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By

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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Abstract

In my dissertation I develop a series of guidelines for responsibly and respectfully navigating varying facets of aesthetic activity involving fat communities. I argue that fat people's engagement with the aesthetic can be used to foster community, resist anti-fat bias, and move towards fat justice. Moreover, I argue that considering representations and treatment of fat people in the production of art must be done carefully in order to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes and anti-fat bias. My project aims to improve the visibility of fat people, ensuring that fat communities can determine how and when they are seen in ways that affirm their identities and experiences.

My project is broken down into four chapters, each of which tackles a different dimension of aesthetic engagement and activity. In the first, I develop a framework called "responsible aesthetic agency" for creators to use when depicting fat people in their work. I intend responsible aesthetic agency to be a way for creators to meet their bare minimum ethical obligations to fat people, and as such this framework is a precursor to (but importantly different from) Jeremy Fried's aesthetic allyship (which I take to entail a deeper, longer-lasting commitment to allyship not required for my account of responsible aesthetic agency). I use this framework to argue that artists must attend to the narrative webs in which a work exists when designing their new work's narrative, and that fat people must be active participants in this design and in the realization of said narratives.

My second chapter addresses how individuals can use aesthetic agency to advocate for themselves and their communities. I argue that beauty labor can be used to help dismantle anti-fat bias. Using Kathleen LeBesco's framework of agency and identity, coupled with Jeannine

Gailey's assessment of the unique perception of fatness as simultaneously hypervisible and hyperinvisible, I argue that participants in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement shape their identities and advocate for fat communities by forcing society to acknowledge their visibility and worth.

In my third chapter, I consider representations of fatness in popular media, arguing that we can best achieve fat visibility through centering imperfect representations of fatness. I use Anne Eaton's "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression" as a starting point. In this paper, Eaton argues that distaste for fat bodies has an affective element of disgust that we must address to mitigate anti-fatness. Eaton argues that we must habitually engage with vivid and engaging representations that encourage us to see fat bodies as likable and attractive. I argue that while this approach has worthwhile aims, it risks leaving behind those fat bodies which we cannot bring ourselves to see as likeable or attractive (especially larger and disabled fat bodies, which deviate furthest from the type of bodies we collectively deem attractive). To better combat our distaste for fat bodies, I argue that we must show fat people as complexly as we show thin characters onscreen, highlighting the pluralities of ways to exist as a fat person.

Lastly, in my fourth chapter I discuss how to appropriately engage with marginalized communities as a member of a dominant group or identity. I examine the co-optation of the body positivity movement, outline the ethical harms that result from said co-optation, and discuss potential avenues for moving forward with the movement given its co-optation (including body neutrality, proper body pride, and radical self-love). I argue that in order to fully address the myriad levels of goals of the original body positivity movement (personal, community-oriented, and advocacy/activist goals), none of these three alternatives is sufficient, as each misses a crucial element of the original body positivity movement or asks participants to have too narrow of an attitude towards their own body. Given the shortcomings of these movements, I argue we

should move forward from the body positivity movement's co-optation by employing a modified framework of Aubrey Gordon's concept of fat justice, one which also makes room to recognize the importance of fat people being able to experiment with beauty and see themselves as beautiful.

Introduction

Fat Justice: Mitigating Anti-Fat Bias through Responsible Aesthetic Agency

"Let us begin to imagine the worlds we would like to inhabit,
the long lives we will share,
and the many futures in our hands."
- *Susan Griffin, 2014, "Can the Imagination Save Us?"*[1]

-

I. A Problem to be Solved

I have been fat for as long as I can remember. Not just a little chubby, but truly, unquestionably fat. As a fat person, I have received threats to my life and safety because of the amount of space my body took up. I have been denied medical care because of my size. I have walked into countless stores, restaurants, and public spaces only to find myself unable to access the space; booths were too small or arms were fixed and dug into my flesh leaving me with painful bruises, no products fit a body like mine (let alone fit well), and the aisles were too small for me to safely navigate.

Through all of this, I have also been subject to others' unrelenting opinions on and discussions of my body. When I was eight, my grandmother pulled me aside at Christmas dinner. As we stepped into the hallway, safe from the chaotic living room filled with my cousins sharing their new toys and games that they'd opened earlier that day, my grandma told me she had a very special gift for me. She walked down the hall to retrieve it from "BR1"—a room resigned for storage, where she only ever put the bigger, more exciting Christmas gifts like doll houses or scooters. My round cheeks grew rosy as I bounced with excitement, certain that what stood behind the door was something magical. My face fell when she returned with a small, square

[1] Susan Griffin, "Can the Imagination Save Us?," The Tyee (The Tyee, November 15, 2004), http://thetyee.ca/Citizentoolkit/2004/11/15/CanImagSaveUs/.

gift, wrapped in shiny Christmas paper and tied neatly with a ribbon. And somehow, it fell further when I hurriedly tore through the paper, only to find a "teen friendly" diet book in my hands. This was my special gift, the secret my grandma so eagerly passed along—an instruction manual for shrinking myself into oblivion, a warning that I was on the "wrong track" and needed intervention.

I have spent a lifetime navigating these "well-intentioned" gifts and conversations, longing for an escape. While my friends always had movies and magazines and reality TV to turn to when they needed to step back from the real world, those too were designed to wear away at who I was. The people on screen never looked *like me* unless they were there as a warning to others, as a "before" or the subject of an intervention much like my grandmother tried to have that fateful Christmas.

It is an alienating and destructive thing to be constantly bombarded with reminders that who you are is "wrong" or "defective". Having grown up with countless fat friends and fat family members, I have seen the ways in which anti-fatness pervades our lives, often destroying us in the process. I've watched my grandmother suffer through years of back pain out of fear that if she spoke with a doctor about her pain, they would dismiss her concerns and shame her for gaining weight since her last visit. I've sat through countless family dinners where I watched my family members push their food around on the plate, unable to enjoy a single bite, counting every calorie in a desperate attempt to gain control over their allegedly unruly bodies. And I've held my friends close as they cried about their body being "ruined," shedding tears over ill-fitting homecoming dresses and imagining some out of reach finish line where they would finally be "thin enough" to live the life of their dreams. Through all of this, I have been overwhelmed by constant messages that my body was a problem to be solved.

Both personally and professionally, I strive to address and help mitigate anti-fatness, to build a future in which people do not see their bodies as their enemies. I long for a world where others don't have to undergo the trauma of living while constantly at war with their own bodies, where none of us has to heal the wounds of negative self-image. I have fought hard as I learned to love this body, to cherish it. I have taught myself to fit in to a world that isn't designed for me, and I have found myself a community among a select few whose bodies looked like mine, who hoped we could build a better future for ourselves by working together. This dissertation is born out of this desire for a better life—for a chance to exist as a fat person in a space that actively seeks to eradicate me. It is a process of imagination, of dreaming for a life where my voice is heard and my body can feel like home. It is a call for fat justice.

II. On Love and Loss

My mother passed away unexpectedly during my second year of grad school. The sudden loss sent me reeling, and there isn't a day that passes where I do not feel the nagging ache of her absence. In the years that followed her death, I was forced to reconsider the stakes of the work I was doing. There was, of course, a period where I was confronted with the fleeting and fragile nature of life (a period which I will not go on about here, as my grief to this day has still robbed me of the ability to say anything eloquent or worthwhile about loss). But through that, I also came to realize that time I had invested in constructing a carefully crafted image of what I thought a philosopher looked like was time stolen from being with loved ones—and from being myself. As many folks do, I had spent my early years in philosophy trying to be the kind of academic that I thought was expected of me. I wrote technically fine---but emotionally detached—papers for all of my classes and for conferences. While I occasionally showed brief glimpses of myself in my work, I only allowed others to see a very carefully curated version of

my life. After losing my mother, I became unraveled, unable and unwilling to care about the work I was doing—the work that kept "me" at an arm's length from my research, and from those around me.

This project was an opportunity to let go, and to experiment with a more authentic future with philosophy. If I was going to sacrifice time at home with my grieving family, if I was going to invest the grueling hours into finishing the program, then my work needed to be worth it: it needed to help others. But in order to engage with philosophy more meaningfully, I was going to have to find a new way of doing things. So I did (or, at least, I tried to do so). I leaned in to the most tender parts of me, doing work fueled by anger and pain and endless love for my family and friends. However successful my arguments have been in this project, what I hope to have shown is the need (and potential) for more deeply personal philosophy. Each of the dimensions of aesthetic activity I address in this project is inspired by a lifetime spent in a world not designed for bodies like mine. Each of the recommendations and strategies for moving forward that I propose is designed to be a lifeline, a way of using the tools of philosophy to construct a more bearable future for fat people.

Although a growing body of literature in aesthetics and ethics touches on body oppression and social justice, few works specifically address anti-fat oppression.[2] My research aims to help fill this gap, situating fatness as an issue of legitimate concern in aesthetics and applied ethics. Importantly, my work is done as a lifelong and undeniably fat woman who has faced structural and institutional anti-fatness which impacts my ability to work, attend school,

[2] With notable exceptions including A. W. Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," in *Body Aesthetics,* ed. Sherri Irvin (Oxford University Press, 2016), 37–59, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198716778.003.0003.; and Sherri Irvin, "Resisting Body Oppression: An Aesthetic Approach," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (December 20, 2017), https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2017.4.3..

seek medical care, find clothing, and participate in society. My lived experience as a fat person has forced me to grapple with society's distaste for fatness and makes the discipline's insufficient engagement with anti-fat oppression an undeniable and glaring issue in need of address. My research aims to use the lived experiences of fat people (especially fat activists) to legitimize fatness as an issue of philosophical import.

In addressing the gaps in current literature within philosophy, my project focuses on three central questions: (1) What does a framework of fat justice look like? That is, what would it mean for society to dismantle its anti-fatness, and for fatness to be seen as a legitimate and protected element of identity? (2) How can we improve representations of fatness in popular media to move towards a framework of fat justice, helping people resist anti-fatness and avoiding perpetuating anti-fat biases? And (3) how can fat communities (that is, communities in which members share self-identification and socialization as fat people) use their identities, experiences, and nuanced understandings of fatness to challenge anti-fat bias?

III. Moving Towards Fat Justice

My overall aim in this dissertation is to develop and defend a series of guidelines for responsibly and respectfully navigating varying facets of aesthetic activity involving fat communities. In this project I argue that fat people's engagement with the aesthetic can be used to foster community, resist anti-fat bias, and move towards fat justice. Moreover, I argue that considering representations and treatment of fat people in the production of art must be done carefully in order to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes and anti-fat bias. My research aims to improve the visibility of fat people, ensuring that fat communities can determine *how* and *when* they are seen in ways that affirm their identities and experiences.

My project is broken down into four chapters, each of which tackles a different dimension of aesthetic engagement and activity. In the first, I develop a framework called "responsible aesthetic agency" for creators to use when depicting fat people (and, ideally, marginalized communities/ individuals more broadly) in their work. I intend responsible aesthetic agency to be a way for creators to meet their bare minimum ethical obligations to fat people, and as such this framework is a precursor to (but importantly different from) Jeremy Fried's aesthetic allyship (which I take to entail a deeper, longer-lasting commitment to allyship not required for responsible aesthetic agency on my account).[3] I use this framework to argue that artists must attend to the narrative webs in which a work exists when designing their new work's narrative, and that fat people must be active participants in this design and in the realization of said narratives.

My second chapter addresses how individuals can use aesthetic agency to advocate for themselves and their communities. I argue that beauty labor can be used to help dismantle anti-fat bias. I examine a fat fashion movement known as the "Fuck Flattering" movement, in which fat people collectively challenged anti-fat beauty standards by experimenting with fashion, utilizing it as a tool to occupy space both physically and digitally. Using Kathleen LeBesco's framework of agency and identity[4], coupled with Jeannine Gailey's assessment of the unique perception of fatness as simultaneously hypervisible and hyperinvisible[5], I argue that participants in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement shape their identities and advocate for fat communities by forcing society to acknowledge their visibility and worth using fashion.

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[3] Jeremy Fried, "Ally Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77, no. 4 (2019): 447–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12681.
[4] Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).
[5] Jeannine A. Gailey, *The Hyper(in)Visible Fat Woman: Weight and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Society*, First edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

In my third chapter, I consider representations of fatness in popular media, arguing that we can best achieve fat visibility through centering imperfect representations of fatness. I use Anne Eaton's "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression" as a starting point. In this paper, Eaton argues that distaste for fat bodies is more than just a matter of misinformation or negative stereotypes about fatness. Instead, this distaste has an affective element of disgust that we must address to mitigate anti-fatness.[6] Eaton argues that we must habitually engage with vivid and engaging representations that encourage us to see fat bodies as likable and attractive.[7] I argue that while this approach has worthwhile aims, it risks leaving behind those fat bodies which we cannot bring ourselves to see as likeable or attractive (especially larger and disabled fat bodies, which deviate furthest from the type of bodies we collectively deem attractive). To better combat our distaste for fat bodies, I argue that we must show fat people as complexly as we show thin characters onscreen, highlighting the pluralities of ways to exist as a fat person.

Lastly, in my fourth chapter I discuss how to appropriately engage with marginalized communities as a member of a dominant group or identity. I examine the co-optation of the body positivity movement, a decades-long movement that began as a fat activist and fat liberation movement but was co-opted after becoming more popular due to the rise in social media use in the early-mid 2000s. I outline the ethical harms that result from said co-optation, and discuss potential avenues for moving forward with the movement given its co-optation. I argue that we must attend to both our societal anti-fatness and our individual self-esteem and relationships to fatness simultaneously to truly address the aims of the original body positivity movement. To do this, I argue that the best pathway forward (that will accomplish the myriad levels of labor and

[6] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 38.
[7] Eaton, 53.

goals from the original iteration of the body positivity movement) is a modified framework of fat justice.[8] I modify Aubrey Gordon's notion of fat justice to incorporate an attention to beauty, something which I argue is often wrongly left out of fat activist efforts to promote fat acceptance.

What these four projects have in common is that they rely on two main threads: promoting fat justice, and using a framework of fat justice to foster more responsible aesthetic activity. While not all of these chapters explicitly address a framework of fat justice, this commitment runs in the background of all of my work. Having a commitment to fat justice entails committing to prioritizing the lived experiences, needs, and identities of actual fat people. Rather than discussing fatness in the abstract, my work is informed by my lifelong identity as a fat person, and by carefully attending to the lives, activism, and scholarship of other fat people with whom my identities and experiences diverge. To that end, in each of these projects I have aimed to balance the work done by fat people and fat activists outside of the academy with more traditional academic sources.[9]

This commitment to fat justice also involves an overarching goal of promoting radical, unconditional fat acceptance. Much of the work done on fatness in philosophy (especially in applied ethics and bioethics) has framed fatness as a moral issue and problem to be solved.[10]

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[8] This framework stems from Aubrey Gordon's conception of fat justice. (Aubrey Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).)

[9] It is important for me to acknowledge that while this kind of first-personal work and conversation between people in and outside of academia is less common in some academic spaces, there are fields (like Fat Studies) in which this is a much more expected and typical approach to academic work. I am incredibly grateful to have the model of Fat Studies scholars to follow in my own work, and am hopeful that in the future there will be more work done to bridge the gap between academic philosophy and fields like Fat Studies.

[10] Notable exceptions (in the field of philosophy) to this tradition, which instead promote fat acceptance of the sort that I aim to do in my work, include G. M. Eller, "On Fat Oppression," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 24, no. 3 (2014): 219–45, https://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2014.0026; Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression."; Rekha Nath, "The Injustice of Fat Stigma," *Bioethics* 33, no. 5 (2019): 577–90, https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.12560. Exceptions also include ongoing work in bioethics by Alison Reiheld and recent feminist work on moral defenses of fatness from Kate Manne.

Renowned bioethicist and Hastings Center co-founder Daniel Callahan, for example, notoriously advocated that we should address the so-called "obesity epidemic" with "social pressure that does not lead to outright dis-crimination—a kind of stigmatization lite."[11] He publicly advocated not only that fatness was a problem to be solved, but that it *could* be solved (something which has dubious, at best, empirical support) and that we should solve it through "an edgier strategy": public shaming of fat people.[12] Callahan encouraged fat people "to put some uncomfortable questions to themselves: If you are overweight or obese, are you pleased with the way you look? Are you happy that your added weight has made many ordinary activities, such as walking up a long flight of stairs, harder?...Fair or not, do you know that many people look down upon those excessively overweight or obese, often in fact discriminating against them and making fun of them or calling them lazy and lacking in self-control?"[13]

Callahan's comments have received (well-deserved) pushback[14], and I am not alone in understanding his remarks as reprehensibly ableist, anti-fat, and bound to replicate/amplify already outrageous levels of stigma against fat people. While the purpose of this project is not to criticize Callahan's specific remarks further, it is important to acknowledge how his approach (and approaches of others like Callahan) is emblematic of a harmful and pervasive attitude in academia regarding fatness and fat people. Callahan recognizes the harms of stigmatizing individuals, and has spent his career devoted to promoting *ethics* with the aim of helping people and seeking justice (two of the pillars of the field of bioethics). Yet in that same mission, his

[11] Daniel Callahan, "Obesity: Chasing an Elusive Epidemic," *Hastings Center Report* 43, no. 1 (2013): 39, https://doi.org/10.1002/hast.114.
[12] Callahan, 34.
[13] Callahan, 39.
[14] See, for example, Cavan Sieczkowski, "'Fat Shaming' Strategy Pushed By Bioethicist Daniel Callahan To Help Curb Obesity," HuffPost, January 24, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/daniel-callahan-fat-shaming-curb-obesity_n_2543270. and Lindsay Abrams, "A Case for Shaming Obese People, Tastefully," The Atlantic, January 23, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/a-case-for-shaming-obese-people-tastefully/267446/.

paper shows how poorly society regards fat people. Not only are fat people discriminated against for their weight, but Callahan's comments show that this discrimination is framed as *helping* them, justified on the grounds that it (purportedly) prevents people from becoming or staying fat. This is an indefensible approach in any context, but *especially* within the context of academic work that claims to promote justice and ethical behavior.

What Callahan's comments reflect is a willingness to harm people, to treat them in a way that we would otherwise deem unacceptable, because we are doing so for their "health." In committing to doing work within a fat justice framework, I advocate against this kind of conditional treatment of fat folks. Fat people deserve to be respected, loved, and cared for, full stop. Even if they gain even more weight, are unhealthy, or choose to remain fat, they deserve to be cared for and treated with dignity. While there is a long history of work that denies this unconditional fair treatment in academia, my work aims to disrupt this history, and to see and accept fat people *as they are.*

In addition to this commitment to fat justice, my works have in common that they utilize (whether explicitly or implicitly) a framework of responsible aesthetic agency that is informed by my commitment to fat justice. The first chapter, "Toward a Responsible Aesthetic Agency: Mindful Representation of Marginalized Communities in Popular Media," provides an explicit model of responsible aesthetic agency designed to guide the process of artistic creation. I offer a series of guidelines artists can follow to meet a bare minimum ethical obligation to create respectful and responsible depictions of fat people in their art. The kinds of guidelines motivated in this chapter implicitly inform the considerations I make regarding other modes of aesthetic engagement in subsequent chapters. For example, in chapter three ("Imperfection as a Vehicle for Fat Visibility in Popular Media"), a framework of responsible aesthetic agency helps

motivate the need to shift the kinds of narratives we utilize regarding fatness and imperfection. Responsible aesthetic agency requires artists to critically reflect on the narratives they use in their works, considering how these narratives reinforce or diverge from other comparable works. Given the long history of fatness being used as a visual shorthand for imperfection, which in turn reinforces the idea that fatness is a problem to be solved, responsible aesthetic agency would require us to reimagine how we show imperfection as it pertains to fatness.

The second and fourth chapters of my dissertation focus on more everyday aesthetic activity, examining our participation in social media-driven movements, our relationships to our own bodies (and, by extension, the bodies of others), and opportunities for exercising our aesthetic agency. On the surface these works may seem like a departure from the theme of responsible aesthetic agency, as they do not involve the same kind of narrative and process-related considerations as the aforementioned works. However, the same spirit of critical inquiry that is central to responsible aesthetic agency in the context of popular media production can inform our more everyday aesthetic labor. One way that I envision this working is through critically reflecting on aesthetic decisions and objects with which we might otherwise engage passively. Many of us are used to mindlessly scrolling through social media at the end of a busy day (especially during the pandemic, during which—for many of us—social media and our online lives became our only lifelines to socializing with others). This kind of passivity makes it all too easy to thoughtlessly engage with (and possibly endorse) different views on body image, casually liking and reposting #selfiesforselflove and personal posts about coming to terms with our ever-changing bodies.

Similarly, for many people what we wear and how we present ourselves in public is often a casual decision. We may think about what clothing fits us most comfortably, or about

"professional" dress codes or the setting when we decide what to wear each day, but we often fail to step back and reflect on the broader societal implications of how we present ourselves to others.[15] Responsible aesthetic activity challenges us to reflect more deeply on these kinds of activities, making more informed and socially responsible choices about everyday aesthetic activity that we might otherwise take for granted.

IV. Beauty and the Weight of the Aesthetic

One final facet that is crucial to this project is that I aim to show the philosophical importance and seriousness of beauty and the aesthetic. Because my work draws so heavily on the work of fat communities (especially fat activists), there is a tension in the kinds of activity I've selected as my focus. Fat activists, particularly in today's age, are often focused on addressing and mitigating the material harms of anti-fatness, e.g., medical anti-fatness, the lack of legal protections for fat people in employment settings, and navigating dimensions of our built environment that exclude or are not designed with fat people in mind. Given this focus, many fat activists explicitly specify that they are not working on, or particularly concerned with, beauty, fashion, body image, self-love, and the like. Activist and fat scholar Aubrey Gordon, for example, offers the following constraint on engagement with her social media accounts: "There are lots of places to discuss dieting, weight loss, self-confidence, and plus size clothing. This isn't one of them."[16]

At the same time, many fat people (and especially those involved in fat fashion and fat influencer communities) are deeply invested in talking about things like clothing and makeup.

[15] My intuition is that this kind of passive engagement with adornment is amplified the closer one falls to an idealized body, which allows them the kind of social capital and power to ignore (or simply not reflect on) the broader implications of what we wear.
[16] "200,000 Followers!", @Yrfatfriend, posted July 14, 2021. Accessed July 27, 2021.

Fat bloggers like Alysse Dalessandro-Santiago, Rosey Blair, Chastity Garner, and CeCe Olisa, whose work I discuss in various chapters (but especially in chapter two, "Beauty Labor as a Tool to Resist Anti-Fatness" and in chapter three, "Imperfection as a Vehicle for Fat Visibility in Popular Media") have built platforms primarily focused on beauty and fashion. While some of these figures (like Dalessandro-Santiago) use fashion to challenge anti-fatness, others (like Blair) intentionally choose to refrain from or de-center discussing or promoting fat acceptance. I have long felt at odds, seeing important value in both of these types of projects.

Beyond just seeing *value* in these two types of projects, I think they inform one another. (That is to say, it seems as though the aesthetic—particularly beauty and fashion—play an important role in addressing anti-fatness and its material harms.) As a lifelong fat person who has had the privilege of watching mainstream fashion slowly evolve and become more inclusive, I have spent a lifetime longing for the ability to engage with the aesthetic in ways that my thin friends took for granted. When I was a child options were much more limited than they are now, which meant I was forced to dress in women's clothing that was not age-appropriate, let alone in a style that I had personally *wanted* or *chosen* as my own. And even now, as increasingly more brands (both indie brands and more mainstream ones) expand the size range they offer, my options are still limited because my body falls on the further end of the fat spectrum.[17]

This issue goes beyond just lacking access to the cuts and patterns of dresses and tops of my dreams, as the clothing we wear conveys messages about our identity, personal and moral commitments, and experiences. Lacking access to a wide and aesthetically engaging variety of clothing, shoes, and accessories robs people of the ability to present themselves as they would

[17] And they would be more limited if I lived in a more rural/remote area, had less disposable income, had sensory needs that limited the types of clothing I could wear, etc.

like, undermining a pivotal element of their aesthetic agency. Moreover, it carries with it practical consequences, as limited access can impact whether one is seen as dressing sufficiently "professionally" (which, in turn, can impact the degree to which they are understood as competent or an authority), whether one is read as taking care of oneself and taking pride in one's appearance, and whether one is able to connect with others thanks to visual signifiers of identity and values.

Beyond issues of access to clothing, other dimensions of the aesthetic like beauty seem to play a crucial role in anti-fatness. Weight has been used for centuries as a marker of desirability and worthiness, and historically being thin and white has been taken as a sign of presumed moral superiority in a way that reinforces anti-fatness and anti-Blackness.[18] Moreover, whether one is understood as beautiful (and relatedly, as desirable) has a profound impact on how they are treated. I follow Eaton in believing that our learned distaste for fat bodies, rooted in affective sentiments about fatness, is "an important *constitutive element of the oppression of fat people.*"[19] Given these considerations, the aesthetic seems to play a crucial role in the maintenance *and* disruption of anti-fatness. My project, then, aims to bridge a gap in current fat communities, through treating material harms of anti-fatness *and* the aesthetic (often treated as more frivolous or an afterthought) as equally important facets of seeking fat justice.

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[18] Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2019).
[19] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 38. Emphasis is Eaton's.

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1. Toward a Responsible Aesthetic Agency: Mindful Representation of Marginalized Communities in Popular Media

When fat people are depicted in popular media, we often take their behavior to be representative of all fat people. Representations from narrative artworks become part of a bigger narrative web, simultaneously being understood as stories of individuals and of broader communities. On the one hand, many narratives of television and film claim to represent characters individually— this is the story of Thor after "The Snap" as he helps his friends defeat Thanos once and for all; or Toby from *This Is Us* as he tackles new relationships, mental illness, and parenthood; or Patty Bladell from *Insatiable* as she navigates the pageant world in her newly svelte frame.

These stories are meant to represent the experiences and lives of *individual people*, based sometimes on true stories and other times on works of fantasy, but they aren't meant to represent all fat people. After all, not every fat person even gets the chance to wield Thor's hammer, Mjölnir, in a battle to defend the galaxy; nor does every fat person struggle through the emotional turmoil of murdering beauty pageant queens after having their mouth screwed shut for several months. Yet, we often take the characters we see as representative of all fat people: their voices are reduced to, or absorbed into, the collective "fat experience" (even if there is no such singular experience).

Moreover, the narratives about fatness in popular media are narrow and repetitive. Seeing the same narrow set of stories told about fatness, then, influences how we think about fatness more generally. If most works share the same limited narratives, or a narrative is regularly repeated, it shapes our understanding of the group about whom a narrative is told. Regarding fatness, we often encounter stories about fat people struggling with their weight or intentionally seeking weight loss. We see fatness represented as a negative way of embodiment, one to be

avoided by any means necessary. If we only (or even predominantly) see fat people who hate their fatness, or are fat because they have lost control, then those attitudes can become part of the collective narrative surrounding fat people.

This way of generalizing based on recurring narrative themes reduces fatness into a monolithic experience, one that many have critiqued is born out of an imagined thin idea of what it means to live while fat. As Aubrey Gordon argues, "over the last thirty years, the majority of fat representation has pushed just a few reductive narratives"[20] which "subtly assert that thin people know as much as (or more than) fat people do about what it's like to be fat, that fat bodies are only temporary, and that fat people who stay fat are simply shirking their responsibility to create a body that would earn them respect."[21] Most works that depict fatness do so from the standpoint of thin creators, and historically representations of fatness have ignored the in-group understandings of and relationship with fatness that fat people actually hold. This reduces fat people to a caricature of themselves, ignoring their complexities and experiences in ways that reinforce harmful mindsets about fatness.

How do we avoid this reduction? How can we responsibly depict fat characters without further perpetuating negative stereotypes and harms done to real fat people? I will propose the beginnings of an account of responsible aesthetic agency, focusing on aesthetic concerns and agency in popular television and film.[22] Using discussions of popular media representations of fat people (many of which utilized thin actors wearing fat suits to depict fat people), I will

[20] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat,* 128.
[21] Gordon, 129–30.
[22] I use this focus because these types of art are the ones with which many of us most regularly engage. There are important issues in representation of fatness in other mediums of art. Stefanie Snider (2018), for example, explores depictions of fat people in contemporary self-portraits, arguing that a "politics of ugliness" should be used to help disrupt dominant cultural norms of beauty. (Snider, "On the Limitations of the Rhetoric of Beauty.") While these types of analysis are important, I am particularly interested in the art that many people in the U.S. engage with on a more frequent basis, as I suspect it has a greater (or at least more regular) impact on our perspectives of others.

motivate an account of responsible aesthetic agency which can be used to improve the ways in which vulnerable and marginalized communities are depicted in art. Through focusing on the cases of *This Is Us, Avengers: Endgame,* and *Insatiable* as a guide, I hope to illustrate the thought process required for a framework of responsible aesthetic agency. Central to this account of responsible aesthetic agency are two features: inclusion of and deference to members of the communities depicted (in this case, fat people) from a variety of backgrounds throughout the production process, and mindfulness of the preexisting narrative web built around the communities depicted (in this case, anti-fat narratives which harm a variety of fat communities). These features help us navigate and reflect on three different levels at which responsible aesthetic agency can be engaged: in a work's narrative, in the process of creating a work, and in the process of sharing/promoting a work.

Alongside discussion of the general depiction of fatness, in this paper I will also examine the use of fat suits as it plays an important role in how (and by whom) fat people are represented. Especially considering contemporary conversations about the importance of actors from marginalized communities being cast in roles depicting members of those same communities, we must critically reflect on the ways that utilizing fat suits can perpetuate harm and remove opportunities for fat people in portraying themselves (and people like them) onscreen. Through examining both general depictions of fatness and utilization of fat suits within a framework of responsible aesthetic agency, I will highlight the need for a drastic shift in how we consider marginalized populations in art—in reimagining both who tells their stories, and what stories are told on their behalf.

I. Motivating the Need for Responsible Aesthetic Agency

We ought to take care in the stories and images we construct in popular media given their ability to uniquely impact viewers. Following Katariina Kyrölä, I hold that popular media is a medium that deeply influences the way we see ourselves, others, and our relationship to others.[23] Television and film are more easily and readily accessible than many other mediums of art, such as sculpture or performance art, which are often only explored in limited contexts (such as museum visits or one-off events). With the rise of countless streaming services and millions of pieces of new content being published online on a daily basis, it is easy for large groups of people to engage with the same artwork from their homes, from the subway on the way to work, or even during a quick lunch break. Television and film are also often more relatively affordable mediums of art for the general audience to engage with than art that is kept in museums or collected. Thus, not only are people able to more frequently engage with it, but more people are also able to engage with art who might have historically been unable to do so due to financial barriers.

Moreover, these works deeply impact viewers and their understanding of the world. As Kyrölä explains, "media images can show us bodies we would never see in everyday life, thus expanding our perception of what is possible, or exclude bodies we see in everyday life, which can shape our evaluations of what kind of bodies are significant, valued or devalued enough to become the stuff of images."[24] The things we see onscreen, then, carry a significant weight because they challenge and expand how we see (or fail to see) others. Being seen has the power

[23] Kyrölä, *The Weight of Images*, 1.
[24] Kyrölä, 1.

to reaffirm our worth as individuals; when we are made visible to others it suggests that we are *worth* seeing and attending to, and when we are left invisible our dignity is undermined.

Further, the ways we are depicted can result in concrete harms to the communities represented. Depictions of fat people, for example, can harm fat people insofar as they "rely on and reify long-standing beliefs that fat people are isolated, desperate, [and] voracious."[25] Limited and harmful representations of fatness reinforce that fat people are less worthy or valuable than their non-fat counterparts, and that they should accept any treatment because of this presumed inferiority.

Moreover, there is empirical data which suggests that shows with explicitly anti-fat messages may increase similar attitudes and stigma in viewers. In one such study on the weight loss competition show *The Biggest Loser,* researchers found that watching the show "did not improve anti-fat attitudes, but rather, exacerbated them."[26] Crucially, as Domoff et al., report, "after exposure to *The Biggest Loser,* participants reported significantly higher anti-fat attitudes; specifically, they reported greater belief that weight is controllable and greater dislike of obese individuals."[27] While this study focused on one particular television show, its research supports a concern that certain narratives about fatness in television and film only serve to amplify anti-fat bias and stigma. Reimagining the way we represent fat people through a framework of responsible aesthetic agency can be a meaningful step towards minimizing the harms that are perpetuated against fat people due to the prevalence of more limited narratives and representations.

[25] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat,* 102.
[26] Domoff et al., "The Effects of Reality Television on Weight Bias," 996.
[27] Domoff et al., 996.

I propose a new framework for approaching depictions of marginalized communities in popular media: a framework of responsible aesthetic agency. The aims of responsible aesthetic agency are (1) to address and improve upon the limited and harmful narratives used to depict marginalized communities, and (2) to approach artistic creation in a way that respects and reaffirms the value and dignity of marginalized community members. Responsible aesthetic agency is importantly distinct from an account of ally aesthetics. Responsible aesthetic agency entails meeting a bare minimum ethical obligation to others: to responsibly and realistically depict them when creating artworks, and to avoid perpetuating harms and stigma against them in artworks. This establishes what I think is a low level of engagement on the part of the artist—responsible artists will learn about and defer to communities before depicting them or making claims about their lives through artworks. In contrast, aesthetic allyship entails a deeper commitment to collaboration and discussion with marginalized communities than I argue is requisite for responsible aesthetic agency.

Ally aesthetics, a concept proposed by Jeremy Fried, is an approach to making art wherein the artist is an "ally attempting to create works that advocate on behalf of others."[28] In ally aesthetics, artists take on a deeper commitment to advocate for and work towards being allies to members of marginalized groups. Successful works of ally aesthetics, on Fried's view, center the needs and voices of members of a "dominated group"; an artist working on a project of aesthetic allyship does not speak over or for members of marginalized groups, does not gaslight them, and refrains from co-opting their goals and projects as a community.[29] Successful

[28] Fried, "Ally Aesthetics," 448.
[29] Fried, 450.

works of ally aesthetics instead advocate for and are done with careful consideration of members of marginalized groups.

Fried argues that in order to be successful instances of ally aesthetics, works must be accepted by the relevant communities.[30] If artists engaged in projects of ally aesthetics care about responsibility, they "should consult with members of the relevant group during the conceptualization and creation phases of their work" to help increase the likelihood that a work is positively received.[31] Thus, works of ally aesthetics are likely to require some kind of responsible aesthetic agency such as what is laid out in this project. However, the idea of responsible aesthetic agency cannot be reduced or equated to ally aesthetics. Responsible aesthetic agency, on this account, is a precursor to and foundation for aspiring allyship.

This distinction is important, as many artists do not see themselves as or wish to be allies to the communities they depict. Artists may disagree with the lifestyles and identities of people they depict in art, or may have few thoughts whatsoever about the communities they depict outside of the works they are creating. Further, artists may not feel comfortable claiming allyship for a variety of reasons—because they are just learning about a new identity or community, would rather allow the relevant community the power to deem who is and is not an ally to their group, etc. Artists may also want to depict members of marginalized communities without this becoming the central theme or message of their art. In other words, they may not wish for a work of art to *advocate* for marginalized communities in the ways required for aesthetic allyship. Thus, part of my goal in developing an account of responsible aesthetic agency is to help provide guidelines for all artists to follow regardless of their commitments to allyship.

[30] Fried, 452–53.
[31] Fried, 453.

Responsible aesthetic agency provides an approach through which artists can minimize harm to others, respecting their identities and experiences and creating artworks which do not deepen harms against those communities. This seems morally necessary for all artists, and can provide a meaningful set of concrete practices and considerations artists can keep in mind as they create. This is helpful for artists who are not or do not wish to be allies to the communities they represent, and can help guide artists toward aesthetic allyship if they do choose to take on deeper commitments to allyship. Keeping this distinction in mind, we can now examine three cases in order to highlight considerations needed to move towards responsible aesthetic agency.

II. Fatness as Redemption: "Fat Thor" in *Avengers: Endgame*

In the recent film *Avengers: Endgame,* viewers are given glimpses at the varying grieving processes of the superhero group, the Avengers. Following defeat in a battle which resulted in half of the world's population being erased, an event known as "The Snap," the superheroes struggle to reclaim their space in the world and find purpose in the absence of their loved ones. As with most grieving, they have divergent and complex reactions: some find solace in group therapy, some devote their days to protecting those who remain in the universe, and others turn to violence as they seek revenge against the "evil" people who survived "The Snap."

One character, a chiseled and idealized god known for his resilience and toned physique, turns to self-medication to cope. As viewers discover, following "The Snap" Thor blames himself for the heroes' loss and spends his days drinking, eating, and playing video games. What was most shocking about Thor's reveal, however, is that when his friends finally located him he'd transformed from muscular god to a slobby, depressed, alcoholic fat man. In the film, "Thor's entry was made by his belly, low and rounded, naked, before panning up to his familiar

face."[32] His body reflected years of damage and coping with his immense grief, and in many theaters was met with choruses of restrained laughs as people tried to reconcile their understandings of the old Thor with the new "Fat Thor".

Actor Chris Hemsworth donned a fat suit for his depiction of "Fat Thor." This depiction has been met with mixed reactions due to his inconsistent treatment in the film. While his body was the punchline throughout the film, with loved ones making jokes about how he had "Cheez Wiz running through his veins" and could use a salad,[33] Hemsworth's fat suit-adorned body was still one of the first depictions of a fat superhero in a major comic film franchise where muscular, thinner, idealized bodies reign supreme.

The narrative constructed surrounding "Fat Thor" was not the typical one, and the fat suit was not used to depict weight loss as an inevitability or necessity following significant weight gain. Instead, "Thor stays fat. He fights fat. And in the show stopping final battle, he wins fat. There is no work out montage, no on-screen dieting, no disgust expressed on screen…— just a natural metabolization of grief that each of his fellow Avengers are processing differently."[34] This narrative allows space for a complicated story about the evolving relationship between one's emotions and body. As screenwriter Christopher Markus explained, "He's emotionally resolved. We fix his problem [over the course of the film] and it's not his weight…. [Our] issue that we wanted him to deal with was his emotional state..."[35]

Interestingly, the film reaffirms Thor's value despite his being fat and depressed. Thor is known for having a hammer named Mjölnir which can be summoned at will only by those who

[32] Gordon, "Can Fat Thor Advance Fat Acceptance?"
[33] Sims, "The Untold Truth Of 'Fat Thor.'"
[34] Gordon, "Can Fat Thor Advance Fat Acceptance?"
[35] Sharf, "Taika Waititi Says Future of 'Fat Thor' an 'Ongoing Debate' With Marvel."

are "worthy." Throughout the other *Avengers* films this is a running theme, as other superheroes (who we would ordinarily think of as supremely good in ways that deem them worthy) fail to be able to lift Mjölnir. However, after grieving and undergoing serious emotional growth Thor is once more able to summon his hammer, exclaiming proudly "I'm still worthy!"[36]

Regardless of his fat body Thor is still good—he can help save the world, and still has the same value he had prior to gaining weight. "Fat Thor's" story is one of redemption, of overcoming self-doubt and hatred *without losing weight.* This contradicts more typical weight loss narratives used in media, in which one often sees themselves as irredeemable or unlovable until they lose the weight. In a world where fatness is too often seen as a "Before" picture, with thinness being the ideal "After" or end goal, Thor's staying fat demonstrates that fatness can be morally neutral.

"Fat Thor" presents a complicated case, as the use of a fat suit reinforced uncommon and perhaps refreshing narratives surrounding fatness. Further, the response to Hemsworth's wearing a fat suit was mixed, even among those in fat communities. While many felt hurt or disgusted by the fat jokes that peppered the film and the audience's reactions to the character's newfound fatness, others felt seen as they recognized themselves and their own journey in Thor's process of grieving. Many remarked that the depiction of Thor as worthy despite his weight gain demonstrated that they had value despite their own weight, a narrative which is rarely reinforced in popular media.

The case of "Fat Thor" is riddled with successes and failures which can help inform our decision to use fat suits in a more responsible way in popular media. It is arguably praiseworthy

[36] Heller, "Thor's Reaction to His New Look Is the Only One That Matters."

to depict fatness in a genre in which thin bodies reign supreme, especially when attaching a positive message as *Avengers: Endgame* strives to do.[37] As Anne Eaton has argued, positive representations of fat people are necessary in order to combat a societal distaste in fat bodies which results in fat oppression. Eaton argues that habitually exposing ourselves to positive examples of fat bodies "offers a promising strategy for combatting the perversion of our taste in bodies under fatism."[38] To that end, she claims we should "produce and widely promote vivid, imaginatively engaging, and artistically interesting representations that *celebrate* fat bodies and encourage us to see them as likeable and attractive."[39] On this model, "Fat Thor" seems successful insofar as Thor is ultimately able to celebrate and admire his own body. He goes through a complex process of grief and growth throughout the film, which concludes with him recognizing his own worth and value in his newly larger body (and the film invites viewers to do the same).

As Amy Gullage argues, depicting fresher, less harmful narratives about fatness using fat suits could help further the conversation about fatness, dismantling systems of anti-fatness which threaten and harm fat people daily. Gullage explains that "given the ways in which a fat suit can represent the complex intersection of identities, such as identities related to fatness, gender, social class, and heterosexuality, fat prosthetics can and should be used to create interesting and

[37] It is worth acknowledging that while fat characters are not frequently depicted in this genre of comics, they are not completely absent. There are many examples of fat superheroes in comics, such as Big Bertha or Comics' Bouncing Boy. There are also fat villains, like Penguin or Kingpin. While we can identify exceptions, in general comic franchises feature slimmer, muscular bodies (or use fatness as a visual signifier of moral evil, as is arguably the case with many fat villains' portrayals). Moreover, while there are more fat characters in traditional comics, fat characters *in film and television adaptations* of comics are few and far between (with notable exceptions including "Fat Thor"; the recent appearance of Kingpin in the Disney+ series *Hawkeye;* Peter Parker's best friend, Ned, in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*; and Firefist in *Deadpool 2*). Moreover, the few representations of fat people we have in this genre of television and film often feature fat villains (or, at best, morally grey characters). Thus, "Fat Thor" being depicted in a (mostly) positive manner signifies important progress in representations of fat characters in this kind of art. (Many thanks to Ruth Tallman for discussions which informed this point.)

[38] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 53.

[39] Eaton, 53. Emphasis original.

complicated narratives. It is from this place that we might begin to use fat suits in order to change, challenge, and/or destabilize how fatness and bodies are understood and constructed, and create narratives that can be used to question, subvert, and transgress oppressive and limited representations of fatness and enable a means to represent fat bodies as capable of boundless possibilities."[40] The narrative of personal redemption and acceptance used with Thor helps us move towards the kind of positive representation of fatness for which both Eaton and Gullage advocate.

Although this is the primary narrative constructed (setting aside the barrage of fat jokes launched against the hero by his loved ones which detract from this narrative) the film still relies on viewers' presumed anti-fatness for comedic effect. When depicting fat people artists must be careful about the ways in which they treat fat people (real or as represented with fat-suits) within the work itself. To that end, they must think critically about how fat suits and fatness are used in their works. Even with an intent to innocuously depict the worthiness of fat people, *Avengers: Endgame* undermined its own message consistently on a few levels.

First, it is harmful insofar as it reinforces a harmful and cliched narrative of fatness as someone "letting themselves go," becoming slobby, lazy, and unable to control their own body. The film could have depicted a complicated story of grief and self-medication, and even one of weight gain, without resorting to these clichés through Thor's character. Thor could have gained weight while grieving, but still maintained his hygiene, kept in touch with loved ones, and had control over his eating. Further, the film could have continued to depict his emotional struggles

[40] Gullage, "Fat Monica, Fat Suits, and *Friends*," 187.

with feeling unworthy because of his missteps in battle without some sense of worth (or lack thereof) being derived from his weight.

Second, it is harmful insofar as the show uncritically deploys fat jokes, making Thor's weight gain the subject of humiliation and abuse from his loved ones. Despite acknowledging that the jokes would be found harmful and detestable by some audiences, screenwriter Markus uncritically included them in the film, trading Thor's humanity and worth as a person for the sake of a few cheap laughs. Even with an arguably fresh and important overarching narrative, the writers' choice to include jokes about fatness at Thor's expense demonstrate that not enough work has been done to address and eradicate typical anti-fatness in the work. They could have kept the fat jokes in and immediately had other characters criticize their use, demonstrating that this behavior was unacceptable or detestable. Instead, the fat jokes are used as an opportunity for viewers to laugh, to enjoy the needless criticism of Thor's body without confronting the moral perniciousness of fat jokes and body shaming used in the film.

Third, the film undermines its own message through harmful framing of shots which play on Thor's fatness for jokes. While there is comparatively little overt fatphobia in comparison to past works which used a fat suit, the artists still made the choice to film shots in ways which preyed on the audience's anti-fatness at the expense of the character's dignity and value. As Aubrey Gordon argues, the disgust is not explicitly expressed on screen, but instead "is largely left to the audience's reaction, and to camera work that knowingly lingers on Thor's rounded belly, pausing for the laughter to subside."[41]

[41] Gordon, "Can Fat Thor Advance Fat Acceptance?"

These three layers of failure reflect the creators' anti-fat bias, a bias which undermines the aims they could have plausibly had to redeem a fat character or do justice to fat people through depicting them with a fat suit. Although many fat viewers found the depiction of Thor to be successful and identified with the character, I argue that artists have an obligation to consistently work to unpack their own anti-fatness. Given that the writers recognized and anticipated that the fat jokes they used were potentially harmful, they are at fault for keeping them in anyway. Their conscious choice to keep potentially harmful jokes and shots in the film reflects a willingness to undermine the humanity and dignity of fat people, and to play off of viewers' anti-fatness when it is convenient to do so. This reflects a lack of integrity, a moral inconsistency in their aims and production.

The mistake-riddled case of "Fat Thor" teaches us that is not enough to introduce a new narrative about fatness. If an artist simultaneously introduces new narratives while reinforcing old, harmful narratives about fatness, they have failed to take seriously and respectfully the very population they aim to depict. Creators must be cognizant of and actively seek to combat their own anti-fatness in the creation of their work if they are to respectfully and responsibly depict fat people in popular media.

In considering responsible aesthetic agency, we must also consider whether a particular thin actor is necessary for a character, as opposed to hiring a fat actor. We should be mindful of who we cast to portray fat people, as casting thin actors using fat suits removes opportunities for fat actors. Casting actors from outside of the relevant group to depict members of marginalized communities causes material harms to those communities. As Paul Taylor notes regarding casting white or light-skinned Black people to depict darker skinned Black people, "the film industry capitulates to the problematization of black bodies in its casting decisions... This

artificially limits opportunities for black actors in a film industry that…is already less than hospitable to black folks."[42] Our casting decisions have an important impact on marginalized communities, and we can extend Taylor's concerns here to other marginalized groups such as fat communities.

Some fans have sought to justify the use of a fat suit in *Avengers* because Hemsworth was already established in the role, having played the character in several other movies in the franchise. Replacing him with a fat actor for the final film could dramatically alter how the character is played such that creators felt more justified in using a fat suit. If creators wished to keep the same actor in that case, their main choices would be to (1) use a fat suit to depict fatness, (2) change the narrative so weight gain was not a part of the character's story in the movie, or (3) ask Hemsworth to gain weight for the role.

One could plausibly argue that the most responsible choice would be option 2, as fatness was not essential to Thor's narrative of transformation as a character. However, in going with that narrative a fat suit may have been the most responsible choice they could make of the remaining options. Studies show that "fluctuation in body weight was associated with higher mortality and a higher rate of cardiovascular events independent of traditional cardiovascular risk factors," suggesting that having Hemsworth gain significant weight could pose serious risks to his wellbeing.[43] Given these risks, a fat suit is a safer way to depict weight gain in that kind of case. While this does not justify *all* uses of fat suits, it does lend some legitimacy to using them in cases where a character is already established and must gain weight for the narrative—if the

[42] Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful*, 68.
[43] Bangalore et al., "Body-Weight Fluctuations and Outcomes in Coronary Disease."

creators have rightly determined that this narrative is essential and does not harm fat people in the ways outlined above.

Finally, artists must consider the impact of their works and whether their depictions of fat people using fat suits are accepted by various fat communities. Although not always working from an ally perspective, artists who utilize fat suits need to consider the reception of the work by those in marginalized fat communities in a similar way to what Fried proposes if they hope to act responsibly. Given the routine and historical abuse and misrepresentation of fat people in media, and the ways art reinforces negative stereotypes about fatness, artists should think critically about how their works may be perceived by those within fat communities. Importantly, creators should think about the ways in which fatness manifests itself differently and imparts different lived experiences based on size, gender, sexuality, race, and other social contexts.

One of the most interesting features about "Fat Thor" is that his representation was received in such polarizing ways, with some feeling well-represented by the character and others feeling harmed. This speaks to the importance of creators consulting a wide variety of fat people—trans and queer fat people, fat people of color, smaller and larger fat people, and so on. While it is impossible to capture *every* fat person's experience in one character, having the character informed by individuals with different experiences can increase the likelihood that the use of a fat suit is responsible and can mitigate anti-fat biases being replicated in the work. Further, having fat people involved in the creation—as actors, writers, producers, etc.—can help ensure that the narratives constructed and presented using the fat suit are informed by actual lived experiences with fatness as opposed to misinformed ideas of thin fantasy regarding what fatness must be like.

III. Fatness as Neutral Costume: Toby and Kate in *This Is Us*

In contrast to *Avengers: Endgame,* the NBC show *This Is Us* utilizes fat suits alongside other depictions of fatness featuring fat actors. In the show, we are introduced to Toby Damon and Kate Pearson, two people who have had lifelong fluctuations in and struggles with their weight and meet in a weight loss support group. Throughout the series Toby and Kate date and eventually marry, and in Season 3 of the show they have a child together. During the first four seasons of the show, Toby and Kate make various attempts at losing weight, learning to love and be content with their bodies, and navigating dating, careers, and family life as fat people. Although the actress who plays adult Kate, Chrissy Metz, is fat in real life, Chris Sullivan (adult Toby) dons a fat suit for much of his portrayal of Toby.

Throughout the first four seasons of *This Is Us*, Kate is shown as a lifelong fat person who routinely grapples with (and fails to reduce) her weight. We are introduced to Kate in the series with a scene where she rummages through her refrigerator with a pained face. As Kate looks in dismay, we are given a glimpse into her dieting focus thanks to sticky notes covering the food. "250 calories PER SPOONFUL," reads one, while another covering a pre-packaged snack says more plainly "BAD."[44] What this tells us, from the moment we first set eyes on Kate, is that her character's main concern is her weight. As we learn throughout the first season, this obsession has been a lifelong issue. Kate's family members (but especially her mother) want and encourage her to lose weight, and Kate is determined that her body size is a barrier to her living the life she desires. In flashbacks to her childhood, we see her parents having hushed conversations about whether she's put on too many pounds, and as she ages Kate becomes more self-aware of how her weight is perceived (e.g., by discussing how it impacts her ability to date

[44] Season 1, Episode 1: Series Premiere

while in high school). As an adult who is dissatisfied with her life, she begs her brother for a wakeup call, exclaiming "You're the only good thing in my life, Kev… I had this… whole dream life that I envisioned for myself. A real career. I would marry a man like Dad. I would be a mom like Mom. But look at me, Kev. Like, I ate my dream life away."[45]

Toby, in contrast, has a more inconsistent relationship with his weight. At times, Toby says he is comfortable with his size and uninterested in dieting. When he and Kate first meet in Overeaters Anonymous, he seems resigned to (and perhaps accepting of) his size. While Kate says she's going to lose weight, he admits that he probably won't—and as their friendship begins, he seems more hesitant to lose weight. But after having a heart attack and deciding weight loss is necessary for his future health, Toby intentionally pursues weight loss (eventually successfully losing weight through working out at a CrossFit gym to cope with the pressure and struggle that results when his and Kate's son is born with an unexpected disability). Sullivan dons a fat suit at various points of the series to show his larger size, although in later seasons (and in scenes showing glimpses at the future) he does not wear a fat suit and instead has a thin, more muscular figure.

This Is Us's depictions of fatness through Toby and Kate are troubling insofar as they perpetuate limited narratives surrounding what it's like to exist as a fat person. Moreover, the contractual terms under which fat actors can participate in the work are irresponsible requests from the creators. Kate spends the majority of the first season of the show struggling to lose weight. In taking on the role of Kate, Metz was told that weight loss was a fundamental part of Kate's character. As a larger fat woman, Metz's contract "did state that that would be a part of it,

[45] Season 1, Episode 1

to lose the weight in the trajectory of the character as she comes to find herself."[46] Although the creators were willing to be flexible about the timeline for Metz losing this weight for her role, she was nonetheless contractually obligated to lose weight to be part of the series.

While Metz presumably agreed to this contract of her own accord and has claimed she was excited at the idea of having an external motivator to lose weight, the creators' demands of weight loss are concerning. At the very least, they are concerning in that the creators prioritized a particular story line which necessitated weight loss. This depiction of a fat woman centered on Kate's belief that happiness could be found only by losing weight, which resulted in a shallow and tired character and storyline. Every decision Kate made, particularly in the first season of the series, centered on losing weight, "gaining control" of her health, and reaching some hypothetical point where she would be happy enough with her body. To create a show where a fat person has no interests beyond weight loss is to erase the humanity of actual fat people.

Even for fat people who are focused on losing weight, they still have other desires, interests, and motivations: to enjoy hobbies, have a family, be in loving relationships, and so on. Gordon echoes this point, demanding that we complicate our depictions of fatness beyond this limited weight loss narrative. "For some fat people, stories like these [which focus heavily on weight loss] may ring true: they may be members of Overeaters Anonymous… they may have been ridiculed by thin lovers' friends… But even if they do ring true, fat people's lives are so much more than our bodies. Fat people have complex interior lives, complicated love lives, professional triumphs, and personal tragedies."[47]

[46] Rosa, "Chrissy Metz Says It's in Her Contract to Lose Weight for 'This Is Us.'"
[47] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*, 135.

Although in later seasons Kate's narrative has expanded to include a singing career, finding love, having a child, and navigating complex relationships with her family, at the beginning her character was a shallow representation of a thin fantasy of fatness. This too-often perpetuated narrative "[holds] up ghoulish faux-realities of life as a fat person, grounded in little more than [thin people's] imaginations. And there [is] no counterbalance, no alternative narrative, nowhere to turn from the desperation, isolation, and bleakness of fat lives as invented by thin people."[48] The majority of fat people (other than Kate and Toby) in the series are shown in Overeaters Anonymous, each of them feeling out of control around food and certain that losing weight will help them unlock the life they've always wanted. Particularly in earlier seasons, fat characters are shown only in the context of conversations or plotlines about weight and weight loss, and are denied any depth in character or any interests beyond their own weight loss. As critic Meghan de Maria notes, all we know about the fat characters in earlier episodes of *This Is Us* is that they want to lose weight.[49] We know little about their desires, aspirations, and personal lives, as de Maria explains, especially when we compare these fat characters to their thin counterparts.[50] While this does improve some as the show progresses, there is still a predominant narrative that fat people dislike being fat and ultimately pursue intentional weight loss.

The narratives surrounding fat characters in *This Is Us* and the ways in which the show's creators treat fat people (in and outside of fat suits) reflect several facets of neglect. First, they perpetuated overused stories about fatness. Second, the characters reflected the creators' ignorance about the realities of fatness, calling into question who wrote the stories about the fat

[48] Gordon, "To the Writers of "Insatiable": From a Fat High-Schooler Who Stayed Fat."
[49] de Maria, "These 'This Is Us' Stories Aren't as Body Positive as You Think."
[50] de Maria.

characters in the show. Moreover, their treatment of actual fat people reflects a similar misunderstanding of the rich and varied ways in which one can exist as a fat person.

This Is Us reflects some success in using responsible aesthetic agency insofar as creators did consult a fat person throughout the production process. Show creator Dan Fogelman's sister, Deborah Fogelman Devine, works as a consultant on the show, helping shape and refine the ways in which fatness is approached in the series. Deborah's experiences with weight were the loose inspiration for Kate's character. As Fogelman remarks, "For my sister, weight has been a constant battle, up and down, for her entire life…I loved sending notes from my sister to the writers… [once] I said 'I'm trying to find stories for Kate that aren't always about the weight,' and she said, 'It's *always* about the weight.'"[51] Metz shares this experience, reflecting that many of the words her character says have been things Metz herself remarked about her pain and struggles as a fat person.[52]

This Is Us thus demonstrates that simply talking to or taking as authoritative one fat person's experience (or the experiences of fat people only from one background, such as cisgender, heterosexual white women) may result in harmful narratives being recreated and reinforced through the use of a fat suit. It is crucial to talk to and try to represent a wider range of experiences of fatness—or at least to acknowledge that the experience depicted is only that of *one* fat person. In the show creators have countless opportunities to highlight this, as Kate and Toby once attended *Overeaters Anonymous.* In that circle, or in showing other fat people in the show, writers could have indicated that there are other experiences and relationships with fatness beyond the ones the main characters experience. Although Kate and Toby have slightly different

[51] Rochlin, "Creator Dan Fogelman Knew He Had a Gem with Breakout Hit 'This Is Us.'"
[52] Rochlin.

relationships with dieting, weight loss, and fatness (Kate constantly striving to lose weight, and Toby shifting between a desire to lose weight and acceptance of himself as a fat person), further identifying and focusing on other narratives around fatness would be helpful in moving forward the discussion of fatness. Especially as the show's most notable feature is its tendency to present experiences from a wide variety of perspectives through the use of time jumps, this could easily be incorporated into the narrative of the show.

However, it might be argued that since Kate is just one character in the show, and represents the experiences of one actual fat person (informed by the writer's sister Deborah), it is reasonable for her character to reflect a limited range of experiences. After all, it is an unfair and unrealistic standard to expect one person to represent the experiences of all people in a given group, or to expect one marginalized person to speak for or replace their entire community. As such, it is reasonable for Kate's character to represent a limited set of experiences—and even for those experiences to sometimes center on weight loss. Moving towards a responsible aesthetic practice, however, necessitates that artists consider the wider narrative web in which a character exists on several levels—both within a work, and in comparison to other similar works.[53] Artists have an obligation to consider whether what they are saying in their works has already been said too many times before.

This Is Us is relatively successful, internally and as the show progresses, at depicting fatness and having varying narratives for fat people. They do not stop at having one token representative of the relevant community, and instead feature a couple of different fat people at

[53] Here I mean to argue that it seems intuitively reasonable to compare works of the same type. Given the overwhelming number of artworks in existence, it would be impossible for a work to be compared to *every other artwork* and the narratives therein. Instead, we may narrow the comparison class for a work like *This Is Us* to other contemporary television and film, for example, especially ones within a similar genre or aimed at a similar audience.

different points of the fat spectrum. These characters, as previously mentioned, have different relationships to their bodies and identities as fat people, and especially throughout later seasons Kate and Toby's characters are given more robust motives, aspirations, relationships, and narrative arcs. While there will always be room to improve, to present a wider variety of perspectives (especially, for *This Is Us,* by adding non-cisgender and non-white fat people to the cast), the show tries to show different options in ways that reflect an attempt at responsible aesthetic practice.[54]

Looking in comparison to other narratives about fatness in different works, though, the story of Kate and Toby has already been told countless times. The number of works where a fat woman is driven to hate her own body and spends a lifetime doing anything she can to change it are too numerous to count. Fat bodies are regularly imagined as "befores," temporary states to be changed or reduced. Thus, even if Kate's experiences accurately depict one real fat person's experiences (or represent the experiences of lots of fat people), the creators have an obligation to consider whether this story still needs to be told if they wish to move towards more responsible depictions of fatness. The narrative of weight loss perpetuates the idea that fatness is a problem to be solved, and feeds into the wrongly imagined notion that fat people are unhappy with their bodies or wish to change them. When this is the overwhelming narrative shown about a group of people, it helps inform society's ideas of those identities and groups in real life.

[54] It is important to note that while they do show two different fat bodies in the show, both fat characters are white, able-bodied, cisgender characters. This is reflective of an ongoing tendency for art to depict fatness only when it is within a certain proximity to the idealized body. As Gordon argues, there is a history of shows which "center the stories of straight, cisgender, teenage, and adult white women in stubbornly heterosexual narratives. They focus on lead characters who are fat, but not *too* fat, and most center bodies with etiologies, explanations for bodies that deviate from the thinness audiences will expect. Yes, fat stories are rarely told by fat people—but when they are, they're told by and about those of us whose bodies are, aside from their fatness, already marked by privilege." (Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat,* 126.) In light of this history, it is worth reflecting on how much praise is owed to *This Is Us* for its depictions. While they try to show a plurality of perspectives on fatness, this is still limited to bodies in closer proximity to dominant groups.

Not only has this story been told before, but there is a worry that Kate's story in particular *mis*represents what it is like to be fat. Recall that Deborah Fogelman Devine claimed her struggles *always* boiled down to weight. While this may be her own experience, this is far from what many fat people experience. Rather, fat people can and do live rich lives, comfortable with their bodies, happy, in relationships, working, traveling, making decisions without thinking about their weight or ruminating on a need to lose weight. Although it would certainly be foolish to say that *no* fat person's life centers on weight loss, it is also harmful to perpetuate this as the primary narrative of fatness given the ways in which this informs our ideas of fat people in everyday life. Until other narratives exist—ones with fat people who love their bodies, fat people who wish to gain weight, fat people who travel and love and struggle with the same levels of depth as thin people in art—there is an increased obligation to combat this tired narrative. At the very least, the creators of *This Is Us* must take steps to ensure that they make clear that this is just one character's experience and relationship to their body. While they do this fairly successfully (all things considered) in the first season of the show through Toby's character being comfortable with his fatness and wanting to abandon *Overeaters Anonymous*, they undermine this success by having Toby work so hard to lose weight in later seasons of the show. In season 4 of the show Toby joins CrossFit and works aggressively to maintain a slim figure, going so far as to hide his workout efforts from his then-wife Kate. This narrative shift reinforces a troubling idea that every fat person will eventually want to lose weight and change that they are fat. It tells the viewer that even if Toby *thought* he could accept his weight and be happy living as a fat person, he was wrong and eventually sought to change it. This further upholds the idea that fatness is only temporary, never a state of happiness, comfort, or permanence.

In addition to its troubling depictions of fatness more generally, the show uses fat suits in an arguably harmful manner. The show purports to use fat suits as a value-neutral tool, similar to a prop or a costume. Sullivan wears a fat suit to portray adult Toby in order to reflect weight changes over time. The series utilizes regular time jumps to show commonalities among people from different generations and social groups, and follows the characters throughout their lives. As Sullivan explains, "the costume allows, if [the writers and producers want to], for us to jump back and forth through time. There's other logistical things involved in the decision-making… There's like a thousand things that go into each of these choices."[55] Sullivan goes as far as to equate the fat suit with costume, much like a blazer or pair of pants, claiming that "the logistics of wearing a costume like that allows me to travel back and forth through time" to show "a time when [Toby] was skinnier."[56] On this view, fat suits simply help move the plot along, allowing artists to depict weight change over time in ways that are safe for the actor.

Metz has similarly defended the use of fat suits in the show. Metz views a fat suit as equal to any other prosthetic and argues that its use was necessary in order to have the best actor for the role in question. As she explains, "We tested a lot of gentlemen who were bigger, and I get it — people think the authenticity is kind of ruined by that. But Chris has been heavier, so I think he understands the plight of being overweight. Also, he was just the best man for the job. And people wear prosthetics all the time — it's just weight as opposed to, like, a nose or a chin. It's just kind of the name of the game."[57]

We can look to the ways in which anti-fatness pervades the work in other places to assess whether fat suits are used responsibly in this work. Were fatness perceived as being as neutral as

[55] Moraski, "Why Chris Sullivan Isn't Surprised by Outrage Over His 'This Is Us' Fat Suit."
[56] Moraski.
[57] Cohen, "Why One Controversial Element of 'This Is Us' Actually Has a Great Explanation."

something like a pair of socks or a book, the decision to depict fatness using a fat suit could plausibly be value neutral as intended. In other words, when divorced from the contexts in which the show is developed, the padding used for fat suit prosthetics could be equivalent to any other article placed on the actor's body as a costume. However, the depiction of fatness carries with it real and serious implications given the policing of and social and political sanctions towards fat bodies. Viewing fat suits as mere costumes is harmful and misguided, as it runs the risk of ignoring the complicated history and ongoing reception of fatness.

First, the choice to use a fat suit is harmful insofar as it overlooks fat actors, and thus fails to sufficiently shift representation of fat people in media. When fat suits are used, they are used in place of real fat people. This replacement and domination of space makes it such that fat suits cannot be purely value-neutral costumes. Instead, they are tools used to keep fat people from fully participating in constructing and sharing narratives about their own lives. As Gordon argues, "fat suit narratives subtly assert that thin people know as much as (or more than) fat people do about what it's like to be fat, that fat bodies are only temporary, and that fat people who stay fat are simply shirking their responsibility to create a body that would earn them respect. There is a cultural weight to fat suit narratives, and it pulls everyone down."[58]

Fat actors exist and actively seek roles wherein they can represent members of their own communities, so using a prosthetic or costume device inherently overlooks them and undermines their agency and ability to participate in aesthetic production. Speaking on casting decisions and the erasure/invisibility of Black people in movies, Paul Taylor argues that "the film industry capitulates to the problematization of black bodies in its casting decisions, preferring whites to

[58] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*, 129–30.

blacks where it can, and light-skinned blacks to darker-skinned ones where it can. This artificially limits opportunities for black actors in a film industry that (again, in part for market reasons) is already less than hospitable to black folks."[59] In a similar vein, utilizing a fat suit to depict a fat person, instead of hiring an actual fat person, robs fat communities of the opportunity to participate in these representations. Opting for fat suits over fat actors has material impacts on fat people, as it excludes fat people from an opportunity for employment and from being able to participate in sharing stories about people like themselves.

Fat people notice when fat suits are favored over fat actors, and have spoken out against this kind of harm. In response to the thin actress Sarah Paulson being cast as Linda Tripp in *American Crime Story: Impeachment,* fat entertainer Kristin Chirico remarked, "This could have been a fat actor. This could have been their big breakout role. This could have been their Golden Globe or their Emmy nod. This could have been their paid off student loans or their first house. Instead it's Sarah Paulson in a fat suit. I feel like so much has been said on why actors in fat suits are harmful on so MANY different levels but even at the very basic, surface level... this is one more fat person getting shut out."[60] This speaks to the harms and erasure caused by choosing to utilize a fat suit as a prop in place of hiring a fat person.

Second, the use of fat suits creates two levels of distancing from actual fatness. On the one hand, they allow artists (including writers, producers, and actors) to step away from fatness at the end of filming. To that end, fat suits at worst prevent, and at best don't facilitate, any deeper understanding of embodied lived experiences as a fat person over time. As a result, they function differently from other costumes insofar as they shield users from a crucial lived

[59] Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful*, 68.
[60] Chirico, "April 28 Twitter Retweet on Sarah Paulson."

experience in ways that can be detrimental to responsibly depicting fatness. On the other hand, fat suits allow viewers to distance themselves from fatness through reaffirming stereotypes about fatness. As Kathleen LeBesco argues, viewers tend to be aware of the fact that the actor can remove their fat suit at the end of the day, a distance which enables them to view fat suits and fatness as tools, often for comedic relief.[61]

It is a misstep to think of fat suits as mere costume. In so doing, we erase actual fat people from our narratives, doing further harm to an already marginalized community. Moreover, presenting fat suits as a mere costume completely sidesteps the question of who is using them, further allowing artists to ignore the interests and opinions of the people depicted by these "costumes." As such, I maintain that we must approach fat suits acknowledging the real and serious implications of fatness in our society. In aiming for responsible aesthetic agency, we must consider these implications when we construct depictions of fat people. To determine whether it is appropriate to use a fat suit in a framework of responsible aesthetic agency, we cannot merely reflect on the narratives of fatness the fat suit is being used to portray. Instead, we must also ask ourselves how utilization of fat suits impacts (and harms) fat communities and individuals who could otherwise participate in depictions of their own communities if a fat suit was not used. Further, a framework of responsible aesthetic agency requires us to consider the context in which a prop, costume, or prosthetic like a fat suit is used, understanding the cultural baggage and privilege (or lack thereof) that comes with using such an object in art.

IV. Fatness as Moral Failure: Patty Bladell in *Insatiable*

In the opening scenes of the trailer for the satirical Netflix original series *Insatiable* (2018), the show's protagonist, Patty, examines her partially clothed fat body with disgust. As

[61] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, 239.

the trailer rolls on, viewers witness the onslaught of insults Patty faces daily, from abusive comments to vandalism of her personal property. Patty narrates the trailer, discussing the social ostracization she experiences as a fat teenager, as scenes of her binging on snack food and covering her body in shame play on the screen. Suddenly, the trailer shifts—following an accident, Patty loses weight and undergoes a dramatic transformation, causing her classmate to publicly exclaim "Patty's hot!" The series focuses on Patty's transformation from self-proclaimed "fatty" to pageant queen, seeking revenge on the people who hurt her so badly when she was fat. The success of the story and the dramatic transformation it depicts relies on its lead actor, Debby Ryan, wearing a fat suit during flashbacks.

In reading the script for the series, Ryan realized she'd "never seen rage and disordered eating and this want for justice that's so misguided" being depicted like it was in *Insatiable*.[62] She and the show's creator, Lauren Gussis, wanted to represent Patty in a responsible way which moved the conversation about appearance forward, demonstrating that falsity of the typically depicted "makeover montage" wherein an external, physical change completely fixes a character's life.[63] In the series, "every single one of the characters is insatiable for something… looking for outside validation."[64] The show navigates how to release these insatiable desires and find one's true self.

Despite Gussis's intentions, the show received enormous backlash before even premiering. In a change.org petition started after the release of the show's trailer and which received over 230,000 signatures, user Florence given claims that the show contributes to a harmful culture of equating worth with bodies, perpetuating "not only the toxicity of diet culture,

[62] Lawrence, "Debby Ryan on 'Insatiable,' Mental Health, and the Pressure of Hollywood."
[63] Miller, "'Insatiable' Creator Lauren Gussis Wants You to Give Her Controversial Show a Chance."
[64] Miller.

but the objectification of women's bodies."[65] The petition calls for the series to be cancelled, citing concerns of eating disorders, self-doubt, and negative self-image that may arise from the series. In response to the trailer and petition that followed, Gussis has argued that "the trailer is not representative of the show as a whole, but it is a representation of where the story starts."[66]

Regarding the narrative of the show surrounding fatness, creator Gussis claimed that the series was satirical, a subversive presentation of our typical relationship to self-image. Given her own experiences with binge eating and negative body image in adolescence, Gussis wanted to do justice to those experiences and represent them in a complicated and nuanced way that diverged from previous failures (and lack of representation) in other media. Moreover, Gussis recognized a troubling narrative in media, particularly those depicting teenagers, wherein losing weight suddenly solves a character's problems and changes their life. Given these aims, the main character Patty loses the weight but is still as miserable thin as she was when fat. Her sudden conventional beauty does not fix her problems, but instead complicates and exacerbates her troubled relationship with food and body image.

Although this series aims to be subversive, it still relies on limited narratives surrounding fatness, particularly as it pertains to binge eating disorder. When Patty binges, she is not just depicted as having a lack of control over her eating and an inability to stop eating. Instead, her image while binging is sloppy and disheveled, a disrupted and unkempt departure from her otherwise put-together exterior. In one scene in series 1, episode 10, Patty consumes an entire birthday cake as her makeup smears down her face. Dropping the fork she'd brought to eat with, Patty resorts to shoveling food into her mouth using her hands, allowing icing to smear all over

[65] given, "CANCEL Netflix's Body-Shaming Series 'Insatiable.'" Nonstandard capitalization of author's name is derived from the original source.
[66] Miller, "'Insatiable' Creator Lauren Gussis Wants You to Give Her Controversial Show a Chance."

her mouth. Other similar scenes show Patty sitting among piles of empty food containers, binging while sitting among literal garbage. These scenes, especially in flashbacks wherein Ryan is wearing a fat suit to depict the "old" Patty, reinforce harmful and mistaken ideas of fatness in ways that undermine any good intentions the series creators had.

The representations of fatness in *Insatiable* are harmful for a number of reasons: because they imply that fat people must inevitably hate their bodies in a way that precludes any alternative relationships with fatness, and because they reinforce stereotypes of fatness that play into a shallow and limited understanding of what it is like to be fat. Scenes where Patty is seen fat and out of control while eating do not represent the relationship that many fat people have with food. Moreover, the attitude of self-loathing and insatiable desire to reduce her fat body fail to represent many fat people's relationships with their own bodies—there are plenty of fat people who love their own bodies, who celebrate them and live comfortably in them without having an unending desire to shrink. As I argued regarding *This Is Us,* we must be mindful of how a work plays into and disrupts predominant stereotypes, especially when those stereotypes are harmful to the communities depicted. While there are certainly some fat people who feel out of control while eating, and who loathe their bodies, *Insatiable* fails to even acknowledge (let alone depict) other possibilities and relationships with fatness. Given that Patty's attitudes and behavior reinforce tired, harmful stereotypes, this glaring absence of alternatives is reprehensible.

The fat suit itself is also a poor representation of fatness, as it does not realistically portray the way that fat sits and moves on most fat bodies. Rosey Blair (@roseybeeme), a fat/plus size influencer, discusses the fat suit Ryan wore in her TikTok series "Fat Suits Rated and Graded by an Actual Fat Person."[67] As Blair notes, Ryan's fat suit is fairly accurate in the

[67] Blair, *Debby Ryan's Fat Suit in "Insatiable."*

face; Blair cites Ryan's "resting TV watching double chin" as an accurate representation of fat bodies while seated.[68] However, the body (specifically the torso) of Ryan's fat suit is inaccurate insofar as it is too taut/lacks movement and does not match her natural proportions (evidenced in comparison to Ryan's thin "glow up" body). Thus, narrative issues aside, this representation of fatness is visually inaccurate. In comparison to other works this is an important failure, as it reflects a lack of research and understanding of the bodies being depicted in the artwork.

In creating films and television shows, there is usually a team of people involved in making props and costumes, who work hard to ensure that clothing and props are accurate to the atmosphere/setting and time period of the work. These crews often go above and beyond in considering the minute details of works—down to the types of silverware or posters shown in the background of a scene. To fail to put this same level of work, preparation, and realism into something as central and visually dominating as an actor's body (vis-à-vis a fat suit) is to fail to responsibly depict an already marginalized community. It reduces a real experience or identity to a meaningless prop, failing to afford fat people the dignity they deserve onscreen. Creators must ensure that *at least* the same level of care is put into the real bodies and lives they are representing as goes into things like set. On this level, Patty's fat suit in *Insatiable* fails to meet a bare minimum level of respect given its visual and physical inaccuracies.

Setting aside the visual errors involved in representations of fatness in *Insatiable,* the narrative portrayed is still harmful. Admittedly, much like in the discussion of *This Is Us* one might argue that these narrative representations do not *have* to represent every fat person. Gussis's own aim was not to speak for or represent all fat people, but instead to represent her own experiences with binge eating disorder and discomfort with her own body. Thus, even if

[68] Blair.

Patty's eating habits and relationship to fatness did not represent *all* fat bodies, one might argue that this is an unfair expectation—and something that Gussis importantly did not claim to undertake. Further, the depiction of fatness in *Insatiable* may accurately represent *some* fat people's identities and experiences. After all, some fat people do indeed struggle with binge eating disorder or negative self-image, and many fat people grapple with their weight and attempt to diet or change their bodies.

Even still, reinforcing this narrative is an inexcusable harm in the context of the broader narrative web of representations of fatness. Situated alongside other works which reinforce similar narratives, the narratives of fatness in *Insatiable* are harmful insofar as they reiterate negative stereotypes of fatness. These narratives play into a shallow and superficial understanding of fatness that is already present in dominant thinking. They echo the idea that fatness is undesirable, a sign of failure that must be addressed and changed. Much like with the limited narratives present in *This Is Us,* the story of Patty exists in excess. There are countless stories of fat people who hate their own bodies, and who will do anything to change them. Typically in these stories losing weight magically fixes everything that was wrong with the former fat person's life, and it is important to recognize that *Insatiable* does not repeat this mistake. In *Insatiable* Patty loses weight and is still miserable, unlovable, a poor friend and morally corrupt person. Thus, Patty's moral failings are not *because of* her fatness, which is am important improvement on other depictions of fatness throughout history. Still, in *Insatiable* Patty regularly reverts back to her "fat person habits," putting on negligible amounts of weight and then abusing her body to slim back down. This narrative of constantly needing to minimize one's body reinforces the idea that weight loss is an inevitable necessity. Further, Patty's

narrative while fat is harmful insofar as she hated her fat body and had no confidence *until* she lost weight.

The creators of *Insatiable* could have removed the element of self-loathing while fat and still had a successful story—one that was arguably more successful insofar as it didn't rely on tired narratives to present Gussis's subversive message. The basic arc of Patty's story is as follows: Patty hates herself (largely because she is fat) and is ruthlessly mocked while fat. She loses weight and has a "glow up", now thin and seen as more ideally or traditionally beautiful. Patty seeks out revenge, aiming to prove her worth and beauty through competing in beauty pageants, but instead finds herself unable to escape her self-loathing because she has not undergone sufficient emotional transformation. The element of hating her fat body is unnecessary to tell this tale of fat revenge, and of failed emotional transformation. It is not that the ideas of fat revenge, or of insatiable desires to change one's body are inherently bad or irresponsible narratives to include in a work. Indeed, actual fat people like Blair have spoken about their interest in seeing these themes done in respectful and reaffirming ways.[69] Moreover, Gussis aimed to be subversive, and to challenge an equally damaging narrative of weight loss as a one-size-fits-all solution to our problems. These aspirational narratives are each in and of themselves acceptable—even refreshing, and arguably needed, particularly in popular media that is otherwise filled with makeover-as-moral-redemption montages. It is when these narratives are coupled with harmful and tired stereotypes that they become impermissible, and in the case of *Insatiable* the creators crossed that line.

We can imagine a world wherein Patty hates her life for other reasons (perhaps because she isn't aggressively confident, or is a bad friend, or is the subject of mockery from classmates)

[69] Blair.

but accepts and embraces her fat body—a world wherein Patty knows her classmates are wrong for their anti-fat bias. In this world the same story could play out. Patty could lose weight (or not), she could have a "glow up" moment, she could participate in pageants and grapple with self-acceptance unrelated to her body. While self-loathing as a fat person may be a reality for some people, it is a reality that already dominates preconceived ideas of what it is like to live as a fat person. This unnecessary and tired addition to Patty's character merely reinforces stereotypes of fatness. When considered alongside a rich history of similar works it is irresponsible insofar as it does little to allow fat people to reclaim their identities and reshape thin people's imaginings of fatness.

V. A Positive Case: Michelle in *American Pie Presents: Girls' Rules*

Although the cases above had more mixed success, the 2020 film *American Pie Presents: Girls' Rules* provides a promising starting point for creating works using a framework of responsible aesthetic agency. This film is the latest in the *American Pie Presents* series, a series of raunchy sex comedies. Typical films in this franchise feature a group of young men going through humiliating and/or immoral and crude antics out of their desperation to have sex. The original films in the franchise often focused exclusively on male pleasure and desire; consent was typically an afterthought (if a consideration whatsoever), and sex was depicted as something to which the protagonists of the film were entitled. However, the most recent installment of the series, *Girls' Rules,* sought to push back against this narrative, giving a refreshing and less morally reprehensible version of a sex comedy. *Girls' Rules* is a useful example of responsible aesthetic agency in relation to its depictions of women's sexuality, and in relation to fatness more specifically.

Girls' Rules features the first female-fronted cast in the *American Pie* and *American Pie Presents* franchises. In the film, four best friends entering their senior year make a plot to reclaim their sexualities, strengthening their relationships, sex lives, and self-esteem. They aim to have the "perfect" senior year, centering on a plot to have the relationships of their dreams all in time for the school's big dance. As they later discover, they are all pining after the same man and begin competing for his affection. Eventually, three of the women find romantic interests elsewhere, leaving the main protagonist Annie to pursue their former shared love interest. The film ends with the friends recognizing the importance of their strong friendship over more fleeting romantic interests, and they each work to help one another recognize their growth throughout the school year.

Many films which have historically featured this trope of friends going after the same man (particularly teen films with high schoolers as the target audience and as protagonists in the film) end in the women competing and tearing one another apart, destroying their formerly strong friendships for the pursuit of love. While there are a few scenes in which the women in *Girls' Rules* compete against one another and forget about the strength of their friendship, the overall message of the film speaks to the importance of friendship, and to a woman's right to take ownership and control over her own sex life. The writers of the film intentionally aimed to avoid the typical catty woman stereotype found in this kind of film, claiming, "We didn't really want the girls fighting with each other, making like a catty thing. We wanted them more to work together."[70] Thus, the creators of *Girls' Rules* looked carefully at the existing narrative web of this type of film, striving to avoid the pitfalls and harms typical of the genre. As the authors commented, "we couldn't really make that kind of movie [a raunchy sex comedy riddled with

[70] Balkovich, "The American Pie Spin-Off That's Heating Up On Netflix."

toxic masculinity] anymore. We didn't even want to. We didn't lament it. We were like 'Okay, things are changing for the good, and let's just be part of the good things that are happening right now.' So we switched, and changed [the film] to *Girls' Rules.*'"[71]

This project further demonstrates a commitment to something like responsible aesthetic agency through portraying a variety of experiences, rather than reducing portrayals of women's relationships with sex to a singular experience. Within the work itself, *Girls' Rules* makes it clear that there are a variety of different relationships one might have with sex, and varying levels of comfort talking about those relationships. All of the four protagonists grapple with their own sex lives. While some are experienced with sex, others have not had sex or are newly exploring it. Similarly, they use sex for different purposes: closeness within relationships, to increase self-esteem and self-acceptance, to put or maintain emotional distance between themselves and their partners, etc. The film also alludes to different possibilities beyond what is directly shown as the characters question their own motives and experiences, thus leaving open that the four protagonists' lives do not speak for or represent all possible viewers' experiences. This helps move toward responsible aesthetic agency insofar as it validates the wide range of lived experiences we may have, all which are shaped by our resources, identities, history, and more.

Girls' Rules is refreshing insofar as it utilizes the entire cast to bring depth and breadth to characters in ways that amplify their individuality. No work can depict or should be held to the standard of depicting *all* possible experiences and identities—to set the standard for responsible aesthetic agency here would be to set too high of a bar to be realistically met. But *Girls' Rules* stands as a strong instance of responsible aesthetic agency because it alludes to alternatives not

[71] Balkovich.

shown in the work, as the work itself rests on the idea that our sexual comfort and experiences are varied and deeply personal. Contrasted with something like *This Is Us,* where one of the critiques of Kate was that her experiences were not representative of all fat people, *Girls' Rules* is refreshing insofar as it utilizes the entire cast to bring depth and breadth to characters in ways that amplify their individuality. Acknowledging the plurality of experiences people from one group may have helps humanize them, ensuring those groups are made visible in art. This is important, as Taylor argues with specific reference to Black plurality, because denying the complexity of a group ignores "the multiplicity of roles, identities, and categories" that may apply to someone in that group.[72]

Thinking of fatness more specifically, *Girls' Rules* makes similar efforts towards responsible aesthetic agency through the depiction of fat protagonist Michelle (played by Natasha Behnam). Michelle begins the film in touch with her own sexuality, and openly discusses her sexual experiences with her friends. Presenting a fat person as openly and happily sexual, without being fetishized, is a significant departure from historical narratives surrounding sexuality and fatness. Typically, fat people in this kind of film are cast as humorous but undesirable or non-sexual friends, such as Rebel Wilson's character Fat Amy from *Pitch Perfect.*[73] If fat people are seen as sexual or desirable, it is typically only as a fetish or once they have lost weight and more closely conform to beauty ideals. Michelle, in contrast, is sexual and desired *while being fat,* but not because of or for her weight—she is instead desired as a complete person who happens to be fat. This helps broaden narratives surrounding sexuality and

[72] Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful*, 63.
[73] See Gordon's discussion of Fat Amy in Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*, 130..

fatness, bringing them closer to reality in which fat people are and can be sexually active and desired, and can and do lead satisfying sex lives.

The character Michelle is further proof of the steps the *Girls' Rules* creators took towards responsible aesthetic agency insofar as fatness is not the central focus of her identity or experiences in the film. While Michelle is a fat person, this is not a plot point or motivator for her story. Not only does the film refrain from employing tired weight loss narratives, but it allows Michelle's character the space to be fully human and to have the depth and range of her straight-sized counterparts. In other movies and films in which a fat person navigates relationships and life more generally, being fat tends to be a driving force behind every decision they make. For example, Kate of NBC's *This Is Us* fears entering a relationship because she is fat and holds off on her musical career because she worries that people that look like her (i.e. are fat) cannot be celebrities. Even seemingly minor choices, like swimming at night in an empty pool, become a conversation about her fatness and the limitations it brings.

Of course, the reality of navigating the world as a fat person does influence the lives of fat people, and their fatness is inevitably going to be a consideration in various behaviors. For example, while I shouldn't have to, I simply must think about my weight when I pick an airline to travel to an academic conference, as airlines each have different policies regarding "passengers of size". Similarly, when thinking about where to go to eat or which stores to shop at, my weight is a consideration: will there be aisles that I can navigate? Is there accessible and accommodating seating that supports my weight and the distribution of fat on my particular body? So this is not to say that it is wrong for fat people to *ever* consider or be influenced by their fatness—fat people often must and do consider their weight and size when navigating their lives.

But far too often, fat people in media are reduced to merely beings who think about their weight. Fat people can and do make decisions without their fatness being the central consideration, and lead fulfilling lives that go far beyond just their fatness. Yet onscreen, fat people are often depicted as *only* worrying about their fatness; as being obsessed with their size and unable to think of other considerations outside of weight. This runs the risk of reducing fat people to stereotypes and stock figures, something which contributes to their invisibility onscreen.[74] Michelle from *Girls' Rules* is refreshing in that her character is allowed to exist as a person—not just as a *fat* person. She is able to pursue relationships, flirt, attend school, go to parties, while being a whole person who is not reduced merely to her fatness. This depth and portrayal of Michelle as a whole person helps avoid turning the character into a prop to share messages about fatness.

All of this is not to say that *American Pie Presents: Girls' Rules* is a perfect example of responsible aesthetic agency. Far from that, the film importantly fails insofar as the team of writers and directors behind the work is all male, a critique raised by film critic Robert Kojder.[75] In a film that purports to be a feminist reimagining of a historically misogynistic series rife with toxic masculinity, one would hope that women would be involved in the creation of the film (rather than merely portraying characters imagined and written by men, as is the case with *Girls' Rules*). Projects aiming for responsible aesthetic agency need to include the marginalized communities they depict in the creation process for a variety of reasons: to help maximize the chances that justice is done to the characters depicted, to help minimize unacknowledged or unaddressed bias and harm towards the communities in the work, to help make the work center

[74] This follows Taylor (2016), who argues that depicting Black people as mere stereotypes "defined by single, characteristic traits…rather than by the complex configurations that make for unique personalities" contributes to their being rendered invisible (52).
[75] Kojder, "Movie Review - American Pie Presents."

more realistic depictions that take into account actual lived experiences of the relevant groups, and to financially compensate the people whose stories are being told and used to make a profit.

While the absence of women in the writing and directorial teams of the film is a serious flaw of the film, *Girls' Rules* importantly demonstrates that a work need not be perfect to be taken seriously as a work that aims for responsible aesthetic agency. *Girls' Rules* makes serious contributions and improvements to the narrative web surrounding sex, sexual agency, and empowerment in this genre of film, and importantly the film makes real improvements on depictions of fat people in comparison to other works in and outside of the genre. The film features an actor who is actually in the relevant marginalized group, Natasha Behnam, and the messages told about relationships (while not exhaustive of the wide range of possibilities) are varied. Thus, while the work is imperfect it provides a fruitful starting point for imagining responsible aesthetic agency.

VI. Lessons for Responsible Aesthetic Agency

These works of art help us navigate the difficult issue of aesthetic responsibility, providing a framework through which we can approach and reflect on artworks to improve our aesthetic practice moving forward. I have argued that there are several central levels where artists must strive for responsible aesthetic agency in creating works: on a narrative level, in production of a work, and in the actual art product itself. In what remains I will briefly recapitulate each of these dimensions of responsible aesthetic agency, highlighting the type of questions artists can ask themselves when working with and depicting marginalized individuals. While the specific considerations and answers to these general questions will vary depending on the relevant marginalized group and medium of art/production process, my goal here is to provide a starting point for using a framework of responsible aesthetic agency.

Narrative Considerations:

As previously argued, artists who are committed to responsible aesthetic agency need to consider the implications of the narratives they create and perpetuate both within a given work and in relation to other works. Artists should strive to seek out and represent a diverse range of experiences when possible. They also need to take steps to ensure that the work represents the group's own perspectives and understandings of their identities, rather than merely representing these experiences from an outsider's (uninformed) perspective. Artists must also consider the narrative webs in which their work exists. In considering this, artists can ask themselves what sorts of narratives on similar themes are being told in other works.

- Does the work allow for different experiences to be presented, or does it present the experiences of marginalized individuals as singular?[76]
- Does the work portray members of marginalized groups in a realistic or accurate way? Is this representation realistic/accurate from the perspective of the marginalized group it depicts, or merely from an outsider's perception of that group?
- Does the message of the artist's story already exist elsewhere? If so, does this new work amplify inaccuracies, stereotypes, and other harmful narratives that are already prevalent?
- Lastly, does what the artist is saying in their work need to be said? Does the narrative they create contribute to, expand, refresh, or otherwise improve the narrative web that exists on this topic or theme?

[76] See Taylor's discussion of the importance of plurality for ensuring the visibility of marginalized groups (especially, in Taylor's focus, for Black communities) Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful*, 62–63.,

Production Considerations

Beyond the narrative created in a work, artists must be mindful of how that narrative *and* the artwork itself come into existence. This involves carefully attending to production of the work, being mindful of who is involved in its creation and how those people are treated throughout the production process. Below are some questions artists can consider in order to be more mindful of and responsible in production of their works:

- Are the show's messages undermined by how we treat people in the relevant communities? Are they undermined by implicit bias in the work itself (e.g. camera angles)? Do we rely on the audience's bias to successfully make jokes about or otherwise cause harm towards members of this group?
- Are we including people from these communities throughout different stages of production? Are they appropriately compensated for their experience and work? Is the narrative directly informed by their perspectives and experiences, and are they appropriately credited for their intellectual and creative contributions and expertise?
- Can we utilize actors (and other people—photographers, videographers, writers, etc.) from the relevant groups rather than resorting to second-hand accounts from those groups, CGI or animation, and prosthetics?

Final Product/Artwork Considerations

Lastly, artists need to consider the artwork itself as a product that exists in the world. To that end, responsible aesthetic agency necessitates attending to the accuracy of the art product. It

also involves ensuring that while promoting the work members of marginalized communities have been protected from harm.

- How is this work perceived by the communities it depicts? How can creators use the response to their work (prioritizing feedback from the relevant marginalized communities) to better attend to responsible aesthetic agency moving forward?
- In what way(s) will this work impact or change our collective understanding of the relevant group's culture, identity, and experiences? Does this work reinforce existing harmful stereotypes about that group?
- How is the work discussed in media? When promoting the work (e.g., giving interviews with media about a movie or show), what steps are taken to ensure that members of marginalized communities are not subject to additional harms as a result of biased attitudes (e.g., from those doing the interview)?

As Gordon argues, "Media representation of fat characters is tightly tied to a handful of wildly oversimplified stereotypes, perpetuating and magnifying them and flattening us in the process."[77] It is by moving towards a framework of responsible aesthetic agency, wherein these narratives are considered and improved within a narrative web in concert with previous representations, that we will be able to reclaim agency and dignity for fat people. By reworking the images and stories of fat people in art, we can slowly construct a better and more humane future—one in which fat people's stories are told by and for them, ringing true to their actual experiences, needs, and dreams.

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2. Beauty Labor as a Tool to Resist Anti-Fatness

Fat people are plagued with oppressive standards which dictate everything from the way they eat in public to the way they dress. These norms are a discriminatory reminder that fat people need to take up as little space as possible, conforming to others' ideals of beauty while simultaneously remembering that they are not the kind of people who get to count as beautiful (Bartky 1990, 73). As Kathleen LeBesco (LeBesco 2004, 1) explains, "fat is the antithesis of the beauty ideal of the day: tight, lean, and toned." Fashion has been a longstanding means of controlling bodies, forcing individuals to conform to narrow beauty ideals and to make this conformity (or inability to conform) undeniably visible. Jeannine Gailey (Gailey 2014) notes, for example, that "social control over bodies is nothing new, especially women's bodies… Today the most coveted womanly form is thin and toned… Thinness confers social status and privilege" (2).

One of the rules often used to control people in contemporary fashion is that women ought to dress in figure flattering clothing that both emphasizes their curves and hides any "flaws" on their bodies. In a list of the 50 best fashion tips of all time, InStyle Magazine (InStyle Staff 2018) says women should "embrace your shape," "know which silhouettes flatter you," and choose clothing that is both on-trend and the 'right' cut of clothing for that body type. For fat women, the 'right' cut is one which minimizes the appearance of fat. Clothing that smooths over rolls, lumps, and bumps, or which makes someone appear smaller, is accepted. Meanwhile, clothing which makes someone appear their actual size (or, heaven forbid, makes them look larger) is taboo. These beauty norms help maintain an oppressive societal structure which disadvantages fat people. I follow G. M. Eller (Eller 2014) in categorizing anti-fatness *as oppressive*, as opposed to as merely harmful or as justified discrimination, given the extent to which anti-fatness does cause myriad interconnected harms which severely limit fat people's

freedom and autonomy. Understanding and examining beauty standards within this context of anti-fat oppression, we are more readily able to investigate and understand the moral gravity of their control.[78]

Beauty standards serve as a tool to control and limit people's expression and ability to navigate the world freely in their own bodies. A similar phenomenon occurs with cases involving gender, race, and disability, wherein people are forced to present themselves in ways that approximate idealized forms of beauty. These harmful, idealized beauty standards then reinforce or bolster other oppressive structures. For instance, norms of gendered dress often dictate that one is more or less of a candidate for beauty depending on whether the clothes one wears "match" their gender identity. These norms then help reinforce the gender binary, reinforcing the idea that there are "right" or "wrong" ways to be a man or a woman and that there is no "right" way to present oneself outside of these categories. Those who challenge these oppressive ideals can do so on many levels: through political protest, rejecting idealized beauty norms, challenging the larger oppressive structures, advocating for fair legal treatment, etc.

While control of bodies through fashion is nothing new, it is of particular concern for fat people whose bodies are simultaneously hypervisible and hyperinvisible, an apparent paradox identified by Gailey (2014). As Gailey argues (following Casper and Moore 2009), "some bodies are highly public, visually inspected, and made into a spectacle, while others are subject to discrimination or erasure because of societal stratification along the lines of class, race, ethnicity,

[78] It is also important to acknowledge that anti-fatness has historically been a project of anti-Blackness as well. As Sabrina Strings (Strings 2019) and Da'Shaun L. Harrison (Harrison 2021) have compellingly explored, anti-fatness can be traced to historical and ongoing efforts to suppress, marginalize, and otherwise harm Black people. Thinness has evolved to be a marker of supposed superiority, a weapon utilized by white people who seek to police the bodies and behavior of Black people and other marginalized groups. Fat Black people have been at the forefront of fat activist efforts for centuries and have long paved the way for the much needed kinds of beauty labor discussed in this project.

gender, sexuality, age, ability, and so on" (7). The perception of one's body as visible or invisible impacts the opportunities and privileges afforded to them, as well as their ability to help shape narratives surrounding their own identities. Being perceived as visible or made invisible are fluid states, and one may occupy different states depending on the situation. Gailey raises the example of thin white women, who may be visible as they experience "immediate catering in clothing stores but also [enjoy] an invisible status when [moving] through customs while traveling" (Gailey 2014, 11). Privileged bodies are able to be visible or invisible when it is convenient. In contrast, fatness presents an "*apparent* paradox because it is visible and dissected publicly; in this respect, it is *hypervisible*. Fat is also marginalized and erased; in this respect, it is *hyperinvisible"* (Gailey 2014, 7).

Despite occupying space as simultaneously hypervisible and hyperinvisible, fat people have historically challenged widespread perceptions of their bodies and embraced their bodies as an opportunity for resistance against body-based oppression. This resistance has taken the forms of political/legal advocacy, creation of safe community spaces for fat people (on and offline), and protests, among others. Recently, fat people have connected through an online movement known as the "Fuck Flattering!" movement to use engagement with fashion and beauty norms as a meaningful method of resistance.

In this paper I argue that people can use acts of beauty labor as a form of resistance against oppressive beauty norms, but also against larger oppressive structures. By exploring how fat people shape their own identities and experiences through this movement using beauty labor, I will argue that fat people are able to challenge their status as hyper(in)visible, demanding visibility in ways that force others to address and consider their own anti-fatness. Beauty labor, a concept borrowed from Shirley Anne Tate, consists of acts "involved in producing this surface

[of beauty on the body]" which can then be visible to and assessed by others (Tate 2009, 17). On her view, acts of beauty labor are used to respond to (and sometimes challenge) beauty norms. There are numerous instances of beauty labor, including (but not limited to) doing makeup, certain ways of dress, styling of body hair, and more permanent or long-lasting choices like piercings or tattoos.

Beauty labor is situated in a context in which beauty is racialized, unfairly and unequally removed as a possibility for people of color. As Tate explains, this racialization is such that "there is an inscription of beauty on some bodies and not others so that beauty is always embodied *as white*" (18). This idea of candidacy for beauty can be extended to account for size, disability, gender expression, and other visible facets of embodiment. In other words, whether one is a candidate for beauty depends on the degree to which their body approximates or resembles the type of body (accounting for race, disability, size, gender expression, etc.) in virtue of which beauty is defined. Acts of beauty labor can be used to increase apparent proximity to idealized beauty, but can also be used as a tool for resistance against those same conceptions of beauty. Through the "Fuck Flattering!" movement, fat people reject society's tendency to only perceive fatness when convenient. Using acts of beauty labor, participants in the movement force society to perceive their bodies *on their own terms*, confronting their fatness even when it is unwanted or inconvenient. This forced perception is a means of controlling and reclaiming one's own visibility, and offers a meaningful site of resistance against anti-fatness.

I focus this project on the ways beauty labor can be used to resist anti-fatness, as anti-fatness is an underexplored topic in philosophy, especially in the field of aesthetics. Although there is a growing literature about how to use or attend to aesthetics to combat body oppression, much of this literature focuses on sites of oppression and marginalized identities other than

fatness, such as race and gender.[79] In light of this gap, this paper seeks to motivate an account of the ways fat people redefine and reimagine beauty, creating space for themselves and other fat people to be seen as candidates for beauty. Through this reconstruction of beauty, fat people can combat anti-fatness more broadly as their beauty labor becomes a tool for resistance. This project also follows previous explorations of fatness as a site of identity and resistance in other fields outside of philosophical aesthetics.[80] By exploring the ways that fat people use their bodies as aesthetic tools for resistance, I hope to expand the understanding of the rich interplays between body size, beauty standards, and collective action and activism.

In Section I of this paper, I present the case of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement, a social media-driven movement aimed at challenging an anti-fat fashion industry. Analyzing the myriad actions involved in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement will help motivate an account of beauty labor as a tool for resistance. In section II I identify criteria necessary for an act of beauty labor to count as resistance, using the "Fuck Flattering!" movement to highlight the different degrees of epistemic awareness of and engagement with norms possible in acts of beauty labor as resistance. I present these criteria alongside Gailey's analysis of fatness as hyper(in)visible, and borrowing from Kathleen LeBesco's analysis of redefining fat identity as a form of group resistance. After motivating this account of beauty labor as resistance, in section III I discuss how those acts of beauty labor help people resist broader systems of anti-fatness, highlighting the ways that the movement allows individuals to claim and re-claim space, both digital and physical, from which fat people have been historically excluded.

[79] See Garland-Thomson 2009, Staring: How We Look; Tate 2009, Black Beauty; Al-Saji 2014, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing"; and Irvin 2017, "Resisting Body Oppression: An Aesthetic Approach." A notable exception is Eaton 2016, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression."
[80] See LeBesco 2004; Gailey 2014; Blank 2020.

I. Anti-Fatness and the "Fuck Flattering!" Movement

In November 2015, designer and plus-size fashion blogger Alysse Dalessandro Santiago released the controversial Convertible Cupcake Dress through her clothing line Ready to Stare (Dalessandro-Santiago n.d.). This dress, inspired by singer Rihanna's 2015 Grammy Awards gown, has an oversized silhouette that balloons out from the body.[81] Rihanna's dress was overall considered fashionable and beautiful. Despite the strikingly similar silhouettes, the Convertible Cupcake Dress was not as well received.[82] Its poor reception was largely due to the fact that the dress violates one of the most basic and widely held rules of fat fashion, wherein fat women are expected to wear curve-hugging, "figure-friendly" clothing like empire waist tops or A-line silhouettes. Dalessandro Santiago remarked that

> this dress represented freedom. Although this dress didn't sit tightly on my body, it showed my arms which are one of my largest body parts. I still have a double chin in this dress. I wasn't trying to hide my fat; I wasn't trying not to "embrace my curves," I was trying to wear whatever the fuck I wanted (Dalessandro-Santiago n.d.).

[81] See figure 1.

[82] One could argue that there is an important difference between the two dresses in that Rihanna's dress was meant to be couture or high fashion whereas the Convertible Cupcake Dress was intended as streetwear or everyday fashion, which could explain the different reactions to the two dresses in relation to their intended categories. However, even if we grant this distinction, there is still a disparity in the responses to unflattering clothing in the case of the Convertible Cupcake Dress vs. with similarly cut clothing for thin women. A quick glance at popular clothing stores like H & M, ASOS, or Urban Outfitters confirms that oversized silhouettes are currently accepted and in fashion for thin women, and do not receive the same amount of backlash as did the Convertible Cupcake Dress.



Figure 1: Dalessandro Santiago's Convertible Cupcake Dress (Red dress, on right model)

Despite her goal of helping expand the number of options of clothing available to fat women, her dress was heavily criticized. Upon its initial release, people commented things like "[the] designer should be fired" and "why why why do this to these girls?...[This is] terrible for these girls who are beautiful." Dalessandro Santiago has responded to these comments, noting that since she is in fact a fat woman it should not be surprising or disturbing for her to wear clothing that makes her look fat. Others have followed suit, praising the dress for opening the doors to a movement that could change the face of fat fashion. On the blog "Flight of the Fat Girl," for example, one owner of the dress exclaimed the following:

> "I saw it on Facebook first, back around the time [her collection] launched — the nasty comments, all because a designer dared to challenge society's idea of what plus size fashion should be… What Alysse has done, is go up against the standard… and say, it's time to forge further and conquer new territory in plus size fashion! It's time

> to step out of these stagnant waters and allow ourselves to accept that we have a right to wear any style a thin person can, whether society deems it "flattering" or not!" ("Don't Flatter Yourself, Cupcake" 2015).

This dress has played a large role in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement, a social-media driven movement wherein fat people insist that "flattering" clothing need not be the only acceptable type of clothing, and that fashion should allow people to wear what they want. The movement represents an attitude endorsed by fat people—especially within the fat fashion (or "fatshion") community—to reject the notion of "flattering" as a necessary feature of clothing. Moreover, the movement strives to unpack the anti-fatness implicit in norms which recommend "flattering" clothing. As queer fat fashion blogger and art historian Shannon (of the blog "With a Rare Device") explains,

> when those of us in the fat activism community say we want to 'fuck flattering,' we don't just mean that we want to wear things that go against flattering norms. That part's great—horizontal stripes and sack dresses and things that emphasize our volume forever and ever—but there's more. It's a recognition of the fact that "flattering" has not been used as a compliment for many of us; it's been used as a weapon. It's been used to diminish us, to reward us for shrinking ourselves, to deny us the full range of color and expression and joy, to assume our bodies are unruly and forcefully tame them (2019).

While popular fat bloggers like Bethany Rutter (Rutter 2012), Alysse Dalessandro Santiago, and Caroline Dooner (author of *The F*CK It Diet*) endorse the movement, its participants also engage in the movement on social media such as Instagram. The "Fuck Flattering!" movement represents a cluster of actions, many of which constitute beauty labor as

resistance. At its most basic, this beauty labor includes dressing in clothing which is not traditionally deemed flattering for a fat person's body. Some participants of the movement expand these acts of beauty labor, sharing their outfits on social media, being seen at public fashion events (e.g. New York Fashion Week) in "unflattering" clothing, and creating their own "unflattering" clothing to wear when it is not available commercially. These varied actions have in common that they aim to celebrate and validate fat bodies, rejecting oppressive norms which dictate that said bodies should not exist as is.

As one of the founders of the movement, Dalessandro Santiago noted that there is a lot of internal and external policing and beauty standards which limit which silhouettes are deemed "acceptable" to wear. External forces—the fashion industry, media, informal social pressure, etc.—unfairly limit which clothing options are available and acceptable for certain types of bodies to purchase and wear, helping construct and maintain problematic beauty standards which then gain uptake in society more broadly. Meanwhile, people (including those subject to and marginalized by oppressive norms) internalize those standards, self-policing and monitoring others' bodies and choice of clothing.

The "Fuck Flattering!" movement helps challenge these ideals, criticizing "the idea that the point of fashion should be to look as thin as possible because that's the 'enhancing' that flattering is used to signify" (Dalessandro-Santiago n.d.). Following LeBesco (2004, 16), I leave room for nuanced and varied meanings of and motivations for acts of resistance. Although it is impossible to speak for every individual act of beauty labor performed within the "Fuck Flattering!" movement, we can draw general conclusions about the choice to wear unflattering clothing as a fat person.

While LeBesco situates language as a "means for positioning an inhabitable subjectivity for fat people" (3), allowing those communities to resist oppressive and limited understandings of what it means to exist as a fat person, it is but one of many ways of resisting anti-fatness. LeBesco argues that this resistance is powerful insofar as "by exuberantly saying what they do, affinity groups use rhetoric to enter themselves into discourse in significant ways that demonstrate that even small collective actions can make important differences" (13). This aspiration is echoed in acts of beauty labor as a form of resistance. Through participants of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement engaging in acts of beauty labor, they are asserting their right to participate in collective discourse surrounding beauty, demanding to be taken seriously as aesthetic agents with a right to contribute to societal understandings of their own bodies.

II. Beauty Labor as Resistance

When an agent's act of beauty labor challenges dominant beauty norms, it is potentially an act of beauty labor as resistance. Three key elements often contribute to an act of beauty labor counting *as resistance*: (1) the agent's being situated as a less ideal candidate for attributions of beauty, (2) the agent's having some level of knowledge or awareness of the norms (defined in light of dominant groups) and their harms, and (3) that knowledge or awareness of the harms informing the agent's act of beauty labor. In what follows, I will consider each of these in turn, using the "Fuck Flattering!" movement to demonstrate the varying degrees to which one might have awareness of and intentions to disrupt or reject a beauty norm. While some acts of beauty labor as resistance involve a conscious, principled decision to dismantle oppressive beauty norms, others will involve a more nebulous or vague feeling that the norms to which one is subject are somehow unjust.

IIA. Candidates for beauty

I suspect that beauty labor as resistance is often (if not most regularly) performed by those outside of dominant groups—by individuals who have been deemed less suitable candidates for beauty. Thin or straight sized individuals within the United States benefit from body privilege, "an invisible package of unearned assets that thin or normal-sized individuals can take for granted on a daily basis. These 'normal' bodies, because of size, shape, or appearance, unwittingly avert various forms of social stigma, while simultaneously eliciting social benefits" (Kwan 2010, 147). Within this body-hierarchy, thin people are seen as stronger candidates for beauty, while fat people are not afforded this same privilege and agency. Thus, fat folks "must negotiate daily interactions, sometimes feeling shame, guilt, and anger because of their body" (Kwan 2010, 147). They must engage in heightened body management, physical or emotional adjustment in light of their awareness that their bodies do not conform to beauty ideals (Kwan 2010, 150). Oftentimes this body management takes the form of reducing one's body—wearing flattering clothing, wrapping your limbs tight into your torso to take up less space in public transit, or taking fewer leadership roles so your body is not as often in the public eye. But as we have seen with beauty labor as a form of resistance, fat people are refusing to engage in this body management. Instead, they are forcing others to acknowledge and reflect on their lack of body privilege due to narrow beauty standards, asserting their right to take up space and be treated as legitimate aesthetic agents worthy of dignity and fair treatment.

Being deemed a less ideal candidate for attributions of beauty can give rise to myriad attitudes. Some grow frustrated with dominant beauty contexts and thus abandon or ignore beauty norms as a result of their exclusion. This decision not to attend (let alone conform) to dominant beauty standards—or any standards of beauty whatsoever—in one's self-representation is one way that one may participate in an act of resistance against beauty standards. However,

one may also choose to attend to, broaden, or reconstruct notions of beauty by performing acts of beauty labor as a form of resistance. One may pick and choose *which* dominant beauty norms they respond to and which they ignore, or may redefine beauty for themselves or their community, pulling from any number of sources or understandings of beauty to inform a new conception. This means of playing with and selectively attending to beauty standards pushes back at the expectation that those with deviant or nonideal bodies must perform body management to atone for their "problematic" bodies.

While beauty labor as resistance seems to be performed most often by those deemed not candidates for beauty, it is important to acknowledge the burden this places on those people. Being able to resist beauty norms in outwardly visible ways—especially when those norms are used to uphold broader systems of oppression—is often the result of privilege. Similarly, ignoring beauty norms altogether or refusing to participate in beauty labor are options most readily available to those in positions of relative privilege. There are real consequences to performing (or choosing not to perform) acts of beauty labor in ways that defy what is expected of an individual, including physical threats and concerns for safety, social ostracization, or the loss of one's employment or ability to participate in education settings.

For instance, in many contexts beauty-related norms involving dress, makeup, and body hair help inform a rigid gender dichotomy. In this dichotomy, there are a limited range of accepted ways to present oneself as a man or a woman, and failures to comply with this dichotomy (or attempts to present as outside of the binary, e.g. as gender non-conforming) are (at best) frowned upon, or (at worst) jeopardize people's safety as others try to reinforce and police the binary. People like Alok Vaid-Menon, a self-described "gender non-conforming performance artist, writer, educator, and entertainer" (Vaid-Menon n.d.), may have to choose when to perform

acts of beauty labor as resistance. While Vaid-Menon dresses in a mix of traditionally feminine and masculine clothing and accessories, often combining heavy facial hair with handbags and bold lipstick, they have been harassed and threatened for doing so both on- and offline (Vaid-Menon 2019a).

Similarly, beauty standards are used to police race, size, and disability. This is glaringly clear in the policing of hairstyles in schools, workplaces, and the military. At Mystic Valley Regional Charter School in Massachusetts, two black teenage girls were given infractions for their braided hair extensions, which were deemed "distracting" and a violation of dress code (Lattimore 2017). Mya and Deanna Cook were made to miss class due to this "violation," and were removed from extracurricular activities and prom. The choice to reinforce the dress code regarding hair disproportionately disadvantages people of color, as white students are not similarly singled out for hairstyles specific to their culture in dress codes. In this case, beauty norms are used to maintain a racial hierarchy that threatens and harms students who are people of color, making it difficult for them to participate fully in getting an. Similar bans have been enforced historically in the workplace and in the military (Cooper 2014), demonstrating a troubling history and tendency for beauty norms to reinforce oppressive structures in society.

Given the amount of privilege and bravery often required to perform acts of beauty labor as resistance, I want to leave open the possibility that one may perform an act of beauty labor as resistance in solidarity with those in marginalized groups from within a dominant group. For instance, one could imagine a cisgender, heterosexual woman who chooses to dress in a butch fashion, defying typical norms of femininity to help make that mode of dress more acceptable

and normalized for people outside of those groups.[83] This act of resistance in solidarity could be an invaluable form of allyship, if done in consultation with and while respecting members of the marginalized community in question. Such an act of solidarity plausibly appears to be a case of beauty labor as resistance, but more work needs to be done to develop an account of how this serves as a mode of resistance from within the group traditionally deemed eligible for attributions of beauty.

The case of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement easily meets the first criterion insofar as fat people (at least in dominant U.S. contexts) are deemed unfit candidates for attributions of beauty. In this context, thinness is treated as essential to beauty. There is clear evidence that our society structures beauty norms in relation to thin people. It is well documented that society has a distaste for fat bodies that results in fat bodies being "rarely represented in mainstream forms of entertainment and advertising" lest they be depicted as "unattractive, ridiculous, contemptible, and even gross and disgusting" (Eaton 2016, 38). This distaste for fat bodies, as Anne Eaton argues, "is an important constitutive element of the oppression of fat people" (38). Similarly, Sherri Irvin notes that "obesity" results in oppressive social sanctions including unfair medical treatment, discriminatory hiring practices, and inadequate assistance following accidents (Irvin 2017, 4). These positions of privilege inform dominant beauty standards, helping construct unfair criteria which exclude certain groups of people from being candidates for beauty.

IIB. Awareness of Beauty Norms

For beauty labor to count as resistance, it also seems necessary that the agent have some degree of epistemic awareness or knowledge of the norms to which they are responding, and of the

[83] I am grateful to Sherri Irvin for suggesting this kind of case as another instance of beauty labor as resistance.

harmfulness of those norms (to individuals and insofar as the norms uphold systems of oppression). The degree of awareness varies depending on the case in question. Some cases, such as that of Vaid-Menon, involve individuals who are activists for their communities, whose careers consist of critically engaging with the norms that they oppose. Vaid-Menon, for instance, gives lectures worldwide on the importance of dismantling a rigid gender dichotomy, regularly reflecting on the harms caused by or resulting from norms of behavior, dress, and expression which perpetuate that dichotomy. Vaid-Menon's work informs their actions of beauty labor as resistance, which reflect a high degree of awareness or knowledge of the oppressive norms in question.

Not all cases of beauty labor as resistance involve this acute awareness of oppressive norms and their subsequent harms, however. An agent may instead have a more implicit level of awareness informed by their lived experiences. Given that beauty norms often uphold and function in conjunction with other oppressive norms, an individual may have experienced related oppression without being able to articulate how that oppression functions or is supported by beauty norms.

As a person who was fat since childhood, I grew up aware that there was *something* different about me from my peers. Although I couldn't always articulate it, I noticed the whispers when I walked into a straight-sized clothing store with my friends, where employees kept a close eye on me and treated me as though I didn't belong. While I was never directly told I was unwelcome, I was never offered help locating an item in a different size, accessing a fitting room, or any of other services offered to my thin friends. This sort of experience resulted in an implicit, unconscious understanding that I was being othered, kept out of a world in which I could only dream of participating. As I've grown up and sought out others with similar

experiences, I've gained a deeper understanding of the power structures that uphold fatphobia. However, many acts of beauty labor as resistance performed in my youth (such as wearing garments that demanded attention from others and maximized the amount of space I took up, like long, sequined dresses or voluminous tutus) were done with a less developed understanding of the norms to which I was subject.

In the case of Dalessandro Santiago's dress, and the "Fuck Flattering!" movement more broadly, the agents involved are acutely aware of how their bodies are perceived and detested. This reflects a level of knowledge or awareness of norms of beauty which privilege thin bodies and harm fat bodies, the second criterion necessary for beauty labor to count as resistance. Beyond impacting medical care, health practices, and more general social interactions, fat oppression pervasively infects fashion standards as well.

For example, as Eaton notes, clothing company Abercrombie & Fitch deliberately excludes women over a size 10 (which precludes a significant percentage of female American consumers from shopping there). Company CEO Mike Jeffries justifies this by saying his stores intentionally represent and market themselves towards sexually attractive and cool (and, by implication, thin) women (Eaton 2016, 37). As Jeffries commented in a 2006 interview, "We [at Abercrombie & Fitch] go after the cool kids… A lot of people don't belong [in our clothes] and they can't belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely. Those companies that are in trouble are trying to target everybody: young, old, fat, skinny" (Denizet-Lewis 2006).

Moreover, as Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag argue, there is a norm or construction "of being 'appropriately' female [which] transgresses the physical body and incorporates other markers such as personality and movement. Accordingly, a woman must be smaller than a man…and take up little space. Fat women are, then, the antithesis of what it means to be

appropriately feminine… [they] are constantly reminded of 'appropriate' looks and style, which are then expressed in self-evaluations, behavior, and self-control directed at diminishing size and restricting movement" (Giovanelli and Ostertag 2009, 290) in order to keep with these norms of what is appropriate.

Besides more hidden and overlooked instances of discrimination like those cited above, key figures in the movement like Dalessandro Santiago received regular backlash for their choices (as demonstrated earlier) and still regularly receive criticism for having the audacity to exist (and even be happy) as fat women. As a fellow fat woman who once had an active blogging presence where I posted photos of my outfits and talked about difficulties shopping while fat, I regularly received messages saying things like "hey, fata**, go eat a cookie," or "you are disgusting. How dare you glorify your lifestyle? The world would be better off without people like you." As most fat people with an internet presence will agree, this is a regular occurrence.

Fat people are often unable to escape the reality that most of society does not want us to exist, and thus are acutely aware of the fact that we are not "beautiful"—an awareness which is requisite in my account of beauty resistance. All these instances provide evidence that the first two criteria of my account of beauty resistance are met. Fat people who participate in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement fall outside of the dominant group in virtue of which beauty is defined, and they have awareness, whether overt or explicit, of the harmfulness of the norms to which they are subject and the systems of oppression that said norms uphold.

IIC. Motivation Stemming from Epistemic Engagement with Beauty Norms

Relatedly, beauty labor as resistance seems to require that one's awareness or knowledge of oppressive norms helps inform their goals or reasons for acting, and that this informs their desire

to oppose those norms (often via questioning the set of beauty norms to which they are subject). Sometimes the act of beauty labor as resistance is a conscious act, accompanied by clear statements of intentions to defy a norm or system of norms. In other cases, one may feel an overall sense of unease or have a more inarticulable, embodied reaction to oppressive norms that gives rise to a vague desire to act against them. For beauty labor to count as resistance, there needs to be some level of reflection on and motivation as a result of one's awareness of the norms to which one is subject, but I leave open the degree to which one might consciously or deliberately choose to act with this motivation. I suspect that this kind of motivation to act can take many forms, including (but not limited to) propositional content, intuitions or "gut feelings", or conscious, calculated motivation.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the awareness that participants of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement have, its participants choose to reject oppressive beauty standards through wearing unflattering clothing. That aesthetic choice reflects that they've acted as a result of engagement with and desire to oppose those norms due to the harm the norms in question cause, as participants of the movement reject limited clothing options and body standards which privilege thinness. Under the "Fuck Flattering!" movement, then, participants' acts of beauty labor count as resistance insofar as they have reflected (to varying extents) on the standards to which they are subject and the harms that result from those standards, and act in light of this reflection and awareness of those harms.

The cases of the Convertible Cupcake Dress, and subsequent "Fuck Flattering!" movement, are unique in that multiple, sometimes contradictory beauty norms are clearly functioning to limit the range of acceptable acts of beauty labor possible for fat people. There is the clear standard to wear flattering clothing, which is perhaps most pressing. Under this

oppressive rule, the style of clothing available to fat people (and especially fat women) is more limited than in comparison to thin women. However, there are also norms of fashion that dictate the kind of clothing "beautiful" people wear. This makes it acceptable for women of a certain body type (namely, thin) to wear oversized, billowing silhouettes à la Rihanna and still be deemed beautiful and fashionable.

These competing standards are interesting, as they change the degree of epistemic engagement necessary for the person performing the act of beauty resistance. Although we may stereotypically think of resistance to norms as simply rejecting them, this case demonstrates that resistance can involve a much more complex interplay of competing norms to which one must attend. In the "Fuck Flattering!" movement, there are some fashion norms, informed by icons and styles of clothing (such as the aforementioned Rihanna gown), which are deemed worthy of uptake by participants in the movement. The agent in question, however, is subject to a narrower and competing set of norms (e.g., "if you are fat, wear only flattering clothing") which they believe unfairly restrict their options of dress and cause undue harm, and as a result they intend to violate the narrower set of standards while acting as though they can meet the broader fashion norms. In other words, part of this case of beauty resistance involves "playing the game" of beauty, so to speak: acting in line with beauty standards and accepted practices despite the knowledge that those efforts to participate may fall short of actually achieving idealized beauty.

Part of what makes the "Fuck Flattering!" movement such a compelling case of beauty labor as resistance is that the agents involved acknowledge (rather than simply rejecting or ignoring) beauty norms. However, through this acknowledgement the participants also assert their (previously denied) right to candidacy for beauty, insisting that beauty can take forms not

readily recognized in mainstream discourse. Through this assertion, agents work to recognize and combat the harms caused by more narrow or idealized imaginings of beauty.

Part of what is so harmful about being a hyper(in)visible body, on Gailey's view, is that "marginalized bodies are not just seen or acknowledged; they are dissected and overtly made into a spectacle" (Gailey 2014, 12). The "Fuck Flattering!" movement, then, is unique insofar as participants in the movement make *themselves* into a spectacle through wearing clothing which demands to be noticed. This taking up space is a means of refusing to be forced into a state of hyper(in)visibility, reasserting participants' rights to dictate the way they are perceived. It forces people to notice and reckon with their fatness in a society in which fatness is strategically and inconsistently rendered hyperinvisible in order to dehumanize and ignore the agency and worth of fat people.

Competing standards of beauty are accepted and rejected in differing degrees by participants of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement. Some participants of the movement reject that their body size is something to be avoided, choosing to emphasize the size of their body through their fashion choices. This is sometimes an outright rejection of body oppression but is also sometimes inspired by people having a desire to simply experiment with fashion, wearing clothes like their fashion icons/inspirations wear. In contrast, some participants of the movement engage in a more principled rejection of the competing and unfair standards which dictate and regulate their choices and available clothing options. People like Dalessandro Santiago have written extensively on the ways that beauty norms are harmful and feed into broader systems of anti-fatness, reflecting more extensive epistemic engagement with those norms.

By dressing in clothing like a thin person would (or could), and refusing to conceal the fat of her arms or her double chin, Dalessandro Santiago simultaneously rejects the narrow and

restrictive set of beauty norms that dictates "acceptable" clothing for fat women to wear and *acts as though* she can be beautiful according to prevailing norms of fashion more broadly (even though, as a fat woman, she is aware that society has already decided she is not a suitable candidate for attributions of beauty). Participants in the movement engage in beauty resistance by performing acts of beauty labor which, quite pointedly, say "fuck flattering" and oppose the restrictive norms by which fat women are expected to dress. These acts of resistance help dismantle the broader fatphobic structures in society, reclaiming space in the fashion industry and in the public eye for a group of people that has historically been demonized and disenfranchised.

Although beauty labor as resistance is sometimes a conscious choice, we must recognize the countless individuals who have no choice but to resist if they are to live as their authentic selves. While I may still maintain my identity as a fat cis-woman regardless of whether I perform (at least some) acts of beauty labor as resistance, there are many people for whom resistance is a necessary path in order to affirm and respect their identities.

For example, non-binary people living in societies with rigid gender binaries may constantly be *perceived* as performing acts of beauty labor as resistance if they choose to dress in accordance with their gender identity. In a context in which norms are structured in accordance with a rigid gender binary, dressing (and identifying as someone) outside of that binary makes one a less ideal candidate for attributions of beauty. By recognizing the harms and limitations of this binary, and choosing to present in ways that defy it, a non-binary person may engage in acts of beauty labor as resistance simply in virtue of attending to their identity in a way that feels authentic and affirming. However, their motivation may be less centered on deconstructing and reimagining norms of beauty (as is the case with many acts of beauty labor as resistance involved

in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement), and moreso stemming from a need (for their mental health) to live authentically in accordance with their identity.

Failure to have the ability to express one's gender identity can have debilitating effects on one's mental and physical health, creating and sustaining long-term trauma (Olson et al. 2016). Vaid-Menon highlights this point when reflecting on the need for bodily adornment, arguing that "adornment is not supplementary to the body, it is foundational to its constitution" (Vaid-Menon 2019b). Regarding clothing, they claim clothing "is not my costume, it is my being… the objects that I adorn myself with become myself" (Vaid-Menon 2019b). Vaid-Menon is one of many people who see acts of beauty labor as necessary, rather than one of many possible choices they could make. Their way of dress, which happens to challenge a rigid gender dichotomy, is essential to their being. While in this kind of case an individual may still have the degree of engagement with and desire to defy harmful norms necessary for an act to count as beauty labor as resistance, they are also performing this act in order to survive and maintain their mental health—an inspiration or motivation to act which may not be present in every instance of beauty labor as resistance.

Similarly, people of a certain size or who are racialized in particular ways may be perceived as resisting, and may be choosing to resist, as they merely make the choice to continue existing. The reality that certain features of our bodies are inescapably visible to others may change the ways in which people think of their actions as beauty resistance and may impact the acts of beauty labor which they perform *as* resistance.[84] For example, certain sizes of fatness are impossible to hide, regardless of what clothing or poses an individual tries. For people on the

[84] Special thanks to Stephanie Holt for discussions which informed this section of the paper.

furthest end of the fat spectrum, often referred to as "infinifat" (Nischuk 2016), their fatness is visible at all times such that merely existing at that size can be read as an act of resistance or defiance of thin-centric beauty norms. Someone who is infinifat may be resisting in every outfit choice they make, every photo they post online, or every space they engage with in public, because they exist and allow themselves to take up space without changing or minimizing their body. Given the complexities of our identities and the broad range of human experience and embodiment, it becomes even more crucial to consider how beauty labor can function as resistance, as it is a necessary, life-sustaining, and identity-affirming project for many individuals.

IID. Additional Considerations for Beauty Labor as Resistance

One central aim of this paper is to motivate a general account of beauty labor as a tool for resistance, which allows aesthetic agents to challenge beauty norms and broader systems of oppression. It is important to note that acts of beauty labor as resistance may manifest themselves differently depending on the standards relevant to a given act of beauty labor. As a result, what constitutes beauty labor as resistance will vary from culture to culture and change over time as our norms change. Moreover, I suspect that who is able to perform acts of beauty labor *as acts of resistance* will change depending on who is deemed a suitable candidate for beauty in a given context.

The possibility of beauty labor as a form of and tool for resistance is crucial given the overwhelming amount of social oppression which occurs in virtue of, and through the weaponization and policing of, our bodies. Sherri Irvin and Anne Eaton, among others, highlight that perceived failure to satisfy beauty norms can result in real social and political harms, such as threats to employment, limited legal protections, and threats of physical violence when we

deviate from what is conventionally considered "beautiful" or the norm.[85] Thus, it is crucial to recognize that beauty labor has liberatory potential insofar as it enables us to challenge and dismantle oppressive norms (beauty-related or otherwise).

III. Resisting Anti-Fatness Using Beauty Labor

Having established that many acts of beauty labor are genuine instances of resistance on my framework, we can now consider how this beauty labor as resistance helps combat body oppression and anti-fatness. Participants of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement make individual-scale actions, and at first glance one might not perceive their choices to wear certain dresses, tops, or pants to have any substantive impact on complex systems of oppression. However, in this section I will push back against this worry by highlighting the ways that beauty labor as resistance can be used as a tool to dismantle anti-fatness more generally.

For fat people, the ability to participate in norms surrounding beauty and fashion has been historically limited, narrowing the options for self-expression made available to fat individuals. Even as brands like Universal Standard aim to create more inclusive clothing lines, and more fashion magazines and advertisements resist photo retouching or feature a broader spectrum of body types, society acts as though "it is still morally and aesthetically questionable in mainstream culture to deign fatness appealing in any way" (LeBesco 2004, 70). Some, like Ophira Edut, are suspect of worrying about this lack of inclusivity given the broader contexts of anti-fat oppression. Edut asks, "Will equal access to haute couture lead to equal rights in the workplace, in health care, and everywhere else size discrimination runs rampant?" (Edut 1998,

[85] See Eaton 2016 and Irvin 2017.

18). In short, many worry that attending to fashion and beauty norms does little to meaningfully resist oppression.

These worries are understandable. Certainly, the ability to buy a dress at a popular store alone is not enough to stop anti-fatness. But we should not be so quick to dismiss the importance and value of fashion and beauty labor as meaningful opportunities for helping us shape our identities, form and sustain communities, and resist oppression. At its most basic, beauty labor is a crucial opportunity insofar as it allows us to express ourselves in ways that reinforce and help us make sense of our own identities (as Vaid-Menon does through experimentation with gender-fluid clothing). It also helps us sustain our communities, providing a touchstone to our cultural history and affording us the opportunity to express our participation or membership in those communities. Beauty labor offers us one opportunity (among many) for meaningful resistance, which can be used alongside other forms of resistance to incite lasting change. As Erin Keating argues, as cited in LeBesco (2004), "If the personal is political, then being able to find clothes that fit and make you feel good about yourself is a political plus. In my mind, we must take these successes whether they come through direct action like marches and rallies, or through market recognition of yet another way to make a buck" (LeBesco 2004, 72). In a world that is so viciously anti-fat, the ability to find solace in one's clothing and to utilize that kind of beauty labor to shape one's life and identity is an importantly revolutionary act.

LeBesco highlights a difference between liberatory and assimilationist political action and resistance, tendencies which exist on different ends of a spectrum. Assimilationist work in fat communities "works to secure tolerance for fat rights and experiences and tries to raise consciousness about fat oppression but still possibly conceives of fat as a problem… In contrast, a fat 'liberationist' celebrates fatness and tries to secure for the fat a positively valued experience

of difference from the norm" (LeBesco 2004, 42). Participation in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement is significant insofar as it often aims at liberationist goals—in celebrating fat people's bodies as different from dominant understandings of beauty, and in demanding that fat be allowed to take up space. Many acts in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement are focused not just (and sometimes not at all) on self-acceptance, but on challenging the very construction of beauty standards. Participants in the movement use beauty labor to critique the strategic exclusion of whole groups of people as candidates for beauty, questioning how exclusionary beauty norms have been constructed and perpetuated. The movement also allows members of fat communities to construct their own understandings of beauty, helping break down societal anti-fatness. By wearing clothing like the Convertible Cupcake dress which makes fat bodies stand out, and refusing to blend in through the limited number of clothing options made available to fat people, fashion becomes revolutionary as "its newfound ability stymies fat oppression" (LeBesco 2004, 73).

Having situated beauty labor as a legitimate option for resistance against anti-fatness, I will now discuss how it is used as a tool for resistance. Although there are countless ways that individuals (and groups) can use beauty labor as a tool for resistance, my discussion will focus on three key features of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement: reclamation of digital and physical space, affording an opportunity for education and unpacking of oppression and bias, and expansion of the fashion industry.

First, the acts of beauty labor involved in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement are a powerful tool for resistance against anti-fatness because they allow individuals to claim and re-claim space which they have been historically denied. This happens on two levels: physically, in everyday life; and digitally, through posts that increase visibility of fat people on social media.

The acts of beauty labor as resistance in the movement resist harmful body standards which are used to uphold anti-fat, patriarchal standards. Participation in the movement involves fat people taking up more space, as they wear oversized clothing and resist the demand to minimize the appearance of their bodies. Wearing unflattering clothing as a part of this movement enables fat people to reclaim physical space in their environment, asserting their right to exist at their current size and to navigate space in ways they choose.

In a similar vein, participation in these acts of beauty labor often enables fat people to reclaim space digitally through posting about their outfits on social media. This digital reclamation of space results in more fat people taking up digital real estate, further increasing visibility of different ways of being embodied as a fat person. This digital visibility can help fat viewers, as they see people who look *like them* existing happily. This kind of narrative is crucial, given the real harms that negative representations (often *mis*-representations) may perpetuate. Paul Taylor (Taylor 2016) cites many types of harmful representation often used to depict Black people—ones which are informed by and perpetuate stereotypes (52), fetishize or obscure the personhood of their subjects (54-5), or deny/ignore the perspectives of their subjects (58)—and similar forms of mis-representation are employed to villainize and ostracize fat people. Thus, digital visibility which rewrites narratives about fat people is crucial as it helps reaffirm fat people's identities, increasing self-esteem and showing fat people that they do not need to comply with standards which dictate that they must minimize their bodies. As I have previously emphasized, reclaiming space in these ways can help fat people resist their status as hyper(in)visible such that it meaningfully combats anti-fatness.

Moreover, digital visibility helps expand others' understanding of what it means to be fat, challenging the notion that fat people must dress and act in a narrow set of ways in order to be

accepted. Through presenting important and varied narratives (and counter-narratives which challenge oppressive beauty norms that dominate U.S. contexts), participants in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement are able to demonstrate the many possible understandings of beauty. Both this and the physical reclamation of space help legitimize the aesthetic and personal choices of fat people, especially when considered collectively. This broadening of space and creation of new understandings of beauty is what Tate (2009) refers to as a "cut and mix" approach to aesthetics, wherein participants in the movement draw on a variety of traditions and aesthetic ideals (e.g. dominant fashion trends for thin people and the desire to experiment with fashion within the fat community) to develop their own concept of beauty.[86]

Eaton echoes the importance of positive representations and counter-narratives of fat people in combatting anti-fatness. She recommends "that we produce and widely promote vivid, imaginatively engaging, and artistically interesting representations that *celebrate* fat bodies and encourage us to see them as likeable and attractive" (Eaton 2016, 53). Through habituating ourselves to regularly see fat bodies aestheticized or represented positively, we can more readily celebrate, recognize, and seek out the good in fat people. Under this framework, the digital and physical reclamation of space entailed in acts of beauty labor in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement is crucial as it invites (and sometimes forces) viewers to recognize and acknowledge the self-celebratory nature of said beauty labor. As participants in the movement take up (literal and digital) space, they assert their right to participate in and occupy beauty related spaces, an act which presents a positive image of a fat person existing in the way they choose. Over time, as part of a collective movement, these acts can combat anti-fatness and body oppression as they

[86] See also Kobena Mercer's "Black Hair/Style Politics," pp. 124–25 (Mercer 1994).

invite viewers to see fat bodies as attractive (or, at the very least, worthy of occupying space they were previously denied).

Second, beauty labor as resistance performed within the "Fuck Flattering!" movement allows us to push back against anti-fatness as it affords multiple opportunities for education about fatness. This kind of beauty labor allows fat people who participate in the movement to combat anti-fatness that results from ignorance and prejudice as they educate viewers about their lived experiences and identities as fat people. With increased visibility, there are increased opportunities to discuss the rich complexities of fatness—the varying ways of fat embodiment, relationships to oneself and the world around one, and connections between fatness and beauty. Although on the surface these acts of beauty labor seem to merely respond to beauty norms, they also serve to validate and normalize existing (and allowing oneself to be happy) while fat.

Images of fat people participating in acts of beauty labor as resistance under the "Fuck Flattering!" movement help reshape the narrative around fatness, showing that fat people can be accept and celebrate themselves rather than centering their existence on trying to lose weight. While on one level anti-fatness involves conflating fatness with ugliness, anti-fatness is also vicious insofar as it functions through treating fatness as bad in itself in a way that transcends the aesthetic, perpetuating the idea that fat people must be miserable *because of* their fatness.[87] Anti-fatness centers the "need" for weight loss, and people who express these anti-fat attitudes often assume that fat people must hate their own bodies and want to change them. Moreover, anti-fat attitudes typically assume that fatness is *morally* wrong, associating fatness with laziness, lack of care for the self, and other negative moral judgments about the character of fat people. As

[87] Cf. Nehamas 2017. In this book Nehamas argues that happiness is a central facet of how beauty norms are enforced and become oppressive.

Aubrey Gordon writes, when we look at fat bodies in our predominantly anti-fat society, we assume "a fat body must be the result of some tragedy. A fat body is deviant, aberrant, troubling" (Gordon 2020, 77). People with anti-fat attitudes criticize and undermine the humanity of fat people, treating fat people "as props, set pieces to prove thin people's virtue by contrast" (Gordon 2020, 87).

Thus, beyond being helpful for members within the fat community who are validated by increased visibility, the acts of beauty labor involved in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement function as a crucial instance of resistance as they push back against harmful narratives, allowing participants to show members outside of that community that their lives hold value *even while they are fat*. These actions help reshape our narratives surrounding body size and worth, asserting (as Gordon does) that "there are no prerequisites for human dignity" (Gordon 2020, 166). Construction of this new narrative is a crucial way in which acts of beauty labor performed in the movement can resist anti-fatness more broadly, as fat people rewrite anti-fat narratives to allow one to be happy in—and even celebrate—their fat body.

Finally, the acts of resistance performed in the "Fuck Flattering!" movement combat anti-fatness through forcing expansion of the fashion industry. As fat individuals have become frustrated with the insistence that they wear a limited range of clothing and with their exclusion from mainstream fashion, participants of the movement have used this frustration to fuel change (and advocacy for change) in the fashion industry. Some individuals like Gabi Gregg and Nicolette Mason (founders of plus-size fashion company Premme) have gone as far as to create their own fashion lines that provide a wider range of fashion options, allowing wearers to not feel limited by oppressive fashion norms. Similarly, Chastity Garner (garnerstyle) and CeCe Olisa (plus size princess) founded an annual event called theCURVYcon, a three-day convention

"that brings plus size Brands, Fashionistas, Shopaholics, Bloggers, and YouTubers into one space, to chat curvy, shop curvy, and embrace curvy" ("About" 2020). The demand created by participants of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement for more accessible and extensive fashion options has enabled (or inspired) countless people such as Gregg, Mason, Garner, and Olisa to expand the world of fat fashion, showing concrete change and efforts to eliminate or mitigate anti-fatness in the fashion world.

Others work to increase education about the construction of clothing for fat people in fashion schools, hoping to expand the number of designers and retailers who are equipped to create clothing for fat people. For example, in 2018 plus-size retailer Dia&Co and the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) launched "a joint education initiative in which CFDA will provide funding for classes to teach tomorrow's designers how to design for bodies beyond sample size" (Mondalek 2018). Thanks to the efforts of fat people, especially within the "Fuck Flattering!" movement, society is beginning to take notice of the ways in which fat people have been historically disenfranchised and excluded from opportunities afforded to thin people. Were it not for the demands of participants of the movement to have more options available and to regain autonomy over their bodies, the changes to the fashion world that are currently developing would have come much more slowly. The collective acts of beauty labor as resistance performed by members of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement help to actively combat anti-fatness, securing more rights for fat people and allowing fat people to redefine and reimagine beauty for their own communities.

IV. Beauty Labor as a Liberatory Tool

In this paper I have proposed an account of beauty resistance which can be used as a liberatory tool against body-based oppression. My paper focuses on fatness as a case study in

order to help rectify its underrepresentation in academic philosophical literature. To that end, I have presented the "Fuck Flattering!" movement as an important instance of beauty labor as resistance, one which allows fat people to combat anti-fatness while reclaiming space as candidates for beauty. My goal in this project was not to give a generalized account of beauty resistance that captures every instance of resistance, but to develop an account of one form of beauty labor as resistance. The unifying features that I argue are necessary in accounts of beauty resistance include an awareness of beauty norms (and the fact that they are harmful) which inform one's behavior as one acts out of a desire to oppose the norms *because* they are harmful. However, the ways in which this manifests itself may differ greatly, giving rise to different additional accounts of beauty labor as resistance.

It is crucial that we examine beauty labor as a potential avenue for resistance. Given the prevalence of acts of beauty labor in our lives, beauty resistance serves as a meaningful and accessible way to combat oppression and champion a more just society. Groups like the followers of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement have made significant impacts on the fashion industry through their beauty resistance, broadening the fashion options available to fat people and raising awareness of one of many injustices they face. Moreover, they have challenged ignorant and harmful narratives surrounding fatness, demonstrating the complexities of fat identities and the potential to accept (and celebrate) existing as a fat person.

This case reflects that beauty resistance has the capability of affirming our identities, enabling us to live more authentic, enriched lives while expressing ourselves and the rich and varied norms of our communities. Moreover, it also demonstrates the ability of beauty resistance to challenge broader oppressive structures, empowering individuals to object to and push back against institutions and norms which prevent them from expressing their identities and

participating fully in society. As Gailey argues, “visibility is linked to acknowledgement and recognition. To be seen by another person is an indication that we exist” (Gailey 2014, 167). Beauty labor can be used as a tool to echo this sentiment; it is a microphone with which fat people can remind the world that they exist, they matter, and that they need and deserve equal recognition and consideration.

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[88] I intentionally center the voices, experiences, and understandings of fat people and fat activists who are more actively involved in the communities relevant to this project. As such, in this paper I have tried to carefully balance what are traditionally seen as "academic" sources with less traditional academic sources.

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3. Imperfection as a Vehicle for Fat Visibility in Popular Media

Fat people are far too often depicted in popular media as imperfect, their whole characters riddled with negative features that can be attributed only to their non-idealized body. Their weight stands as a visual reminder (and root cause) of personal, often moral, failures—a sign that they cannot shrink themselves to a more purportedly acceptable size, a failure which in turn taints the rest of their character and capabilities. There are myriad depictions of fat people in popular television and film that emphasize such a link between imperfection and weight: see, for example, the lovable but incompetent father Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons* (1989-present), or the dorky and romantically hopeless "Fat Monica" in *Friends* (1994-2004). Importantly, these characters' imperfections are often presented as inextricably linked to their fatness. That is, Monica's failed attempts at dating are because she is fatter than women "should" be and drive her to maintain or gain weight out of self-loathing, and Homer's weight is presented as both a result and a symptom of his laziness.

This framing relies on viewers taking for granted that the fat body, and by extension the fat person, is imperfect. Representations of fat people too commonly imply not only that fatness itself is aesthetically and physically imperfect, but that fatness is caused by and causes more robust imperfection of character. That is, fatness is linked as both cause and consequence of personal and moral imperfections. Due to this bidirectional link between one's moral failings and body size, fatness becomes an easy visual shortcut for showing a person's imperfection. This relationship between fatness and imperfection weaponizes imperfection against fat people. Any flaws a fat person exhibits are portrayed as an inevitable result of their larger failure to obtain thinness.

Historically, television and film have predominately portrayed fatness as contemptible, laughable, or a moral failing.[89] These narratives reduce fat people's lives, needs, and experiences to monolithic imaginings about being a fat person, rather than illustrating the rich complexities of fatness in a more realistic and nuanced way. Moreover, these narratives reinforce society's anti-fat attitudes, simultaneously increasing and feeding off of pre-existing societal disgust for fat bodies.[90] When we regularly see fat people whose imperfections are blamed on their weight, we begin to imagine all fat people as sharing these deeper character flaws. Our collective understanding of fatness, then, becomes that fat people are imperfect because of their weight, and that they would be better off (happier, more lovable, kinder, cleaner) if only they could shed a few pounds. In a world where thin or average sized characters are given room to be unlikeable, unattractive, complex people who are nonetheless worthy of dignity and fair treatment, fat people are not offered the same space to be flawed. When many thin characters are imperfect—incompetent, cruel, greedy, clumsy, etc.—they are still allowed the space to be fully human, fully developed characters. In contrast, when fat characters are imperfect they are reduced to their flesh, their imperfections attributed fully to their size. This reduction informs a caricature in which we imagine fat people in a shallow, ill-informed manner that reinforces anti-fatness.

In this paper I will argue that in order to address our collective distaste for fat bodies (and, by extension, our shared anti-fat bias) we need to create and habitually engage with humanizing representations that show fat people as imperfect but do not blame those flaws on their weight. By creating more complex, fully human fat characters, we can learn to love and

[89] See Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 75; Aubrey Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 119–20.
[90] A. W. Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," in *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherri Irvin (Oxford University Press, 2016), 38, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198716778.003.0003.

accept fat people without reinforcing harmful stereotypes about fatness. To explore how we can create these more humanizing imperfect representations, I will consider the case of Hulu series *Shrill*, which highlights several fat characters in ways that affirm their identities and experiences without painting an inaccurate and harmful picture of fat people as have comparable representations of fatness in the past. In section I, I will motivate the need for more humanizing imperfect representations before presenting the case of *Shrill.* In section II, I will argue that *Shrill* most successfully mitigates harms perpetuated by older shows which reduced fat characters' imperfections to their weight, utilizing Paul Taylor's concept of plurality. In section III, I will argue that A. W. Eaton's advocacy for positive portrayals falls short of fostering the kind of plurality essential to fat visibility. I will conclude in section IV by offering some considerations creators can use to shift imperfection from a reductive weapon to a humanizing tool.

I. *Shrill* and the Need for Humanizing Imperfection

In television and film depictions, fat people are included in a small handful of narratives, if they are depicted at all. As Aubrey Gordon argues, "over the last thirty years, the majority of fat representation has pushed just a few reductive narratives that are tired, hackneyed, and as ubiquitous as ever."[91] Gordon identifies three primary ways in which fat people have historically been shown in popular media. On her analysis, fatness is (1) a pitiable 'before' state, which can inspire weight loss in viewers; (2) evidence of immorality or a consequence of bad behaviour; or (3) an opportunity for comedic relief.[92]

These representations tend to show fat people as imperfect—unlovable, clumsy, unintelligent, unsuccessful—with all their imperfections being inextricably linked to their

[91] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*, 128.
[92] Gordon, 128–29.

weight. Rather than being allowed the room to be fully developed persons, they are limited to serving as cautionary tales for other characters and for the audience. Their fatness is used as a rhetorical device to perpetuate the presumed superiority of thinness. In contrast, thin characters are often shown as similarly imperfect, but their imperfections are presented as character quirks or challenges that can be overcome rather than inevitable failures blamed on and attributable to their body size.

This kind of controlling image mirrors the kind of harmful symbolism Patricia Hill Collins discusses regarding race. "Black women encounter controlling images such as the mammy, the matriarch, the mule and the whore, that encourage others to reject us as fully human people," she explains.[93] "Ironically," she continues, "the negative nature of these images simultaneously encourages us to reject them. In contrast, White women are offered seductive images, those that promise to reward them for supporting the status quo. And yet seductive images can be equally controlling."[94] In each case people are reduced to caricatures and tropes rather than fully developed persons.

The images we present are representative of the power dynamics and harmful stereotypes that exist in society. When we allow these images to reduce whole persons to a single or select few attributes we dehumanize them in the process, a dehumanization which further reinforces oppression and bias. We ought to be concerned, then, with how imperfection is displayed. When imperfection is cast as a totalizing moral failure attributed and inseparably linked to one's weight, rather than an accepted reality that is an inevitable part of being human, we reinforce anti-fatness.

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[93] Patricia Hill Collins, "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection," *Race, Sex & Class* 1, no. 1 (1993): 34.
[94] Collins, 34.

Such portrayals that rely so heavily on caricatures of fatness exist as a result of creators' anti-fat attitudes and are representative of a culture which demeans and seeks to eradicate fat people—often *because* they are seen as incorrigibly imperfect, and thus unworthy of respect and fair treatment. This deployment of imperfection both reflects and reinforces societal attitudes. Representation is important, as it shapes the way we think of and respond to others. Characters onscreen help connect us to others and send a message about the kinds of bodies and people worthy of visibility.

In light of this history, one might propose that we simply work to have more positive representations of fatness, showing that fat people can be smart, beautiful, kind, worthy, or any other number of positive attributes stereotypically thought of as mutually exclusive with fatness.[95] While this strategy of positive representations counters a history of more exclusively negative representations of fatness, it is insufficient in truly seeking justice for fat people through aesthetic representations of fatness. It is not enough to replace these oppressive tropes and caricatures with more positive images, as "replacing negative stereotypes with ostensibly positive ones can be equally problematic if the function of stereotypes as controlling images remains unrecognized."[96] In other words, merely replacing negative or harmful stereotypical representations with more positive stereotypes is insufficient, as even positive representations/images can be harmful if they continue to reinforce limited stereotypes.

Even in cases where caution is taken to avoid reinforcing stereotypes, though, positive imagery may be insufficient in helping dismantle anti-fatness. Regarding a shift from negative to more positive representations of disability, Paul Anthony Darke explains this worry by noting

[95] An account of this type will be discussed later in the paper in discussing Eaton's proposal that we habitually engage with works that aestheticize fat bodies.
[96] Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): S17.

that the push for more "positive" representations has facilitated "the move towards a sanitised imagery of disability being shown: an imagery that is no more or less 'realistic' than that presumed to be 'negative' imagery."[97] Sanitised imagery is often deployed, for example, in representing the sex lives of people with disabilities. In an attempt to portray a positive representation of a person with a disability having sexual agency, a film may show that person engaging in sexual intercourse. However, when this imagery ignores any struggles or difficulties that come with that intercourse (such as finding a comfortable position that works for partners with differing physical capabilities, or having access to comfortable and supportive furniture that has enough room for a couple engaging in sex), it creates a sanitised image. In an attempt to make a more purely positive image, an image can become sanitised insofar as it erases or ignores the real struggles and negative experiences that are often intertwined with positive experiences in real life. Positive imagery (especially to the extent that it is sanitised or ignores real-life nuance and difficulties) can often harm those in marginalized groups (in Darke's case, people with disabilities, and in this context, fat people) by "making clear that to be accepted and valued by society one must be like this or that" in a way that furthers the oppression of those groups.[98]

What we need, then, is an approach to aesthetic representations of fatness that humanizes fatness, allowing fat people the space to be imperfect, fully developed, *real* people. Ideally, this approach should also feature fat people on their own terms, in ways that ring true to their complex desires, experiences, and identities. It is especially important that we aim to make fatness visible in more humanizing ways given the extensive history of hyper(in)visibility that is forced upon fat people. As Jeannine Gailey argues, fat people "are hyperinvisible in that their

[97] Paul Anthony Darke, "The Changing Face of Representations of Disability in the Media," in *Disabling Barriers, Enabling Environments*, ed. John Swain et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2004), 102.
[98] Darke, 102.

needs, desires, and lives are grossly overlooked, yet at the same time they are hypervisible because their bodies literally take up more physical space than other bodies and they are the target of a disproportionate amount of critical judgment."[99] Importantly, fat people are often denied any say in how and when they are seen; their visibility is seldom on their own terms.

The ability to be seen is essential, as it implies that a person matters and is valued. As Katariina Kyrölä explains: "[media] images can show us bodies we would never see in everyday life, thus expanding our perception of what is possible, or exclude bodies we see in everyday life, which can shape our evaluations of what kinds of bodies are significant, valued, or devalued enough to become the stuff of images."[100] Representing fat people on the screen is a laudable goal. It sends a message that fat people have value, that their bodies and lives are worth depicting in the first place. Following Kyrölä, "the more mainstream and widely circulated media images become, the more societal weight they can carry…"[101] But we must be mindful of *how* they are depicted if we are to address and unlearn our shared anti-fat bias.

To help do this, we can turn to Hulu's *Shrill*, a series that presents imperfect fat characters in a more humanizing light, treating them with the same dignity and care most typically shown to thin characters. *Shrill* follows fat journalist Annie (Aidy Bryant) as she navigates her evolving romantic relationships, friendship with fat friend and roommate Fran (Lolly Adefope), voice as an emerging journalist, and relationship to her body. *Shrill* shines in that it shows a wide variety of fat people, each of whom has a unique relationship to their body and, by proximity or deviation, to dominant beauty norms. The series highlights people like Fran

[99] Jeannine A. Gailey, *The Hyper(in)Visible Fat Woman: Weight and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Society*, First edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 7–8.
[100] Katariina Kyrölä, *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 1.
[101] Kyrölä, 1.

who celebrate their fat bodies; Annie's mother Vera who has put her family on a lifelong mission to lose weight; and Annie who is just beginning to love her fatness. There are also, regularly, fat love interests, friends, and people in the background of the series, showing a plurality of ways to exist as a fat person. Rather than fatness being used merely as a prop to uphold the superiority of thinness, *Shrill* shows fatness as one of many natural variations of embodiment. Most importantly, none of these characters is shown without flaws, but their imperfections are situated alongside a more robust, nuanced web of character traits. This reflects a major shift from previous works like *Friends* or *The Simpsons,* where the major imperfections of a fat character are inextricably linked to their weight.

While fatness is often a central topic in the series, Annie and the other characters are not reduced to their fatness or used as mere props to share lessons about fat people. Importantly, throughout the series Annie explicitly grapples with coming to be known as a 'fat writer' and expert on fatness and self-love. In Season 3, a core theme is her rejecting being reduced to her appearance. Annie strives to be celebrated for her talents as a whole person, rather than just as a fat person. This leads her to take on challenging assignments at work, such as a disastrous investigative piece on a white separatist community (Season 3, Episode 304: 'Ranchers'). Although Annie's article winds up being divisive and harmful, it represents an important moment of her taking control of defining her own identity and relationship to her body. Creators refused to use fatness merely as a prop to represent a person's imperfections and moral failings.

Annie's character shows one possibility for depicting imperfect fat characters more responsibly. Often, fat characters' imperfections focus singularly on their failure to meet narrow beauty ideals, a presumed flaw that infects their whole identity and abilities. As we see with Homer from *The Simpsons*, he is unable to reliably and securely provide for his family or be an

attentive and engaged father, a fact we are constantly reminded of with the visual signifier of his weight. In contrast, Annie's career failures and strained relationships with her family result not from her weight, but from other characteristics like her absentmindedness and self-centeredness. We can see in contrast the same flaws and imperfections presented in two drastically different ways: *The Simpsons* showing imperfection in a reductive way that reinforces negative, anti-fat stereotypes, and *Shrill* showing that same imperfection in ways that humanize Annie.

Although the characters in *Shrill* are not always likeable or praiseworthy, they are real characters. They hurt people, try (and sometimes fail) to learn from their mistakes, love fiercely, and represent a plurality of experiences with and relationships to fatness. When we imagine thin people in media, we can think of many instances of humanizing imperfections. While some thin characters are likeable, attractive, or otherwise positive representations, we can also recall countless vivid and imaginatively engaging representations of *unlikeable* and *unattractive* people—messy, complex, ugly, often cruel characters whose stories nonetheless captivate and compel us upon viewing. From Walter White, a chemistry teacher turned meth dealing murderer on *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), to Olivia Pope, the shamelessly power-hungry protagonist from *Scandal* (2012–18), thin characters are often allowed the space to exist as unlikeable and complicated. When we deny this same complexity and imperfection to fat people in representations, we create a new and impossible expectation for fat people to meet, wherein they must be simplistically acceptable or likeable in order to be shown and treated with dignity and care.

Shrill resists this temptation through centering messy, complex characters, and through allowing them the room to fail and grow. Annie's roommate Fran is one strong example of this. As Katie Greenall argues, 'Fran is sarcastic, messy and queer, all whilst living in a fat body that

isn't directly referenced' (Tonic, '*Shrill* Can't Be the End'). Throughout the third season, Fran's relationship with partner Emily (E. R. Fightmaster) evolves. Fran is often imperfect: forgetful and overly cautious, stuck in the comfort of her life as it was before this relationship. After months of budding romance, Emily and Fran finally decide to move in together, leaving Fran's current roommate and best friend, Annie, without a place to live. When it comes time to take concrete steps towards living together, instead of showing up for an appointment to view a rental property with her partner Emily, Fran attempts to cling to her comfortable past by proposing that they continue living with Annie (in Season 3, Episode 8: 'Move'). This fear and discomfort in the face of uncertain change humanizes Fran. Rather than the show painting her in her best light in attempts to make Fran more likeable, it makes the viewer frustrated with Fran's insistence on keeping things the same, and disappointed in her carelessness towards her loving partner. Moreover, it makes the viewer root for Fran, hoping she will grow and allow herself to commit more fully to her relationship with Emily. This shows that it is possible to use imperfection as a humanizing feature, rather than something which tarnishes a person entirely in the reductive manner seen in previous works.

The show's protagonist, Annie, is allowed similar room to be imperfect while nevertheless worthy of dignity and respect. One instance where this is most apparent is in Annie's attempts at dating in season 3. Feeling pigeonholed into an identity as the 'authority on fatness', Annie becomes singularly focused on embracing her identity outside of her weight. When a friend sets Annie up on a date with a man who happens to be fat, Annie assumes they have only been matched together because of their weight. Embarrassed and frustrated, Annie is cold and detached from her date. Even when he shows clear signs of interest and excitement to meet Annie, she is unwilling to consider the possibility that they were matched because of their

personalities. Annie reduces her date to his fatness and is unable to see past it—the very type of reduction Annie is frustrated with receiving from others. Despite her disregard for the date's feelings or needs, the show makes it clear that Annie is a full and complex human about whom one thing remains consistent: she is worthy of respect and fair treatment, even as a fat person with flaws.

II. Addressing Anti-fatness Through Positive Representations of Fatness

Through more humane representations which center imperfect but real characters, we can help slowly expand societal understandings of (the many ways of) existing as a fat person. Treating fat people with dignity, care, complexity, and depth in representations shows that fat people—like all people—are worthy of recognition and visibility; they deserve to be seen. By attending to the complexity of fat people in representations in popular media, we can show careful attention to the pluralities of fatness, helping ensure that fat people are truly visible and are seen in ways that respect their desires and perspectives. This helps expand our collective understandings of fatness, pushing us past a more limited understanding of fatness that relies heavily on shallow stock characters and tropes.

We may be tempted to address the historic (and ongoing) erasure and invisibility of fatness by centering more purely positive depictions of fatness. Anne Eaton motivates this kind of account, asking us to engage with works that "*celebrate* fat bodies and encourage us to see them as likeable and attractive."[102] This process can help dismantle our shared sensibility that fatness is itself an aesthetic imperfection. On Eaton's view, anti-fatness stems not only from beliefs about fat people and bodies (including stereotypes and misinformation), but also from our aesthetic tastes. Our collective distaste for fat bodies developed in part from images that foster

[102] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 53.

disgust for fat people, eliciting feelings of repulsion or aversion.[103] This learned revulsion contributes to stigmatization and marginalization, and thus "our collective taste in fat bodies is misguided and unjust, and must be changed."[104] As Eaton explains:

> distaste for fat bodies, … rooted primarily in one's sentiments rather than in beliefs, is an important *constitutive element of the oppression of fat people*. That is, the prevailing distaste for fat bodies is not a mere secondary phenomenon resulting from fat negativity and discrimination but, rather, is part of what … establishes … implicit biases … and discriminatory practices that make up … fatism … [Therefore,] combatting fatism requires changing not only what we believe about fat people but also how we *feel* about fat bodies.[105]

To combat anti-fatness, in Eaton's view, we must address our learned revulsion for fatness. Eaton argues, after Aristotle, that "imaginative engagement with mimetic art" can prime positive responses to representations, shaping in turn our responses to the depicted objects when we encounter them in real life.[106] Looking at paintings such as Rubens' *Venus in Front of the Mirror* or photographs such as those in Leonard Nimoy's *The Full Body Project*, which intentionally depict fat people as beautiful, sensual, and worthy of admiration, helps us begin to recognize fat bodies as attractive, encouraging an attitude of admiration that we might not otherwise have prior to engaging with those works.

Eaton's focus is important because it requires us to address habitually how we *feel* about bodies. On this account, our goal is to engage regularly with compelling, vivid depictions of fat people which encourage us to regard their bodies positively, countering our learned disgust.

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[103] Eaton, 43–44.
[104] Eaton, 44.
[105] Eaton, 38.
[106] Eaton, 52.

When coupled with resisting misinformation and stereotypes about fat people, habitual engagement that encourages positive evaluations can help us combat anti-fatness.[107] A strength of Eaton's aesthetic and Aristotelian approach to combating anti-fatness is that it acknowledges the complexity of our collective distaste for fat bodies. As she argues, this anti-fat bias is not born solely out of misinformation or negative stereotypes. That is, we do not dislike and oppress fat people just because we have negative *beliefs* about them (e.g., that fat people are lazy or exhibit a moral failing). While negative beliefs contribute to anti-fatness, it is also important to recognize our affective experiences of fat people.

The goal of increasingly rich and varied representations of fat people importantly addresses the harmful representations of fat people most frequently used in television and film, mediums that are easily accessed. Given the limited depictions of fatness discussed previously, we need better representations of fat people, ones which show them as whole persons rather than reductive caricatures. Eaton's proposal is a step in the right direction insofar as it aims to challenge historically tainted representations of fat people. It ensures that viewers confront and engage with fatness and with their own pre-existing attitudes.

This engagement reinforces fat people's worth insofar as it renders them visible on more positive terms. Fat people occupy a paradoxical state of being hypervisible and hyperinvisible. As Jeanine Gailey explains, fat people are often relegated to a "hyper(in)visible space, a phenomenon that occurs explicitly within institutions…and implicitly in our interpersonal and imagined worlds ([e.g.] through shunning or typecasting particular body types in everyday life and media."[108] Often without their consent, fat people are made hyper(in)visible, attended to only when it is convenient. When rendered hyperinvisible, fat people's needs, desires, lives, and

[107] Eaton, 39.
[108] Gailey, *The Hyper(in)Visible Fat Woman*, 7.

experiences are ignored. In the rare instance where fat people are made hypervisible, their bodies become spectacle, and their lives and choices are subject to "a disproportionate amount of critical judgment."[109]

Given the realities of the alternating subjugation, erasure, harm, and seclusion of fat people, Eaton's proposal offers a promising opportunity for fat people to assert their agency. By habitually engaging with positive representations which celebrate fat bodies, we are unable to ignore fat people (or to exclude them from having a say in when and how they are considered and attended to). Moreover, these positive images help us confront anti-fat bias and help widen our shared understandings of fatness. The problem with Eaton's proposal, though, comes in her insistence that these representations "*celebrate* fat bodies and encourage us to see them as likeable and attractive."[110] Her account risks ignoring the plurality of fatness by encouraging engagement with only a certain type of fatness: namely, whatever the viewer can plausibly perceive as attractive or likeable. But, just like straight-sized people, not all fat people *are* likeable or attractive, as imperfection (both visual/aesthetic and personal/moral) is a natural part of being a person.

This is not to say that expanding and challenging tastes isn't worthwhile. Challenges to see more people as attractive or likeable can counter implicit biases developed by oppressive systems. However, by seeking out images we are able to find attractive as a means of challenging our anti-fatness, we continue to exclude those fat people whose bodies we find too deviant—often those who we deem unhealthy, who are larger, who diverge from gender expectations, or who are also disabled. To have true fat visibility, we must center a plurality of fat bodies,

[109] Gailey, *The Hyper(in)Visible Fat Woman*, 8.
[110] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 53.

recognizing and responsibly depicting even those bodies which we see as imperfect or otherwise falling short of our moral and aesthetic expectations.

If people learn to accept, and even like or celebrate, fat people by viewing fatness at its best—attractive, likeable, desirable—they may only change their attitudes towards fat people that they see as similarly attractive or likeable. For those fat people who are unlikeable, seen as lazy or as moral failures, or who are unattractive in looks or personality, I fear that Eaton's proposal will be insufficient. If we are to seek true justice for fat people, we must mitigate our anti-fatness for the sake of *all* fat people, not just those we like or find attractive, because *all* fat people have worth or dignity in virtue of being human.

While I share Eaton's sentiments that fat oppression has an importantly aesthetic dimension, and that we can use art to address our collective distaste in fat bodies, I worry that her proposal is limited as it risks leaving behind those individuals whose bodies deviate the furthest from our shared beauty norms. To put this worry differently, asking people to engage with representations of fat people that encourage us to find them *likeable* or *attractive* may dehumanize fat people in the process. In the next section I will explain how the strategy of focusing only on representing fat bodies as likeable and attractive that Eaton calls for is dehumanizing, employing Paul Taylor's concept of plurality.

III. Left Behind: The Limitations of Likeability in Eaton's Aesthetic Approach

Despite the potential strengths of Eaton's proposal, her aesthetic approach to combatting anti-fatness is limited insofar as it requires us to engage with representations of fat people that encourage us to see fat people as attractive and likeable. This focus runs the risk of placing conditions on dignity and fair treatment for those people, as we learn to accept fatness only when it is presented in a certain light (i.e., when it is likeable or attractive to us as viewers). To

understand why this focus on a certain type of positive image is potentially harmful, we can turn to Paul Taylor's framework of black visibility as a guide.

Taylor identifies four ways in which black people are rendered invisible in art: denial of presence, disregard of personhood, disregard for black perspectives, and denial of black plurality. On Taylor's view, racial invisibility involves "multi-level racial disregard" and provides a useful framework for reflecting on the selective attention to and ignoring of black people in art.[111] By more deeply investigating which levels of black invisibility are deployed in a work, we can more readily understand and address the ways in which it is dehumanizing or in opposition to black visibility.[112]

On one level, black people are made invisible insofar as they are not represented or depicted in art. This may occur through literal absence (i.e., no black people being present) but it also occurs through white people being unable or unwilling to see and acknowledge the presence of black people who are in the work.

When black people's presence is recognized, they may still be rendered invisible through the disregard for black personhood: through deploying stereotypes or stock figures that are "archetypal personifications of anti-black prejudices, defined by single, characteristic traits…rather than by the complex configurations that make for unique personalities."[113] Further, their personalities may be denied insofar as they are merely used as a tool (e.g. for white characters' personal development and reflection, as a foil to whiteness, or as markers of deviance).[114]

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[111] Paul C. Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, Foundations of the Philosophy of the Arts (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), 34.
[112] It is worth noting that the levels of invisibility Taylor highlights are not wholly distinct: often a single case may feature many different levels of invisibility.
[113] Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful*, 52.
[114] Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful*, 55–56.

Black people are also made invisible when a work denies or disregards black perspectives. This disregard happens in a few ways: either by the artist presuming that black people must share white perspectives, or, when they differ, by presenting black perspectives a defective version of white perspectives. As Taylor explains, "Whitely ways of seeing become the social defaults; they become the intuitive, commonsense standards…"[115] When a work purports to represent or include black people but does so using only white perspectives, the artist has thereby failed to properly and sufficiently attend to, cultivate, and represent black perspectives in a way that contributes to black invisibility.

Lastly, black invisibility may occur when black people are painted as a monolithic group, homogenized and denied their true complexity. "Black people are, of course, not simply black, but are also male, female, gay, straight, rich, poor, citizens, immigrants, and much else besides," Taylor argues.[116] By painting them to be overly simplified, we not only deny their individuality and personhood, but we also ignore "the dimensions along which those single individuals might imagine their life plans."[117]

Taylor's framework of levels of invisibility can be usefully applied to representations of other marginalized groups, including fat people, in popular media.[118] While there are perhaps more representations of fat people than ever before, their mere presence in popular media does not assure that fat people are treated with the dignity and respect they are owed. We can now revisit Eaton's proposal to see why her account is insufficient in addressing anti-fatness.

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[115] Taylor, 59.
[116] Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful*, 62.
[117] Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful*, 63.
[118] I do not mean to suggest that black people and fat people are always separate groups, or that these identities and sites of oppression are wholly distinct. There are many fat, black people, and it is important to acknowledge the ways in which anti-fatness is an anti-black endeavor (see, for example, Sabrina Strings' 2019 book *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* and Da'Shaun L. Harrison's 2021 book *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*).

While Eaton's proposal helps address some levels of fat invisibility (most notably denial of presence and personhood), it fails insofar as it does not sufficiently attend to the plurality of fatness. As I noted earlier, straight-sized characters are granted more room to exist in all of their complexity (especially when they otherwise conform to dominant identities and standards). Eaton asks us to engage with works that encourage us to see fat bodies as attractive and likable as a way of combating our learned and shared distaste towards fatness. This request asks us to ignore the plurality of fatness by encouraging engagement with a certain type of fatness: namely, whatever the viewer can plausibly read or understand as attractive or likable. But not all fat people *are* likeable or attractive, just like not all straight-sized people are likable or attractive.

By seeking out images we find attractive as a means of challenging our anti-fatness, we may leave behind those fat people whose bodies we find too deviant (often those who we deem unhealthy, whose bodies are larger, who deviate from our gender expectations, or who are fat and disabled). In order to have true fat visibility, we center a plurality of fat bodies, recognizing and treating with dignity even those bodies which we see as unattractive and unlikeable. To put this worry differently, my central concern with Eaton's proposal is that it may leave behind those real fat people who are not likeable or attractive in the same way as the images people habitually engage with following Eaton's view. Thus, when challenging our distaste for fat bodies we must aim to humanize *all* fat people, helping us see and accept fat people as they are.

Moreover, Eaton's proposal may make us unknowingly disregard fat perspectives, as many fat people intentionally avoid discussions of attractiveness or seek to be treated with dignity regardless of whether they are found attractive. Writer and political activist Aubrey Gordon, for example, intentionally de-centers conversations about beauty, attractiveness, and self-esteem in her social media and writing. As she explains, "Complex conversations about fat

people's marginalization are often derailed by more familiar, comfortable topics, like dieting and self-esteem. This space works to center fat people as we are, not as we're pressured to be."[119] In stipulating the rules of engagement with her writing, Gordon specifically requests, "There are lots of places to discuss dieting, weight loss, self-confidence, and plus size clothing. This isn't one of them."[120] In efforts to respect the perspectives of fat people, we must consider whether asking people to learn to find fat people attractive is the best pathway to justice for those communities.

I have argued that we have reason to worry about approaches that encourage us to see certain bodies as likeable and attractive, given the reality that many fat people's bodies deviate so heavily from the kinds of bodies we are collectively willing to see as beautiful. But compounding this worry, it is difficult to see how Eaton's proposal can successfully help us address our collective distaste for fat bodies when we engage with non-static representations of fat people. Eaton encourages us to engage with representations of fat bodies that elicit certain, more positive, attitudes and tastes in fat bodies. Many of the central examples Eaton provides are static images of bodies, ones that encourage us to see those bodies as beautiful or attractive. While these may help shape how we see and respond to fat bodies, it is unclear how successfully this approach can be applied to representations of fat people more holistically.

Many of the representations of fat people we most regularly engage with are not static images—they are real people. From celebrities like Lizzo to popular television characters like Kate from *This Is Us*, the representations of fatness that have become increasingly mainstream are not just figures whose only attribute is beauty (or lack thereof). They have complex lives and histories, and their experiences and bodies help shape our (dis)taste for fat people. Eaton seems

[119] Per her Instagram post, "200,000 Followers!", @Yrfatfriend, posted July 14, 2021. Accessed July 27, 2021.
[120] "200,000 Followers!", @Yrfatfriend, posted July 14, 2021. Accessed July 27, 2021.

to allow that these representations of fat characters and people (as opposed to mere fat bodies) can help habituate us to see fat bodies in a more positive light, just as static images can. She acknowledges that there is work to be done to "dislodge our collective distaste for fatness" in a more responsible way by, for instance, creating "representations that entice us to find fat women to be witty, charismatic, confident, charming, stylish, strong, courageous, athletic, talented, and imbued with other traits that make a person attractive."[121] Increasing numbers of children's books, for example, "portray fat characters as likeable, interesting, and fun."[122]

I don't want to deny that these images are a significant change in fat representation. Historically, fat characters such as those in Shallow Hal or Friends were depicted in a much more limited way, with fatness often being used as a joke or as a pitiable reminder of the superiority of thinness. So creating these charismatic, charming, courageous, talented fat characters is in many ways an improvement, as it helps carve out space for fat people to be seen in a more positive light. My worry, however, is that habitually engaging with these kinds of more positive depictions of fat people in order to rewrite our distaste for fat bodies puts fat people on a pedestal, creating conditions for their acceptance. This echoes Darke's worries regarding positive representations of disability, wherein using exclusively positive representations sanitizes the people being represented, further dehumanizing and fueling oppression against people within the relevant community.[123]

Taylor's levels of invisibility (particularly plurality and perspectives) are useful in helping us imagine an aesthetic approach that can more successfully address our anti-fatness. Eaton is right in calling for us to "produce and widely promote vivid, imaginatively engaging,

[121] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 55–56.
[122] Eaton, 56.
[123] Darke, "The Changing Face of Representations of Disability in the Media," 102.

and artistically interesting representations that *celebrate* fat bodies," (Eaton 2016, 53) but those representations must center and respect the plurality and perspectives of fat people. To do this, we should seek to create and engage with perspectives which intentionally invite imperfection—ones which show fat people as complicated, likeable/attractive, unlikable, confusing, infuriating, flawed, and real. We must engage with a variety of different kinds of fat people and challenge ourselves to recognize their basic dignity and worth as persons *regardless of* their bodies, moral successes and failings, attractiveness (or lack thereof), or abilities. By inviting and intentionally highlighting these imperfections, we are able to create more humanizing narratives about fat people, ones which highlight their experiences and identities in ways that ring truer to reality.

In order to best attend to the pluralities of fatness that will bring true visibility to fat communities without perpetuating harms against them, I argue that we should aim to create works which, like *Shrill*, complicate our understanding of fatness. Rather than weaponizing imperfection against fat people or trying to capture fatness in its most attractive light, we need to center imperfect representations which do not blame a person's failings on their weight. Taylor's levels of invisibility (particularly in relation to plurality and perspectives) suggest an aesthetic approach that can more successfully address our anti-fatness by creating and engaging with perspectives which intentionally invite imperfection—ones which show fat people as complicated, attractive, unlikeable, praiseworthy, flawed, and real. We must engage with a variety of different kinds of fat people, challenging ourselves to recognize their basic dignity and worth as persons *regardless of* their bodies, moral successes or failings, attractiveness (or lack thereof), or abilities. By inviting and intentionally highlighting these imperfections, we can create more humanizing narratives about fat people which highlight their experiences and identities in ways that ring truer to reality.

IV. Imperfection: From Harmful Reduction to Humanizing Tool

Thus far I have advocated an approach which disrupts the understanding of imperfection frequently utilized in depictions of fatness. I have shown that we can use imperfection as a tool to humanize fat characters, offering them the same care and dignity most typically afforded only to thin characters. By using imperfection as a more humanizing framing device, we can create more responsible aesthetic products, ones which meaningfully foster visibility of fat people through highlighting a plurality of ways of being fat.

To conclude, I want to offer some additional considerations of how we can use imperfection as a humanizing tool. In addition to separating one's imperfections from their body size, we can create humanizing imperfection to the extent that we show characters with significant moral and personal failings who are nevertheless worthy of dignity and fair treatment. The kinds of imperfect representations seen in *Shrill* are significant in that they allow characters Fran and Annie the freedom to live authentically, while still being worthy of the viewer's care and respect. Fran's and Annie's respective failures as partner and friend are not attributed to their fatness, and the characters are not placed on a pedestal. This kind of imperfect representation demands viewers to challenge themselves to accept a fat person as they are, rather than painting fatness in its most attractive light. This allows fat people more agency in determining when and how they are visible in public through attending to their perspectives and understandings of their own bodies and selves, challenging a long and ongoing history of works which prevent fatness from being visible on fat people's own terms.

In this paper I have argued for the importance of imperfection in the production of humanizing representations of fat people. Representations of imperfection, modelled in shows like *Shrill*, better allow room for the plurality and perspectives of fat people to be portrayed in

popular media. As I have argued, if we hope to take an aesthetic approach to addressing anti-fatness then we must do so by centering and regularly engaging with varied, realistic representations of fat people—ones that acknowledge imperfection and leave room for nuance, showing the good and bad and everything in between of being a fat person.

Representations of imperfect fat people allow fatness to be portrayed with the same depth and variety offered in portrayals of thinness. They force viewers not just to accept those fat people that they see as likeable or attractive, but to accept all fat people *as they are,* recognizing their humanity and dignity without qualification. While I have argued that *Shrill* characters Annie and Fran are a good first step towards addressing our shared anti-fatness, it is important to recognize that *Shrill* is just one small piece of the puzzle.

As Gina Tonic points out, "Of course, it's impossible for Shrill, in its short three-season run, to be a faultless representation for fat people on screen. While it succeeds in many ways… it isn't realistic to expect one show to tick all the boxes for an entire community of plus-size people. The best outcome for the end of the show, then, is not for just one fat TV show or character to follow in its footsteps, but a multitude. For as many different intersecting identities that fatness encompasses, through race, through sexuality, through gender, through class and through a mix of these factors and so many others too, so should there be representation for plus size people to not only see their stories on screen but be given the opportunity to tell their stories in these spaces usually reserved for thinness."[124] Our best hope at seeking justice, then, is twofold. As artists, we should aim to create works which center the experiences, stories, voices, and needs of a variety of fat people, highlighting the endless, complicated, and imperfect ways of being fat. As consumers, we must do as Eaton proposes in seeking out and engaging with many

[124] Gina Tonic, "Shrill Can't Be the End of Fat Representation on TV," *I-D* (blog), May 7, 2021, https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/y3ddnj/shrill-aidy-bryant-fat-representation-tv-euphoria-insatiable.

imaginatively engaging works centring fatness. In this journey we must invite imperfection, taking care to look for works which celebrate fat people as they are, rather than just as we'd like them to be.

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Friends (NBC, created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman, 1994-2004).

Nimoy, Leonard, *The Full Body Project: Photographs by Leonard Nimoy* (New York, 2007).

Rubens, Peter Paul, *Venus in Front of the Mirror* (Liechtenstein Museum, Vienna, 1614/1615).

Scandal (Created by Shonda Rhimes, 2012-2018).

Shrill (Hulu, created by Aidy Bryant, Alexandra Rushfield, and Lindy West, 2019-2021).

The Simpsons (Created by Matt Groening, 1989-present).

4. What to Make of Body Positivity?: Using Fat Justice to Address Co-Optation and Body Oppression

The body positivity movement is a muddled, nebulous concept, originating in 1960s and 1970s activism against anti-fatness in the United States. In recent years, the body positivity movement has strayed from its original aims: what was once a movement aimed to protect and champion for the acceptance of fat, queer, trans, and other marginalized bodies has become a push for self-love for all bodies (including those of persons belonging to dominant groups). As self-love mentor and wellness advocate Sarah Sapora argues, this shift in the body positivity movement conflates body positivity and self-love, undermining the original aims of body positivity "as the concept of body positivity becomes more widespread and more commercialized."[125]

In this paper I aim to explore the ethical implications of the evolution of the body positivity movement. I will argue that the shift in the movement towards accepting all bodies is an instance of co-optation that is ethically problematic, as it makes it more difficult to accomplish the goals of the original movement and further marginalizes the bodies the movement was aimed to help and protect. I will survey some of the options for moving forward with the body positivity movement while addressing the harms that resulted from its co-optation, ultimately arguing that we must use a framework of fat justice to address three different (but related) sets of goals: personal, community-oriented, and activist/advocacy goals. In my account I also motivate the importance of attending to beauty in accomplishing these goals, situating beauty and the aesthetic as legitimate concerns that are pivotal to seeking justice for fat communities. This discussion of beauty occurs in a context in which beauty is often treated as

[125] Julia Malacoff, "Where the Body-Positivity Movement Stands and Where It Needs to Go," Shape, July 30, 2018, https://www.shape.com/lifestyle/mind-and-body/how-body-positivity-movement-is-evolving-whats-next.

irrelevant to fat justice, as many fat activists see concerns surrounding beauty as being secondary to focusing on the material harms of anti-fatness (e.g., lack of legal protection against anti-fat discrimination, anti-fatness in healthcare, etc.).

In the first section of this paper, I will briefly introduce the shift in the body positivity movement. Citing current social media practices as evidence of the transformation of the movement, I will explain how this movement has been co-opted by those in privileged positions in society (namely thin, white, fit, able-bodied persons). In the second section of this paper I will outline several key harms that result from this co-optation: first, it erases the original goals of the movement without those goals being resolved; second, it amplifies social ostracization of fat bodies; and third, this anti-fatness results in legal ramifications which further harm already marginalized bodies. In the third section of the paper, I will identify which goals we must center as we find a viable alternative to the body positivity movement. Based on these goals, in the fourth section I will survey three alternatives to body positivity (body neutrality, proper body pride, and radical self-love), examining each of their strengths and weaknesses. Finally, in the fifth section of this paper I will propose a path forward with the movement using a modified framework of fat justice.

I. A Brief (and Incomplete) History of the Movement[126]

The roots of the body positivity movement lie largely in fat activism, trying to combat fat shaming that pervaded the medical community in the mid-20th century and which continues today.[127] This phenomenon is well documented, with weight bias resulting in both negative

[126] An early version of this section previously appeared in Cheryl Frazier and Nadia Mehdi, "Forgetting Fatness: The Violent Co-Optation of the Body Positivity Movement," *Debates in Aesthetics* 16, no. 1 (March 2021): 13–28.
[127] Lux Alptraum, "A Short History of 'Body Positivity,'" *Fusion* (blog), November 6, 2017, https://fusion.tv/story/582813/a-short-history-of-body-positivity/.

attitudes regarding fat people and structural inequalities that prevent fat people from accessing safe and thorough healthcare.[128] For instance, as Rebecca Puhl and Kelly Brownell report, studies show that physicians have feelings of "discomfort, reluctance, or dislike" towards patients who are obese, and associate fatness with conditions like "poor hygiene, noncompliance, hostility, and dishonesty."[129]

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of the movement, it has clear origins in fat activism in the 1960s and 70s. Many point to the 1967 "fat-in" in Central Park as the beginning of collective fat activism. During this sit-in, hundreds of people protested anti-fat bias as they "ate, carried signs of protest, burned diet books and photos of model Twiggy, and were visibly, publicly, and loudly fat without being apologetic."[130] This protest was crucial as fat people participating in the protest were visibly and happily fat, challenging presumptions that fat people were miserable because of their weight and universally desired weight-loss. It was soon followed by Llewelyn "Lew" Louderback's article "More People Should be FAT," a paper published in *The Saturday Evening Post* calling attention to anti-fat discrimination and publicly defending fatness. These two instances helped lead to the establishment of the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (today called the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance or NAAFA).[131]

This East Coast activism began at roughly the same time as feminist thinkers in California formed the Fat Underground. On behalf of this organization, Judy Freespirit and

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[128] Rebecca M. Puhl and Chelsea A. Heuer, "The Stigma of Obesity: A Review and Update," *Obesity* 17, no. 5 (2009): 941–64, https://doi.org/10.1038/oby.2008.636.
[129] Rebecca Puhl and Kelly D. Brownell, "Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity," *Obesity Research* 9, no. 12 (2001): 788–805, https://doi.org/10.1038/oby.2001.108.
[130] Linda Gerhardt, "The Rebellious History of the Fat Acceptance Movement," *Center For Discovery Eating Disorder Treatment* (blog), February 4, 2020, https://centerfordiscovery.com/blog/fat-acceptance-movement/.
[131] Tigress Osborn, "From New York to Instagram: The History of the Body Positivity Movement," BBC Bitesize, accessed February 7, 2022, https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z2w7dp3.

Aldebaran published the *Fat Liberation Manifesto*[132], in which they posit "that fat people are fully entitled to human respect and recognition… [demanding] equal rights for fat people in all aspects of life."[133] Freespirit and Aldebaran proposed a commitment to "reclaim power over our bodies and lives," and issued a call to action: "FAT PEOPLE OF THE WORLD, UNITE!"[134] This manifesto is important "because it is one of the first times where there was a public call for unification of fat women and fat people under one common purpose."[135] The body positivity movement (in its fat activist iteration) was a space for fat people to build community and celebrate their bodies as they worked together to address anti-fatness. Freespirit and Aldebaran's call to unite for similar aims, then, was a model of collective action that helped inspire these goals of the body positivity movement.

With this fat activism building momentum throughout the country, the beginnings of the body positivity movement took root. Although, as Tigress Osborn notes, the movement did not initially utilize the language of body positivity, their aims were clearly aligned with what eventually became the Body Positivity Movement.[136] (That is to say, the original body positivity movement began as fat activism, a broad project that evolved over time to become the body positivity movement.) The original body positivity movement encompassed a wide range of personal and interpersonal efforts to champion for fat acceptance. Spanning over several decades, this original, fat-activist directed body positivity movement involved a few different types of goals and labor: **personal goals** (related to finding comfort and joy in one's own fat

[132] Alexandra Sastre, "Towards A Radical Body Positive: Reading The Online Body Positive Movement," *Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations,* no. 2569 (2016): 16.
[133] Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, "Fat Liberation Manifesto," *Off Our Backs* 9, no. 4 (1979): 18.
[134] Freespirit and Aldebaran.
[135] Micaela Foreman, "The Fat Underground and the Fat Liberation Manifesto," The Feminist Poetry Movement, December 20, 2018, https://sites.williams.edu/engl113-f18/foreman/the-fat-underground-and-the-fat-liberation-manifesto/.
[136] Osborn, "From New York to Instagram."

body, recognizing one's own fat body as beautiful, etc.), **community-oriented goals** (related to building and enjoying communities with others who share an identity of and socialization as fat people, reimagining shared norms of beauty and value that are constructed by and inclusive of fat people, etc.), and **activist/advocacy goals** (related to challenging institutional anti-fatness, advocating for fat people, and challenging anti-fat attitudes and policies, etc.). These types of goals often play off of one another: finding joy in your own fat body helps you find joy in others' fat bodies, having a community of fat people to commiserate with helps sustain you during the difficult work of challenging anti-fat institutions and policies, individuals' celebrations of their own fat bodies (when made visible, e.g., through social media) help disrupt other's learned anti-fat attitudes and bias, and so on.

Through body positivity, fat activists sought to eradicate the diet industry and medical anti-fatness, and regularly held protests or otherwise appeared in public celebrating fatness, loving their bodies and showing that fatness could be regarded positively. These protests allowed them to address the many different levels of goals that became ubiquitous to the movement: personal (through showing self-love and positively regarding their own bodies), community-oriented (through celebrating one another's fat bodies), and activist/advocacy (through challenging anti-fat diet and medical industries). By the 2000s fat activists had more formally began using the language of body positivity in online spaces like Tumblr and Instagram.[137] Body positivity centered on "unapologetic body acceptance" in a context where anti-fatness was just as pervasive as (if not more pervasive than) it was in the 60s when the movement originated with fat activist circles.[138] This unapologetic acceptance and celebration of fatness reflected the

[137] Osborn.
[138] Osborn.

personal and community-oriented goals of the body positivity movement. Fat people (but especially fat women of color and queer communities) popularized this movement, spreading this message of radical acceptance of fatness on social media using hashtags like #BOPO and #allbodiesarebeautiful.[139] These messages helped fat activists work towards the advocacy and activist goals of the movement, as they encouraged *all* people (not just fat people) to move towards radical acceptance of fatness, challenging a dominant view that there was something wrong with fatness.

Importantly, much of the foundational fat-activist origins that led to the body positivity movement were spearheaded by fat Black women, many of whom were also members of LGBTQ communities. Black women like Margaret K. Bass, writer of "On Being a Fat Black Girl in a Fat-Hating Culture," protested pervasive anti-Black, anti-fat attitudes in the 1950s and 60s.[140] Similarly, Black welfare activist Johnnie Tillmon noted her race, size, and class as sites of discrimination, calling attention to the dehumanizing treatment that fat Black women received on the basis of their appearance.[141] As Osborn notes, this work was important as "radical fat activists saw fat liberation as linked to other struggles" against oppression.[142] Although more mainstream fat activism (especially work done in association with NAAFA) often overlooked the voices of people of color, the movement would not have been possible without the effort and organization that fat Black people, and especially fat Black women, did to advocate for radical fat acceptance. As Briana Dominici argues, "body positivity went on to be a product of the fat

[139] For the duration of this paper, I use the terminology of "the original body positivity movement" to refer to these decades-long fat activists efforts, which did not formally get described as "body positivity" until the 2000s (thanks to work done to share fat activists' missions online on social media sites like Tumblr and Instagram).
[140] Briana Dominici, "The Black History of the Body Positive Movement," *ZENERATIONS* (blog), August 21, 2020, https://zenerations.org/2020/08/21/the-black-history-of-the-body-positive-movement/.
[141] Dominici 2020.
[142] Osborn, "From New York to Instagram."

liberation movement of the 1960s. It was created by fat queer Black women and femmes—a space by and for marginalized bodies, for anyone who felt cast aside compared to the strict beauty standards of the time period."[143] As the language of body positivity became more explicit and common as an offshoot of fat activism, fat Black people like Sonya Renee Taylor (creator of "The Body is Not An Apology") led the way and made it possible to build a community dedicated to radical fat acceptance.

Through this movement, people have been able to challenge our misconceptions regarding fatness and health (an activist/advocacy goal). The body positivity movement has also historically sought to combat the notion that one's moral worth was inherently tied to their health (or lack thereof).[144] This movement helps create an important space for fat people to commiserate with one another and advocate for better healthcare, fair treatment in employment and legal situations, and a more fat-friendly society. This is especially crucial given the oppressive societal structures in place which regularly disadvantage fat people.[145] For example, as Anne Eaton notes, "we live in a fat-hating world, one that regularly refuses to accommodate fat bodies; that openly and unabashedly teases, bullies, shames, and stigmatizes fat people from early childhood onward, and that discriminates against fat people in a variety of ways" including wage gaps, inadequate medical care, and lack of adequate space on popular airlines.[146]

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[143] Dominici 2020.

[144] This labor worked on a couple different levels: individually (as people worked to disrupt learned messages about their own moral worth and to navigate their personal relationships to health), and through activist/advocacy goals (in working to challenge and dismantle anti-fat systems, policies, and institutions).

[145]See A. W. Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," in *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherri Irvin (Oxford University Press, 2016), 37–59, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198716778.003.0003; Deb Burgard, "What Is 'Health at Every Size,'" in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther D. Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (NYU Press, 2009), 42–53; Michael Hobbes, "Everything You Know About Obesity Is Wrong," The Huffington Post, September 19, 2018, https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/everything-you-know-about-obesity-is-wrong/.

[146] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 39–40.

The original body positivity movement arose out of a need to protect marginalized bodies, allowing fat people to celebrate their bodies in a world which aims to tear them down. While the original movement was a radical attempt to promote fat bodies themselves, much of today's discussion of body positivity focuses on fashion and empowering ourselves regardless of our body size. However, this shift in focus is concerning as it has overtaken "the radical roots of the original movement," as Evette Dionne notes, "…and people with bodies that have been marginalized are no longer the center of their own creation."[147] The current body positivity movement tries to promote empowerment, self-love, and representation of all types of bodies in the media, but in doing so it "has failed to address [systemic] discrimination as its foremothers did."[148] This overshadows its origins as a fat activist movement, pushing its creators (primarily fat, queer, Black folks) out of focus.

This movement was created by and designed to protect fat Black women who were among those most acutely harmed by society's anti-fatness. As Sabrina Strings and Da'Shaun L. Harrison argue, anti-fatness is inextricably linked with anti-Blackness. As Strings explains, "The fear of the imagined 'fat black woman' was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade black women *and* discipline white women."[149] Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, Strings shows that "racial discourse was deployed by elite Europeans and white Americans to create social distinctions between themselves and so-called greedy and fat racial Others… Elite white people also used Protestant discourse to claim a *moral* superiority over these same poor, immigrant, and racial others."[150] Harrison, following in

[147] Evette Dionne, "The Fragility of Body Positivity: How a Radical Movement Lost Its Way," Bitch Media, November 21, 2017, https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/fragility-body-positivity.
[148] Dionne.
[149] Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2019), 6.
[150] Strings, 6.

the same vein as Strings, highlights that "out there is a reality where fat Black folks are experiencing the harms of anti-Blackness as anti-fatness…Black liberation is the end goal, and for it to happen, fat liberation must also be part of that goal."[151]

Given the historical and ongoing connection between anti-fatness and anti-Blackness, and the fact that fat Black women were largely responsible for the body positivity movement's origins and success, we ought to be concerned about this movement's popularization and evolution (especially insofar as it ostracizes and villainizes members of groups responsible for its very existence). It is concerning for all fat people that the body positivity movement has shifted away from its more radical fat acceptance roots. The harms of this shift are only amplified when we acknowledge the ways that race and fatness intersect, especially since fat Black people (and fat Black women in particular) are among the most vulnerable to the harms of anti-fatness and an anti-fat body positivity movement.

The body-positivity movement has been co-opted by predominantly thin, able-bodied, white women. Much of this co-optation occurs on social media, where thin people have taken up the language of body positivity without bringing with it the goals of its radical, fat-activist history. Social media has played a major role in this co-optation, as hundreds of thousands of posts related to body positivity (often using hashtags like #bopo or #bodypositivity) center thin people (including influencers). Companies have taken note of how popular body positivity messaging has now become, and many companies use body-positive tactics to sell their products (e.g., by using unretouched ads featuring "real" bodies). As body positive spaces, like communities on Tumblr and Instagram, are now flooded by posts from thin people using the

[151] Da'Shaun Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2021), 3.

language of body positivity, it has made it increasingly difficult to connect to other fat people in those spaces. Moreover, as more (notably thin) people use the language of body positivity, its fat activist origins go largely undiscussed, and the goals of the current movement have become a watered-down version of the original movement. Many people now use the language of body positivity to focus exclusively on things like accepting their stretch marks, wearing crop tops, and accepting occasional (and often minor) fluctuations in weight. While these uses are not inherently bad goals in general, they occupy digital real estate in what was once a space created by and more exclusively for fat people to connect with one another and to coordinate activism efforts that supported fat communities.

It is crucial to investigate this shift in the movement to shed light on the ethical implications of its popularization. This shift in focus creates serious ethical harms, playing into a capitalist society without rectifying unjust institutions and policies. Non-marginalized bodies have co-opted a movement which once focused on some of society's most vulnerable and unprotected groups. Body positivity has evolved into what Bethany Rutter calls "Socially Acceptable Body Positivity," a movement primarily centered on bodies which are already accepted. As she argues, fat bodies are "not just being erased from body positivity, fat women are being actively vilified."[152] The body positivity movement was once a movement which tried to help shatter the perception that weight and health were conclusively linked, but it also sought to challenge the idea that people needed to be healthy to be worthy of dignity and respect. However, as Rutter notes, much of the current discourse around body positivity currently comes back to comments like "it's fine to be bigger as long as you're healthy."[153] "Health has become

[152] Bethany Rutter, "How 'Body Positivity' Lost Its True and Radical Meaning," Dazed, April 28, 2017, https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/35746/1/how-body-positivity-lost-its-true-and-radical-meaning.
[153] Rutter.

the stick with which to beat fat people with, and the benchmark for whether body positivity should include someone…In a movement that's fair and compassionate, no one should have to prove they're healthy enough to deserve respect. The thought of jumping through hoops to prove that you're worthy of being cared about is violent."[154]

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the aims of a movement changing over time, the current body positivity movement undermines the aims of the *original* movement in ways that are violent. What was once an attempt to remind society that all people are worthy of respect has become an opportunity to show off outfits of the day and sell products for large corporations.[155] While the acceptance of *all* bodies is an arguably important aim, the use of the hashtag or language of body positivity redirects that movement's focus away from marginalized bodies. This broadened focus detracts from the original movement and helps further marginalize fat bodies.

When we understand the shift in the body positivity movement *as co-optation* three key harms become apparent. First, the new movement's shifted focus undermines the original movement's aims. Second, it results in an anti-fat body positive movement, wherein creators of the movement no longer have a space to amplify their voices and demand better treatment. Third,

[154] Rutter, emphasis added.

[155] It is important to note here that showing off outfits has the potential to be a part of radical fat acceptance. As the language of body positivity began being used explicitly in the movement, fat people used fat visibility that came from selfies and pictures of their outfits as a way of challenging anti-fatness. (Osborn, "From New York to Instagram.") As Osborn argues, these images "represented personal choice as a political statement of unapologetic body acceptance." (Ibid.) This kind of online visibility carved out space for fat people to experiment, commiserate with one another, and to celebrate their bodies—a stance which was radical within the context of a fat-hating society. As I argue elsewhere, this kind of visibility and digital reclamation of space is an invaluable method for combatting anti-fatness. (Cheryl Frazier, "Beauty Labor as a Tool to Resist Anti-Fatness," *Hypatia*, forthcoming.) While this kind of visibility is possible, today's body positivity movement tends to favor and feature thin and more socially accepted bodies instead. There is an important difference between fat people posting their outfits and bodies as a method of increasing fat visibility, versus a thin person posting their outfit using the language of body positivity.

the shift in the movement reinforces legal and institutional harms against already marginalized bodies.

II. Harms of the Movement's Co-optation[156]

The first harm that results from the co-optation of the body positivity movement is that the movement's original goals have been erased *without being resolved.* The aim for acceptance of and justice for fat bodies has been eradicated, as the movement now centers "health at any size" and loving yourself. The movement's fat activist roots sought fair treatment for all fat people regardless of whether they were healthy, as fat activists and folks involved in fat liberation thought fair treatment and respect were owed to all people unconditionally. Switching to a movement that emphasizes *health* at any size, then, runs the risk of placing conditions on what kinds of fat people are allowed to participate in the movement. As the goals of the contemporary body positivity movement have narrowed significantly from the movement's original goals, the current movement makes it seem as though body positivity is *just* a matter of self-love, when in reality it was originally a movement seeking a much more robust sense of justice for fat people. This is not to say that self-love and "health at every size" messaging cannot co-exist with a more radical mission of fat acceptance and justice. Instead, it is just to note that contemporary iterations of body positivity tend to stop at self-love, without pushing for these broader goals of justice.

Moreover, because of how common the co-opted movement has become, many people do not even know of its radical roots. A recent *Psychology Today* post outlines that the most popular definitions of "body positivity" include "being okay with flaws," "loving yourself," and

[156] An early version of this section previously appeared in Frazier and Mehdi, "Forgetting Fatness: The Violent Co-Optation of the Body Positivity Movement."

"being confident."[157] These are respectable and important aims, but fail to recognize the systemic injustices the body positivity movement was designed to address. As Amanda Mull argues, "Corporatized, media-friendly body positivity… puts the onus on people living in marginalized bodies to turn their criticism inward… What none of this addresses, of course, is why someone might hate their body. There is no inherent unhappiness to womanhood, or to fatness, or to blackness…The conditions under which we loathe ourselves are socially constructed, but in practical terms, they're very real."

Second, the co-optation of the body positivity movement is harmful as it amplifies the social ostracization of fat people, pushing them out of a movement that they created. As Quinta Tinsley discusses, most of the current discourse around body positivity is focused on white people (white women in particular). This overlooks a wide spectrum of people who need the protections the original iteration of the body positivity movement sought to establish. Tinsley argues that within the movement "there are images of relatable [white] folks with varying presentations. However as a black woman, it is very hard for me to find this variety of representation within the body positivity movement. And Black folks aren't the only people who are being left behind. When spreading the message of body positivity, we also have to be sure we are including the voices of transgender and other gender non-conforming folks…"[158] As the current, co-opted body positivity movement stands, it has shifted our focus towards promoting a narrower set of people and identities, without simultaneously critiquing oppressive social structures through an intersectional lens so as to protect *all* marginalized bodies (beyond just fat,

[157] Katherine Schreiber, "What Does Body Positivity Actually Mean?," Psychology Today, August 11, 2016, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-truth-about-exercise-addiction/201608/what-does-body-positivity-actually-mean.
[158] Quita Tinsley, "Who Is the Body Positivity Movement Leaving Behind?," The Body is Not an Apology, January 29, 2019, https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/who-is-the-body-positivity-movement-leaving-behind/.

cisgender white women). Recognizing this co-optation calls attention to the myriad people who are pushed out of the movement in its current state.

Many self-proclaimed body positivity advocates are anti-fat, or disparage fat people over a certain size (sometimes referred to as "pretty fat" or "acceptable fat"). For example, Lizzie Cernik argues that while the body positivity movement has brought about many good changes, it has also "taken things a step too far."[159] Citing "plus-sized" models and influencers as a problematic face of the movement, she argues that their body positive posts normalize obesity and represent "an irresponsible form of denial."[160] Her center on health (as opposed to acceptance of fat people) demonstrates a lack of understanding of the movement's initial aims. Regardless of whether data supports the idea that those bodies are unhealthy, calling for the removal of those bodies from what was originally a movement *for those same bodies* is a reprehensible approach. Noting that one finds fat bodies unfit to send a "body positive" message helps foster an anti-fat body positivity movement, adding further harm to an already marginalized group of people.

Brands have similarly taken up the language of body positivity while only regarding some bodies positively (namely, those bodies that conform to ideals of beauty and can be used to sell products that help uphold those ideals). Many companies that claim to promote body positivity and inclusivity actively exclude fat people from their efforts. For example, as Amanda Mull notes, clothing company Everlane "recently launched a new underwear line featuring a plus size model in its ad campaign," in the interest of *appearing* inclusive and body positive, "despite

[159] Lizzie Cernik, "It's Not Fine to Be Fat: Celebrating Obesity Is Irresponsible," The Guardian, April 10, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/10/fat-pride-obesity-public-health-warnings-dangerous-weight-levels.
[160] Cernik.

making no actual plus-size underwear for sale."[161] And Everlane is hardly the only company to employ this tactic—companies like Madewell and Outdoor Voices also utilize "plus sized" models in their campaigns despite not making products for those people in real life.[162]

Anti-fat societal attitudes, informed by an anti-fat body positivity movement, help reinforce oppressive structures in society. This is the third harm of the movement's co-optation: its anti-fatness results in material harms to fat people who lack legal protection. Peoples' anti-fat attitudes, amplified by an exclusionary body positivity movement, result in an anti-fat society with few (if any) legal protections for fat people. When we understand the current body positivity movement as being co-opted, it becomes apparent that this is harmful in part because it removes one of very few groups once dedicated to seeking out equal legal protections and treatment for fat people. This allows the continuation of wage-gaps for fat people, the perception that overweight job applicants are less qualified than thin counterparts, and an increase in negative employment outcomes for fat people.[163] With virtually no states with laws that prohibit workplace discrimination on the basis of weight (with the exception of Michigan, and a handful of cities nationwide), an anti-fat body positivity movement becomes a threat to fat people's wellbeing and livelihood. Fat people quite literally cannot afford to be excluded from one of the only movements originally centered on advocating on their behalf, as the lack of organized activism on their behalf allows society to remain stagnant and apathetic towards legally-sanctioned or excused discrimination against fat people.[164]

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[161] Amanda Mull, "Body Positivity Is a Scam," Vox, June 5, 2018, https://www.vox.com/2018/6/5/17236212/body-positivity-scam-dove-campaign-ads.
[162] Lauren Downing Peters, "When Madewell and Lululemon Use Plus Models, It's Size Appropriation," Vox, June 5, 2018, https://www.vox.com/2018/6/5/17236466/size-appropriation-brands-clothes-plus-size.
[163] John Cawley, "The Impact of Obesity on Wages," *The Journal of Human Resources* 39, no. 2 (2004): 451–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/3559022.
[164] Hobbes, "Everything You Know About Obesity Is Wrong."

III. The Goals of the Body Positivity Movement Moving Forward

The body positivity movement's co-optation, coupled with the ongoing harms of living in an anti-fat society, leaves us with a question of how to move forward with the aims of the original movement. Recall that the original iteration of the movement had three primary types of goals: **personal goals**, **community-oriented goals**, and **activist/advocacy goals**. Ideally, a path forward from the body positivity movement will encompass these different types of goals simultaneously.

Before addressing possible pathways forward with alternatives to the body positivity movement, I want to briefly address the role that beauty played in the original movement. Many feminist scholars have critiqued an emphasis on beauty, especially within the context of the body positivity movement. As Céline Leboeuf warns, the body positivity movement's current emphasis on beauty is potentially damaging, especially in the context of a society with such limiting aesthetic standards.[165] One might worry that any focus on beauty, however radical, merely moves the goalposts of who/what is considered beautiful. Beauty, one might object, necessarily creates hierarchy as it is juxtaposed with ugliness. We have good reason to be wary of a focus on beauty, as we do not merely want to create a new (but still exclusionary) set of norms against which people are judged and shamed.

Further, many commercialized instantiations of the current body positivity movement imply that we *ought* to strive towards beauty.[166] As Kaila Prins argues in light of Dove's campaign for "Real Beauty," body positivity sometimes aims to *sell* beauty, convincing people

[165] Céline Leboeuf, "What Is Body Positivity? The Path from Shame to Pride," *Philosophical Topics* 47, no. 2 (2019): 114.
[166] Kaila Prins, "3 Reasons Why Body-Positive Ad Campaigns Are Less Empowering Than You Think," Everyday Feminism, May 5, 2015, https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/05/problem-with-body-positive-ads/.

(but especially women) that they must buy a certain product in order to attain beauty. Further, beyond these capitalist critiques, an emphasis on beauty becomes problematic when women are asked to *feel* beautiful. As Prins worries, the body positivity movement's invitation for all women to feel beautiful "is all well and good—except what happens on the days when you don't 'feel beautiful,' even though you've been told you're *supposed* to feel that way?"[167]

I recognize the importance of these worries, and agree that we need to be careful that any future offshoot of body positivity does not place this pressure on those who participate in the movement—*especially* when this pressure is created or used to sell (beauty) products. While these are important critiques of a movement that focuses on beauty, I worry that they miss the radical reimagining of beauty that was so crucial to the original body positivity movement. Part of the power of the original body positivity movement was that it allowed fat people to celebrate and recognize new forms of beauty within themselves. For many fat people in the movement, body positive spaces were the first spaces in their lives in which this radical reimagining of beauty occurred, and in which bodies that deviated from beauty norms could even be imagined in a positive light. The original body positivity movement challenged how we understood beauty. It expanded what we imagined (and could imagine) as beautiful, positing that there were no limits on beauty and that *all* bodies were beautiful as they were. But more than this, it also helped popularize the idea that beauty (or, a specific type of beauty) was not something we *owed* others. Instead, beauty (within the context of the original body positivity movement) was an invitation to play with your image, to experiment, to connect with your own body and others' bodies, and to live authentically.

[167] Prins.

This approach to beauty involved fat people creating beauty for themselves, connecting themselves to living fat people and to a rich history of fat people and ancestors. It often required extreme creativity and ingenuity, as fat people had to carve out space for themselves to participate in beauty and in aesthetic engagement in a realm from which they had historically been excluded. They did this through a myriad of measures that evolved over time as the movement developed. In earlier stages of the movement this included making clothes out of repurposed fabrics. As social media and technology enabled this message to spread further and allowed the movement to gain momentum, fat people participated in beauty by building their own opportunities for collaborative fat aesthetic production and engagement (e.g., fat owned and focused fashion lines and events[168]) and sharing pictures of themselves online living while unapologetically fat to increase fat visibility. This labor mirrored what Shirley Anne Tate describes as 'cut and mix' approach to aesthetics. Tate uses this term to categorize the improvisational, inventive approach to beauty and aesthetics that Black communities often utilize to subvert beauty norms.[169] Through this kind of approach, Black communities were able to defy dominant conventions of beauty, combining different heritages and diasporic practices of stylization in ways that pushed back at anti-Black systems and attitudes. Similarly, fat people in the original body positivity movement often participated in dominant beauty practices and discourses, modifying those practices and adapting them to suit the needs of fat communities.

While there are many legitimate critiques of beauty norms, it is important to recognize the value of this specific kind of beauty-related labor and engagement. This kind of labor was

[168] See, for example, the fashion line Premme, founded by plus-size fashion bloggers Gabi Gregg and Nicolette Mason. Premme "was born out of a love of fashion and the recognition that the [fashion] industry is still lacking when it comes to the wants and needs of plus size women." (Gabi Gregg and Nicolette Mason, "Premme," Social media, Facebook, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/premme.us/.)
[169] Shirley Anne Tate, *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics* (Routledge, 2009), 29.

radical both in how it challenged and sought to dismantle dominant approaches to beauty, and in how it enabled fat people to reclaim aesthetic agency that they had historically been denied (and often continue to be denied today). We continue to live in a society in which fat people (despite being the most common body type) are denied access to clothing, excluded from beauty and fashion campaigns, and are forced to fight for a right to participate in aesthetic adornment. This is true of all fat bodies, but especially those that deviate furthest from dominant understandings of beauty (e.g., those fat people with visible disabilities, whose gender challenges dominant gender norms, larger fat people, and fat people of color).

While there are increasingly more brands that cater to (or at least *claim* to cater to) fat people, few of those center bodies that deviate strongly from idealized thinness. Even with brands dedicated exclusively to fat fashion, like Torrid, the bodies shown are overwhelmingly white and able-bodied, with hourglass figures and falling on the smaller end of the fat spectrum. Moreover, there are still far too many people who imagine fatness as the antithesis to beauty, and multi-billion dollar industries dedicated to eradicating[170] fat bodies. This shows us that there is much work to be done still in who is understood as being able to participate in beauty.

In addition, we have compelling reason to believe that beauty (and relatedly, desirability) plays a large role in the very existence of anti-fatness. As Eaton argues, our collective distaste for fat bodies is "an important *constitutive element of the oppression of fat people.*"[171] As Eaton cautions, we are often too quick to underestimate the role our tastes and aesthetics play "in

[170] Or, at the very least, these industries offer a promise to eradicate fatness, even if they ultimately fail to do so. For evidence of the inefficacy of dieting (and, by extension, the diet industry) at creating long-term, sustainable weight loss, see J. W. Anderson et al., "Long-Term Weight-Loss Maintenance: A Meta-Analysis of US Studies," *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 74, no. 5 (November 2001): 579–84, https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/74.5.579.
[171] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 38.

instituting and maintaining oppression."[172] Anti-fatness does not just come about or get perpetuated because of stereotypes and false beliefs about fatness, but because of our sentiments about fat bodies themselves. Eaton recommends that in order to fully combat anti-fatness, we must challenge not only these false thoughts and beliefs about fatness, but our *feelings* about fat people and bodies. On her view, learning to recognize fat positively (as likable and attractive) helps us learn to celebrate fat bodies, which over time can help us address our distaste and unlearn anti-fatness.[173]

Within this context, then, we have good reason to think that beauty *matters:* that it is a laudable and important goal to allow space for fat beauty. While we must be careful not to replicate or create new hierarchies and exclusionary beauty practices, we must also be careful not to shut out or disregard beauty altogether. As we imagine the future (or replacement) of the body positivity movement in light of its co-optation, we can use the original movement's beauty practices and radical reimagining of what beauty means as a model for future efforts. To address some of the feminist critiques of the body positivity movement more specifically, and focusing on beauty more generally, we must frame fat beauty as an opportunity rather than an obligation. It is not that anyone *must* be or feel beautiful, or that their worth is tied to this beauty. Instead, a future that does justice to the original body positivity movement will understand beauty as an invitation and opportunity for fat people to cultivate a sense of play and discovery regarding beauty, to connect with other fat people, and to reclaim aesthetic agency in a way that is meaningful and authentic to them on an individual and collective level.

IV. What to Make of Body Positivity?

[172] Eaton, 38.
[173] Eaton, 53.

Now that we have a better understanding of the goals that should be included in any future iteration of the (original, fat-activist) body positivity movement, as well as a recognition of the importance of beauty in this context, we can consider a path forward. One move that may seem initially desirable is to return the body positivity movement to its rightful owners, recentering the body positivity movement on fat people (especially those most vulnerable to and disproportionately harmed by anti-fatness). Recognizing the history of the movement and the individuals and groups whose labor made the movement possible, one could reasonably argue that justice requires us to give the movement back to those voices, reclaiming it from those who co-opted the movement. While this is an admirable aspiration, it is not practically feasible. The movement has been deeply co-opted, both by individuals and by corporations, and is so prolific in its contemporary focus on self-love and beauty that many do not even know of the movement's fat activist origins.

Although we could attempt widespread education on this front, we would still be left with a couple of pressing issues. First and foremost, it is difficult to imagine how this return would function in pragmatic terms. The kind of widespread monitoring this would require (especially on social media) seems costly (both financially and in terms of labor/time), legally questionable, and ultimately a logistical nightmare given how widespread use of the language of body positivity has become. Second, returning the movement to its rightful owners would remove a space for arguably important goals of self-acceptance and challenging beauty standards for all bodies, goals which have been the more narrow/singular focus of the new iteration of the movement.[174] A recent study by Rachel Cohen et al. showed that viewing body positivity-related

[174] This is not to say that the movement's co-optation is excused or justified because it has given rise to arguably positive aims and change. Rather, it is to recognize the reality that the movement has an important purpose as it currently stands. We can recognize the value of celebrating and promoting widespread self-acceptance while still

posts and messages helped improve participants' moods and body image, and had a greater impact on their body satisfaction and appreciation than did thin-ideal and appearance-neutral images.[175]

Lastly, returning the movement to its rightful owners would likely fail given that many fat activists have rejected the movement *because* of its co-optation. As the current iteration of the movement often pushes away those bodies which deviate furthest from beauty norms (e.g., gender non-conforming fat people, super- and infinifat people, fat people of color, and disabled fat people—the very kinds of people the movement was designed to protect), many fat activists are uninterested in investing the time and emotional labor needed to continue to demand their rights to participate in the movement.

Fat writer and community organizer Aubrey Gordon is one of many fat activists who has spoken out against the movement in its current, co-opted state. Gordon rejects the movement's narrow focuses on beauty and self-esteem, focuses which she argues move the movement too far from its fat activist origins. As she explains,

> Like so many fat people, I did not come to body positivity for self-esteem. I did not come to body positivity because I wanted to feel beautiful or loved—those things had always lay beyond the reach of our cultural imagination for people with bodies like mine. I came to body positivity because I cared about being human. As a fat person, my humanity was—and is—too readily erased, eclipsed by either beauty or health. I came to body positivity because it held the promise of something radical—the possibility that I, as a

taking steps to acknowledge the movement's history, the harms of its co-optation, and the ongoing need to challenge anti-fatness.

[175] Rachel Cohen, Toby Newton-John, and Amy Slater, "The Case for Body Positivity on Social Media: Perspectives on Current Advances and Future Directions," *Journal of Health Psychology*, March 19, 2020, 135910532091245, https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105320912450.

very fat person, could be seen and understood for who I am. Not because I am happy or healthy, thin, or beautiful, but because I am human.[176]

What Gordon's words reveal is a sense of alienation and harm that many fat people feel within a movement that focuses only on self-esteem and beauty. In a space that once offered hope of a radical new way of understanding and approaching fat bodies, the current body positivity movement fails to live up to this promise. While self-esteem and beauty are arguably important dimensions of body positivity, they are not the only goals worth attending to from the original movement. A movement that truly supports fat people, as the body positivity movement's fat-activist roots once did, needs to be targeted at each of the different levels of work mentioned earlier: personal, community-oriented, and advocacy/activist goals. In light of the current movement's failure to address each of these goals, we are left with the question: how can we best achieve the aims of the original, fat activist body positivity movement moving forward? To address this question, in the remainder of this section I will discuss the merits and drawbacks of three alternatives to the body positivity movement: body neutrality, proper body pride, and radical self-love.

IVA. Body Neutrality

One alternative to body positivity that has been popularized in recent years is a shift towards body neutrality. Body neutrality "displaces the premise of one's relationship to one's body from its appearance to its abilities," aiming to disrupt our fixation on outward beauty. This contrasts with the message from the contemporary body positivity movement that "all bodies are beautiful."[177] Body neutrality is an approach that aims to bring people peace with their bodies by

[176] Aubrey Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 158.
[177] Leboeuf, "What Is Body Positivity?"

encouraging them to recognize what their bodies can do, to accept their body's limitations without shame, and to challenge harmful messages that one's worth is tied to their beauty.[178]

As one resource describes, "for people who do not want to love their body or cannot see it as beautiful, body neutrality is the movement for them."[179] By practicing or participating in this movement, people will ideally develop and maintain "a healthy relationship with [their bodies] without trying to force body love."[180] To do this, one must "focus on accepting your body and how it serves you. Listen to signals your body gives you, and do what makes you feel good."[181] What this looks like may vary based on one's individual needs and abilities, but may include practices like mindful and intuitive eating, adorning oneself in a way that makes one feel comfortable, tailoring social media use to restrict accounts that fuel negative body thoughts and image, finding opportunities for joyful movement, and neutrally acknowledging what your body can and cannot do.[182] Through all of these activities, pressure to achieve some external standard of beauty is minimized, as one works to understand body image as "just one facet of our identity, which we can remain neutral about."[183]

Many people find body neutrality to be an appealing alternative to body positivity, as it puts less pressure on an individual to have a positive regard for their body. Body positivity is often taken as a daunting task for individuals whose bodies are not seen as beautiful or socially acceptable. We are often taught to see our own bodies as shameful and wrong when they fail to conform to society's standards. Suddenly regarding your body positively in this context (of the

[178] Natalie Horn, "Body Neutrality," *University of Washington Tacoma Sociology Student Work Collection* 75 (2021): 2–3.
[179] Horn, 6.
[180] Horn, "Body Neutrality."
[181] Horn.
[182] Horn; Miranda Park, "Concept: Body Neutrality," The One Woman Project, September 14, 2020, https://www.onewomanproject.org/bodies/concept-body-neutrality.
[183] Park, "Concept: Body Neutrality."

contemporary body positivity movement) is difficult not just because others may continue to see your body negatively, but also because it requires unlearning a lifetime of internalized shame and hate (often while still embedded in a society that continues to encourage those negative responses). Body neutrality, in contrast, removes this pressure on individuals to feel this (often alienating) positive regard for their body, as it merely asks people to acknowledge their body as it is.

As Leboeuf explains, though, body neutrality has been criticized as exclusionary for "persons whose physical abilities are severely limited" due to its focus on what the body can do.[184] Relatedly, the movement asks people to acknowledge their limitations without shame. Although, in an ideal world, all people should be able to acknowledge and accept their bodies without shame, this can be a difficult and alienating task for those individuals who *do* feel shame because of their limitations. Especially in a world in which the built environment is often not designed for certain bodies (e.g., those with mobility limitations or who rely on a mobility aid, those who are at the larger end of the fat spectrum, etc.), it is reasonable to think that shame, frustration, and other negative emotions may arise when one is unable to navigate the built environment in the same way as those with bodies for whom the built environment was designed.

Moreover, even if this movement may help individuals reconfigure self-aimed attitudes, it does not necessarily help disrupt society's rampant anti-fatness as was an aim of the original body positivity movement. Aubrey Gordon echoes this worry, arguing that body neutrality can be useful in enabling us to heal our relationships with our bodies as individuals while still allowing systemic body-based oppression to exist (and to cause disproportionate harm to fat

[184] Leboeuf, "What Is Body Positivity?," 123.

people). As she explains "Body neutrality seems to offer the opportunity to take the power away from our bodies, to free us up to think about *something else and just live our lives.* In the context of individual recovery and resetting our relationships with our own bodies, that's a powerful task to undertake—and it can be a meaningful tool for internal work. But what I rarely see [in conversations about body neutrality is] engaging with the larger social forces that shape our own body image—much less challenging these forces."[185]

I leave open the possibility that over a longer period of time, widespread disruption of our focus on beauty may help to address at least some facets of anti-fatness (especially as anti-fatness often stems from or is amplified by our shared beliefs about which bodies are and are not desirable). However, that work is only a small part of the picture, and does not on its own do enough to dismantle anti-fatness. Thus, while body-neutrality may offer a viable alternative to the *current* body positivity movement (which primarily focuses on personal or self-oriented goals), it does not achieve the activist/advocacy goals of the original iteration of the movement. While people may be able to see their own bodies as neutral, I worry that they may be unable to apply this mindset to others' bodies—especially larger fat bodies, unhealthy fat bodies, and disabled fat bodies, towards which many experience feelings of extreme disgust.[186]

Lastly, while body neutrality helps us address some of the personal goals of the original body positivity movement (e.g., finding comfort and value in one's own body, regardless of whether it is "beautiful"), it does not acknowledge the importance and value of fat people being able to recognize themselves as beautiful. While body neutrality rightly steps away from dominant understandings of beauty, positing that people have worth regardless of whether

[185] Aubrey Gordon, "Having a Better Body Image Won't End Body-Based Oppression," SELF, July 22, 2020, https://www.self.com/story/body-neutrality. Emphasis original.
[186] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 43.

society deems them beautiful, it also steps away from the radical reimagining of beauty found in the original body positivity movement. This departure signifies an important loss, especially given the role that the aesthetic and our aesthetic taste plays in anti-fat bias and oppression.[187] Ideally, any path forward from the current body positivity movement will leave room for this radical reimagining of beauty, as this goal is importantly tied to other goals (e.g., community building or advocacy goals) involved in the original iteration of the movement.

IVB. Proper Body Pride

If body neutrality is not a viable alternative to body positivity, perhaps we can focus our efforts on things like self-love or self-pride. Leboeuf argues that we should understand body positivity "as *the transition from limiting body shame to proper body pride*,"[188] a type of pride aimed at resisting body shame.[189] Proper body pride allows one to limit shame through recognizing the strengths of their own unique body, developing a proper emotional relationship in which we accept and become comfortable in our own bodies.[190] As Leboeuf argues, following Simone de Beauvoir, women become alienated from their bodies because of both "negative perceptions of female bodily functions" and because of the way they are taught to imagine themselves as objects (both aesthetic and sexual).[191] This alienation gives rise to intense experiences of shame, both about the body itself and its behaviors (e.g., its movement).[192] Leboeuf argues that others' negative perceptions of our bodies give rise to this body shame, and that this shame limits our

[187] See Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression."
[188] Leboeuf, "What Is Body Positivity?," 115.
[189] Leboeuf, "What Is Body Positivity?"
[190] Leboeuf.
[191] Leboeuf, 115–16.
[192] Leboeuf, 117.

ability to flourish.[193] To combat this shame, and thus foster a more positive relationship with our bodies, Leboeuf recommends that we cultivate proper body pride.

Proper body pride entails having a certain kind of positive regard for your body, and Leboeuf is careful to stipulate that we can feel pride for our body even if we are not morally responsible for it.[194] Not *all* pride in one's body will help us develop body positive attitudes, though, as some types of pride are misplaced (e.g., taking pride in an excessively thin body, when this pride occurs because one fears being fat).[195] Using Jeremy Fischer's work on pride, Leboeuf argues that *proper* body pride requires that pride in one's body (1) "contributes to the meaningfulness of one's life", and (2) "is consistent with moral obligation."[196]

Leboeuf's account of proper body pride offers a promising alternative to body positivity in that it alleviates many of the pressures from the current body positivity movement to regard one's body completely positively. As discussed previously regarding body neutrality, this pressure is often alienating and damaging to participants of the movement. Proper body pride requires that we recognize not just what our bodies can do, but also their limitations. To that extent, it allows us more space to feel a range of emotions towards our body than does the current body positivity movement.

It also addresses some of the shortcomings of body neutrality. Body neutrality in a sense overcorrects body positivity's emphasis on regarding one's body positively, encouraging us to neutrally regard our bodies and focus on cultivating an attitude of acceptance. Proper body pride

[193] Leboeuf, 117–18.
[194] This contrasts with some accounts of pride, wherein someone is thought to only be able to take pride in things for which they are morally responsible. Leboeuf, 120.
[195] Leboeuf, 121.
[196] Jeremy Fischer, "The Ethics of Reflexivity: Pride, Self-Sufficiency, and Modesty," *Philosophical Papers* 45, no. 3 (2016): 390.

is a strong alternative as it encourages us to go beyond mere acceptance, finding joy and positive responses to our bodies when possible (and accepting and acknowledging when this is not possible). Especially in a context in which fat people are taught to hate (and work to destroy) their fat bodies, a movement that encourages people to find joy and positivity in their embodiment is important in challenging anti-fatness.

Another strength of proper body pride in contrast with body neutrality is that proper body pride can more naturally require or enable us to actively combat and disrupt anti-fatness. Because one of the qualifications for having *proper* pride is that it is consistent with our moral obligations, it requires us to understand and address a broader context of harm that results from weight stigma and anti-fatness. Body neutrality does not actively require this kind of acknowledgment, as it focuses more on individual attitudes and one's experience in their own body. This also contrasts with the contemporary body positivity movement, in which participants are often actively anti-fat and shun fat people from participating in the movement if they are over a certain size. A pathway forward from the original body positivity movement necessitates that we work actively to address systemic anti-fatness and our shared anti-fat attitudes, and proper body pride can help bring us closer to this goal.

It is important to recognize that while proper body pride entails that one has the right moral attitudes about ending anti-fatness and weight stigma, it does not necessitate that we *act on* these moral attitudes. One could imagine a person having proper body pride and recognizing that we should not discriminate against others on the basis of weight, without that person taking active steps to disrupt and challenge anti-fatness in practice (by, for example, challenging friends and family who make anti-fat comments, demanding that their healthcare providers have fat-inclusive equipment and procedures, etc.). So, while proper body pride's requirement that our

pride is consistent with our moral obligations has the *potential* to facilitate the activist/advocacy goals of the original body positivity movement, it does not *guarantee* that these goals are acted on.

In addition to this worry about the extent to which proper body pride requires us to act on activist/advocacy goals, I worry that this alternative to body positivity fails to sufficiently acknowledge the history and co-optation of the movement. While proper body pride does require (or at least encourages) us to understand and address anti-fatness in order to have *proper* body pride, Leboeuf's proposal oddly does not acknowledge the history of the body positivity's co-optation. Leboeuf does not claim to be providing an alternative to the original iteration of the movement, and we can plausibly read her account as offering an alternative merely to the modern, co-opted movement. But even if we grant that this is Leboeuf's focus, ignoring the movement's co-optation further amplifies many of the harms that come from it being co-opted, erasing decades of work by fat Black women to advocate for fat communities. The movement's fat activist origins are central to its mission. Failing to acknowledge this troubling history does further harm to the individuals and communities who sacrificed and fought to make the movement possible in the first place. Thus, while Leboeuf's proposal provides an arguably great alternative to the *current* movement, it could be strengthened by acknowledging the greater context in which this movement exists.

Further, in light of my previous comments on the central role beauty played in the original movement, I worry about Leboeuf's de-centering beauty in the context of proper body pride. While Leboeuf offers strong reasons to be wary of the way the contemporary movement focuses on beauty (as an obligation tied to harmful dominant beauty norms), it again overlooks the role that beauty played in the original body positivity movement. Leboeuf's pluralistic

proposal does allow that we can broaden standards of beauty alongside working to develop appreciation for our bodies. She recognizes that beauty "is an essential part of our lives," and that adornment and beauty practices are a major part of our culture.[197] Despite this recognition, her proposal could be strengthened by having a broader understanding of the type of radical reimagining of beauty involved in the original movement (which went beyond merely expanding which bodies counted as beautiful).[198]

One final worry about Leboeuf's account is how individualized it seems. While Leboeuf's proper body pride does require us to consider our moral obligations to (and thus our relationships with) others, much of the work being done is individual. Proper body pride involves learning to challenge your personal attitudes about your body, finding acceptance and unlearning shame in your body. These are important goals, and they can help us address many of the personal *and* activist goals of the original movement. But this account does not necessitate or particularly encourage any community-oriented goals or activity, such as discussing our learned shame and feelings of alienation from our bodies with those who share similar experiences or sharing our moments of pride in our body, creating a supportive network of people who celebrate one another.[199] While the individual labor involved in proper body pride is important, it misses part of what made the original body positivity movement thrive in the first place: its emphasis on community. Fat people in the original movement understood and recognized the value of building and sustaining a community with other fat people, not only because of the political

[197] Leboeuf, "What Is Body Positivity?," 125.
[198] Leboeuf, 124.
[199] This is not to say that any specific community goal (e.g., discussing shameful feelings towards your own body with others) should be obligatory for participation in this movement. Instead, my concern here is that Leboeuf's account does not seem to require enough community-oriented labor in general, and that this community-oriented work was a significant part of the original body positivity movement (and one which I think is worth having moving forward, given the important role that this community work has played historically in making fat activism possible).

power this community could offer, but also because this kind of collective acceptance and celebration of fat bodies helped disrupt common understandings of and disdain for fat bodies.

Leboeuf does offer a brief hope that proper body pride can lead to consciousness-raising about body oppression, bringing a broader recognition of "how we fight our bodies because of rigid beauty standards or how we fail to recognize our bodies' worthiness of respect or of care."[200] But this consciousness-raising, while helpful for satisfying the activist goals of the original body positivity movement, does not necessarily facilitate the kind of community-oriented goals that made the movement unique. Part of the original body positivity movement involved taking time to enjoy and be in the company of other fat people. This collective engagement was not done for the sake of raising awareness, or to challenge harmful bias and behavior. Instead, it was an opportunity to simply exist as a fat person, without the constant pressure to fight and advocate for yourself and your community. Fat people, like all people, deserve the right to enjoy their lives and identities, without making their every action about legitimizing their identity and existence to others.[201]

Ideally, we should have a movement that allows for (and intentionally centers) each of the three types of goals found in the original body positivity movement: personal, community-oriented, and activist/advocacy goals. In light of the shortcomings of proper body pride, and the opportunities to more explicitly build these goals into the movement, we will now consider one additional alternative: radical self-love.

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[200] Leboeuf, 125.

[201] Leboeuf's proposal does occasionally touch on community-oriented activities, particularly sports and movement-based opportunities, and community-oriented beauty practices. (Leboeuf, 215.) But even in these contexts, much of the activity she discusses seems to serve the role of challenging unfair systems, expanding representation, and engaging in advocacy. The one area where she does not explicitly tie community engagement back to some kind of advocacy work is in discussing participation in physical activities (e.g., sports, dance, or yoga), but these options are often exclusionary and alienating to fat people—especially those at the furthest ends of the fat spectrum.

IVC. Radical Self-Love

One of the biggest strengths of both body neutrality and Leboeuf's proper body pride was that each view encouraged people to accept their bodies as they were, without feeling forced to alter their bodies. In keeping with this theme, we now turn to a third possible path forward that would enable us to accomplish the goals of the original body positivity movement: Sonya Renée Taylor's "radical self-love."[202]

Radical self-love is a method of resisting body oppression wherein we "counter the constant barrage of shame, discrimination, and body terrorism that are enacted against us every single day" through reuniting ourselves with love and acceptance of our bodies as they are.[203] Taylor understands various systems of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, ableism, transphobia, and anti-fatness) as harmful forces that make it "difficult and sometimes deadly to live in our bodies," and offers radical self-love as a hope for a future devoid of these systems of oppression.[204]

Radical self-love, like Leboeuf's proper body pride, is created to help us unlearn indoctrinated shame that has been instilled in us since birth.[205] To unlearn this shame, Taylor

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[202] It is worth noting that Leboeuf sees proper body pride and radical self-love as projects that can support one another. Noting that radical self-love has been proposed as an alternative to body positivity, she says "So, why not focus on love rather than on the shame-pride dyad? My framing of the issue and that of body-positivity activists such as Taylor are not at odds with one another. I conceive of body positivity as an opposition to harmful body shame because much of our lack of love toward our bodies originate in deep feelings of shame….My contention is that if we are to love our bodies, we must reject such shame and, further, that rejecting such shame is grounded in proper pride." (124) While these two accounts can plausibly coexist, I discuss both in this project as they have been offered as alternatives to body positivity in different areas (Taylor's radical self-love being discussed in primarily activist and social media circles, and Leboeuf's proper body pride stemming from academic and philosophical literature on body positivity). I recognize that both have been offered as a way to combat learned shame in our bodies, but since each takes a different approach to combatting this shame (using either self-love or developing pride in our bodies), I think they are distinct enough to warrant separate discussions.

[203] "Why We Are Radical," The Body is Not an Apology, 2021, https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/about-tbinaa/why-we-are-radical/.

[204] Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*, First Edition (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 18.

[205] Taylor, 5.

encourages us to "think of body shame like the layers of an onion. For decades in our own lives and for centuries in civilization, we have been taught to judge and shame our bodies and to consequently judge and shame others. Getting to our inherent state of radical self-love means peeling away those ancient, toxic messages of bodies," refusing to apologize for our bodies.[206] This approach goes beyond mere self-confidence, self-esteem, or even self-acceptance, as radical self-love requires us to return to a childlike loving relationship with our bodies, one which Taylor argues we start our lives holding.[207] By moving (back) into this relationship of love, we radically reimagine and reform the way that we as a society engage with bodies.

Amelia Hruby argues that body positivity exists within a context in which "white supremacist, patriarchal, late stage [capitalism]" alienates us from our own bodies.[208] In this context, particularly for those who are marginalized, we are taught narratives of self-hatred and self-loathing. While aspiring for body positive attitudes towards our own bodies can be important in this space, body positivity has been co-opted and no longer carries the same radical connotations that the movement once held. Because of this co-optation, Hruby understands radical self-love as a movement that is more "in touch with fat feminism," and more readily facilitates "a real redefinition and revaluation of fatness in our society" than does contemporary body positivity.[209]

This movement of radical self-love requires us not only to transform our personal relationship with our own bodies, but to become aware of systems of oppression, others' struggles, and our relative privilege. Taylor envisions that we will use this relationship of self-

[206] Taylor, 6.
[207] Taylor, 10.
[208] Ellie Anderson and David Peña-Guzmán, "From Body Positivity to Fat Feminism (Feat Amelia Hruby)," Overthink, accessed March 9, 2022, https://www.overthinkpodcast.com/episode-27-transcript.
[209] Anderson and Peña-Guzmán.

love "to interrupt the systems that perpetuate body shame and oppression against all bodies."[210] This account requires us to engage with one another and be interdependent, and it also helps facilitate this dependence since, on Taylor's view, cultivating a foundation of radical self-love "is the foundation of radical human love."[211]

This account is promising in that it initially seems to attend to each of the three types of goals found in the original body positivity movement. Through addressing our own relationships with our bodies as individuals, cultivating self-love, we are able to find moments of joy in those bodies and to celebrate our size (thus satisfying the body positivity movement's personal aims). Further, Taylor argues that this radical self-love enhances our ability to extend that love toward others, celebrating and uplifting them while recognizing and respecting our differences. Learning this radical human love can help us tackle the original body positivity movement's community-oriented goals, as we learn to appreciate others' bodies and identities and learn to extend our compassion towards others. Lastly, because this account requires us to reflect on and dismantle systems of oppression, it takes clear strides towards the advocacy/activist goals of the original body positivity movement.

My main worry with this account is that learning to love one's self, especially when you've spent a lifetime being taught to cultivate an attitude of hate towards your body, can be an arduous task. While working to restore a relationship of radical self-love, we still live in a world in which oppressive hatred (especially for fat people) reigns supreme. Radical self-love, then, requires that an agent has an incredible amount of resilience, and is willing to withstand

[210] Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology*, 5.
[211] Taylor, 9.

strenuous mental labor and emotional pain as they try to reimagine their personal relationship to their body within a system that is not making similar efforts.

If we could synchronize all people to undergo this process of radical self-love simultaneously, I would have more hope of its plausibility. But when this system is not implemented in a widespread manner, I worry that it sets individuals up for failure. Even if one does manage to overcome the barriers of living in a fat-hating society and learns to love oneself, one still has to regularly encounter reminders that this love is wrong. Loving yourself cannot insulate you from a world that says you shouldn't.

Further, we live in a world where there are often material consequences for living unapologetically in a way that the world says you shouldn't. Any fat person who has dared to post a happy photo online knows that these public measures are often met with threats of violence and verbal abuse. As many fat queer folks can attest, dressing in a way that defies gender and body expectations can increase the risk that you are attacked or assaulted in public. And the further one deviates from body and beauty norms, the greater risk they may have of facing similar instances of violence. Given these pressures and material harms, it is understandable that a fat person may find if difficult (if not impossible) to love themselves while fat.

To summarize, I worry that self-love is too high a bar for many fat people to reach. In recognizing that self-love is (at best) a very labor-intensive and daunting mission for fat people to undertake within a fat-hating society, I think the best pathway forward from body positivity will have a different focus: one that allows us to work towards loving ourselves if we want to, but that also leaves space for a wide breadth of alternative relationships with one's body. To have a framework that maximizes different opportunities for engagement while still

accommodating the different types of goals involved in the original body positivity movement, I recommend that we turn our attention toward a framework of fat justice.

V. Motivating a Modified Account of Fat Justice

In order to truly attend to the different goals of the original body positivity movement, we need a framework of fat justice that allows us to challenge existing anti-fatness while celebrating fat people as they are. I propose that we can use a modified version of Gordon's framework of fat justice, one which addresses systemic anti-fatness while also leaving room for the celebration of fat joy and a radical reimagining of beauty.

Gordon presents her framework of fat justice as an aspirational future in which body-based discrimination is seen as universally unacceptable. As she explains, "we need a world that insists upon safety and dignity for *all of us—not* because we are beautiful, healthy, blameless, exceptional, or beyond reproach, but because we are *human beings.*"[212] Seeking this world requires all of us, regardless of body size, to work collaboratively towards justice. It also requires us to recognize our relative privileges, and to critically reflect on the ways in which different systems of oppression impact and compound one another. As Gordon argues, a movement of fat justice requires that we understand and acknowledge that "each system of oppression needs to be understood on its own terms, and as part of an interdependent web of oppressions that impacts all of us."[213] To adequately address this web of oppressions, we must all acknowledge how our identities impact our lives and the privileges afforded to us, working together to dismantle the oppressive systems that harm marginalized communities. To that end, Gordon's proposal of a movement of fat justice is reminiscent of the early fat activist origins of the body positivity

[212] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*, 162. Emphasis original.
[213] Gordon, 156.

movement, especially the call to action from the Fat Underground's *Fat Liberation Manifesto* in which they understood the struggles of fat people "as allied with the struggles of other oppressed groups against classism, racism, sexism, ageism, financial exploitation, imperialism, and the like."[214]

Much of Gordon's framework focuses on actionable steps we can take "to stem the tide of systemic, institutional harms facing fat people," as current legal systems and institutions fail to protect (and often actively harm) fat people.[215] She lists six specific measures that would move us towards fat justice:

- "End the legal, widespread practice of weight discrimination" (162)
- "Realize the promise of healthcare for fat people" (162)
- "Increase access to public spaces" like public transit, housing, state-buildings, and restaurants (163)
- "End anti-fat violence" (163-4)
- "End the approval of weight-loss drugs with dangerous—even fatal—side effects" (164)
- "Stand up for fat kids" by addressing anti-fat bullying, weight management/monitoring programs in K-12 schools, and anti-fat public health campaigns targeting childhood "obesity" (164-5)

One of the major benefits of this framework of fat justice is that it does not prescribe any one set of attitudes or relationships with one's own body. Fat justice does not *require* you to feel any certain way about your body (be that pride, shame, joy, love, hatred, etc.)—but it does leave

[214] Freespirit and Aldebaran, "Fat Liberation Manifesto."
[215] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*, 162.

room for you to find joy in your body, and to celebrate that joy with others if that is personally useful.

This framework is also helpful in that it leaves space for fat joy—both on an individual and a collective level. To be fat is often to live a life of trauma: to constantly be reminded of the myriad reasons you are "supposed" to hate your body, and worse yet, your very existence. We (fat people) are constantly bombarded with media messaging about the horrors of being fat[216], advertising with promises of a quick fix to help us drop those extra pounds, and public health campaigns promising to ensure that no child has to live in a fat body[217]. To have these messages constantly repeated is exhausting at best, and deadly at worst. To find joy in one's fat body in such a viciously anti-fat society, then, is revolutionary. It resists centuries of oppression, dehumanization, and erasure, and offers a needed glimpse at a better future. Fat justice leaves room for this kind of joy, as it asks us to honor our bodies, lives, and experiences as we are—without the pressure to change our bodies. While many of the other accounts discussed previously (particularly radical self-love) may also leave room for this joy, a framework of fat justice does so while also leaving room for those who cannot or do not wish to seek this joy (but nevertheless want to engage with the other goals of the framework) since it does not require us to have any specific type of emotional response to our bodies.

This framework is also strong in that it requires community-oriented work, as seeking true justice is only possible through working with others, and importantly through attending to

[216] See, for example, a 2017 study that found that weight-based stigma was observed in 84% of popular children's movies from 2012-2015. Janna B. Howard et al., "Obesogenic Behavior and Weight-Based Stigma in Popular Children's Movies, 2012 to 2015," *Pediatrics* 140, no. 6 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-2126.
[217] See, for example, the state of Georgia's 2012 Strong4Life campaign, in which they plastered images of fat children on billboards with messages like "WARNING: My fat may be funny to you but it's killing me. Stop childhood obesity"; "WARNING: Chubby Kits may not outlive their parents"; and "WARNING: Fat prevention begins at home. And the buffet line." (See Gordon [2020, p. 38-39] for a discussion of this campaign.)

and seeking to eradicate other systems of oppression.[218] As Gordon explains of fat justice, "Its organizing is tender and relational, making space for holding the traumas caused by our oppression, for building a broad and brave vision for a more liberated world, and for driving toward it with anger and joy."[219]

Where I come apart from Gordon's framework of fat justice is in emphasizing the radical nature of fat beauty. Gordon leaves behind this emphasis on beauty, instead focusing on fostering opportunities for fat people to connect with one another, celebrate themselves, and to work together to challenge anti-fatness. While these goals are laudable, they need to happen alongside efforts to reimagine beauty in a radical lens, especially since beauty (as I mentioned previously, following Eaton) contributes to anti-fatness.

This addition to fat justice of a renewed focus on beauty (alongside other goals of a fat justice framework) is especially important given those whose labor made the movement possible in the first place (namely: fat, queer, disabled Black folks). For these groups, finding beauty in themselves (and celebrating that beauty) is still a radical stance, since it occurs within a society that defines beauty as only one way of embodiment (white, thin, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied). As I have emphasized previously, I am not arguing that beauty *simpliciter* is needed for my framework. Instead, I am advocating for a radical reimagining of how we understand beauty, one in which all bodies (and truly ALL of them) are beautiful, and we can recognize the beauty in simply existing, authentically ourselves.

[218] This is not to say that other approaches do not also do this. As I noted, views like Taylor's radical self-love also ask us to consider bodies and identity through an intersectional lens. I am not presenting this particular strength as a foil to other approaches discussed in this paper and am instead merely noting that it is a strength of this account (that I allow may be present in other accounts as well).
[219] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat,* 156.

One worry with my proposal is whether this modified framework of fat justice is necessary. In this project I have discussed at length a variety of different movements and alternatives to body positivity, all of which are strong for different reasons (insofar as they more naturally address different subsets of goals from the original body positivity movement). Why, then, should we seek a singular movement as an alternative rather than being pluralists who allow fat activist work to occur within multiple different movements? Is it *really* necessary to have a single movement that addresses all three types of goals (personal, community-oriented, and activist/advocacy goals) when we could just have different movements tailored to different subsets of goals working simultaneously?

I understand this worry, and I certainly do not wish to imply that we cannot have multiple movements (and perhaps multiple different groups of people) committed to seeking justice in different ways. As I note in my discussion of the contemporary iteration of body positivity, even that version of the movement has its merits and seeks goals that are important and worthwhile. My modified framework of fat justice is proposed as a singular, cohesive movement that can be used to carry out the goals of the original efforts of body positivity, in its fat activist origins. This is not, nor should it be, the only body-related movement that exists (that is, I am not arguing that we should get rid of the other movements discussed in this paper entirely). While these other movements are arguably important and needed, none of the alternatives to body positivity I address fully and adequately enables us to combat anti-fatness as robustly as does my modified framework of fat justice.

The other movements I discuss *purport* to be alternatives to contemporary body positivity that are needed given how it has become a watered-down version of the original body positivity movement. However, as I have argued, none of these alternatives sufficiently addresses *all* of the

goals of the original movement, each of which is needed to fully address anti-fatness. I am open to taking a more pluralistic approach to addressing anti-fatness, in which multiple movements and sites of labor are used to work towards different types of goals.[220] At the same time, I recognize that having a more unified movement may be pragmatically beneficial in seeking justice. (That is to say, while it may not be *necessary* to have a single, unified home for these different goals, it may be *useful* to do so.) Intuitively, one benefit of having a single, more unified movement is that it allows people a clear place to connect with others committed to the same mission of seeking fat acceptance. It also seems as though many of the levels of goals support other goals from the original movement. For example, speaking with others about your experiences as a fat patient in a medical setting (a community-level goal) can help you better understand and accept your own experiences (a personal goal), and can give you the motivation and collective labor necessary to advocate for better treatment by, for example, challenging anti-fat practices at your healthcare provider (an activist/advocacy goal). So, while it is not strictly *necessary* to work on all of these goals at once, it is often the case that the realities of addressing anti-fatness will at least benefit from, and at most require, you to address multiple levels of goals at once. As I have argued, a modified framework of fat justice most readily equips people to do this kind of work—and the fact that it naturally facilitates **each** of these different levels of goals is, on my view, a reason in favor of the framework as a way to move forward with (original, fat-activist) body-positivity in light of its co-optation.

[220] And, in fact, a pluralistic approach of some sort is necessary given that there is not just one unified, universally accepted way of addressing anti-fatness, nor is there one shared, monolithic "fat experience" that we can use as a starting point to addressing anti-fatness. There is no one universal solution to anti-fatness, especially given the ways in which different systems of oppression disproportionately disadvantage and amplify harms caused towards certain groups of fat people. My modified account of fat justice is not intended to be the *only* place in which fat activism occurs, but is instead offered as an alternative to body positivity that better (and more fully) captures the aspirations of the original movement in comparison to alternatives like body neutrality, proper body pride, and radical self-love.

This modified framework of fat justice most readily addresses the three types of goals involved in the original body positivity movement, leaving space for a wide variety of ways of participating that reflect the nuanced and varied realities of being fat. Moreover, its fat activist and liberationist roots require and enable us to recognize the history of the original movement, working to rectify past wrongs for those whose labor was co-opted and has gone overlooked. As such, it provides a promising strategy for reimaging the original body positivity movement, providing a new space for fat people to build community and work towards a better future.

I have argued that today's body positivity movement has been co-opted and further marginalizes the very people it initially aimed to protect, perpetuating legal and structural anti-fatness. As Dionne argues,

> body positivity can't focus on thin, white women and simultaneously tackle discrimination against fat, trans, and disabled people. Expanding legal protections must be the focus [of the body positivity movement], otherwise the outcomes of our lives will continue to be determined by fatphobia, transphobia, and ableism. Until body positivity centers that, the message will continue to be that all bodies are good bodies, but some bodies are still treated better than others.[221]

In light of this need to build a movement that protects *all* people (but especially those who have an ongoing history of being marginalized in the US), I have considered three paths forward with the movement: body neutrality, proper body pride, and radical self-love. While each of these alternatives addresses some of the goals of the original body positivity movement, I have argued that none sufficiently addresses all of those goals. Unless a movement

[221] Dionne, "The Fragility of Body Positivity," 2017.

simultaneously tackles individual empowerment, beauty, community-building, and acceptance alongside combating systemic anti-fatness, it will not be sufficient in meeting the body positivity movement's radical origins. In light of these considerations, I have argued for a modified framework of fat justice, one that allows us to refocus our efforts on the body positivity movement as it was originally designed. By returning to the movement's original roots, we can build a world in which fat people are allowed the space they need to seek joy and fulfillment as they are and as they would like to become.

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Conclusion: As We Are

Our society is (for better or for worse) obsessed with fatness. We are regularly assaulted with advertisements, news stories, public health campaigns, and fictional accounts of fatness which villainize and praise fat people. One need only flip through virtually any magazine in a grocery store checkout lane to recognize that bodies and personal image are an enormous concern in personal and public thought, and to know that fatness is often demonized or seen as a condition/reality to avoid or minimize. This framing of fat people is often echoed in academic philosophy, with fatness being reduced to a matter of self-control (or lack thereof) and a concern for public health. This conception of fatness as a problem to be solved erases or undermines the inherent value and importance of fat people and their communities. It ignores fat people's own framing of their bodies as an integral part of their identities and leaves little room to establish a notion of justice for fat bodies. Our society's overwhelming anti-fatness negatively impacts career opportunities and income, support in the criminal justice system, quality and availability of healthcare, and fat people's ability to navigate physical space (including classrooms, public transit, airplanes, gyms, and more).[222] In light of these manifestations of anti-fat bias, framing fatness as a problem to be fixed fails to help meaningfully alleviate oppression towards fat people.

In this project I hope to have pushed back against this understanding of fatness, making room for fat people's own understandings of their lives, bodies, identities, and communities to inform philosophical and academic work on fatness. I have argued that in order to develop more responsible aesthetic agency, we must carefully reflect on our aesthetic engagement and

[222] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*; Gailey, *The Hyper(in)Visible Fat Woman*; Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression"; Irvin, "Resisting Body Oppression"; Hanne Blank, *Fat,* Object Lessons (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*.

production to better attend to and promote fat justice. In service of these goals, in chapter one I develop a series of guidelines useful for artists in navigating representation of fat people using a framework of responsible aesthetic agency. In chapter two I turn my focus to everyday aesthetic agency, arguing that we can use our aesthetic agency to address and dismantle body-based oppression, using the "Fuck Flattering" movement as a case study of what I call beauty labor as resistance. In chapter three I offer another applied example of responsible aesthetic agency in action, using the framework to argue that we ought to reimagine how we depict imperfection as it relates to fatness in order to create more humanizing depictions of fat people. Finally, in chapter four I return to everyday aesthetic agency, arguing that we can best accomplish the goals of the original, fat-activist body positivity movement through utilizing a modified framework of fat justice (similar to the one that is implicit in this project more broadly).

There is a wealth of important work being done in Fat Studies, work which I have tried to bring into dialogue with philosophical aesthetics. While the aesthetics community (at least in the United States) is increasingly concerned with issues pertaining to diversity, we have a long way to go in order to build a field in which diverse scholars are supported, and diverse lives and topics are discussed in the field.[223]

I recall how alienating my first experience at an American Society for Aesthetics Annual Meeting was: how, while at the meeting, I had to grapple not only with seeing so few bodies that

[223] I am in good company in asking for this change, particularly within the American Society for Aesthetics. See, for example, A. W. Eaton, "The ASA at 75: How Are We Doing with Diversity and Inclusion?," *Aesthetics for Birds* (blog), November 27, 2017, https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2017/11/27/the-asa-at-75-how-are-we-doing-with-diversity-and-inclusion/; Paul C. Taylor, "The ASA at 75: 'splaining and Safaris," *Aesthetics for Birds* (blog), November 27, 2017, https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2017/11/27/the-asa-at-75-splaining-and-safaris/; Peterson, "The ASA at 75: Diversity and the Tipping Point," *Aesthetics for Birds* (blog), November 29, 2017, https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2017/11/29/the-asa-at-75-diversity-and-the-tipping-point/. See also, in more recent discussion that follows up on these concerns, Sherri Irvin, "The Aesthetics of Frustration: Diversity and the ASA," *American Society for Aesthetics Newsletter* 41, no. 2 (2021): 1–5.

looked *like mine* (in terms of weight) in the room, but also with seeing fatness largely ignored from discussion. In that meeting I attended several sessions related to diversity, and at various points in each the presenters listed off various sites of oppression that we needed to consider in light of their specific topics. Each time, fatness was excluded, and each time I asked a question pertaining to fatness in the context of their work, my questions were met with blank stares and promises of future inquiry. Few people, it seemed, had stopped to think about how the size of our bodies impacted aesthetic issues (which was puzzling, given how deeply connected aesthetics is to our experiences *as embodied agents*). We could strengthen the field considerably through inviting the kind of rich, interdisciplinary work that Fat Studies offers—both the content of their work and issues of/related to fatness, and in the method which prioritizes the lived experiences of marginalized community members *as modes of academic knowledge and inquiry.*

My current research provides provide a groundwork for future research in which I plan to apply my frameworks of fat justice and responsible aesthetic agency to more robust moral commitments for artists, and to developing an account of other aesthetic obligations. I see my future research branching in two main directions: (1) developing an account of aesthetic allyship that provides moral obligations for artists that go beyond the bare minimum specified in responsible aesthetic agency; and (2) motivating protecting public health as a unique aesthetic and moral obligation of artists whose works may negatively impact public health (e.g., because of its impact on the mental health of viewers).

In my first project, I plan to create an account of aesthetic allyship which is compatible with a framework of fat justice, building on the more general project of aesthetic allyship Fried presents. My current framework of responsible aesthetic agency primarily aims to avoid perpetuating anti-fat bias. This is needed given the ways that popular media depicts fatness

currently and historically, where fatness has most often been shown as making a person contemptible, laughable, or a moral failing.[224] These narratives reduce fat people's lives, needs, and experiences to monolithic imaginings about being a fat person, rather than illustrating the rich complexities of fatness in a more realistic and nuanced way. Moreover, they reinforce society's anti-fat attitudes, simultaneously increasing and feeding from pre-existing societal disgust for fat bodies.[225]

While responsible aesthetic agency is a crucial step towards mitigating the harms aesthetic agents cause through perpetuating anti-fatness in creation and use of aesthetic goods, it alone cannot bring us true justice as it does not challenge people to unlearn their anti-fat attitudes. To do this, we must make a more robust commitment to allyship, a commitment that I plan to argue necessitates more deeply understanding (1) how anti-fatness functions and (2) how to address this anti-fatness on interpersonal and systemic levels. By building on my foundation of bare-minimum ethical commitments and behaviors needed to move towards fat justice, we can construct a framework for further amplifying and centering the needs and perspectives of fat people as aesthetic allies. I imagine this work having widespread impact on our aesthetic behavior, as it forces us to more actively respond to anti-fatness that others perpetuate. For example, one way I imagine one could be an aesthetic ally to fat communities is through boycotting clothing brands which refuse to create and sell clothing that accommodates a wider range of bodies. This aesthetic decision, when performed collectively, can incite meaningful change as it forces companies to be inclusive towards bodies that are too often ignored in the clothing industry. Far from being trivial, this increased access to clothing can help us seek fat

[224] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?*, 75; Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat,* 119–20.
[225] Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," 38.

justice as it allows people the option to dress in ways that afford them professional credibility in work settings, and in ways that reaffirm their gender identity and culture.

Second, I would like to develop a project in which I motivate public health as a unique aesthetic concern. Many artists create artworks with the goal of using that creation as an act of catharsis. Art enables people to meaningfully engage with their emotions, providing a much-needed outlet through which people can process their experiences and thoughts. However, when this art centers certain topics like mental illness or personal body image, it runs the risk of causing harm to audiences that engage with the work. I plan to examine how artists can best balance their own need to create and have an emotional outlet with the needs of consumers, providing a set of considerations that can be used to protect public health while still allowing the artistic freedom that will provide artists with sufficient opportunities for personal expression. This project meaningfully expands the current literature on artists' moral obligations, most of which currently focuses on morality of artists themselves, examining whether and how we can support artists who have done immoral things in the past. This provides a new frame of understanding the intersections of ethics and aesthetics, as it asks us to consider the moral *impact* of *works* themselves, balancing a plurality of moral obligations and needs to protect our communities (especially those in vulnerable and marginalized groups who may be disproportionately impacted by the public health harms of artworks).

In all of my work (past, present, and future) I am fueled by the pain of a lifetime as a fat person in a fat-hating world, as well as a deep love for fat people everywhere. I am fortunate to follow in the footsteps of fat scholars like Gordon, Strings, Harrison, and Marquisele Mercedes, whose work pushes for a more just future for fat people everywhere. Speaking of Mercedes' labor in addressing ongoing harms in the fat acceptance-adjacent Health at Every Size (HAES)

field, Caleb Luna noted the following: "[At] the heart of Mikey's ask for accountability is a love of fat ppl & love of herself. [Mikey's work is] aligned with a larger politic I have noticed in my time getting to know Mikey: Her absolute love of fat people. Her refusal to settle. Her dreaming big & vocalizing what she deserves."[226] My dissertation is nowhere near the kind of highly visible work that folks like Marquisele are doing to advocate for fat people, but it is done in the same spirit: out of a deep love for fat people, and with hopes of a brighter future where we can be seen and accepted as we are.

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[226] Caleb Luna, "@chairbreaker Thread on @marquisele's Labor Regarding HAES and Lindo Bacon," Social media, Twitter, March 16, 2022, https://twitter.com/chairbreaker_/status/1504157587289538562.

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