These movements are the work of all of us.

Conclusion

From her girl group to her music as a solo artist, from the lyrics of her songs to the visuals of her music videos, selections from Beyonce's career offer insight into a Black feminist refusal of racial gender abjection through aesthetics. In "Formation," her simultaneous deployment of fat aesthetics with aesthetics of Modern Black Nationalism offer an entry point into a coalitional movement for collective liberation for non-Black activists and fans alike.

The negotiation of power amidst devastation is perpetual. Here, minoritarian subjects can access pleasure and coalition through the erotic, negotiations of power can come with limited options for survival. In the next chapter, I analyze *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a stage where power negotiations play out at the site of the body. In doing so, I theorize what I call health aesthetics as a performance that can undermine the well being of queers of color in exchange for belonging.

[17] See "Charlotte Cooper and Judy Freespirit in conversation, June 2010". http://obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com/2010/09/charlotte-cooper-and-judy-freespirit-in.html.

Chapter 3
Let's Get Sickening: Queers of Color, Size and the Performance of Health Aesthetics

> "No one wants to be infected by obesity, largely because people know how they see and treat and think about fat people and don't want such a fate to befall them"
> —Roxane Gay, *Hunger* (123).

RuPaul has been a part of my life since her 1993 single "Supermodel (You Better Work)," which catapulted her to mainstream fame and into my suburban childhood life. I have been watching her hit television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* since it first premiered on Logo in 2009, ultimately launching her into fully realized media mogul. As the most influential and successful queer media empires in history, *Drag Race* offers insight into the high stakes of compulsory thinness for gender and sexual minorities. As the biopolitics of settler sexuality continue to play out structurally, norms of settler sexuality shift to encompass homonationalist subjects. Queers of color face additional pressures to perform thinness as cultural citizenship, survival and safety. I engage with *RuPaul's Drag Race* here not only for its contemporary relevance, but to illuminate the insidiousness with which aesthetics of settler sexuality travel, and how they become reproduced in queer of color communities, especially. I explore the location of fat contestants in the competition generally before honing in on a season 9 conversation to underscore how thinness remains compulsory affectively, aesthetically and financially.

At time of writing, the show has become a global media empire, with 14 seasons and counting, Further, it has spawned multiple spin-offs, including *Untucked* and *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars. Drag Race* has expanded beyond the U.S. with multiple international iterations, most recently including the international All Stars competition *UK vs. The World.* For this chapter I focus on the U.S.-based franchises, which use a reality competition formula to cast drag performers from the U.S. and its territories in a race to be crowned "America's" Next Drag Superstar. Combining tropes, challenges and skills from shows like the Tyra Banks-hosted *America's Next Top Model* with the Heidi Klum-helmed *Project Runway*, *RuPaul's Drag Race* requires contestants to both perform challenges as well as model and sometimes even create their own garments for each episode. The winner is the contestant who ultimately proves to RuPaul she possesses the Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent needed for the title.

Dragging *Drag Race*

Today, the show is simultaneously heralded for its somewhat progressive representation, while also acting as a faithful beacon of critique, primarily leveled at its namesake and host, RuPaul André Charles. In addition to revelations that RuPaul's husband, Georges LeBar, owns a Wyoming ranch which hosts fracking,[18] the show specifically has been critiqued for transmisogyny in its early seasons—especially its simultaneous incorporation of puns on trans slurs while famously forbidding out trans women from competing.[19] As a microcosm of the larger culture, *Drag Race* offers an opportunity to examine the diversity and complexity that exists within queer community, including structural fat stigma and ableism that shape queer ideas and aesthetics of art and the erotic, and especially how they impact some of its most vulnerable

[18] See "Rumors of RuPaul's fracking ranch may be surprising to some – but not his Wyoming neighbors," https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/aug/28/fracking-wyoming-ranchers-rupaul.

[19] Over the years, many past contestants have come out as trans women, and the show now allows out trans contestants from competing. Perhaps most famously, trans male drag queen Gottmik was a finalist in its 13th season.

members.

While on the surface *Drag Race* presents itself as a size-neutral competition, its value judgments and considerations are often where its implicit biases are revealed. For example, many challenges require contestants to lip sync, act and/or dance—the expected skills of a queen RuPaul's tradition. But the choreography assigned can be inaccessible to fat dancers, and present disadvantages to less skilled contestants across the spectrum of size. Even when some fat contestants, such as Silky Nutmeg Ganache and Eureka O'Hara, incorporate physical tricks into their routines, they are often under appreciated in comparison to the plasticity available to some of their thinner counterparts.

Exploitation of athleticism and flamboyant displays of skill come to a head in the season finales, wherein the finalists are challenged to competitions of lip synching and choreography—sometimes to their own original song—for the Crown. This naturally presents disadvantages to less choreographically-skilled contestants of all sizes and, ultimately, fat contestants rarely make it this far. In fact, despite fat queens regularly achieving status of fan favorites—such as season 3's Latrice Royale—the first fat semi-finalist does not appear until season 7's Ginger Minj in 2015. Minj was followed by season 8's Kim Chi, whose clever song "Fat, Fem, and Asian" reclaimed her abject size, gender and racial aesthetics while poking fun at her notoriously bad dancing efforts.[20] Still, she lost. Other fat finalists have included season 10's Eureka O'Hara and season 13's Kandy Muse. Although both Ginger Minj and Eureka made it to the semi-finals of season 6 of *All Star*s, ultimately neither one took home the crown. This was a particularly progressive season with a record-breaking four fat contestants—two of whom made it to the finale. One of those contestants, Jiggly Caliente, as well as the season's non-fat winner, Kylie Sonique Love. are trans women who came out after their initial seasons.

In fact, while several fat contestants have made it to the finals many times, there have been no fat winners in all 14 seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and 7 seasons of *All Stars*. Thus, while the show presumably welcomes fat contestants, the structure of the show is such that they are unlikely to actually win—or even make it as far as the finale. While three winners are disabled—season 5's Jinkx Monsoon, season 11's Yvie Oddly and season 14's current reigning queen Willow Pill—none of them are fat. However, their status as disabled winners is nonetheless important, particularly as both Jinkx and Willow came out as trans women either after or during their seasons, respectively. Yvie Oddly even cleverly incorporates the hyper mobility her Ehlers-Danios syndrome presents in her body into her routine—arguably helping her win—while also being self-aware this comes at the potential expense of her longevity and wellness. Without pitting fatness and disability. as two sometimes overlapping and similarly stigmatized embodiments, against one another, this distinction does offer a comparative moment to underscore the unique challenges of fat embodiment, both in non-disabled fat people and in non-fat disabled people.

Beyond this brief survey of *which* queer bodies the competition rewards, the show also has a long history of displaying more explicit fat stigma. This is most poignantly signified in the first episode of its very first season with the elimination of Victoria "Porkchop" Parker, the season's oldest and only fat contestant. While Parker is memorialized in later seasons as the first eliminated queen, the role of fatness in the show goes regularly unexplored. Indicative of this is both the unexamined fatphobia that structures the expectations and demands of the competitors as well the campy gestures to and implicit sanctioning of the disordered eating endemic in LGBT communities present from its first season.

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[20] See "The Fierceness of 'Femme, Fat, and Asian'" by Spencer Kornhaber and C. Winter Han, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/05/kim-chi-rupauls-drag-race-femme-fat-asian-c-winter-han-interview-middlebury/483527/.

In its first season finale, "Grande Finale" (episode 8) airing on March 23, 2009[21], RuPaul invites the finalists to lunch as they prepare for their final performances. When the first finalist, Nina Flowers, arrives RuPaul invites her: "I just want to have a little lunch with you and eat some of my favorite things." RuPaul gestures to two white plates before them, each with two white tic tacs. Nina responds, "Haha, little tic tacs, I love it." RuPaul laments "I've already had too many," with a smirk, modeling campy scripts of temperance and discipline which provide cover for disorder. While RuPaul's personal eating habits are unclear, the presentation of restriction as a joke here introduces, minimizes, and normalizes disordered eating behavior. Here, 9 minutes into its inaugural performance of the most intimate moments of connection the contests are allowed with RuPaul, this is how the host chooses to present herself both to contestants as well as viewers. If this shtick feels familiar, it's because it endures—referred to as the Tic Tac Chat—and contestants usually respond with some dismissive quip like Flowers does here.

The prominence of eating disorders in the LGBT community as well as their inevitable reflection in queer cultural production like *Drag Race* exist as both mirrors and continuities of larger events. A 2020 literature review of research on eating disorders in the queer community by Laci L. Parker and Jennifer H. Harriger found that "both clinical eating disorders and eating disorder behaviors occur more frequently in LGBT individuals compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts" (2). Representation becomes a double-edged sword when contestants are burdened with modeling relationships to sex and gender, as well as food and bodies for young viewers especially, who might be first accessing queer culture through *Drag Race*. I think here of my own initial encounters with the parallel queer media I had access to in *Will & Grace*, as referenced in chapter one.

Indeed, over 14 seasons in 13 years, *Drag Race* not only reproduces and represents gay culture, it in many way *produces* gay culture. The show has been airing for so long it has already created contestants who were influenced by it directly. Most poignantly, 2018s 22-year-old season 10 winner Aquaria declared she grew up watching the show.[22] Beyond gay culture, the show has garnered tremendous cultural influence for audiences of all sexualities. Its large-scale cultural impact is undeniable with 56 Emmy nominations and 24 wins in categories ranging from its front-facing achievements in Outstanding Unstructured Reality Program, Competition Program, Host, Costumes, Makeup, Hairstyling and Casting to technical categories like Directing, Production Design, Cinematography, Sound Mixing, and Picture Editing.[23] Its scale is further evidenced by its celebrity guest judges, ranging from queer celebrities such as Bob Mackie, Lily Tomlin and Johnny Weir. The show also "reaches across the aisle" with straight ally guest judges like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Vanessa Williams, and Andrew Garfield.

Drag Race arguably even inspired the 2015 Spike network television show *Lip Sync Battle*, where celebrities who are not drag performers dress up in drag and perform their own lip syncs. RuPaul himself has gone on record to state the show appropriates gay culture for straight people.[24] But of course, not all viewers who identify as cis and straight remain that way. Drag as an art form is often many young queer and trans people's first foray into gender exploration. Part

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[21] "RuPaul's Drag Race (Season 1)," https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/RuPaul%27s_Drag_Race_(Season_1)#Episode_8:_.22Grand_Finale.22.

[22] "Aquaria Doesn't Need *Drag Race* To Become a Superstar," https://www.them.us/story/aquaria-rupauls-drag-race.

[23] See "RuPaul's Drag Race - Emmy Awards, Nominations and Wins," https://www.emmys.com/shows/rupauls-drag-race.

[24] See "RuPaul: Lip Sync Battle is 'ripping off' gay culture for straight people," https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2016/03/24/rupaul-lip-sync-battle-is-ripping-off-gay-culture-for-straight-people/.

of the appeal and success of *Drag Race* is its ability to reach especially underage and rural audiences who might not have access to their own local drag communities or the larger queer enclaves that support them.

Despite RuPaul's initial exclusion of out trans contestants, an increasing number of past and current contestants have come out as trans, surfacing the deeply woven and historical relationship between drag and trans communities. Unfortunately, eating disorders can also accompany social and medical transitions, as trans subjects attempt to produce their bodies in alignment with social expectations and gendered norms around body size and shape.[25] By the same token, cis queers might presuppose their acceptance within queer communities hinges on their conformity to a particular bodily standard. Parker and Harriger's study found that:

> approximately 54% of LGBT adolescents have been diagnosed with a full-syndrome eating disorder during their lifetime, with an additional 21% suspecting that they had an eating disorder at some point during their life. Additionally, 60.9% of LGBT adolescents in one study reported engaging in at least one disordered eating behavior within the past year. Transgender youth were more likely to report eating disorder behaviors compared to cisgender populations. Finally, a recent study examining participants upon admission to eating disorder treatment reported that sexual and gender minority participants had more acute eating disorder symptoms and higher rates of abuse compared to cisgender heterosexual participants. (2)

While *Drag Race* has undoubtedly at least partially shaped a generation of young queer people, the relationship between disordered eating and queer culture is certainly much larger than the show itself. Here, I am using it as an opportunity to place pressure on discourses of health and longevity, particularly for queers of color, trying so desperately to survive centuries into devastation.

Eat It!

In the spring of 2017, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is in its ninth season, airing from March 24th through June 23rd. There are 14 contestants, with only one fat one: Eureka O'hara, a white queen who inadvertently ushers in a conversation around currently and previously living with eating disorders in the workroom in the fourth episode. While the queens are putting on their make-up, they commiserate about their bodies. A thin, light-skinned Latina queen named Valentina says "Can I tell you guys about another disorder I'm struggling with?" and Eureka quips, "eating?" This comment leads Sasha Velour, another thin and white contestant, to intervene, telling Eureka not to joke about eating disorders (unless, of course, you are RuPaul herself). Velour continues that she has struggled with eating disorders for years, and it is hurtful when people look at her and tell her she is anorexic.

During the next episode, "Reality Stars: The Rusical," Eureka approaches Valentina Sasha Velour, to apologize for a joke about eating disorders she had made in the previous episode. The dynamics of the only fat person in a room of eleven being hailed to apologize for mocking the alleged eating habits of thin people—while the presumed eating habits of fat people remain a cultural joke, with sometimes fatal consequences—is never addressed. Nor are the larger jokes about size and disordered eating that structure the show. Instead, Eureka, like many fat people before her, is called on to perform the emotional labor of witnessing and placating the thin people

[25] This is examined for specifically Black trans masculine people in Da'Shaun L. Harrison's *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness.*

around her around her about their body images concerns and their relationship to their eating habits. The structural and interpersonal oppression of fat bodies is minimized to the point of erasure, mirrored in the lives of fat embodied subjects who are either prescribed or praised in their disordered eating habits for the purpose of weight loss.

The thin queens thank Eureka for apologizing and continue to commiserate about their disordered eating habits of the past and present, with Sasha Velour confessing to being anorexic in her early twenties. A thin, Black contestant, Shea Couleé has crossed the workroom to join the conversation. Shea then admits to having struggled with bulimia in the past, citing pressures of beauty standards in the gay community as a primary reason. This astute observation is confirmed by Parker and Harriger's sobering conclusion that "having greater connection to other sexual minorities and being involved in the LGB community were found to be risk factors for eating pathology among gay and bisexual adults," in addition to a racialization as Black, Latinx or white (13; 7; 8).

During this segment, Valentina shakily confesses "it's not just a thing with women, I'll tell you that. It's very prevalent in the gay community to have an eating disorder." The confidence with which Valentina shares this indicates a deep awareness of both the embodied experience of an eating disorder, as well as who is discursively imagined to be most impacted: young white cis, heterosexual women. The discursive erasure of people of color, men, queer and trans folks and more that Valentina calls attention to is mirrored in the public health umbrella data. Parker and Harriger's study found that:

> Adult sexual minorities have been found to have experienced significant disordered eating symptomology, including *desire to be thin*, bingeing, purging, and body dissatisfaction, which correlated with being overly concerned about body shape and size and level of femininity (regardless of sex assigned at birth). These behaviors occurred at higher rates than within the heterosexual and cisgender male population, but did not appear to be significantly different from heterosexual and cisgender females. (2, emphasis mine)

Valentina continues by confessing that she still lives with disordered eating and had to promise her mother that she would eat every day while she was competing on the show—saying sometimes it feels like she is "force-feeding" herself when she eats. This rather frank confession to a serious medical condition that leads many people to a preventable early death, is not with any serious concern for Valentina's health, safety, or livelihood. Their eating disorders are not mentioned again throughout the season. We do not know what measure is being taken behind the scenes or in production to care for Valentina and the other girls, functioning as a tacit endorsement for her thin body and the life-threatening processes necessary to achieve or maintain it. Instead, the contestants simply express gratitude for being able to share their stories with other drag queens, and continue preparing for their runway looks.

In a surprise twist for that runway, a contestant that did not score in the bottom two is sent home. After the lip synch battle between the bottom two contestants, Cynthia Lee Fontaine and Farrah Moan, RuPaul surprises everyone by calling Eureka forward and telling her that she cannot, in good conscience, allow her to continue the competition in her injured state. In the second episode of the season, "She Done Already Done Brought It On," Eureka jumps and lands in a split during the weekly challenge, a cheerleading routine. Although this is a standard trick for Eureka, during this performance, the footage slows and Eureka's voice interjects overhead, saying she hears her knee pop. Eureka's knee injury goes on for several episodes unmentioned, until she is finally shown using crutches to treat her injury in the fifth episode. RuPaul sends

Eureka home to heal, and gives her an open invitation to return to the show in the next season, which she does, and goes on to compete in a later season of *All Stars*[26].

While Eureka's injury is undoubtedly serious, it begs the question of fatness and the compulsion to perceive fat bodies as already unhealthy, and more susceptible to injury than their thin counterparts. Eureka's injury and her treatment cannot be thought of as separate from her fat body under rumors of health—6'4" tall and 403 pounds of competition, she reveals. In contrast, Valentina's body, as a thin one, is assumed to already be in good health, softening the severity of her confession to unhealthy habits. While Eureka's body is perceived as already being unhealthy, allowing her injury to be taken more seriously, the unhealthy measures Valentina takes to maintain her thin body are obscured, along with her motivations for doing so.

While this conversation is transracial, and even white contestants confess to their own histories of disordered eating, their experiences cannot necessarily be thought of together without considering body size is a racializing factor. A study summarized by Anna Kirkland in her article "The Environmental Account of Obesity: A Case for Feminist Skepticism" aptly synthesizes how race intersects with class in concerns over fat embodiment and health status. It confirms fat embodiment holds a particular salience in affluent white communities:

> A recent University of Michigan survey of parents nationwide revealed that they considered child obesity the number 1 health concern for their children for the first time this year, topping smoking, drug abuse, and neglect (C. S. Mott Children's Hospital 2008). The more affluent the household, the more concern there was about obesity. The poorest families worried most about drug abuse, smoking, and teen pregnancy (in that order). Black parents rated teen pregnancy as the most pressing health problem for youth, while Latino parents' first-rated worry was smoking and tobacco use. The authors of the report were then concerned that minority parents were not concerned about fat. (472)

The disproportionate anxieties wealthy white communities perform around fat embodiment are normalized despite the reality that "children's obesity levels actually have not increased over the past decade," while parents of color are pathologized for accepting their children's bodies as they are naturally and historically produced (Kirkland 472). Yet, this does not account for how children of color—and they adults they may grow up to be if not murdered through police, vigilante, or general gun violence, lead-poisoned water, poverty, COVID, or something else—internalize these struggles. Especially if they are lucky enough to grow up to participate in queer community.

Thus, I turn to Valentina and Shea Coulée who, though embodying different racialized genders, both find subjectivity under the broad umbrella term 'queer people of color': intersecting communities notoriously and regularly targeted as 'at risk populations' in biopolitical settler public health campaigns against disease —HIV and obesity, respectively. The aesthetic associations of thinness with health and, subsequently, eroticism, arise in a particularly salient and intimate form for queers of color. Beyond public health campaigns, in the U.S. Black, Indigenous and Latinx queers of color especially live with the psychic awareness of mass death in our communities since contact. This is partially the result of our construction as sexually and racially undisciplined subjects through the biopolitics of settler sexuality.

In his monograph *After the Party: Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, Joshua Chambers-Letson articulates this presence as our collective "liv[ing] in the face of historical and social conditions that produce an unjust distribution of death toward, and exploitation of, black and brown life and

[26] She also later stars in HBO Max's 2020 reality show *We're Here!*, along with fellow *Drag Race* alumni Bob the Drag Queen and Shangela.

queer and trans bodies, actively shortening black, brown, Asian, indigenous, queer, and trans of color life with alarming and mundane regularity" (4). We perform our lives and bodies with the reverent awareness that, Black and Indigenous trans women and Two-Spirit suffer the most acute violence of murder, and all of our lives and livelihood can be disproportionately shortened depending on our proximity to settler sexual norms of race, gender, class, size, ability, citizenship status, and more. One way to escape further stigma, marginalization, impoverishment, medical neglect and a host of other correlative experiences which produce a lower quality of life, is to not be fat.

Even if it kills you.

Affective and Material Rewards of Thinness

Under the biopolitics of settler sexuality, fat embodied subjects are passively left to die through a host of intertwining structural processes. And they compound with other biopolitical subjectivities, such as minoritarian race, gender, sexual, ability, citizenship status, and more. Statistically, fat people are more likely to experience medical neglect and abuse, leading to poorer health outcomes and earlier deaths. We are systemically barred access to higher education, experience wage discrimination, are disproportionately impoverished, more likely to be unmarried, and experience social stigma in a multitude of ways which compound to a lower quality of life.[27] In a metaphoric parallel to quotidian life, we may be invited to participate in social life, and even compete in competition shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but we will rarely, if ever, be allowed to win. None of these realities are innate to fatness, nor inevitable. Rather, they are the outcome of living in an oppressed body in a fascist culture.

Further unpacking the hefty consequences of a fat body in queer male social circles can provide some additional insight into the driving force behind the surrender to these ideals for the contestants, as well as those who struggle silently or invisibly. Sociologist Jason Whitesel notes that "[i]n heteronormative society, big men are at least recognized as 'gay,' whereas in gay circles, they are seen only as 'fat'" (36). Queer male communities replicate phobic impulses from dominant settler cultures that cast fat embodiment as a moral, ethical, sexual and racial failure which supplants and flattens other bodily, moral and political values and valuations. It becomes a visual signifier for a host of assumed personality defects, which can translate into social stigmas that present challenges to dating, friendship, community and competing in and winning the largest award in your industry within a phobic society (Whitesel 31).

For example, Erick Alvarez argues what I call the performance of health aesthetics "are used not just to describe an increasing number of gay men, but desired and sometimes required from their potential partners and friends" (2). Queer male sociality can place additional parameters around the heteronormative standards such as socio-economic status and education level for acceptable partners (Alvarez 4). Like other heteronormative bodily standards of race, gender and ability, size becomes an additional factor to determine whether one is quite literally *fit* not just for partnership, but for friendship, community or the Crown. In other words, the affective fear and disgust of fat bodies translates into material benefits for thin people. They are the conditions of possibility for the oppression of fat bodies, abstracted to reports about body image, self-esteem, health outcomes and overall longevity. This provides further context for the life-threatening dedication to the privileged body that many queer men form attachments to, where bodily performance becomes another kind of capital and social category to create further distinctions between otherwise seemingly aligned subjects, and non-conformity can easily

[27] See Paul Ernsberg, "Does Social Class Explain the Connection Between Weight and Health?" in *The Fat Studies Reader*.

translate to further social isolation and even ostracization.

While disordered eating is a risk factor of queer community, *not* performing disordered eating can result in communal rejection. As a reminder, queers of color already experience discrimination within queer communities, which led to ballroom being developed in the first place. As captured in the 1968 documentary *The Queen*, as well as 1990s infamous[28] *Paris is Burning*, Crystal LaBeija co-founded the House of LaBeija in response to exclusionary white supremacy of the drag pageantry circuit, which disallowed Black queens, like her, to win. As ballroom developed over time, it naturally evolved to supplement biological family who had disowned us for our sexual undiscipline.[29] Ballroom is gestured to in the structure of the *Drag Race* itself as well as RuPaul's legacy, whose fourteenth studio album, released January 7th, 2022, was titled *mamaru*. She is also affectionately referred to as "Mama Ru" by the contestants, who then all become her drag daughters. RuPaul is certainly not the first mother to model disordered eating for her daughters.

Similarly, RuPaul is not the first queer culture maker who has contributed to this cycle, either. While the AIDS epidemic by no means initiated the phenomenon of what Alvarez identifies as gay gym culture, he also troubles the passive role the men themselves are cast in producing the phenomenon. He agrees that "the media is a driving force, but it is often driven by gay men. We are not the victims or the puppets of Madison Avenue—we as a cultural force are quite often the puppeteers" (Alvarez 8). *Drag Race*, as productive of gay culture, is implicated here, as its own marionette for queer culture.

Shea's comment provides insight to the impacts of gym culture aesthetics as they extend into gay male culture writ large. They are, indeed, the aesthetics that Shea is referencing in her reference to 'body image standards.' They are also the aesthetics *Drag Race* promotes, as well, in its pit crew—a rotating harem of hard-bodied and masculine men who act as supportive props for the contestants when needed. They appear exclusively in briefs, highlighting their posteriors and bulges, and their entrance is frequently met with cat calls from contestants who often flirt openly with them. What on one hand is a subversive celebration of queer sexuality, on another hand models and reinforces settler body aesthetics for gay men.

When thinness is integral and even synonymous with the good life, many, like Valentina, will go to extreme ends to achieve or maintain it. In these instances, subjects are wearing themselves out to access the "good life" of thinness—or, what I term the affective rewards. Inverse to the negative affects attached to phobia, I would like to reframe the affective and material *rewards of thinness*. Through what is sometimes termed as thin privilege comes the affective rewards that come with the performance of health aesthetics thin subject receive regardless of their eating habits. The successful performance of the moral social order through

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[28] Most famously articulated and critiqued in bell hooks' essay "Is Paris Burning?", the film's infamy lies in both its skilled and groundbreaking documentation of a predominantly Black and Latinx New York City ballroom scene, as well as questions of appropriation by the white Jewish lesbian director, Jenny Livingston. While the documentary received much attention and awards, catapulting Livingston to fame, many of the subjects failed to receive the same level of success and wealth. Most died in poverty within a decade of the film's release, while Venus Xtravaganza was murdered before the film was completed. As covered in the chapter "Trans Memory as Transmedia Activism" by de Kosnik, et al., included in the anthology *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media*, the legacy of appropriation follows the film. A 2015 anniversary screening organized by the Brooklyn-based arts and media institution BRIC originally boasted an all-white discussion panel. It was not until a collective who self-identified as #ParisIsBurnt organized a Change.org petition with over 1,000 signatures, and flooded BRIC'S Facebook page with criticism that the organization rectified the situation. "In response, BRIC apologised and revised its line-up to include a number of queer and trans people of colour (QTPOC) ball performers who starred in [*Paris is Burning*], as well as a ball featuring eight Houses organised by two members of the scene" (37-38).

[29] See Marlon Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit."

thinness, no matter how it is attained—whether passively through genetics or illness, actively through dedication and/or eating disorders, somewhere in between or elsewhere—leads to assimilation into the dominant social order. This is particularly imperative for people who might not have any other entry point into dominant culture whose options for survival are otherwise deeply limited. The prize money in *Drag Race* ranges from $20,000 in its first season to upwards of $200,000 for some *All Stars* seasons—a phenomenal amount of money for *anyone*, but particularly for multiply marginalized subjects who have limited pathways to financial success under racial capitalism. This prize money is exclusively doled out to non-fat contestants, mirroring the larger material stakes of thinness as capital onscreen, and off.

Eating Disorders as Lateral Agency

When compulsory thinness is integral and even synonymous with the good life, many, like Valentina, will go to extreme ends to achieve or maintain it. While biopolitical discourses of health arrest the conversation of fatness at alleged concern over potential health impacts, the parallel risks of disordered eating are rarely mentioned or acknowledged. Thus, whereas what public health language might call "sexual minorities" might have internalized a desire to make live themselves, they can also paradoxically opt into early death through disordered eating in exchange for the promise of a "healthy"-"looking" body—even if it performs the exact opposite of the alleged benefits of health, in longevity. And these attachments to thinness, health and more broadly, normativity can come at extreme costs—to the point of starvation, as exemplified here on this global stage of perhaps the largest queer entertainment empire.

For Berlant, workers under capitalism are forced to make short term decisions that can be self-interrupting in the long-term, throwing sovereignty into crisis, what she terms "lateral agency." This is undoubtedly true. And even more so if we think of capitalism as one event beside and within the biopolitics of settler sexuality, and not only 'workers' but all minoritarian subjects. Like Berlant, I am sympathetic to the harm reduction strategies we employ to survive the social world including potentially interrupting the longevity of our bodies to access or achieve the affective rewards of thinness. I also trouble questions of sovereignty entirely separated from an affective atmosphere of fatphobia, where many of us relinquish our sovereignty in exchange for the affective rewards of social belonging through an orientation towards thinness no matter the cost. For Valentina, and others, the affective rewards of thinness can override their basic human needs that reproduce livelihood and longevity: food.

Berlant specifies that cruel optimism functions in particular modes for queer people of color, who are inherently traumatized subjects as being multiply outside of the constructed norms of whiteness and heterosexuality. She concedes:

> People's styles of response to crisis are powerfully related to the expectations of the world they had to reconfigure in the face of tattering formal statuses like class, race, nation, gender, and sexuality. . . . People born into unwelcoming worlds and unreliable environments have a different response to the new precarities than do people who presumed they would be protected. (20)

Given the additive burdens of racism on top of homophobia and fatphobia, I want to give space to the reality that non-fat queer people of color are functioning differently in relation to health aesthetics, especially under the reality that fatness also operates as another mode of racializing bodies.

I am interested in complicating the affective attachment towards an orientation of

thinness that queer people of color experience. For communities already dealing with increased surveillance and stigma, it does not seem unreasonable to want to minimize social harm by conforming to dominant social norms as much as possible. Conforming to aesthetics of gay male beauty allows access to the privileged position as an insider not only in the dominant culture, but it comes with material stakes, *especially* for queers of color operating within in queer communities already themselves stratified by race, class, gender, ability, size and more. Under an affective atmosphere of fatphobia operating in tandem with affective atmospheres of white supremacy and heterosexism, an orientation towards thinness is an attempt at an approximation towards reciprocity, towards love and companionship, towards survival through and with one other.

White supremacist aesthetics flatten thinness with social and economic belonging and survival for queers of color especially, forcing them into positions to compromise longevity or well-being for immediate safety. For Shea Couleé, Valentina, and other queers of color, the performance of health aesthetics as an approximation of normativity is necessary for endurance amidst the devastation of colonization, and the racism, homophobia, fatphobia it ushers in. This is the lateral agency of queer of color survival under the biopolitics of settler sexuality in the 22nd century. But it is not the only strategy for survival deployed by minoritarian subjects. In the next chapter, I explore one artist's fat queer of color subversion of erotics and aesthetics to access pleasure and map an alternate future.

Chapter 4
Our Beautiful Gainer Goddess: Mark Aguhar on the Aesthetics and Erotics of Power Exchange

For Mark, the original hot fat girl,
who showed myself and so many others how blessed we are.

My search for media representation led me to Tumblr, a microblogging site active since 2007. It is here where I was introduced to Mark Aguhar, a Filipinx-American multidisciplinary artist who had gained a significant following. A critical approach to the ways queer communities clustered around privileged aesthetics in the forms of whiteness, thinness and masculinity was an ongoing theme of Aguhar's blogging presence, exemplified by her moniker, @calloutqueen. Under the title *BLOGGING FOR BROWN GURLS*, Aguhar's posts articulated theories of gender, race and fatness and more that both reflected my own experiences and deeply shaped who I would become in the world.

Aguhar was earning her MFA at the University of Illinois at Chicago when she died by suicide in 2012. The degree was awarded to her posthumously. Through her Tumblr presence and art pieces (arguably, in conversation with one another), Aguhar's life has left a lasting impact on those who knew her, those who followed her, and those who have encountered her in the years since her passing, with her work continuing to be included in art shows around the country. I write this chapter with deep reverence for this ancestor, and with the hopes to honor her continued impact on those whose lives she touched.

Aguhar's mediums were vast and included drawing, watercolor, sculpture, photography, video, performance, fashion design and more. Her artist's statement reads as follows:

> My work is about visibility. My work is about the fact that I'm a genderqueer person of color fat femme fag feminist and I don't really know what to do with that identity in this world. It's that thing where you grew up learning to hate every aspect of yourself and unlearning all that misery is really hard to do. It's that thing where you kind of regret everything you've ever done because it's so complicit with white hegemony. It's that thing where you realize that your own attempts at passive aggressive manipulation and power don't stand a chance against the structural forms of domination against your body. It's that thing where the only way to cope with the reality of your situation is to pretend it doesn't exist; because flippancy is a privilege you don't own but you're going to pretend you do anyway.[30]

Aguhar's video piece "Daddy loves feeding me treats" is one such attempt 'at passive aggressive manipulation and power,' wherein the artist manipulates the boundaries of brown-embodied domination under white hegemony in a fantasy scene of power exchange filtered through feeding and being fed. This fantasy performance follows BDSM scripts of power exchange and casts Mark as the sexual bottom to her Daddy, a dynamic ripe for commentary when, as Don Kulick argues, "what people fantasize about is related to their position and power in the real world" (83). This chapter places pressure on the implications of each subject's roles in this fantasy to unpack which position and power in 'the real world' each respective actor holds, and how it is reflected, challenged, or rescripted entirely in "Daddy."

[30] See Young Joon Kwak, "Mark Aguhar." https://brooklynrail.org/2016/07/criticspage/mark-aguhar.

In reflecting on her artistic practice, Roy Pérez identifies that "[t]he intersectional nature of Aguhar's work—thinking and creating along race, gender, fatness, desire, depression, and other social vectors—invites encounters at multiple intellectual and embodied sites" (286). Despite this reality, much of the existing scholarship on Aguhar focuses on race, and only gestures toward size, when scholars consider Aguhar's size at all. While Aguhar's work certainly foregrounds race, there are multiple power differentials present in much of her works. A semiotic reading of the bodies of the two actors—and, especially, their bodies in relation to one another, and the roles they are performing—begs questions of race, gender and size through a kind of racial-sexual abjection that, is of course, always a question of empire. In this chapter, I center fat aesthetics and erotics while thinking them alongside race. In doing so, I examine how the tentacles of colonization and the bodily hierarchies of race, gender and size it trafficked in are ever present in the quotidian, shaping our most intimate desires and fantasies. Reading across disciplines to capture an expansive picture, I use each beat in "Daddy" to mark an intellectual and embodied site of the historical and present complexities Aguhar's fantasy is working through to ask: what is lost when we fail to seriously engage the historic meaning of size?

Prelude: Setting The Scene

The three-minute, forty-eight second video opens with a decentered Aguhar sitting on the floor of what appears to be an art studio wearing an over-sized, off-the-shoulder red sweater with pink stripes and black designs overlaying—one of her favorite items of clothing during this era, evidenced by its frequent appearance in her video self-portraits. Her[31] immediate surroundings are comprised of a rack of clothing; behind it, there sits a desk with a sewing machine, lending to the idea that perhaps these clothes were personally made—one of Aguhar's passions shortly before her death. To her right sits an open box—presumably once a package that was received—with miscellaneous items strewn around. Her face is made up with glitter pink lip gloss, turquoise eye shadow, glitter eyeliner underneath and a reverse cat eye in black. The back drop functions as a "messy archive" of her artistic life in the moment of filming.

Martin F. Manalansan IV offers "mess" as an analytic to consider the non/anti-normative queer immigrant life, "not [as] pathology but rather a productive orientation toward bodies, objects, and ideas that do not toe the line of hygiene, 'practicality' or functionality, value, and proper space/time coordination" (Manalansan 98). For Manalansan, the disarray of objects found in queer immigrant homes resist normative ideals of documentation and citizenship and point to the disarrayed life queer undocumented subjects are funneled into by aesthetics of whiteness, citizenship and (hetero)normativity. A fat person dwelling in mess adds another layer of meaning to the queer archive, as it functions as a mirror to the abjection projected onto the fat body, and the assumptions of cultural and hygienic practices imagined to have produced it. Kathleen LeBesco offers that "fat people are widely represented in popular culture and in interpersonal interactions as. . . .agents of abhorrence and disgust," affects closely associated with failures to adhere to norms around "hygiene" and "proper space/time coordination"—especially in relation to food, eating and 'clean' styling often denied fat people—that Manalansan points to (LeBesco, 2001b 75).

Manalansan continues that "mess provides a vibrant analytical frame and a visceral phenomenological grip on the exigencies of marginalized queers — especially those who do not occupy the valorized homonormative spaces of the contemporary West" (99). Indeed, "Daddy"

[31] Aguhar's gender identity and pronouns were in flux at the time of her death; throughout this essay, I use 'her,' the feminine pronoun that primarily in circulation when referencing the artist through Tumblr at the time of her death.

speaks back to the countless ways Aguhar's aesthetics of race, gender, size and sexuality push her to the margins of "the valorized homonormative spaces of the contemporary West," which so often center aesthetics of whiteness, cis masculinity, and normative erotic practices. In a refusal of these norms, Aguhar stages her fantasy amidst the mess of her studio where she labored to produce installation art, drawing and painting, as well as design and construct clothing. In this room, the messy aesthetic "gesture[s] to moments of vitality, pleasure, and fabulousness" made by art, graduate school, and fat queer and trans of color abject life and survival (Manalansan 100). In this messy room, there is a collapsing of the domestic and the artistic, the masculine and feminine, eating and sex, the public and the private.

For the first few moments, she poses and preens herself while looking at the camera, allowing the viewer to sit with and take in her glory. The Ronettes's 1963 track "Be My Baby" plays in the background, offering a sonic accompaniment to her fantasy of temptation. This is a song of desperation and seduction, where the singer pleads to her anonymous beau for attention and affection, posturing with promises of the projected happiness of their life together, mirroring the promises of the fantasy scene.[32]

I'll make you so proud of me/
We'll make 'em turn their heads/ Every place we go

A pale, muscled, hairy pair of arms extend from her right, off camera—the figure who plays the role of Daddy throughout. The artist glances in the direction of the hands but maintains a dedicated focus on her own reflection in the camera. In his right hand, Daddy presents a glass jar filled with five white powdered donuts stacked in a pyramid formation and, in its left, a single donut.

Daddy Play & Modern Pederasty

Through the titular casting, Aguhar employs scripts of Daddy play, which Juana María Rodríguez theorizes as a form of power exchange that eroticizes familial dynamics, "a narrative of ownership and submission, a belonging to and belonging for one another" (Rodríguez 55). But the terms under which Daddy appears, and what actions Daddy performs are specifically negotiated between the two actors; though "these fantasy figures gain meaning only through the culturally available 'meanings' of Daddy," the actions Daddy performs are specific to the fantasy landscape of the actors themselves (Rodríguez 56). As Rodríguez notes, "In these fantasy sexual scenarios Daddy can be kind, he can offer us sweet treats and fondle us gently or he can be the harsh disciplinarian who utilizes his sovereign authority over the family to command (or allow) complete submission" (Rodríguez 56-57). And it is exactly the former that Daddy performs here, in Aguhar's staging of her own fantasy.

But Daddy play is not necessarily about the familial dynamics explicitly engaged; rather, it falls under a larger rubric of power exchange, which is "about engaging directly with forms of dominance--fucking with power, if you will" (Rodríguez 58). While the scene gestures to dynamics of familial roles, this is quite explicitly *not* an incest fantasy, as "most linguistic uses of Daddy in sexual play have very little to do with incest play or BDSM"; instead, the paternal role merely "function(s) instead as convenient and portable narratives to describe gendered relations of care" (Rodríguez 58). And in this performance, specifically, the relations of care are not only gendered, but they are racialized, invoking histories of domination and subjugation beyond the

[32] Phil Specter's 2021 death brought new layers of meaning to the song, as well as the singer Ronnie specter, Phil's ex wife and survivor of abuse at his hand.

actors themselves, gesturing across centuries as well as continents. Here, Aguhar is engaging directly with multiple forms of dominance, as well as the pleasure of submission, even across fraught power differentials.

It is the power differentials across age, status and role that innately imbue the 'culturally available meanings' of Daddy which lend themselves to what Khadji Amin terms modern pederasty, a problematized dynamic in "its inegalitarianism—its impolite and impolitic admission that it gets off on power" differences, specifically (Amin 42). Importantly, for Amin, power differences are not *only* present in the extremes of our historic conceptions of archetypical adult- and childhood (as gestured to in the scene), but they are ever present, ultimately shaping Western modernity through its multiple histories of and racial production and/as conquest. Amin offers an "analytic of *pederastic modernity* [which] builds on [Eng-Beng] Lim's work by positioning twentieth-century pederasty as both a symptom and a diagnostic of the relation between (post)colonial racial difference and a range of potentially less spectacular erotic inequalities. . . .endemic to Western modernity" (Amin 43). This is the lens through which this piece is best read to disentangle the many power differentials across race, size and gender present in the piece, as well as their eroticization.

Aguhar's Daddy play is pederastic not only in its obvious gestures towards the family dynamic and age play, but that within these roles are already multiple historically scripted sites of power across race, gender, racialized gender, and size. This analytic draws attention to how Europe's imperial project—otherwise known as 'Western modernity'—is erotically woven together, highlighting how "European modernity is built on mass, same-sex institutions. . . .that solicit and implant affective attachments to masculine hierarchies" (Amin 56). While not always same-sex, the masculine hierarchy of the patriarchal family institution is nonetheless ubiquitous, imbuing the archetypical figure of the father with the erotic power necessary for a scene of exchange or submission; for, "[i]f playing with Daddy sexually may resonate with, and sometimes be enacted through, scenarios of domination and submission, it is only because these scene reflect real-world asymmetries of power" (Rodríguez 58). It is precisely the 'real-world asymmetry of power' that Amin's study of modern pederasty points to, and which the scene harnesses and eroticizes.

I'll make you happy, baby/Just wait and see/
For every kiss you give me/I'll give you three

The limbs retreat, and the left hand returns with a donut clamped between its thumb and index fingers. By the color of the skin, forearm muscles and hair color, pattern and texture, it is apparent that the hand belongs to a white person; a man. The arm extends slowly; the hand approaches Mark's mouth, while she opens wide and leans forward slightly to receive it—first, holding it between her front teeth, before the hand pushes it gently further into her cavern with its finger. Her lips relax around the digit, suctioning it as it evacuates her mouth. The hand, along with his arm, exits the screen.

Race Play

It is necessary to read "Daddy" in conversation with and contextualized by Aguhar's larger oeuvre, which often "basks sincerely in the problem of desiring whiteness," while whiteness as a social identity and political ideology is simultaneously critiqued (Pérez 283). Aguhar does not succumb to her desires uncritically or passively; rather, she seems to identify them as evidentiary of some sort of internal tentacle, so to speak, that can—and perhaps, must—be

interrogated and, if possible, expunged. "As part of a practice of radical disclosure that shapes her antiracist thinking and theorizing, her online writing narrates her attraction to white masculinity (in particular)," while her visual work often becomes the terrain through which these attractions are grappled with (Pérez 283).

In reflecting on a performance of Aguhar's that functioned as one of the last critiques for her MFA titled "Casting a Glamour: Peony Piece," Pérez introduces a framework of proximity to consider how Aguhar placed her body in intimate relation with others to surface and challenge historico-social scripts that shape how embodied subjects engage with one another. In "Glamour," Aguhar situates herself in the central location of a room, sitting silently and returning the gaze of her audience-voyeurs, "reveal[ing] all the vectors of interaction along which we construct the social world together. . . . suspend[ing] normal, scripted avenues of communication and reclaim[ing] this bandwidth for each person to experiment with and to reimagine queer relation" (282). A photo documenting "Casting a Glamour" was uploaded to Aguhar's artist Tumblr on February 27th, 2012, placing it in the short few weeks between the time "Daddy" was uploaded to YouTube and her death[33]. The proximity of these performances indicates a self-conscious and intentional disruption of a normative, unilateral gaze and penchant for challenging and rewriting these scripts entirely that shaped her work especially toward the end of her life.

In "Daddy," Aguhar calls attention to proximity not only in placing her body in shifting proximity to another's—a white masculine one—but also to "how our proximity to histories of violence and yearning, to those lost bodies that left their viscous traces on our own erotic desires, have shaped us as sexual beings" (Rodríguez 182). There is an iconoclastic awareness of affective and historic proximities to colonization continue to shape the cultural and erotic scripts of each body. Specifically, in Amin's consideration of pederasty as an expansive historical project, he articulates that "Western modernity and its imperialist projects produced at least one entirely novel form of same-sex erotic hierarchy—that of the white colonial man and the brown native boy," a form of what he terms "erotic Orientalism," which "render[s] the native boy a figure of romance and nostalgia in his position of sexual love for the white man" (42; 43). These scripts become the historically-informed culturally available meanings of Daddy's toned, white, hairy masculinized body juxtaposed against Aguhar's fat, brown, hairless, feminized corpus. They become the site of power differentials that animate the fantasy as the actors reprise the roles of their historical archetypes—'colonial man' and 'native boy'—in an eroticized restaging of the colonial encounter.

Aguhar's work is often self-aware and critical of the roles her body—and bodies like hers—have historically been cast in, as evidenced by the 'structural forms of domination against [her] body' in her artist's statement. In doing so, Aguhar performs Amin's "queer historical disposition" which "must remain alive to the commingled affects—such as the intensity of a pain indistinguishable from pleasure, the pangs of a lost and 'impossible' bliss, and the ambivalent togetherness of abjection—that may have been the conditions of past modes of queer life" (73). Invoking seemingly distant and historic racialized gender dichotomies, Aguhar points to how they continue to shape the erotic possibilities of the descendants of both the colonizer and the colonized, even across centuries and continents. These 'past modes of queer life' produced through and as colonization continue to shape the culturally available meanings of their respective bodies across multiple sites of difference.

For, while the actors share an assigned sex at birth (and, to some extent, a presumed sexual identity) there is a racialized gender dichotomy present, where Aguhar's gender identity becomes a complex negotiation of gender performance and embodiment—specifically along the

[33] https://markaguhar.tumblr.com/post/18425566333.

axes of race and size, and in their respective 'culturally available meanings'. This is most legible in her self-identification as a 'genderqueer person of color fat femme fag.' As a genderqueer person, Aguhar locates herself on the trans identity spectrum, ostensibly outside of cis gay male erotic communities. However, as a 'fag,' she also expresses an identification with the same communities—or, at least, a desire for it.

And Aguhar is not *just* a 'person of color'—a broad category, originally coined by an interracial group of feminists as a coalitional umbrella term to indicate those who struggle against racism with differing proximities to both whiteness and Blackness, as well as experiences of racism.[34] Specifically, Aguhar is Filipinx-American, a racial category that falls under the broad of umbrella of Asian American, which has its own discrete histories of eroticized racialization and racism, as Amin points to. In a contemporary context, the 'colonial man' and 'native boy' have undergone a series of rescriptions that nonetheless maintain their original undertones. Tan Hoang Nguyen, extending Lisa Lowe, articulates how "Asian American masculinity continues to be indelibly marked by a long history of feminization, as a consequence of racist immigration policies, labor discrimination, and anti-miscegenation laws" (80). These are some of the 'historical possibilities' that shape the abjection of Aguhar's body as a male-assigned trans feminine subject; for, while her femininity is exacerbated by her self-conscious gendered styling, it is also one that is cast onto her through a racialization shaped by the pederasty of Western modernity.

I take up Aguhar's negotiation and expression of her sexuality as a sincere site of engagement, as Nguyen notes that "[s]exuality constitutes an important and strategic arena in which to explore the intimate linkages between Asian American masculinity and discourses of power" (3). Rather than assuming a pre-racial sexuality, I follow Rodríguez, Amin and Nguyen to trace how sexual desires, fantasies and expressions are shaped by our subjective racialization in tandem with cultural production, representation, and memory. As an Asian American who is feminized by her racialization before her own self-constructed gender identity and performance, Aguhar's social script is determined by the 'culturally available meanings' of Asian Americans in the imaginary that cis gay male communities operate within. The gay gym aesthetics explained in chapter three come with racial biases which mirror those of the larger, U.S.-American white supremacist culture.

Nguyen succinctly surfaces the scripts assigned to differently-racialized cis gay male subjects through reading the racial archetypes offered in gay pornography, which becomes a pedagogical object teaching the viewer how to think about the bodies represented:

> Whereas Chicano/Latino characters are coded as macho, hypersexual, straight tops, and thus not qualifying as properly out and proud gay citizens, Asian characters are not conferred gay membership due to their effeminacy, desexualization, and exclusive bottom role (rather than the standard gay sexual versatility accorded to white men). Both groups of men of color are excluded from normative white gay American citizenship as a result of their racial-ethnic foreignness, working-class professions, and tenuous immigration status. (42)

Here, Nguyen identifies the racially scripted sexual-social roles that cis gay male gay subjects are offered, where—when Asian American actors *are* recognized—"gay abjection and Asian abjection collude to render the gay Asian American male a bottom subject," a historically derided identity, even intracommunally (204). Rather than merely indicating a preferred (or even

[34] In this way, the categorical label, while useful in some contexts, can flatten the specific racial experiences of those who fall under its umbrella (frequently toward anti-Black ends, in both erasing the distinct consequences of anti-Blackness, as well as how non-Black people of color perpetuate anti-Blackness).

incidental) sexual role, "bottom" as an identity category comes cast with numerous implications. Mirroring racial tropes of the passive, accommodating and feminized Asian, as the receptive partner—that is, literally on the bottom of the hierarchy—the bottom is presumed vacant of any agency of their own, where "desiring sexual subjectivity can only be described as masculine, white, and colonizing: inversely, to occupy the position of desired sexual object can only be seen as feminine, Oriental, and colonized" (Nguyen 119). These racial-sexual roles cast onto Asian Americans in queer male communities in the U.S. remain tentacles of not only racial formation upon entering the states, but the conditions that produced the need for migration.

The scripts Nguyen surfaces are revised from Amin's consideration of the 'colonial man and the brown native boy.' He argues this "homoerotic figure of the native boy reveals the West's role in not only perpetuating, but also innovating novel forms of erotically charged hierarchy well into late modernity"—such as strict sexual roles of 'top' and 'bottom', and their compulsory casting along racial lines (43). Thus, not only is Aguhar engaging traumatic histories of racial formation but the complex realities of queer life that was produced *through* and integral to the colonial encounter. In other words, the Asian American condition of Nguyen's 'bottom subject' is by no means obvious, nor an inevitability, but rather the product of unique and specific histories of colonization and migration under the pederastic imperial projects which produced Western modernity. In signaling a BDSM dynamic in the setting of the scene, collapsing Daddy and race play, Aguhar performs agency within power exchange that allows her to rewrite the aesthetic scripts each body are assigned in the contemporary moment of the ongoing colonization of the land she both resides on and exists in diaspora with, contesting their historic and present possibilities. Recall that this fantasy scene is shaped by each subjects 'real-world' social location, but also that Daddy is not discipling her, but feeding her treats.

Oh, since the day I saw you/I have been waiting for you/
You know I will adore you/'Til eternity

Mark smiles and returns her attention to the camera. She once again fills the frame, gently chewing and giggling as she swallows the treat. This transpires for nine seconds before the hand returns to offer yet another donut. But she has not yet finished, pursing her mouth and holds her hand up, pointer finger extended, successfully communicating to the hand *Not yet, I'm not done.* It retreats. She ruminates on the donut and gazes at herself in the camera, preening and posing. She appears generous and forgiving of his impatience, for, truly, who can blame him?

Topping from the Bottom

Here, Mark is not just a bottom. She, a fat, femme, trans, Filipinx, is bottoming for a white, muscular, masculine man in her own fantasy scene. But, beyond race, identity and, certainly gender, there are additional forces at play in the feminization of Aguhar's body, and her subsequent location in the cis gay male erotic imagination. Though unnamed by Nguyen, as explored in my previous chapter, there is another axes required for 'normative white gay American citizenship': a thin body.

In his 2014 ethnography, *Fat Gay Men: Girth, Mirth, and the Politics of Stigma*, Jason Whitesel tracks experiences of ostracization and abjection of fat embodied subjects in mainstream gay male communities. In addition to the white supremacy that is pervasive in the dominant culture and replicated in queer subcultures, he notes that "gay men stigmatize those who do not adhere to rigid bodily standards. These boundaries perpetuate gender inequality" (43). This juxtaposition also points to how fat embodiment is positioned against the bodily ideals of

dominant cis gay male communities and, in doing so, its abjection is produced—partially through a feminizing transference for fat subjects of any racialization. "Fat feminizes male features, threatening masculinity and departing from the archetype of the disciplined hard body. It makes men's genitals appear smaller and causes men to develop breasts and hips, their physicality ultimately betraying them as it reinforces the effeminate label" (Whitesel 44). As I argue in my essay in *Fat & Queer*, titled "The Gender Non-conformity of My Fatness," cisgender identity relies on an idealized configuration of not only thinness, but whiteness, masculinity (for men), and able-bodiedness. Thus, fatness innately produces fat embodied subjects as gender non-conforming, if not trans—always already outside of the cis ideals of masculinity mainstream gay communities idolize.

In erotic dynamics across size difference, such as the one depicted in "Daddy," the fat feminized body is often relegated to the submissive, or bottom role, in a dichotomized gender role that mirrors dominant heteronormative scripts of Western modernity (Whitesel 43).[35] While Aguhar's self-constructed gender might divert from that other fat embodied subjects who engage in cis gay male community, her embodiment precedes her subjectivity in feminizing her body, and thus casting her into predetermined racial-sexual-social roles of the bottom. We can see the parallels in the feminizing process of non-Asian fat subjects, and non-fat Asian subjects in gay male communities that Aguhar and her work operates within, situating her body as feminized and, thus, bottomified — evacuated of agency or active sexual desire — across multiple axes. And according to Nguyen, the femme continues to be abjectified and marginalized within dominant cis male gay libidinal economies, arguing that "the screaming queen—pre- and post-Stonewall—remains the most abject and least desirable figure in gay male communities in the West" (80). But rather than assimilating into the conflations of masculinity, power, tophood and whiteness that, he argues, is the knee-jerk response to the racist feminizing of Asian Americans undertaken by the field at large, Nguyen's larger project aims to recuperate the effeminate Asian bottom subject, finding not only agency, but desire in their gender performance. He argues that "effeminacy might be socially and sexually enabling for some Asian American male[-assigned-at-birth] subjects who profess no loyalty to heteronormativity"—a loyalty notoriously challenged and rebuked in Aguhar's political and theoretical writings, artistic practice and reputation as calloutqueen (82). Here, Aguhar embraces bottomhood as sexually enabling while rejecting it as a static state of passive submission. Make no mistake: Aguhar is not submitting to whiteness, or masculinity.

The title of the piece might leave one to believe that the scene is all about the pleasure of the Daddy. After all, his pleasure is seemingly the one prioritized: it is he who is the referent in *loves*, who receives the affective rewards of the scene that plays out before us. Mark's subjectivity, then, implicitly exists passively. One might think she is consuming these treats for his enjoyment alone. But that is not how the scene plays out: when Daddy wants to continue the scene before Mark is prepared, she stops him. And more importantly: he listens. Aguhar here performs a subversion seen in her work before. Analyzing a companion pair of paintings, featuring fields of multiple (predominantly white) men painted above Aguhar—all in their underwear—and titled "IF U R GAY I WANT TO FUCK YOU" and "EVEN IF UR STR8 I STILL WANT TO FUCK YOU," Pérez notes that they may "make Aguhar's desire for the masculine objects seem inevitable" (286). Instead, Pérez argues, "the paintings seize this inevitability and lay it bare. By diagramming this erotic field, Aguhar draws a queer heuristic for *owning*, learning, and *unlearning* desire" (Pérez 286, emphasis mine). Present in "Daddy" is Aguhar's ownership of her desires and

[35] While Whitesel is specifically studying fat cis gay men, his analysis helps us understand how Aguhar's experience is aligned with them, and thus, is also shaped by the specific location of fat embodiment in these communities.

an attempt at unlearning—or, at least, rewriting their scripts.

While Daddy may get pleasure from feeding her (and who wouldn't?), his pleasure is secondary; tangential, inconsequential, incidental. It is never a question, much less a priority. Instead, the frame revolves around Mark, and her pleasure, of eating, of gazing, of preening, of playing, of submitting. She reclaims her power through the framing of the gaze. All eyes are on her. The viewers, Mark's, Daddy's. We are all watching her. Even in her "joyful abdication of power," true to BDSM scripts, Mark never fully relinquishes her agency (Nguyen 12). When Daddy attempts to feed Mark another donut before she is ready, she stops him; he obeys. The bottom is in control. She turns this compulsion on its head and demands the white masculine body tend to her. It must feed her. What Daddy loves may not be feeding her treats, but in fulfilling his bottom's fantasies, on their own terms, whatever they may be.

Ultimately Nguyen's goal is to "challenge the scorn directed against 'femme' in gay male communities by considering gay male femme as similarly perverse, sexualized, and wanted, thus interrogating the conflation of maleness with masculinity, and masculinity with sexual desirability" (194). In "Daddy," Aguhar performs the empowered (fat) Asian femme subject Nguyen fantasizes on here, as a particularly racialized Asian (trans) femme engages power exchange in a scene where she displaces masculine power almost entirely, claiming it for herself. She exemplifies here Nguyen's "advance[ment of] bottomhood as a sexual, social, and political program that one tactically assumes and consciously cultivates. Bottomhood describes a particular way of inhabiting an abject social-sexual-racial positioning situated in relation to other social-sexual-racial positions in a field of power and difference. Bottomhood constitutes a process of subjectification, one involving subjugation while enabling recognition" (195). Aguhar's bottom constitution restages what Khadji Amin might called pederastic in its eroticization of differential power relations that historically privileges and uplifts not only age, but with it whiteness, masculinity, thinness and tophood. Instead, it embraces fat brown bottomhood to decenter white masculinity, making her fat, brown, femme body the central erotic pleasure receptacle.

So won't you, please/(Be my, be my baby)/
Be my little baby/(My one and only baby)

Mark and the arm repeat this process five times over the course of the next several minutes—and only with her enthusiastic consent. But their dance is not always an exact repetition. The hand finds new ways to feed Mark her treats. Upon finishing her first, she wipes the corners of her mouth, flips her hair, smiles, and then turns to Daddy, giving him permission to proceed. The hand returns with a donut once again clamped between his index finger and thumb, this time inserting the donut wholly into her mouth, bit by bit, with its finger. The finger lingers as she felates every last bit of the powder off. No confection let behind.

The Invisibility of the Chaser

While we witness Mark smiling at her Daddy, we are unsure of his affection—or lack thereof—toward her. Daddy—or, the fingers and the hand it's attached to, the arm that the hand is attached to—stagnates at the level of disembodied feeder, never fully corporealizing into another visible subject. This dynamic mirrors larger histories for the sexual lives of fat people, as well as those who are attracted to us—especially across lines of racial difference. Pyle and Loewy historicize these communities, initially known as "clubs for big men and their male admirers [which] were started in New York and San Francisco in the mid-1970s and were called Girth and Mirth" (145). Notably, Girth and Mirth still exists, and is the group that Whitesel

conducts his ethnographic study on. Pyle and Loewy continue: "These groups were havens for fat gay men who felt ostracized by the fat-phobic gay bar scene, which was, and still is, the main public arena for gay men" (145). These gay bar scenes are also sites of racial hierarchies of desire that often exclude people of color. Even in spaces that center queer people of color, white supremacist hierarchies of size persist, further excluding fat queer people of color.

Some expressions of fat embodiment can be folded into mainstream queer spaces through performances of masculinity—most notably in bear subcultures, as examined in my previous chapter. The feminized counterpart to the marginally more acceptable bear is the chub, who typically has softer fat formations and lacks two of the three qualifiers for entry into bear life (beard/belly/body hair). Whitesel uses fat gay men as a case study to unpack the status of fat men in mainstream gay male communities, and likens it to the experience of heterosexual women under the male gaze. He argues that "fat gets gendered when gay men, like heterosexual women, fall under the male gaze and are sexually evaluated by men. . . . long recognized by feminists to be an oppressive arrangement" (Whitesel 43). As a feminized-through-fat subject, the chub occupies the margins of acceptable desire in a community largely structured around the eroticization of masculine power and its signifiers.

Importantly, these standards are not passively inserted or unconsciously reproduced. As discussed in chapter 3, they are actively upheld intracommunally through the policing of not only 'appropriate' and 'healthy' bodies, but desires as well. Like the racism of the larger social context, the stigmatizing traits of fatness translate into queer cultures to marginalize fat queer people as well as those who are attracted to us (Pyle and Loewy 144). This leads to what Pyle and Loewy term a 'double stigma,' where non-fat queer people who are attracted to fat people are stigmatized both as queer people and as fat-attracted people. This adds a layer of complication, especially for non-fat people who are primarily or exclusively attracted to fat people, termed 'chasers.' Even if they may be 'out' as queer, many chasers hide their desires for non-normative bodies out of fear of social consequences. Whitesel concludes that "rather than being perceived as deviant for associating with a fat person, closeted admirers chose to manage their stigma for this potentially discrediting attachment to their reputation by concealing it" (41). In contrast, the visibility of Aguhar points to the impossibility of a 'closest' for bodies whose meanings are made publicly: for bodies who are unable to access normative aesthetics, hiding their abjection and 'pass' as straight, as white, as cis, or thin.

While Aguhar engages in a heightened and performative mode of consumption that is imagined to produce a fattened body, it is this presumptive fantasy that is invoked by phobic spectators who encounter her fat body outside of this context. Like other feeders and chasers, the same stigma does not attach to Daddy outside of this performance—and not only because we do not know who is attached to the hand. While the refusal to show Daddy's face labors to re-center Mark and her pleasure, it also mirrors 'real world' dynamics, wherein fat attracted people may fear publicly attaching their face—and by extension, identity and even, perhaps, livelihood—to their attractions. Importantly, a fear of claiming fat attraction as a public sexual identity can remain even when subjects might feel comfortable 'out' as the differently stigmatizing sexual identity of queer, gay, or bisexual.

But here Aguhar is not *only* referencing the closeted desires of fat-attracted people. Daddy never coming to fruition beyond the arm that feeds her recalls the tongue-in-cheek titular practice Pérez comments on in "IF U R GAY I WANT TO FUCK YOU" and "EVEN IF UR STR8 I STILL WANT TO FUCK YOU." Like these companion paintings, the white masculine historical object of desire—Daddy—is "reduced to a series of coordinates in the deconstruction of desire and, particularly, white masculine desirability" (Pérez 286). Mark's power here is not only reliant on her own claiming of visibility, but in her simultaneous refusal of the visibility of

the other. She recenters herself, reminding everyone—Daddy, herself, the viewer—whose pleasure is important here. Whose body is important. Despite his titular privilege, Daddy never manifests fully. Instead, like in her other work, Aguhar challenges the viewer to "imagine yourself in a femme-empowered, brown-centering elsewhere" (Pérez 282). By moving these fantasies from behind closed doors and into the public purview through performance, Aguhar presents fat aesthetics and erotics to the world, troubling dominant assumptions they don't exist.

I wish that I could hold you tight/Why don't they let us fall in love?/
Why don't they let us fall in love?

A subtle soundtrack transition: "Be My Baby" comes to an end, and another song by The Ronnettes, titled "Why Don't They Let Us Fall in Love?" begins as the couple on the digital stage continue to their choreography. Here again, the lyrics of the song mimic the actions on the digital stage—a frustrated expression at the suppression of risky and non-normative desire, flattened into the dominant and normative expression of 'love'.

Only when Mark is prepared to receive her next offering does she recall her Daddy. She looks intentionally and intensely off screen in to what can only be presumed to be his eyes, and repositions herself to face him, shifting to balance on all fours as he prepares her next treat. The hand returns with its donut, mimetic of a lever; Mark opens her mouth and extends her tongue, which receives the donut. Daddy teases Mark's tongue, gently rubbing the donut back and forth before allowing it to penetrate her open orifice. This time the finger retreats without Mark's cleansing ritual. She giggles coyly, chewing her treat happily and dutifully. At one point, she holds Daddy's gaze and smiles.

Choreographies of Feederism

Aguhar and Daddy utilize choreographies of feederism staged by the artist and an unknown/unnamed actor. While I cannot speak to the larger dynamic of her relationship with this Daddy, or her body, feederism is legible in this text to at least one viewer, YouTube commenter pilsburypilsbury2 who reverently posts: "our beautiful gainer goddess <3 <3 <3". This aligns with Aguhar's practice of claiming her beauty and goddesshood for herself.

As a form of power exchange, Daddy plays falls under a larger rubric of BDSM, in which "participants are invited to perform, through gestures and utterances, scenes of familial punishment or eroticized care" (Rodríguez 57). Here, care becomes the sweet act of providing your submissive with food in the form of 'treats.' Through staging a fantasy wherein her fat, genderqueer, Filipinx body becomes the receptive site of this eroticized care, "Daddy" speaks back to multiple histories of abjection; after all, as Rodríguez notes, "One must consent to *be* Daddy. And even if this already functions as a meaningful social or sexual role, Daddy must consent to be *your* Daddy, to accept the affective and sexual responsibilities in each new relationship" (Rodriguez 57). In this fantasy, Daddy has *chosen* Aguhar; and, not only has he chosen her: he preens her, adores her, wants to make her fatter.

Against the normative, white masculine muscular or toned aesthetic necessary for citizenship to contemporary gay male communities, feederism and gaining locates the erotic in the durational process of eating and growing larger, in a body that has undergone the transformational and productive process of eating. But this form of eating is not always guaranteed to produce a larger body. Indeed, many gainers are formerly thin or 'underweight' embodied subjects who found power and beauty in their juxtaposed archetypes, the fat body. For many, gaining weight has been a historically difficult process, and weight gain—particularly in

large amounts—is not feasible for every body. While there are overlaps in feederism and BDSM (which I will speak to in the next section), there is not always or only a dynamic of power exchange between the two actors. But Daddy, in this piece, is performing two roles simultaneously: Daddy and feeder, fulfilling the fantasy of paternal care and responsibility invoked in the dynamic. Though not an innately racialized sexual practice, histories of fat abjection as a product of racial abjection in Western modernity are invoked when feederism is performed across a racialized power difference.

Returning to Amin, attention to the ubiquity of pederasty in contemporary life and the institutions which structure it labors to critique discourses which situate Europe's modernity and the Western world(s) it ushered in as progressive and egalitarian societies:

> The idealization of Western modernity as egalitarian and democratic relies on a contrast with historically distant, racialized, and prison cultures cast as backward and despotic. . . .The presence of pederastic sexual relations within the modern West deidealizes Western egalitarianism and *foregrounds the reproduction of social inequalities in and through the erotic.* Pederastic modernity reveals reputedly egalitarian and forward-looking Western modernity to be, in fact, normatively hierarchical and not fully distinguishable from the carceral and racialized cultures of sexual domination it positions as both anterior to and in need of reformation by it. (43, emphasis mine)

Thus, pederastic modernity becomes a strategy to not only engage histories of inequality that shape our world, but simultaneously explicitly confront how these histories, by extension, shape our erotics. Extending Tim Dean, who contends that "all sexuality is fetishistic," Amin argues then, too, "that all sexuality is profoundly and complexly historical. The part-objects, scenarios, and narrative fragments that we find arousing move us to the rhythm of multiple invisible yet felt histories" (106). He advances an argument that "sexuality itself is a complex and multitemporal form of *collective memory*"—importantly, here, across racial divides and binaries of colonized and colonizer—"one which informs us of our own constitution, as erotic subjects, within social orders that produce terror, pleasure, and power out of various forms of inequality and oppression" (106, emphasis mine). In thinking of pederastic modernity, it is important, then, to not *only* consider the eroticization of the seemingly oppressed, disempowered, or colonized, but consider how the erotics of colonization, as collective memory, also shapes the erotic orientations of those who sit atop the racialized gendered hierarchy that colonization imposed. In other words, why *does* Daddy love feeding her treats? *What* does he love about it and, as I will speak to later: what function does this act perform for the feeder?

The fantasy of Western modernity casts fatness as the corporeal evidence of a racial inferiority performed through cultural eating, perpetually restaging the colonial imperative of appropriately disciplined eating as the performance of a white racial caste (Strings 98). Eating has been co-opted to supplant racial formation, both in terms of what and how we eat, and in how the food we eat is imagined to produce the bodies we inhabit, as well as those we desire—which is always culturally reflective. And even, at times, racially reflective.

Kulick articulates how it is the exact inverse of this compulsory restriction—a rejection of it, even—that produces the fat body as erotic in feederism:

> to the extent that eating is sexy and even pornographic, then five-hundred-pound-plus women like [feedee] Supersize Betsy clearly have bodies marked by a long history of pleasure—pleasure that far exceeds the limited duration of any particular acts of sex. Sex here is not an act or series of acts so much as it is a deliberately fashioned kind of self—

> an insistent sexualized self that does not stay behind closed doors but that unapologetically broadcasts its pleasures at every moment of every day. (91)

Importantly, not all fat bodies are produced through 'overconsumption,' and fat bodies developed through these processes carry a unique and specific shape, which is frequently also important to feeders. Against the dominant construction of the erotic body as a racially disciplined one, in feeder communities it is the enduring decision to *not* fashion a body in such a way that produces the sexuality. Rather, the enduring decision to live in a body outside of constructed norms becomes the stimulus. In other words, the decision (conscious or not, intentional or not) to succumb to the sensual pleasure so displaced onto those on the lowest rungs of the colonial racial hierarchy, who also seemingly have the freedom to pursue these kinds of pleasures. In this genre, the subjects of desire are not only *encouraged* to eat, but the eating becomes incorporated into the sex—*as* the sex—in an almost complete reversal of the extended temporality of the sex act which pressures a restriction of eating and, thus, life force. Regardless of how a fat body is produced, they become embodied signifiers not of consumption but of *pleasure*. A lifetime effort, durational, consistent, unabashed pleasure.

But, for many, the desire for social belonging through the achievement, maintenance or incidental production of a thin body takes precedent over the erotic possibilities that fatness offers. The abjection ascribed to those whose bodies are marked as participating in transgressive pleasure rituals—regardless of their actual participation or not—can be attributed to, perhaps, a displaced envy of disallowed possibilities. We see, then, why the sensual indulgence sanctioned by Aguhar's fat racial abjection under Western modernity becomes so enticing to a Daddy whose white racial performance might deny him indulgence in the same pleasure.

Mark and her Daddy harness this history of food and restriction as a proxy for caste production in choosing foods which evoke laments impoverished urban communities of color 'indulging' in 'an unbridled desire to meet demands of the flesh' and the fatness it is imagined to produce in casting fatty treats scripted as unhealthy. They meaningfully choose not to use traditional sexual food props—fruit such as grapes, strawberries, or other allusions to a Dionysian hedonism—but rather treats coded with implications of health and by proxy, class status. The donuts ingested here are confectionary. They are thick and fatty and messy and delicious and, quite frankly, unpleasant to eat. They evoke laments of poverty-induced fatness for communities of color through narratives of the "obesogenic environment," which is the pathologizing framework to consider the impact colonialism has had on food choices for racialized bodies under capitalism, allegedly evident through the incidence of fat embodiment.

In the U.S., these urban racial poor are also displaced and/or colonized Indigenous people from within its own borders, the African continent, and the global South by the pederastic projects of Western empire, while U.S. culture is cast as the fat over consumer on the global stage. Here, the racial food anxieties of Western modernity are restaged and eroticized in a pederastic exchange of power, a twist on Amin's colonial man and native boy—the "part-objects, scenarios, and narrative fragments that" are "arousing" and "move us to the rhythm of multiple invisible yet felt histories" (Amin 113). Through these treats, Aguhar is ingesting the legacy of colonial anxieties surrounding food as it pertains to the twinned projects of racial production and normative sexualities.

As fat embodied subjects, our bodies are always associated with and identified with eating and especially the nonsensical formulation of 'overeating,' of eating in excess. But let us not forget the purpose of food, and of eating. Bodies rely of food not just for mass but for nutrition. For energy, and for life. For fat subjects to embrace this abjection as an avenue toward erotic potential, that grants access to the privileged white, male, masculine body through touch—

another kind of consumption—reconfigures the dominant perception of the abjectifying process that produces the fat body into an erotic one, allowing a pleasurable experience so consistently denied such that one might not ever hope to experience. Her fatness is not only not discouraged, but rather, inspired. Her loves her body so much he wants *more* of it. Through engaging choreographies of feederism, the video suggests the pleasure of the Daddy (this effigy of white masculinity as a whole) is in some way tied to the ongoing fattening of her body. It is a fantastical inversion of the aesthetic hierarchies of race, size and gender performance that structure mainstream queer communities in the U.S., while implicating itself alongside other genres of fat visual cultures and aesthetic. Locating this performance on the digital stage moves this rupture from the privatized and intimate sphere of the bedroom, a gay club, or even chub & chaser event, altering its potential for both Aguhar as a subject, as well as the viewer.

Why do they always/try to keep us apart/
Why do that laugh at/what I feel in my heart?

While Mark holds his gaze, Daddy's hand returns, dangling the next donut over her mouth. She finishes chewing the previous treat, swallows, and throws her head back, mouth open wide, tongue extended. Daddy rolls the wheel-shaped delicacy up her tongue, and Mark once again seals her lips around his phallus as it leaves one donut behind to retrieve another. Visibly pleased with herself, Mark giggles, and politely covers her mouth while chewing. She throws her head in a circle, bringing her hands up to adjust her hair, and allowing one to gently caress the length of her chest as it returns to a resting position.

Feeding Pornography

Feederism is a sub genre of fat pornography and, in some cases, is the primary representation of fatness within pornography. Anthropologist Don Kulick argues the eroticization of eating and the development of fatness in this genre is the product of a kind of Freudian return of the repressed: "In [feeder] pornography, what is inverted, obviously, is the value that society places on thin bodies and on the carefully controlled eating strategies that we should all practice in order to attain those bodies" (85). Yes, we the other Victorians, who carry within us the racialized fears of excess and gluttony that are presumed to be the conditions of possibility for a fat body, might be alternately repulsed and aroused by a pornographic encounter of a fat body indulging our deepest fantasies of eating to contentment. While not all of Kulick's claims about fat pornography hold true under scrutiny, and feeder pornography is by no means the *only* genre of fat pornography, it is nonetheless a phenomena worth considering in conversation with "Daddy."

Drawing even further parallels between the visuals of "Daddy" and the kink dynamics that stage them, Kulick continues: "Like sadomasochistic sex, [feeder] pornography displaces erotic pleasure from the genitals and disperses it to other parts of the body, thereby reconfiguring what can count as a pleasurable body" (91). "Daddy" converges these two practices in a heightened fantasy scene of abject pleasure. But this piece does not merely reconfigure what a pleasurable *body* is, but what pleasure itself is—or can be—as well as what does, and does not, constitute pornography. Kulick argues that pornographic images of feederism are already unknowingly regularly circulated in fat aesthetics throughout culture—in his example, in the form of greeting cards attempting to mock the fat people featured (78). These circulations are meant to reify the racial supremacy of thinness as the imagined product of appropriately disciplined eating while restaging the degradation of fat embodiment as the consequence of

transgressing theses norms. Indeed, the possibility of erotic attraction to fat people—and especially fat people *eating*—allows these images to circulate in plain view, under the radar of those who might object.

Similarly, Aguhar takes advantage of the cultural context of fatphobia that fails to imagine fat bodies as either desired or sites of pleasure, allowing this scene to circumvent YouTube terms of condition that would otherwise flag pornographic content, allowing it to hide in plain sight. This is important not only because, as Nguyen has articulated, pornography becomes a site where bodies are assigned racial scripts of eroticism that translate into 'real-world' sexual encounters. But also because "pornography and other sexually explicit material are instrumental in shaping how we think about what is normal, natural, and possible in regard to sex, sexuality and gender" (Nguyen 24). In other words, the roles that our bodies are scripted into in interpersonal dynamics are always structured by the historically produced 'culturally available meanings' cast onto them through the cultural objects we both consume and produce. "Daddy loves feeding me treats" is a piece where one artist recognizes the historically produced scripts of her body, and resists them throughout.

But is it not *just* Aguhar, nor other Asian Americans, or fat trans femmes that are learning and resisting through this piece. Because "consuming sexual images has the potential to shift our own states of understanding in ways that are difficult to account for and control," any viewer who encounters this piece has the potential to be transformed internally and externally (Rodríguez 159). The potential is heightened by its existence on a video platform that is widely visited and available in the U.S., rather than the increasingly restrictive streaming platform that host *only* pornography. This access is especially crucial to perform cultural shifts because it is "[t]hrough the pornographic encounter, our own erotic attachments are remixed, recalibrated through the available sources of identification and desire" (Rodríguez 159). While "Daddy" can be read on multiple levels—from an uncomfortable embracement of tropes around fatness and eating, to reinscribing racial dynamics and complicity with both—it is this reading *against* the grain where it's most productive readings are made possible. As much as it was a staging of her own fantasy, it is also a fat aesthetic and erotic offering to all of us across differences of race, size, gender and sexuality to challenge our discomfort as much as it is to challenge the histories that produced the contemporary moment of viewership.

I wish that I could hold you tight/Why don't they let us fall in love?/
Why don't they let us fall in love?

Mark readjusts to face Daddy as she finishes chewing, and for a moment the viewer is met only with her profile, before she graciously returns to the camera to preen and check her makeup. Seeing it is still impeccable, she then turns back to Daddy; she's pouting, and even looks a bit impatient. Daddy slowly offers her another donut, this time flat on his outstretched palm as he slowly extends his hand forward. Unable to wait, Mark moves forward to meet his hand; making eye contact, she first simply gently licks at his fingers, before leaning in again to finally receive the offering. Daddy once again assists the consumption, gently encouraging its journey into the cavern with two fingers. This time, the ritual ends in a passionate—even greedy—fellating of Daddy's fingers. Visibly pleased with herself, Mark gleefully chews the donut, powdered sugar painted across her lips, on top of her lip gloss. As she chews, she briefly and demurely hold her chest and, upon completion, mouths '*thank you*' to Daddy. Both the The Ronettes song and video performance climax and end simultaneously.

Fantasy as a Reparative Act

"Daddy" is both a recorded performance as well as the realization of a kind of fantasy. To consider the 'real world' social location of Aguhar as a fat sexual subject, which her fantasy innately responds to, we must further situate fat embodiment in the contemporary U.S., where, put simply, "[f]at people fall outside the parameters for ideal sex objects in two major ways: as desexualized beings or as degradable beings" (Whitesel 21). These standards are so ubiquitous in mainstream gay male communities that fat queer male subjects internalize them themselves, where they may "feel they are out of the running in the sexual marketplace" (Whitesel 40). Fat abjection permeates all aspects of sexual culture, and many fat embodied subjects internalize this as well, particularly when they carry other abject identities along lines of race, gender, class, ability, or more.

While Kulick ties our scenes of fantasy to our 'real world' social location, Rodríguez sees them also as "inherently imbedded in queer understandings of sexual futures," where "we can rewrite the scripts of sexualized objectification, subjection, and racialized violence" (27; 180). This is where fantasy holds a disruptive potential to reconfigure bodies and our relationship to them—to our own, to others', and others' relationships to ours as well. Fantasy "functions not as an escape from the real-world materiality of living, breathing bodies, but as a way to conjure and inhabit an alternative world in which other forms of identification and social relations become imaginable" (Rodríguez 26). In other words, while our bodies cannot escape these scripts in the quotidian, in our fantasies we can refuse the roles forced onto them, or rewrite them entirely. Particularly for those whose abjection produces us "less legible as sexual subjects"—either through race, size, gender identity or expression, color, age, disability, disfigurement, discoloration or something else—"fantasy and the richness of psychic life can offer an avenue for experiencing our bodies of desire differently" (Rodríguez 65). Size, in particular, is one arena of embodiment expressed in this piece that often escapes analysis in dominant theorizations of race, gender and sexuality.

Fat and Asian men are similarly scripted as undesirable for failing archetypes of white masculinity in divergent as well as overlapping ways. This is particularly poignant in consideration of Tony Ayres' assertion that "[t]he sexually marginalized Asian man who has grown up in the West or is western in his thinking is often invisible in his own fantasies" (quoted in Nguyen, 164). In the fantasy staged here, Mark is not only visible in her Asianness, she is also centered in her fatness against "an assumption in western culture that no fat person is even sexual, let alone sexually desirable. In this way fat men are excluded from sexual desire"—sometimes even within their own fantasies (Pyle and Loewy 147). As both fat and Asian, Aguhar's embodiment positions her outside the historically produced normative desire of Western modernity.

Here, Aguhar stages a sexual future that is not entirely disconnected from historical scripts of our bodies, but instead runs toward their abjection and regurgitates it into an alternate expression not quite offered in the moment. In this fantasy, Aguhar, like the fat gay subjects Whitesel studies, "perform[s] their fat bod[y] unapologetically. . . .enabl[ing] them to reject the socially sanctioned ideal of the thin gay man. In this context"—here, a fantastical one—"categories of status and privilege based on body shape and size are temporarily disrupted" (Whitesel 84). Importantly, "Daddy" challenges privileged categories across multiple axes of power—shape and size, as well as race and gender expression. This disruption of categories can extend beyond the fantasy scene and translate into 'real' life.

It is an improper fantasy, indeed; "the type of sexual fantasy that we dare not confess, the type of sexual fantasy that marks us as improper sexual subjects of feminist politics" (Rodríguez

152). This is not a fantasy where the bottom subject inserts themselves into the popularly perceived dominant role, or one of an appropriate desire, one of easily legible performances of love, care, or erotics. It is a fantasy that heightens the social scripts each actors body hails them into, embraces them, and pushes them further to simultaneously highlight the uneven power differentials and eroticize them. But while the scripts of each actor in the fantasy scene might look familiar to a casual viewer, could read as a passive submission to oppressive power structures, their meanings are subverted simply through a consensual engagement in these forces, where consent in other social-racial-sexual dynamics is not otherwise offered.

While it is true that "[w]hen we find perverse pleasure in these moments of submission or domination, we expose our own erotic attachments to power," it also true that in the quotidian we are non-consensually attached to pederastic power—erotically or not—through the multiple histories that have produced Western modernity (Rodríguez 152). In other words, we are erotically attached to power whether consciously, intentionally, or consensually, or not. To engage the uncomfortable and oppressive hierarchies of race, gender and body that shape our material, psychic, quotidian and erotic lives through fantasy makes visible their presence and offers an alternate orientation to subjectivity both inside and outside the boundaries of any given scene.

Rather than swallowing improper desires Aguhar engages with them sincerely as a strategy to produce a different orientation to fat erotics. "To deny our fantasies because they are too twisted, too painful, or too perverse, to erase their presence or censor their articulation in public life, constitutes a particular kind of insidious violence that threatens to undermine our ability to explore the contours of our psychic lives and the imaginary possibilities of the social worlds in which we exist" (Rodríguez 185). While fondling the edges of normative, acceptable sexuality, to consider this fantasy as a possibility becomes transformative for both subject and viewer; to both embody her own erotic potential, as well as visibilize that potentiality for both fat and non-fat viewer. To allow a fat viewer to insert themselves into the desired subject—perhaps, for the first time—and demonstrate that potential for the non-fat viewer alike.

Conclusion

Throughout "Daddy," there is a palpable synthesis of fat erotics, wherein eating and sex are intertwined and substituted for one another in a negotiated exchange of power and pleasure across imbalances of race, gender and size. Uploaded on February 6, 2012, only a little more than a month before her death, "Daddy loves feeding me treats" has lived on YouTube for the past 9 years. YouTube's open access platform allowed anyone who may have come across it to witness her fantasy. With, as of writing, 6,856 views, 88 upvotes and 12 downvotes, it is one of her channel's most popular videos.

The piece engages fat aesthetics and erotics to play out a sexual pleasure scene that simultaneously places pressure on and throws into crisis inherited power dynamics scripted between top and bottom, feeder and feedee, masc and femme, white and racialized other, colonizer and colonized, thin and fat. Aguhar visualizes a fantasy where her fat, brown, trans, femininity becomes the object of desire for white masculinity, where he is in service of her, where her pleasure matters, where her brown trans body is desired, where fatness is welcomed and encouraged and *wanted*. Against the racial abjection of fatphobia experienced in the quotidian, she manifests a world where her body, pleasure and desire is so central, his body becomes relegated a machine whose sole purpose is not only to please her, but keep her alive. In doing so, Aguhar stages a fantasy of a sexual future that is not entirely disconnected from historical scripts of her body, but runs toward its abjection and regurgitates it into an alternate expression.

Conclusion
The Aesthetics and Erotics of Worldbuilding Across Difference

This project makes legible size as a shared site of oppression under colonization and the majoritarian culture that sustains it. Subjects struggle across lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, size, ability and more. But we also act as beacons of light and hope for one another in the process, whether that be interpersonally or through media and representation. I read cultural figures across race, size and sexuality to offer a complex vantage point both in how this oppression manifests as well as opportunities for identification and coalition.

For example, Margaret Cho modeled for me an anti-racist politic that exceeded my own racialization while white fat queer icons like Beth Ditto and Divine modeled futures for me I did not know were possible, even if their racial politics were imperfect or illegible. My study of Black feminist thought offers frameworks for engaging with Beyoncé's artistic production with a respectful consideration of our differential locations. Rather than passively consuming her music, I attempt to actively meet her art where it is at. I close read a lyric of hers in efforts to highlight the shared investment in fat liberation through Black liberation, particularly for other non-Black fat activists. Through a comparative analysis of contestant's size on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I unpack the high stakes of compulsory thinness for multiply marginalized subjects, and queers of color specifically. Finally, through "Daddy loves feeding me treats" we see one strategy for minoritarian subjects to refuse the abjection thrust upon us to access agency and pleasure instead. This is an examination of multiple expressions and negotiations of power that hopes to bring us closer to fatter understandings of collective freedom.

This freedom requires a respectful analytic of difference as politically neutral. In her foundational essay "The Master's Tools Will Not Dismantle the Master's House," Audre Lorde argues: "Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) difference lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with that concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring the future into being" (111-112). This dissertation takes seriously Lorde's call to confront embodied difference as fundamental to harnessing our collective power. It threads together differences of race, size, gender, sexuality, ability and more to offer more holistic frameworks for analysis. I use size as an exemplary stage where we are all differentially impacted, yet sketch possibilities to come together against fat and racial abjection, to 'bring the future into being.' I end with a digital performance which strategically utilizes size difference between otherwise similar actors.

Dorian Wood is a fat non-binary Chicanx vocalist, visual artist and performer based in Los Angeles. Their 2017 short film *PAISA* synthesizes fat aesthetics and erotics to consider size difference within the context of shared racial and sexual abjection. The film opens with a shot of Wood lying across a dirt path in a wooded area. They are wearing a flowy, ankle-length dress that matches their skin tone as well as the dirt path and exposed branches that surround it. They nearly blend into the scenery, gesturing to the imagery of fat queer disabled Chicana photographer Laura Aguilar. The first half of the film features Wood roaming the woods, collapsing the human/nature dichotomy of colonial science upon which racial abjection was built.

Meanwhile undocuqueer Mexican poet Yosimar Reyes reads their poem "Natural" in a voice over, echoing the thesis of Aguilar's oeuvre.[36] The poem is read in English with Spanish subtitles, indicating access. Subtitles are always about who is invited into a conversation and what is considered necessary to understand it. In an inversion of Anzaldúa's wild tongues,[37]

[36] I make this argument more explicitly in Canadian Art Magazine. See "The Natural History of the World," https://canadianart.ca/features/the-natural-history-of-the-world/.

[37] See *Borderlands: La Frontera*. For Anzaldúa, hybrid linguistics refuse translation to enforce parameters

Wood and Reyes signal bilingualism with a dedication to their Hispanophonic kin. Reyes's inclusion also highlights the ubiquitous experience of migration and (un)documentation in Latinx communities. While the specifics of who is impacted is not always immediately legible on the body, Latinx racial abjection hails us all as perpetual foreigners in the colonial borders of the U.S.[38]

As images pass the screen, the audio of Reyes's poem asserts the normality of queer of color sexuality. The visuals range from shots following Wood as they move through wooded areas to scanning the landscape as half-nude non-fat Latinx men pose in varying positions. In one shot, Wood stands behind a tree while the camera focuses on their hands stroking the hard wood of the trunk. After the poem surveys childhood experiences that attempted to discipline them into cisheterosexuality, Reyes challenges the viewer/listener/reader: "What if they were wrong? What if the fire that burns inside of us is really something divine?" (1:21-1:26). The divinity of fat queerness here is invoked by these multiethnic Latinx artists; as these words hover over the visual, a shot depicting Wood from the chest down as they lift their dress and urinate freely on the ground fills the frame.

In another shot, Wood attaches the front of their dress to a tree, revealing they are not wearing undergarments and exposing their large round ass as Wood's hands frame and caress it. Building on Nguyen and echoing Aguhar, Wood recasts the bottom position as an active role in the trusted queer pastime of a cruising scenario, seemingly presenting for any interested tops who may pass by. Reyes's poem invokes Nguyen's bottomhood as well, positing the receptive position—sometimes uncomfortable to painful and always coming with an increased level of risk—as one of bravery and vulnerability. They say, "When I was a kid, I fantasized about this moment. What would it be like to give myself too someone? Like a warrior, laying my body on the line. Besides the warning, besides the fear. A ceremony" (1:34-1:50). While Reyes's poem rescripts queer Latinx erotics as holy, Wood's video actualizes the fantasies of a younger self as in the freedom of the present.

The films extends the themes of the poem by bridging race and sexuality with size through displaying a sexual relationship between the artist and a non-fat Latinx lover, played by Manuel Rodrigues. Rodrigues DJ's under the name Sadboy and is a staple in contemporary Chicanx art movements with a dedicated style to prove it: their torso and arms are covered with tattoos in a 1970's L.A. Chicanx aesthetic. As Reyes expresses "My skin burning against yours. Burning. Burning" a shot of Rodrigues and Wood's faces pressed together flashes across the screen (1:51-157). Their faces are both as made up with a blush, lip gloss and eye shadow as they defiantly stare return the viewers gaze.

Reyes's poem ends: "Maybe they are right. Maybe we are all doomed. But in moments like this everything feels natural" (1:58-2:10). This queer affect of risking annihilation for connection is one more tentacle of the AIDs crisis, certainly not limited to Latinx or undocumented communities. However, Reyes situates this homophobia within the compounded experiences of migration, Latinidad and implicitly, Catholicism. They locate it while not succumbing to it; rather, they privilege the sensual, the somatic, to determine the desirable outcome, rejecting colonial frameworks of settler sexuality.

The film goes on to depict a sexual encounter between two non-binary Latinx queers,

around intracommunity conversations.

[38] Black migrants from across the globe, including Latin America, bear the brunt of immigration enforcement due to anti-Blackness in the U.S.'s legal system. Non-Black Latinx communities in the U.S. are also depicted as criminalized migrants, even if they are U.S. citizens. Immigration data finds that Black and non-Black U.S. citizens are regularly wrongfully placed in deportation proceedings. See Meredith Hoffman, "The US Keeps Mistakenly Deporting Its Own Citizens," https://www.vice.com/en/article/pa4mq7/the-us-keeps-mistakenly-deporting-its-own-citizens.

played by Wood and Rodrigues. As fat and thin subjects, the erotic scenario depicts a chub and chaser dynamic, but the shared racial and sexual identities allow a different valence than the dynamic Aguhar portrays. Their size difference complicates analytics that would suggest a solidarity across racial and sexual lines which, as I have covered, is rarely the case even in queer of color communities. Here, the erotic is mobilized as a site of connection across difference as Wood and Rodrigues play out this scene.

Scripts of casual sexual encounters are portrayed, as the camera follows Rodrigues as they approach a room in a small strip motel. Wood opens the door on the other side, with both actors in masculine drag, a prerequisite pretense for dominant queer male erotics. Both actors wear knee-length jean shorts with Rodrigues in a green soccer jersey and Wood in a white undershirt. The performance is immediately disavowed as the two kiss while slowly skimming their hands over each other's bodies. Shots of Wood running their hands along Rodrigues's back are juxtaposed with Wood caressing the tree, again collapsing dominant colonial logics of human/nature divisions and affirming the naturality of their erotic scenario.

They begin to undress each other and a shot lingers as Rodrigues sits on the bed and takes Wood's nipple in their mouth, inserting fat erotics into more traditional pornographic aesthetics. Notably, the video exists on Vimeo with a 'mature' label, which allows more room for nudity and sexual acts. This section of *PAISA* certainly functions as such, as it follows the couple as they embrace on the bed, making out in the nude. Importantly, this is a mutual scenario, where Wood's soft fat body is treated as an erotic aesthetic as much as Rodrigues's thin body, whose tattoos further eroticize it under some aesthetics.

The story follows the couple to the bathroom, presumably as they wash up post coitally, and new scenes begin to intersplice. In these, Wood is again in the woods, dressed in high waisted Dickies work pants and a harness around their chest and shoulders. Their outfit is designed by Roy Martinez, another prominent contemporary queer Chicanx artist who designs under their label Lambe Culo. In following scenes, Wood is joined by a cadre of Latinx queer and trans kin ranging in size and gender, and posing defiantly in their racialized aesthetics of excess. Wood begins to sing their song "PAISA."

We return to the hotel interior to find Wood sitting on their bed wearing only underwear and with their back turned to the camera. They then open the door to invite in Rodrigues, who has returned for another encounter. They are wearing a white Lambe Culo shirt that reads FUCK ICE repeated twice, with 'FUCK' in white font behind a rectangle of black and 'ICE' in black font, highlighting Latinx aesthetics and racial abjection. Again, the couple kiss, undress and explore one another's bodies. There are multiple shots of Rodrigues running their hands across and grabbing bits of flesh on Wood's chest, belly, back, thighs and ass until the camera follows the couple to the bathroom. Here, they face the mirror, seemingly referencing Janet Jackson's infamous *Rolling Stone* cover: Wood has their arms up above their head, while Rodrigues stands behind cupping their breasts. Wood's face and hand movements indicate they are instructing Rodrigues how to touch them—again, topping from the bottom-- and Rodrigues is gleefully obliging. Suddenly, they are both wearing the make-up visually foreshadowed earlier, and they continue their motions. Wood serves face to themselves in the mirror as Rodrigues cuddles them from behind.

The closing montage interweaves scenes of Wood's queer and trans community in the woods, Wood singing their song "ESCAZÚ" and tightly framed shots of the Wood and Rorigues kissing in their made-up faces. While fat erotics are well on display throughout the film, including the visibility of both Wood and Rodrigues's nude bodies, in this shot their faces are emphasized to underline the intimacy of their encounters against negative chaser stereotypes that anonymize their fat lovers. Rodrigues appreciates Wood's body but not *only* their body. Their mutual desire

in make up further rejects normative erotic scripts of gender and masculinist hierarchies, instead layering a femme-for-femme erotic dynamic onto this complex scenario. In the next shot, Wood kisses a trans masculine friend while another watches, extending fat erotics and queering gendered scripts of erotics.

In the hotel room, the viewer sees Rodrigues from Wood's perspective. They lie fully nude on the bed, their knees arched to obscure their genitals with shadows. They caress themselves smiling as Wood stands blurred in the background, watching, inverting the voyeuristic gaze. Rodrigues smiles at the camera and then turns away, the camera lingering over their nude back side as the credits run. The final shot zooms out on Wood in the woods; their community surrounds them, touching them. They are held.

PAISA responds to the cultural anxieties mined throughout the previous chapters which discipline subjects into normative aesthetics and erotics at risk of social ostracization. Like Beyoncé's "Formation" and Aguhar's "Daddy" it presents fat aesthetics and erotics as sites of profound worldbuilding through the sensual, particularly for subjects across difference. Here, the erotic relationship between Latinx queers of differential sizes is presented as intimate and even healing of the wounds the actors carry. Further, the erotic relationship reveals itself to be woven into Wood's artistry and relationship to community. *PAISA* rounds out the study to present fat aesthetics and erotics as sites of possibility and connection, rather than dominant narratives of trauma, abjection and alienation.[39] The film joins the canon of fat queer media this dissertation surveys, exemplary of the contemporary discourse and a guiding light of what is coming.

[39] This sentiment is deeply informed by my own experience, as reflected on in an essay I co-authored with longtime friend and collaborator, Jules Pashall. See Luna and Pashall, "Fat Kinship for Love and Liberation" in *The Fat Studies Journal.*

Coda

It is Fall. And then Winter. Then Spring. And Summer. It is the future, which is also the present. The world is a lot different than it once was. Not all of our friends are still here with us. We hold them in our hearts. It is hot. The music is loud. Our bodies are pushed together in a crowd of queers and we remember the days when we were so afraid to touch. And if we are old enough, we remember the time before that. And the time before that. Strangers are hooking up in the bathroom. In the stall next to them, friends are sharing drugs. One day people will tell stories about tonight at their weddings as the night they met. Others will talk about it as the night they broke up with their ex. Or they ran into a hookup that had ghosted them. Or the one that won't take the hint. Or that the DJ sucked. Or was amazing. That they loved their outfit that night. Or that the shoes they wore hurt their feet. But for tonight, I need another drink. You need a break. We make our way through the crowd. Tonight, we dance.

Tomorrow, we keep fighting.

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