

RESEARCH ARTICLE

FAT, BLACK, AND UGLY: THE SEMIOTIC PRODUCTION OF PRODIGIOUS FEMININITIES

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Abstract

Taking up the trinomial “fat, Black, and ugly” as a discomfiting point of departure, this piece explores several ways fatness and Blackness are discursively constructed as social comorbidities for feminine people and examines how this discourse affects lived experience. It considers how the discursive field in which “fat, Black, and ugly” dwells traverses temporal and social scales: from early twentieth-century science discourse to recent social media discourse, and from state policies to inner voices. Inspired by Gina Athena Ulysse’s rasanblaj approach, the analysis uses a combination of personal narrative/autoethnography and discourse analysis, and draws from sociocultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, Black feminist studies, African feminist studies, and fat studies. I convene these fields and methodologies in an effort to think about a semiotic collusion between fatness and Blackness that expels certain subjects from legible and legitimate humanness and value in an anti-Black anthroposphere—or, via the illuminations of Hortense Spillers, that renders them prodigious flesh that prevails in the beyond. [race, gender, Blackness, fat studies, semiotics]

STICKS AND STONES: FAT TALK AS DISCURSIVE VIOLENCE AND BEYOND

Introduction: An Autoethnographic Meditation

Words can hurt. Even (or especially) the ones we tell ourselves. During particularly bad times, these “inner dialogues” star some nasty anonymous entity ventriloquizing our “psyche,” or pretending to be those things many of us experience as God or the Devil or something equally mysterious. And these verbalizations tend to confirm the very

things about ourselves we most fear might be true. Of course, such dialogues are rarely, if ever, between one’s consciousness and some indissoluble metaphysical force. Most would agree that, more often than not, these bizarrely banal exchanges are actually between one’s consciousness and a somewhat discrete social structure, rendering them perfectly “dialogic” in Bakhtinian terms (Bakhtin 1981). Some would even insist that they are just public discourses reverberating in our heads, bouncing off the walls of our socially constructed minds. Some others, with a strong penchant for metaphor, might offer that what we are experiencing are the rehearsals of scripts penned by a motley crew of social phenomena and performed by our conscious(ness). Turgid, perhaps, but those kinds of accounts feel especially useful when considering the feel and nature of “fat-talk”—that hypernormalized self-deprecating way many of us talk about and to ourselves, and others, about bodies (Guendouzi 2004; Nichter 2000; Osborne and Giuliano 2008; Taylor 2015).

From personal experience, I can confirm that this insidious fat-talking voice—which reliably appears at the most inopportune times (like when I am about to meet up with a photogenic person I have just matched with on OkCupid, or when I am mid-butterfly on a dance floor amidst loving friends, or the moment I drop my drawers in the gym locker room)—is not me at all. Nor is it God, an ancestor, or any other spirit with which I regularly commune because they never say such cruel and, frankly, uninspired things. These quick jabs, long harangues, snarky quips, and condescending reprieves about my lack of willpower, loose upper arms, spreading face, and slumping breasts are definitely not the words of a celestial being. They are not the articulations of a recessed and autonomous subconscious; this voice is a very “worldly” interloper. And, when such fat-talk is plainly compounded with racialized meanings (that is to say, anti-Black and colorist meanings about my darker-skinned body), I become even more suspect of

its origins and objectives. It is in these moments of skepticism that I clap back against the voices with an other voice that knows the beauty of my dark abundance. That voice, when I am able to hear her over the others, sings, “Fuck that noise, sis. You fine as wine,” and sounds a lot like adrienne maree brown.

After forty-three years of making peace with my fat and Black and feminine body, and eventually coming to love it, I have decided, with the assistance of Hortense Spillers, Judith Butler, bell hooks, adrienne maree brown, Grace Nichols, Gail Weiss, and many friends, family, and lovers, that those wannabe translators of my corporeality that try to live in my head are probably just the ever-mutating (re)sonification of (1) lyrics from some of my favorite hip-hop and pop country songs, (2) those steamy *Scandal* sex scenes featuring a lot of lifting and relocating of Olivia’s tiny frame, (3) the cracks of whips that turned my great-great-grandmothers’ bodies into flesh, (4) shortsighted conversations about wellness at the hot yoga studio or Whole Foods, (5) the captivating GIFs that have colonized the margins of my internet pages, and (6) almost every utterance I have ever heard from anywhere about any aspect of women’s bodies. I have come to understand these moments of battling voices as ones in which discourses of myriad scale and modality that render me “fat, Black, ugly” and wrong attempt to materialize my body as excessive flesh in the ways I occasionally experience and treat it, and in the ways many others (individuals and institutions) experience and treat me—especially the doctors, police, colleagues, and strangers (and even a few lovers, friends, and family) who make up parts of my life.

Like other discourses that construct and sort bodies, the words both beget and brand my flesh, in a sense. And, when this particular corporeal brand mars Black feminine bodies like mine, it seems to open up all kinds of ontological mayhem—and possibility for our understandings of being human. When fattened up, Black flesh, as the “zero degree of social conceptualization” that cannot be cloaked by discourse (Spillers 1987, 67), might bare the everythingness of Blackness in peculiar ways. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson theorizes the significance of the “black female body” as the “matrix-figure” of the Human that yields all possibilities of being (2020, 85), and I suggest that our bodies, when immense, have a peculiarly peculiar capacity to accommodate everything in the realm of being and meaning. So, together, Blackness and femininity (young, old, fat, skinny, dark, light)

seem to gather or move betwixt all social meaning about being (both within dominant paradigms of the Human and far yonder), producing an everyday praxis of Black girlhood and womanhood that is both ordinary and magical, as Savannah Shange’s “Black girl ordinary” illuminates (2019a, 2019b). And, when Black femininities are layered with fatness, we may detect a somatic weighting of the abnormal, the spectacular, and the excessive: the polysemic prodigiousness of (super/other)humanness. Such being takes us to (and beyond) the far reaches of indestructability and moribundity, incivility and grace, disgustingness and succulence, sexualities from hyper- to a-, the sacred and profane, beastliness and utter humanness, and on and on. I cast the word *prodigious* to help divine fat, Black, feminine being because each of its glosses leads us to a sense of beyondness (more than, outside of) and helps us imagine such being as before, during, after, below, above, within—beyond—the dominant schema of humanness in which we have been steeped.

A Rasanblaj Discourse Analysis of “Fat, Black, and Ugly”

That reflection serves as a foreword to an eclectic analysis of the ways discourse both reflects and helps make the ways bodies are experienced and treated, by selves and others. In particular, I take up a discourse fragment, “fat, Black, and ugly,” as articulated to different degrees by different kinds of texts, to examine the ways its components work together to draft a model of Black femininity that radically transgresses and transcends idealized and hegemonic humanness and femininity in its perceived excessiveness and deviance.

Foucault (2010) posited in 1969, and others have since elaborated (Blommaert 2005; Fairclough 1989; Gee 1996; van Dijk 2008; Wodak 1989), that discourse can feel as mystical, as all-knowing and powerful, as any divinity. So it is no wonder that its echoes may sound like God or our core selves or something we consider real and trustworthy. And, although we are still some way from fully comprehending how power and discourse interface, the fact that they interface faithfully and fervently is incontestable. Like others who like to connect the semiotic and political dots between different scales of discourse, I am intrigued by the connection between the racialized fat-talk that zooms over broadband and the voice that languidly whispers in my right ear when I size up my nakedness some mornings. I am awed by the ways discourse tirelessly chips in to help shape

policy, celebrity, residential patterns, institutions of care and policing, love lives, and self-conceptions—co-constructing and deconstructing 24-7. And, when this industrious discourse is reconfigured by some other discourse(s) and does something we applaud—like remind us that gender is constructed, or cleverly poke fun at the insecurities of parenthood, or seditiously redirect our collective gaze toward some suffering we refused to witness, or even encourage us to consume more leafy greens—it is generally a good thing. In these cases, it is more than okay and anticipated that these discourses become institutionalized and internalized, as they tend to do (Farnell and Graham 1998; Gal and Woolard 2001; Urban 1996). There is a broad consensus that we are socially evolving when, for example, some school district changes its lunch program to include more of those leafy greens, or a group of parents starts a weekly salon to safely explore their fears and failures, or a movement reemerges that demands us to acknowledge and abolish institutions rooted in a permanent, pervasive, and particular contempt for Black life.

But there are also discourses that, categorically, are made and mediated to harm. And there are others, still, that may be crafted and deployed with more wholesome intentions but manage to injure nonetheless. And then there are the murky discursive spaces where a few of us cannot tell which is which—like comedian Nicole Arbour’s viral and violent “Dear Fat People” YouTube video, which is claimed to be motivated by concern for the health of the obese, and taps a medical linguistic register to present this “truth-telling,” but also gorges itself on trite fat tropes to shame them (us) at every discursive turn.¹ Arbour does offer more than the “fat is funny” rationale for their work, but some would say that a feigned public service announcement (PSA) is even more harmful.² The core of the so-called PSA is that fat-shaming is a life-saving practice of humiliating people out of their bad habits. Arbour’s video includes a confusing disclaimer that their words are not meant for people with specific health conditions, but we are never informed about how one accesses a fat person’s medical history before the interventional shaming commences. We are, however, informed about the nature of fat people: they sweat Crisco, they’re lazy, and they can’t comprehend health. We also see Arbour’s softer side, like when they share how much they would miss fat and entertaining Black church ladies if they were to die from their fat.

As Arbour’s discursively promiscuous diatribe illustrates, fat-talk (like all discourse) transpires via knotted interdiscursive chains, regularly borrowing and lending meaning across various semiotic fields that traverse space-time (Silverstein 2003, 2005). Borrowing from enregistered (Agha 1999, 2007) and mass-mediated discourses of care and expertise, many non-healthcare practitioners invoke the medicalized term *obesity* to veil discomfort with and/or disgust about deviant (Cohen 2004) bodies, even as they scoff at other medical discourses about fat, such as those concerning food addiction and mental health.

Less filtered fat-talk, like the bulk of Arbour’s jokes, leans heavily on discourses of disgust and shame, value and respectability, morality and discipline, and dis/ability and un/naturalness, to construct race and gender in important ways. It understands fatness as all of the glosses of *prodigious*, collapsed upon one another. So, fatness, when on a feminine or female body, distorts femininity—making it extraordinarily more (in size and intensity), spectacular, monstrously deviant, or even darkly ominous. Sabrina Strings’s (2019) most recent book, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, makes the case that the characterization of fat feminine bodies as deviantly prodigious is riddled with the proto-racial anti-Black logics of the mid-Enlightenment, when the ideal human subject (“the Human”) as slender (an embodiment of temperance and intellect) began to emerge. Strings confirms that by the early twentieth century, Protestant social disciplining had firmed up the virtue of slenderness not only for men, but for women as well, thereby reversing earlier valorizations of Rubenesque white women. This is why, they maintain, associations with a certain conception of primitivity (and animality [Z. Jackson 2020]) that is closely linked to Blackness lie just beneath the surface of most shaming fat-talk, and why such talk metes out a particular kind of discursive violence for those who refuse such classification.

The concept of “discursive violence” was formulated by John Paul Jones, Heidi J. Nast, and Susan M. Roberts in the following passage:

We define discursivity as those processes and practices through which statements are made, recorded, and legitimated through linguistic and other means of circulation. Discursive violence, then, involves using these processes and practices to script groups or persons in places, and in ways that counter how they would

define themselves. In the process, discursive violence obscures the socio-spatial relations through which a group is subordinated. The end effect is that groups or persons are cast into subaltern positions. (1997, 394)

Their definition, like most, imagines discursive violence as other-directed and as having a top-down trajectory. A more hegemony-informed approach allows us to consider self-directed fat-talk as one thread of violence that proceeds from more institutionalized and systemic forms of violence. I would also append their definition with the observation that the violent valence of certain discourses can come from their ability to erase lived truths and to deny the value of some aspect of one's being in certain cultural contexts. And I would emphasize the ways in which a sense of valuelessness, or worthlessness, that is generated via many forms of discursive violence can animate physical aggression, discrimination, and neglect of all kinds. It can also yield psychological and physical dangers that, along with structural and physical violence, expose the multimodal manifestations of discursive violence. From bullying and shaming by peers, negligence and mistreatment by the healthcare industry, and excessive force by police to life-threatening eating disorders and suicidal ideation and attempts, the common upshots of fat-talk discourses appear to reliably deliver more health risks than fat itself.

I spend the next few pages analyzing the discursive violence of anti-Black fat-talk (using discourse analytic tools from semiotic anthropology) and reflecting on the ways such violence scripts the raced and gendered relationships we have with one another and with ourselves about de/value and un/lovability (using concepts from race, gender, fat, and disability scholarship and commentary). In this piece, I effectively examine epistemes, and epistemic valence, to pore over "public and private" scales of fat-talk by pulling out some indexically derived and interactionally entailed meanings and considering their performative upshots as they help make fat, Black, feminine being in the world. That is to say, I will be reading two specific fat-talk statements to consider how their lexical constituents help comprise a discourse that epistemically constitutes a kind of discursive violence (Jones, Nast, and Roberts 1997) that feeds and is fed by social structures that act on bodies (and the subjects in those bodies). I have introduced this methodology (of tethering contemporary race and gender theory by Black scholars

to semiotic discourse analysis) elsewhere in order to analyze multiscalar and multimodal discourses of anti-Blackness and anti-anti-Blackness (Smalls 2015, 2018) and believe it will be useful here as I meditate on two entextualized (i.e., extractable and circulatable) (Bauman and Briggs 1990) statements: "fat and ugly" and "fat, Black, and ugly."

Unlike my earlier analyses, however, this particular reflection is also an attempt to follow Gina Athena Ulysse's rasanblaj predisposition and approach by regrouping, or convening, an array of methodologies to better account for the different dimensions of discourse that performatively construct fat, Black, feminine personhood (Ulysse 2017). To do this, I not only move between theoretical concepts from several disciplines and fields (mainly Black studies, Black feminist studies, critical ability studies, fat studies, sociocultural anthropology, and linguistic and semiotic anthropology), but also (1) analytically tour different genres of text (autoethnographic reflection, social media post, reality television, comedic performance, personal essay, poetry, and scholarly publication); and (2) shift between different tones, styles, and voices. In my use of rasanblaj, I also consider all kinds of moments and acts as ethnographic fodder, following John Jackson's insistence that "everything is ethnography" (2013, 53). All things considered, an ample rasanblaj that collects myriad theoretical offerings that try to make meaning of femininity, Blackness, and/or humanness seems remarkably fitting for a discursive examination of fat, Black, feminine life as both exceed comfort and convention.

Ulysse's contribution emerged from and concerned Caribbean politics and performativity, but they have invited us all to think, and do, with it. Among other things, the decolonial approach beseeches a "rerooting" (Ulysse 2017, 70) of ourselves as scholars whereby we earnestly take up a transdisciplinary practice that attends to different theoretical frameworks, methodologies, modalities, texts, and styles in our research and in our reporting back. Ulysse proudly identifies their scholarly and political genealogy, noting that they follow in the footsteps of torch-bearers like Faye Harrison. Indeed, Ulysse's rasanblaj is effectively an urging that beautifully echoes Harrison's own in *Decolonizing Anthropology* (1997), *Outsider Within* (2008), and her more recent non-monograph intellectual productions (e.g., Harrison 2016, 2018). In particular, both scholars have instructed us that we will need to look beyond our disciplinary homes to find tools that will allow us to tell about

“the dailiness of life . . . embodied viscerally in the structural” (Ulysse 2017, 70) and attend to the “creative and theoretical insights and the socio-political sensibilities of the subaltern” (Harrison 2008, 132). Harrison also tells us that when Black women, in particular, think and create beyond the confines of disciplines, domains, and dominant theory, we regularly shift paradigms and help craft “non-hegemonic modes of knowing the world, its imperatives, and possibilities” (Harrison, forthcoming).

I also imagine this writing to be a tiny installation in the growing body of scholarship and lived praxis Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2016) has named Black feminist fugitivity (and in Sharpe’s “wake work,” as a single witnessing of Black life under attack [Sharpe 2016]). It is my hope that my attempt at a kind of fugitive rasanblaj not only regroups but also “thickens” the various disciplinary concepts I take up (per Friedman, Rice, and Rinaldi’s thickening of fat studies in their volume *Thickening Fat: Fat Bodies, Intersectionality, and Social Justice* [2019]). In particular, semiotic anthropology’s potentially generative concepts for understanding meaning-making are thickened with some recent race theory, gender theory, queer theory, and disability theory to better situate the cultural pragmatics (Silverstein 2004) at play in historical and contemporary social context, contexts that help lay bare the violences of patriarchal, white supremacist (anti-Black, particularly), and ableist discourse and material structures. And, by taking up more recent considerations of scale in linguistic and semiotic anthropology, I impose a “scalar logic” (Carr and Lempert 2016, 16), a temporal and spatial frame, that considers the interdiscursivity (or, connections between the discursive contexts of texts) (Silverstein 2005) of my own internal fat-talk, different kinds of digital discourses (social media posts and a crowdsourced online dictionary), essays, speeches, poems, and other texts within the enduring lifespan of Atlantic slavery.

The placing of distinct yet affinal theoretical contributions of the thinkers invoked throughout this piece (namely, those who home in on either Blackness or Black gender) is principally inspired by works by Faye Harrison (1997, 2008, 2016), Christen Smith (2014), Alex Weheliye (2014), Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2016), C. Riley Snorton (2017), adrienne maree brown (2019), Deborah Thomas (2019), Jamie Thomas (2019), Savannah Shange (2019a, 2019b), and many, many others who earnestly take up the ways race and gender are co-articulated in various discursive structures

and practices that make humanness, and who draw from a range of empirical and scholarly and other sources to do so.

“*Fat and Ugly*” and “*Fat, Black, and Ugly*” *Discourses: An Overview*

Most of us are familiar with the binomial “fat and ugly,” and a few more know the trinomial “fat, Black, and ugly,” but in the case that one is not familiar with either, a cursory Googling of the phrases would provide a swift but effective education. Based on my 2016–20 research, search engine results for the former pairing will likely include the following: headlines about young women who have died by suicide after experiencing the brunt of these words one too many times; a few fat-positive (or fat-neutral) dialogues about gendered aesthetics and patriarchy; a couple inquiries about the relationship between fatness, ugliness, and feminism; and, years ago, a shattering Tumblr page on which people from around the globe (who mostly appeared to be young women) dispensed loathsome comments about themselves, many contemplating death as a viable escape from their “uninhabitable” (Butler 1993) bodies.

In 2016, when one clicked “Images” on the Google results page, a bevy of face portraits of people of different genders and racial presentations appeared, and nearly all showed extremely atypical phenotypical features that may or may not have been related to their weight. Some of the features appeared to be “photoshopped.” Unlike the women discussed or pictured on the main results page containing links to actual websites, these images seemed to present individuals who would most likely be considered extremely and variably aberrant (i.e., “freaks”) by dominant aesthetic norms.

Insert the word *Black*, and many of the same kinds of pages appeared, along with significantly more porn links and animal references (sometimes one and the same). In this explicitly raced configuration, a faithful objectification of Black bodies (as objects of utility, specifically) is maintained, all while substantiating the intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) of anti-Blackness, patriarchy, and ableism.

To help demonstrate the function of “fat, Black, and ugly” (and its variants) in some people’s lives, we can look to former child actor Countess Vaughn, who discussed a lifelong contention with her body on a 2014 episode of the reality show *Hollywood Divas*, explaining to her castmates why she had chosen to have full-body liposuction:

We're talking about insecurities, and mine came from a very young age. Being on the set of *227*, and you actually hearing an adult talk about the way you look. You know, "She fat. She's black. She's ugly." So that played in on my psyche for a long time.³

The conjuring of "fat, Black, and ugly" undoubtedly meant something in this circle of Black American women gathered around a roaring beach fire. Most of us hear it at some point in our lives, or its cousin "Black and ugly," as a way of naming the worst kind of body one could have: one that is too fat (by culturally relevant standards), one that is too Black (Blackness itself is not a problem, but being too phenotypically or unrespectably Black is), and one that is ugly (by virtue of the first two attributes). Vaughn's next big role after *227* was the sassy sidekick in the '90s sitcom *Moesha*, a character who was the butt of relentless fat-shaming jokes.⁴ The next story Vaughn recounted on the reality show elicited more than just knowing nods from the women. In the same scene in which she recollected the very moment those words were imprinted on her, she also shared that at eighteen years old, when she was the star of the network television show *The Parkers*, she performed an abortion on herself and almost died. She had also shared the story with a therapist in an earlier episode of *Hollywood Divas*, and both iterations sadly sounded like confessions about something horrible she felt she had done to a fetus but did not explicitly address the brutal way she had treated her own body.⁵ The fact that the story seemed to be told, both times, in tandem with the "fat, Black, and ugly" story suggests that both tragic events are parts of one narrative (among many) about Vaughn's relationship with her body.

That so many feminine people woefully understand their bodies under the rubrics "fat and ugly" and "fat, Black, and ugly"—either because they have been explicitly ascribed to them via another's verbal torment, or because they have shown up in the ways doctors pathologized them, or because they have been subtly imposed over a lifetime of commercials and conversations—tells us a great deal about these phrases' wide circulation and also about the metapragmatic conditions under which bodies (women's bodies, most acutely) are construed.⁶ In the article "Weighty Subjects: The Biopolitics of the U.S. War on Fat," Susan Greenhalgh has comprehensively mined fat-talk and its related policies and social norms and

locates them in an emergent "biopolitical field of science" that draws on the authority of medical science to police bodies and circumscribe cultural citizenship (Greenhalgh 2012, 472). The result, they explain, of these moralizing discourses and the interactions they engender, is the making of the fat subject, or one who imagines themselves and is imagined through the brutal social formations that have rendered them defective and unwanted. In their 2015 book, *Fat-Talk Nation: The Human Costs of America's War on Fat*, Greenhalgh builds on this correlation between idealized bodies and idealized citizens by briefly directing our attention to ways the "model minority" stereotype "enjoyed" by (East) Asian Americans and migrants is bolstered by reports of lower rates of obesity, perceptions of "skinny Asians," and notions of their "healthy lifestyles" (59), in contrast to fat and unruly African Americans, Latinxs, and Native Americans and their pathologized foodways and lifestyles (Greenhalgh 2015).

This emphasis on the perceived mutability of fat (Friedman, Rice, and Rinaldi 2019) and volition of fat people (that is, the deep-seated belief that fatness is a choice that can be changed) places fatness in a peculiar relationship to disability. In many ways, it is normatively imagined and treated as disability, in the sense that it is a problem, a burden that demands intervention, service and sacrifice from the able-bodied (Bailey and Mobley 2018). To some extent, fatness might be better formulated through critical dis/ability theory, which allows us to consider how it is a constructed social category for certain bodies situated in historical moments and cultural milieus, or, as Liat Ben-Moshe and colleagues put it,

Disability is fluid and contextual rather than biological. This does not mean that biology does not play out in our minds and bodies, but that the definition of disability is imposed upon certain kinds of minds and bodies. . . . But more than that, disability, if understood as constructed through historical and cultural processes, should be seen not as a binary but as a continuum. One is always dis/abled in relation to the context in which one is put.
(Ben-Moshe, Nocella, and Withers 2012, 210–11)

However, the notions of mutability and volition preclude any real consideration of fatness as disability in public discourse and federal policy (i.e., disability rights) (Vade and Solovay 2009, 170).

Understanding fatness as disability and through disability theory might reveal Judith Butler's mappings of "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life," whereby certain bodies are prohibited from a real subjectivity (1993, 237) or veritable citizenship. This seems to be a good fit but, like most theories, it might be too tight to contain fatness and Blackness and un/gender and could gain conceptual capacity with offerings from Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and others who help us temporalize contemporary fat Black feminine bodies within a timeline of racial slavery and this moment in which we live, write, and resist within its wake (Sharpe 2016). They help us understand what this living and dying in this timeline means in praxis. We may also need input from scholars like Wilderson (2010), Wynter (2003), and Weheliye (2014), who have examined prohibitions around Black life and a perceptible Black ontology, also exposing how the boundaries marking the consummate Human (white and male) are/were constructed by populating the hinterlands with "other" kinds of bodies like those of big old "daughters of slaves" (Hartman 2008, 154), like my own. And we would certainly need sustenance from thinkers like Gumbs (2016), Sharpe (2016), Moten (2018), Thomas (2019), Shange (2019a, 2019b), Jackson (2020), and others who survey and revel in Black life that exists before, after, and in spite of the imposed category of "Human" that promises to continue to "produce our fast and slow deaths" (Sharpe 2016, 116). In their own ways, each of these thinkers model and urge a practice of "affective recognition" and "embodied love" of which Deborah Thomas tells (2019).

PIGS AND SHEBOONS: THE BESTIAL LEXICON OF "FAT, BLACK, AND UGLY" DISCOURSE

Linguistically, "fat and ugly" is a binomial joining semantically related terms that describe one's physical appearance, but pragmatically, we understand the phrase to be at least semi-tautological as well, with the second constituent emphasizing the head. "Fat" and "ugly" may not be synonymous, but for many, there is a unidirectional relationship between the two words. As Angela Carter's 1974 essay "Fat Is Ugly" expressed in title and content, "fat is emphatically *not* beautiful" (Carter 2013, 73), at least not in "mainstream America" and most other developed/economically exploitative nations. In many ways, the fixed pairing evokes a kind of social comorbidity that scholars like Stefanie Snider (2018) suggest can only be escaped by

forsaking aspirational beauty altogether and by embracing other criteria of value via a "politics of ugliness."

While any kind of body could be described as "fat and ugly," because race is unmarked in the idiomatic descriptor, we can assume the phrase, by default, indexes white bodies, or those for whom race is not a salient object in a particular context. Epistemically, the phrase seems to efficiently flag deviance from conventionalized femininity and womanhood. The similarly entextualized phrase "fat, Black, and ugly" clues us into the ways non-whiteness is often emphatically marked in such epithets appraising a person's beauty, usually as an additional stratum of insult and/or as another way of ticking off one's distance from the idealized Human (e.g., "fat Asian chick," "fat ugly Latina," etc.). And while being thought fat and ugly is not reserved solely for feminine people, and any fat body is read as being in an unnatural state, the levies of white cisnormative patriarchy make such a designation considerably more detrimental for those whose gendered value is predicated on having a widely desirable body and face (girls, women, and feminine-leaning people).

The lexical inventory for bodies deemed fat in mainstream American culture certainly includes some neutral and valorizing terms that point to an alternative (i.e., nondominant) corporeal paradigm. These terms—*curvy*, *big*, *big-boned*, *voluptuous*, *thick*, *full-figured*, *plus-sized*, *phat*, *stacked*, *busty*, *juicy*, *fleshy*, *shapely*, *ample*, *Rubenesque*, *a brickhouse*, *a PAWG*, *a BBW*, *a BBBW*—stand in stark contrast to those that can reflect the defeminizing and dehumanizing epistemic undercarriage of an appraisal of fatness (e.g., *gross*, *greasy*, *nasty*, *rolly-poly*, *cow*, *whale*, *beast*, *elephant*, [*fat pig* [Figure 1]).⁷ The former terms have certainly contributed as much to my own reconfiguration of fatness as the latter and have helped provide opportunities to cherish and celebrate my fatness.

In the case of markedly "fat, Black, and ugly" feminine people, there is one special term that aptly expresses the extreme deviation from normativized femininity and humanity signified by such bodies: *sheboon*. In 2018 one contributor to the website Urban Dictionary (www.urbandictionary.com) defined *sheboon* as "word used to describe the huge, fat, disgusting, foul mouthed, mannerless nigger females. It is based on the word baboon, to accurately describe the nigger female's extremely close resemblance to said primate." At the time of this writing, that definition was no longer available on the website and had been

TOP DEFINITION 🐦 f >

fat pig

A large fucking woman who's so fat that her [pussy lips](#) are hidden by rolls of fat and two bags of [flour](#) are required to find [the wet](#) spot.

Me and my buddy saw two fat pigs eating a bucket of fried chicken and a bag of [doritos](#) and he said: "You see those two women over there?" and I said: "Those aren't women, those are fat pigs, that's why they're wearing [moo moos](#)!"

by April 09, 2005

👍 98 👎 64 🚩 FLAG

Get a **fat pig** mug for your fish Jerry. 

Figure 1. The “top definition” of *fat pig* on the website Urban Dictionary⁸ [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TOP DEFINITION 🐦 f >

sheboon

Racist slang term for [black woman](#), usually [obese](#) and loud-mouthed.

Check out the [huge ass](#) on that sheboon!

by November 03, 2007

👍 1946 👎 249 🚩 FLAG

Get a **sheboon** mug for your boyfriend Günter. 

Figure 2. The “top definition” of *sheboon* on the website Urban Dictionary⁹ [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

replaced by another user’s “top definition” (Figure 2). Both make evident how our enculturated understandings of humanity, or humanness, are read through race and gender, and how “fat, *Black*, and ugly” also marks the impudence of certain bodies to prodigiously deviate from hegemonic humanness and feminineness.

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s exposition of the bestialization of Black people urges us to go beyond the documentation and examination of such discursive violence and into the ways it has engendered, among Black thinkers and artists, “a

critical praxis of being” and projects of “expos[ing], alter[ing], or reject[ing]” the human-animal binary that counter the denigration of non-human being (2020, 2). These projects, like Sharpe’s “redactions and annotations” (2016, 116–17), are less invested in inclusion and legibility in the Enlightenment construction of the Human than they are in performatively creating (or reasserting) other configurations of being (Jackson 2020, 2). In other work, moved by Sharpe, Jackson, and others, I am reconceptualizing narrative through Black thought and Black feminist theory to

consider how these other configurations of being generate particular kinds of “telling” (Smalls, forthcoming) among young Black subjects in this moment. While this piece does not examine these types of creative projects in depth, it does bear witness to them and to the possibilities they hold.

Indexicalities of Desire and Disposability

The cline of idealized femininity and humanness in these strands of fat-talk usually abides by easy and dependable logics, at least. The fatter one is, the uglier they are, and therefore, the less properly feminine they are. Additionally, the blacker/Blacker one is (mostly in terms of pigment but also in regard to the degree to which their features and practices are racialized as Black), the less feminine and human they are (unless they are super-humanly, universally, everlastingly beautiful, and thin, like Lupita Nyong’o). Together, fatness and Blackness leave one unprotected and more disposable, following Spillers’s (1987) teachings about the ways racial slavery stripped Black bodies of subjectivity and made us flesh, leaving us ungendered Black women without whatever fraught and fickle protections “real” women are afforded.¹⁰ It is necessary to note that in more specific cultural spheres, like among African Americans, African immigrants, Caribbean Americans, Latinxs, and Native Americans of numerous class and regional backgrounds, the yardstick for physical girth may differ considerably from dominant (white middle-class) norms, but by the time one is considered fat (or too fat) in most communities (and not “phat,” as might have been the case in the ’90s), they are very likely experiencing something similar to what a slightly smaller person would be experiencing in another cultural domain.

Locally contingent meanings of fatness, and of Blackness, also impact the degree of correlation to ugliness in many ways. As “token-sourced” and “token-targeted” discursive units, according to Michael Silverstein’s schema, “fat and ugly” and “fat, Black, and ugly” specifically index (2003, 2005) and reconstruct meanings associated with the entextualized phrases. Indexicality, according to Ochs (1992) and Silverstein, helps us see how people make meaning by pointing to pertinent meanings beyond the immediate context, intentionally and unintentionally. This means that a sign (like the phrase “fat, Black, and ugly”) can conjure and make relevant the history of chattel slavery via the transhistorical construction of Black femininity as aberrant or impossible. But, as noted earlier, Silverstein’s and others’ analytics do

not readily lend themselves to the analyses I am making here, and they require a kind of thickening and deepening through the integration of Black thought, like Spillers’s theory of the flesh.

To help map the indexical contours of “fat, Black, and ugly” in the lived experience of one African American and Caribbean American New Yorker, we can turn to a moment a few years ago when Tanya Fields, a race and food justice activist and public figure, stirred up a range of emotions among her many Facebook followers and their expansive networks after her selfie (featuring her large, brown, pregnant belly) and accompanying testimony went viral and generated almost 20,000 hits. In the narrative about struggling to love her fat, Black, and feminine self (from which the following excerpt comes), Fields interrupts notions of big, strong, dark-skinned women by exposing her fragility—something that flustered a few of her 4,500 commenters. She writes:

I took this picture this morning because I need to get a really good look at this body. This body I have had a mostly hate relationship with. I am in the midst of a difficult transition with a man I love deeply and fully. A man who couldn’t keep his dick in his pants and with every infidelity, with every humiliation reminded me that I was too black, too fat and too ugly I hated this body even more. His side chicks felt emboldened to express publicly such things. To elevate themselves- “team light skin” or “team good hair”. Each cheat exacerbated my ALREADY PRESENT insecurities about a body that has been maligned since grade school. Miss Piggy, Treasure Troll, Tracy Morgan, Fiona, Rasputia and I feel ashamed to say that it hurts as much at 35 as it did at 13.¹¹

In a later post, Fields would refer to the image and words as her “SelfLoveGate post,” brilliantly enlisting the morphologized suffix *-gate* to flag the scandal and unlawfulness of a full-figured dark-skinned woman trying to love herself—and publicly, at that.¹²

Disobedient fat, Black, female bodies (to use Andrea Elizabeth Shaw’s [2006] phrasing) have long been the objects of simultaneous demonization and desire, according to Evelyn Hammonds (1999) who has carefully tracked scholarship on Black cis women’s sexuality. Through the scientization of race, sex, and gender, which used measurements of buttocks, genitalia, and nipples

(Curran 2011; Gilman 1985; Hammonds 1999; Stetson 1982) to verify suspicions that Black cis women were indeed hypersexual (and, therefore, more like men than their white and other counterparts), the justification for the enslavement and routinized rape of Black cis women was soundly made (Strings 2015, 2019). The bigger and Blacker they were, the stronger the rationale that they be treated no differently than their counterparts deemed male (except when it came to fucking them, perhaps). To help explain how it was that Black cis women were excluded from that fickle protection their sex organs might have garnered, given the leftover mores of Victorian and Puritan societies, Hammonds quotes Lorraine O'Grady's account of Black cis women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be" (Hammonds 1999, 95).

In their 2015 article "Obese Black Women as 'Social Dead Weight': Reinventing the 'Diseased Black Woman,'" Sabrina Strings historicizes the pathologization of Black women's bodies through nineteenth- and twentieth-century "sensualizing" discourses that connected our alleged insatiability to the spread of syphilis and tuberculosis, and more recently, to our higher rates of medical obesity than white women. They painfully and painstakingly show how the heavy Black feminine body has long been construed as diseased and as "social dead weight" (Strings 2015). As "dead weight," our bodies not only are social, economic, and psychological burdens that others must carry, but also are rendered lifeless masses of flesh. Beyond being ungendered and unprotected flesh, the fat Black feminine body becomes especially valueless if her reproductive abilities are not (or are no longer) a source of free physical labor, and after her closeness to death (as magical negress) and conscripted care (as Mammy) can no longer be operationalized as a source of emotional labor. Transformed into both an object of loathing and a deeply desired instrument of comfort and healing, the abundantly fleshy Mammy may still serve as a site of potential "redemption" for fat Black women—that is, as a viable means to attaining value per dominant society.

FAT, BLACK, FUGITIVE FEMININITIES

From all of this, we can almost understand how being Black and feminine, and surviving or thriving as such, is always already an act of political and ontological subversion, simply because

existing as both has always meant disrupting the epistemic foundations of ideal humans and ideal women. Our ordinary and everyday practices of joy, anger, refusal, and occasional surrender constitute a "thrival" (Shange 2019a) that achieves fugitive Black life. And we can acknowledge big Black women who refuse Mammydom and the "culture of dissemblance" (Hine 1989) in which it resides, and who instead claim dangerous divadom or dimedom (i.e., those who live out their BBBWness or who post "thirst traps" on social media because they fully understand that they are desirable, not just in the sense that they are able to be desired but also in the sense that they are likely to be so).¹³ So, not only do they opt out of Mammy personhood, but they may also adorn their abundance in unrespectability (Higginbotham 1993) and brazenly invite a Jezebel designation instead, becoming fundamentally disruptive, earth-shaking even.

Some would consider the meteoric rise of pop star Lizzo in 2019 as one example of such a disruption. Canvassing pop culture blogs and the comments of her 8.5 million followers on her Instagram account (@lizzobeeating), it is clear that Lizzo unsettles and titillates with her unabashed glorification of her big body. From reprimanding personal trainers (Jillian Michaels), disapproving social commentators (Boyce Watkins), and envious rivals (Azealia Banks) to everyday individuals who follow the star on social media only to verbally abuse her every time she posts a salacious photo or video, the backlash Lizzo faces for being fat and Black while acknowledging and demanding others' acknowledgment of her indisputable beauty and desirability might render her very celebrity subversive and potentially transformative. Her body, scantily clothed, feverishly twerking, or provocatively posed, becomes a semiotic text around which she ardently erects an interpretive frame that we have to recognize, even if we disagree with it: a frame that not only refuses many foregoing interpretive frames of prodigious Black feminine bodies, but avers an alternative one that is founded upon *respectful* salivation over big Black women. That is, her acts of provocation, lyrically and kinetically, are renamings and refigurations that reject those nicknames, those misnamings, tattooed on her flesh (Spillers 1987) that preclude consent or pleasure, helping her effectually perform a sexualized "deviance as resistance," to apply Cathy Cohen's (2004) concept.

But, as Lizzo's many responses to the discursively violence words that help fill the comment

sections of her posts show us, such acts of renaming, or retelling, should not be taken as painless and unfettered. Indeed, Lizzo shares the ways life, as a human (especially in the crucible summer of 2020, when she posted the following), and perhaps as a fat, Black, feminine human, is hard, even as she celebrates herself in her conscious and candid offerings to “people who get body shamed every single day who don’t have my platform or have the same path to confidence I had.”¹⁴ Sprinkled amidst her posts celebratorily foregrounding her body and face are ones that address her pain and frustration. Makeupless and radiant, with the front of her loosened faux locs gathered in a pink scrunchie atop her head, Lizzo recorded an Instagram video posted on August 28, 2020, in which she stated,

Hi, my name is Lizzo and I have nothing poignant or poetic to say except that I am, like, I am fucking sad and I am confused by everything and everyone and I don’t know what to do.¹⁵

The post was followed by another two days later, this time with her locs in two buns and sparkles adorning her eyes, in which she told her followers,

Hey, so I get it, you wanna be viral. We’ve seen people make viral posts become, you know, internet celebrities and actually start making money and have careers. I get the appeal. But here’s a challenge: we as a people, how about we stop rewarding negativity? How about we stop boosting hurtful and hateful things on the internet? If you see a post about somebody and it’s maybe something you wouldn’t want to hear about yourself or someone you love, how about not share it, how about not repost it? Even if you don’t like it, don’t like-hate it, you know?¹⁶

Some might maintain that if one is not too big, and/or not too dark, or is super pretty in widely conventional ways like Lizzo, and/or has fat that is physically arranged in normatively attractive ways (in their breasts and buttocks), then the charges of human aberration are mitigated somewhat and pardons may be permitted.

In this and so many interrogations of gender and race, it is imperative to sit with the centrality of colorism, or “colorstruction,” as Arthur Spears (1992) puts it. In the case of “fat, Black, and

ugly,” “Black,” in almost every iteration, signals a hierarchical cline of Blackness that moves the darkest bodies, especially feminine ones, yet further away from full human femininity. And, when uttered among Black-identified people, it usually does not connote an indictment of being Black *per se*, but of being too phenotypically Black. However, outside of the Black “racioscape” (Jackson 2005, 56), any degree or combination of Blackness and fatness would likely warrant a violation of many sedimented understandings of real and preferred femininities.

Lizzo’s sadness and frustration in these and similar posts, juxtaposed with her optic and verbal celebrations of a fat Black self, might remind some of Nichols’s (1984) poetic “tellings” of the aesthetics of fat, Black, feminine life. In “Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman’s head while having a full bubble bath,” the inner voice of the protagonist, who we are told in the title is languishing in a “full bubble bath,” says,

Steatopygous sky
Steatopygous sea
Steatopygous waves
Steatopygous me

O how I long to place my feet
on the head of anthropology
to swig my breasts
in the face of history

(Nichols 1984, 15)

Nichols’s fat Black woman is beckoning a steatopygous (or “fat-ass”) world in which she is perfect rather than pathological, as anthropology and history have told of her, according to African feminist scholar Gqola’s (2008) analysis of the poem. So, even as the poem’s protagonist pampers her plumpness, Gqola suggests that the words of her thoughts express her “anger at the traditions that have led to the necessity of the ‘fat black woman’ dreaming in this way: various violent epistemic traditions housed in the disciplines of anthropology, history, theology as well as contemporary patriarchal capitalist industries which take advantage of such racist violence” (2008, 46–47). Through Nichols’s poetics we glimpse how multiple scales of violent discourse do not always and only reconstitute themselves in deprecating self-talk, but also become (re)configured (per Jackson’s other configurations of being [Jackson 2020, 2]) into critical inner dialogues that censure or correct the epistemes many of these discourses derive from often

through a kind of worlding like Nichols' protagonist does with her steatopygous biosphere. And we may also see them materialized into rebellious acts of self-love and care like full bubble baths.

To conclude, it might serve us well to summon two historical figures whom we frequently turn to in order to talk about the conditions that Black feminine people have and must continue to endure. The first figure, Sojourner Truth, is generally not regarded as "fat," but her large frame (remembered as around six feet tall) and her Blackness make her famously reported query "Ain't I a woman?" a deceptively simple question that spoke volumes in 1851 and that poked at deep-rooted anxieties and abhorrences that continue to foil many liberal humanist intentions in this very moment.¹⁷ From her, we learned that to even innovate (let alone defend) a feminine subjectivity (and aesthetic, furthermore) while in a Black body was/remains a troubling, even radical, act. And such an act may be even more radical(izing) when that body is large in girth or height, was assigned male at birth, or is differently abled. We often invoke Truth to tell a story of resilience, fortitude, and resistance and in so doing may undermine the fragility of her large Black body and person. Truth's fights to own herself and to mother her four surviving children are certainly inspiring, appropriately heroicizing in our collective memory, but they should also remain heartbreaking. The psychological and spiritual pain that she undoubtedly experienced in these struggles, alongside the tearing of her tender flesh by her owners' whips and penises, cannot be overlooked when we consider her long, beautiful, tragic life.

This failure to "foreground her corporeality" (Gqola 2008, 48) in our remembering is in concert with the ways many overlook the psychic and spiritual suffering of another historical figure, a categorically fat Black woman, who Gqola tells us is readily reduced to a "shorthand" to illustrate, and provide evidence for, our academic arguments: Sarah (Saartije) Baartman, or the "Hottentot Venus." Gqola's searing reflection on the uptake of Baartman in scholarly, literary, and everyday discourse, especially that by Black and African feminists, holds us accountable for the ways we undermine her full embodied existence when we hold her up as the consummate example of the objectification of Black and/or African women. Ironically, these accounts may address the ways she was reduced to her body by slavery and coloniality, and may even attend to her butchered and preserved corpse, but, according to Gqola, they

rarely take up her living body and how she experienced the treatment of that body, and they thereby practice another kind of objectification. Gqola pores over two pieces that try to do that work of returning her to her body in starkly different ways—one that holds space for Baartman's full being through a reverent and conscious silence that refuses to know her or make her knowable (Zoë Wicomb's novel *David's Story* [2002]), and another that bears witness to Baartman's suffering and offers care in the form of "taking her home" (Diana Ferrus's 1998 poem "I've come to take you home" [Ferrus 2011]). So, rather than participating in that well-intended, discursively violent act of knowing her or using her as an evidentiary prop in my assaying of transhistorical discourses that render us big Black women's excessive flesh as justifications for disposal, or as sites of remediation or exploration, I would rather sit with the final stanzas of Ferrus's poem and the Baartman they force us to imagine:

I have come to take you home
where the ancient mountains shout your name.
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill.
Your blankets are covered in buchu and mint.
The proteas stand in yellow and white—

I have come to take you home
where I will sing for you,
for you have brought me peace,
for you have brought us peace.

(Ferrus 2011, 15)

By the same token, I do not intend to use Vaughn, Fields, Lizzo, or others as "evidence" and hope that by re-presenting their actual words reflecting on the significance of these and related discourses, and by attending to the pain they shared publicly, I am not doing them further harm. But I am aware that by speaking of them, I am fixing them, or parts of them, to tell something and that I risk reducing them, or their relationships with their bodies, to this pain. I risk rendering them knowable. As I do with myself, whose complex relationship with a fat, Black, feminine body I also offer glimpses into, I fully recognize that countless other moments of their lives, in which they experience themselves against, or beyond, these discourses (like my "fine as wine" voice), certainly help compose their personhoods and subjectivities, which I cannot and should not know.¹⁸

Finally, it seems to me that to be fat and feminine and any race in “America” is disruptive, and in a lived politics sort of way, makes one who dares to be such, especially if unapologetic, kind of an instant feminist. Ultimately, being constructed as fat (and, accordingly, ugly in many cases) and feminine means that one is walking, breathing, and eating against the grain; one exists in spite of, as spectacle, for many. Even if one actively pursues “the patriarchal gaze” by “instrumentally” donning “traditional signifiers of femininity,” as Patricia Mann puts it (1994, 87), the act of donning such signifiers on a fat body seditionously rattles the infrastructure of Western-cum-modern femininity (see: Lizzo).

That seems like good news: fat girls are instant feminists—or, at least, are embodiments of many feminist passions. None of this is very helpful, however, for fat girls who are not particularly invested in early-wave feminist practice and politics and who long to be feminine in a visible and valued, even conventionalized, way (me, at times). For those individuals, the fat-talk that screams, gestures, or “objectively” teaches that their fatness (and Blackness) is conclusively unnatural, ugly, and unfeminine often sounds very trustworthy. For them, too many “private” utterances (i.e., the things one says alone or with confidants) dialectically “presuppose” and “entail,” according to Silverstein (2003), the “truths” about fatness and ugliness and femininity that help discursively constitute one’s social world. That is to say, every self-directed insult or rueful clutch of belly fat helps to shore up the structures through which fat subjects are made and experienced and treated. “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels” was Kate Moss’s regrettable reflection on their relationship with their body practices in 2009—a relationship that was famously predicted, or conditioned, by the modeling industry—and it became a mantra for all kinds of people who also craved the sweet taste of thinness.¹⁹ This fragment of reported personal fat-talk resonated with other contiguous discourses about bodies and beauty, thus drawing from and adding to the metapragmatic frame that props up the fat-phobic culture we are in and the varieties of intersubjectivity and harms it engenders.

From that, there may actually be some good news (for white folks, especially): like Kate Moss’s widely circulating and discourse-feeding ascetic declaration, other individuals and groups are shifting discourse about fat bodies toward normalizing them or agentively queering them in new ways. “Body-positive” and “fat-positive” discourses

seem to have emerged this way—to have sprung forth from that dialectic space Silverstein (2003) discusses between indexing existing fat discourses and reconfiguring them in interaction. Reflective fat-positive social texts like Aidy Bryant’s Hulu show *Shrill* (2019–) and the film *I Feel Pretty*, starring Amy Schumer (Kohn and Silverstein 2018), provide what many describe as counternarratives.²⁰ And, although body-positive discourse is still largely “sub-cultural,” in that it has not substantially permeated the fashion industry or common turns of phrase or the national ethos, some would still consider it ideologically impactful (E. Smith 2018). Such talk among white women also borrows/takes extensively from the “alternative” corporeal value systems of Black and Indigenous communities and communities of color, like those previously noted, which tend to center larger (than white middle-class mainstream) feminine bodies as ideal. From that perspective, it may not be far-fetched to imagine that, one day, young feminine people will be rehearsing displays of self-love and unabashed and queered femininities while imagining adult bodies of every size and ability, likely singing classic Lizzo lyrics as they do so. Fortunately, when viewed through a protracted lens, dominant standards of beauty have proven to be somewhat malleable.

For Black girls, however, the likelihood that all of the features we associate with unmitigated, excessive Blackness will be liberated from mainstreamed notions of ugliness and unworthiness is not high (unless they are dispossessed from Black subjects, of course). Even Lizzo’s musical and social media oeuvre and films like Nnegest Likké’s *Phat Girlz* (2006), while affirming and loving, do not reconcile, or specifically address, the modern world’s aversion to fat Black feminine prodigiousness. Instead, we will need to look to people like Jari Jones, a luscious transfem model, activist, and artist who told her followers, “It’s not the world that deserves my skin, it’s my skin that deserves the world,” in a quote captioning an Instagram photo of her relishing her pecan-skinned body clad in a black bra and white lacy panties (October 6, 2020).²¹

In a conversation with Crystal Anderson on the website Hypebae, Jones tells of the sphere in which she came to love herself:

JJ: I learned to feel beautiful at a very young age because of the vibrancy of my family. I think I found that beauty very early on, but the interesting part is finding that sense of beauty again.

CA: I love what that journey represents so much.

JJ: I think especially for my transness, I've always described it as getting back to her because I think she was always there. People will police it out of you, beat it out of you and pray it out of you and you have to make a decision.²²

Both invoke the potentially fugitive space of family, in which they were naturally, easily, emphatically beautiful and precious: vibrant spaces where they learned their beauty. And Jones's remarks call up the temporality of this space of self-love as it fugitively appears and reappears throughout her life span vis-à-vis work (or decisions, in Jones's calculation above): the work of family love, self-love, community love, and so on. And, while each nods to the ways their childhoods, infused with affective recognition and embodied love (Thomas 2019), stood in stark juxtaposition to the worlds external to them, Jones further fleshes out this noticing by flagging the ways transness, on top of Blackness and femininity, brings about those other worlds' attempts to police, beat, and pray self-love out of people. In complement to one of C. Riley Snorton's many pivotal contributions, which tells of the oppositional transitivity of transness and Blackness that renders both as states between nonbeing and being (2017), Jones's words invoke the potentiality of a becoming that facilitates new, other, and recovered modes of being. She, and the many thinkers before and alongside her, remind us that as long as Black remains antipodal to the Human in the pervasive imaginary (and therefore in many of the discursive structures that help shape our lives), every principal understanding we have of value will sustain the deviation of Black flesh, fat or lean, and "Black is beautiful" will continue to be an insurgent affirmation that only rings out as an undeniable truth in the prodigious futures we create.

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NOTES

1. Arbour, Nicole. 2015. "Dear Fat People." YouTube video, September 3. Accessed January 4, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXFgNhyP4-A>.
2. Engeln, Renee. 2019. "Is Anti-Fat Bias Making People Sick?" *Psychology Today*, July 31. Accessed January 4, 2021. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beauty-sick/201907/is-anti-fat-bias-making-people-sick>. In order to minimize the risk of misgendering people, I use singular "they" unless I feel very confident about the person's gender identity.
3. *Hollywood Divas*, season 1, episode 8, "That's What a Boss Has to Do Sometimes," produced by Lashan Browning et al., featuring Countess Vaughn, aired December 3, 2014, on TV One.
4. Jameelah, Yasmine. 2020. "For Every Plus Size Women Who Felt Triggered By The 'Moeshas' Episodes That Fat-Shamed Kim." *XoNecole: Women's Interest, Love, Wellness, Beauty*. September 2. Accessed January 15, 2021. <https://www.xonecole.com/plus-size-women-fat-shamed-moeshas/>.

5. *Hollywood Divas*, season 1, episode 5, “Five Black Witches,” produced by Lashan Browning et al., featuring Countess Vaughn, aired October 29, 2014, on TV One.

6. “Feminine people” refers to women (cis and trans) and to nonbinary or genderqueer or demi-gender people who lean toward some kind of feminine identification or presentation. “Woman” and “women” refer to cisgender and transgender women. The binomial “Black and ugly” may be more gender-neutral, as a lyric by hip-hop legend The Notorious B.I.G. (aka Biggie Smalls, aka Christopher George Latore Wallace) demonstrates: “Heartthrob, never. Black and ugly as ever” (Notorious B.I.G. 1995).

7. PAWG stands for Phat Ass White Girl; BBW stands for Big and Beautiful Woman; and BBBW stands for Black Big and Beautiful Woman.

8. Urban Dictionary. 2005. “Fat pig.” April 9. Accessed January 5, 2021. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fat%20pig>.

9. Urban Dictionary. 2007. “Sheboon.” November 3. Accessed January 5, 2021. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=sheboon>.

10. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson contributes to our understandings of Black female flesh and the re-writing of gender and humanity that it promoted by designating it the “matrix figure” (2020, 85) of the Human that encompasses all possibilities of being.

11. Fields, Tanya Denise. 2015a. “I took this picture this morning because I need to get a really good look at this body.” Facebook, September 20. Accessed January 4, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10153053247320966&set=>.

12. Fields, Tanya Denise. 2015b. “So since SelfLoveGate I have gotten a few misguided brothers in my inbox talmbout ‘sup’ and almost ALL of them are married or ‘taken’ with kids.” Facebook, September 28. Accessed January 4, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/tanyadenisefields/posts/10153065535875966>.

13. “Dimedom” is my neologism for the quality or condition (*-dom*) of being a “dime” (variant of the slang phrase “a ten,” referring to a scale of attractiveness for which ten is the highest ranking). A “thirst trap” is a flattering and often alluring photograph of oneself that one posts to incite desire (or thirst) or that is posted as a cry for attention, thereby indicating the poster’s thirst for attention.

14. López, Canela. 2020. “7 Times Lizzo Said Something That Makes You Feel Good about Your Body.” *Insider*, July 7. Accessed January 4, 2021. <https://www.insider.com/every-time-lizzo-said-something-that-makes-you-feel-good-2020-7>.

15. Lizzo (@lizzobeeating). 2020a. Instagram video, August 28. Accessed January 4, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEcskplBRSK/>.

16. Lizzo (@lizzobeeating). 2020b. “You have the power to make kindness sexy. You never know what somebody is going through.” Instagram video, August 30. Accessed January 4, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEh4NgnBLmL/>.

17. Truth, Sojourner. 1851. “Ain’t I a Woman?” Internet Modern History Sourcebook. Accessed March 12, 2015. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>.

18. Tanya Fields is a social media public figure and activist (with public social media accounts) but because of the deeply personal nature of the posts I share in this publication, I sought and received informal consent to quote her posts and received her emphatic approval of my analysis.

19. O’Malley, Katie. 2018. “Kate Moss Says She Regrets Mantra ‘Nothing Tastes as Good as Skinny Feels.’” *ELLE*, September 13. Accessed January 4, 2021. <https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/culture/a23113786/kate-moss-regrets-mantra-nothing-tastes-as-good-as-skinny-feels/>.

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