Brigham Young University
BYU ScholarsArchive

Theses and Dissertations

2023-05-11

"What Would it Mean for us to Seem 'Good' to Each Other?": Contemporary Black Women+ on Fat Phobia and Misogynoir

Devon Ariel Thomas
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Thomas, Devon Ariel, ""What Would it Mean for us to Seem 'Good' to Each Other?": Contemporary Black Women+ on Fat Phobia and Misogynoir" (2023). *Theses and Dissertations*. 9942.
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/9942

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

"What Would it Mean for us to Seem 'Good' to Each Other?":

Black Women+ on Fat Phobia and Misogynoir

Devon Ariel Thomas

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Kristin L. Matthews, Chair
Trent Hickman
Brian R. Roberts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2023 Devon Ariel Thomas

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

"What Would it Mean for us to Seem 'Good' to Each Other?":
Black Women + on Fat Phobia and Misogynoir

Devon Ariel Thomas
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

White supremacy's impact on Black bodies is well-known. Starting with the enslavement of millions of Africans and their descendants, to Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, the race-based War on Drugs, mass incarceration, police murders—and now, through fat phobia. Fat phobia—the hatred of and discrimination against fatness—is problematic for all bodies because it limits basic opportunities and privileges. However, it becomes particularly dangerous at the intersection of structural racism and misogyny. Francis Beale argues that as both Black people *and* women+, Black women+ carry a "double strike" against them; consequently, they experience both racism and misogyny, termed "misogynoir" by Moya Bailey.

Language in recent medical publications indicates the severity of fat phobia in America around the Black woman+'s body: fatness is something Black women+ have a "high recidivism rate" with after weight loss (Small). This rhetoric affirms the criminalization of the Black body; fatness is something a Black woman+ has "recidivism" with—a term used almost exclusively for incarcerated people. Thus, the medical community's discourse affirms the "legitimacy" of fat phobia and of fatness' adverse effects on health, inviting discrimination against Black fat bodies. Specifically, it suggests that Black women+ need supervision over their bodies—by white people.

This thesis considers the work contemporary Black fat women+ (Sonya Renee Taylor, Sesali Bowen, and Tressie McMillan Cottom) are doing through essays and memoirs against fat phobia; that is, it seeks to amplify their voices as they name, critique, and suggest changes for the institutions that uniquely harm fat Black women+—namely medical racism, beauty, and capitalism. The naming, or making visible, of otherwise-invisible institutions affirms bell hooks' assertion that "groups of women who feel excluded from feminist discourse and praxis can make a place for themselves only if they first create, via critiques, an awareness of the factors that alienate them" (276).

Fat phobia perpetuates the narrative that Black women+—especially in larger bodies—are undeserving of love. It posits that women+ are only as valuable as their bodies. But Taylor, Bowen, and Cottom literally rewrite that narrative; instead, these women+ write the fat Black body as inherently worthy and capable of bringing joy—deserving, as we all do, "radical self-love."

Keywords: fat, fat phobia, misogynoir, capitalism, black feminism, medical racism

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my dear friend, colleague, and mentor, Kristin Matthews, thank you. I carry your authenticity, kindness, and corrections with me. I didn't know you very well when I came into your office, nervously fidgeting like a teenager, to ask you to chair the project. But you said yes, and I am so grateful. I'm also grateful to Trent Hickman and Brian Roberts for their perspectives that helped me hone my writing and focus on the voices of Black women+. This is my attempt to amplify their repressed voices.

And, lastly, thank you to my family—of blood and marriage—for your consistent support. I'm especially grateful to my partner and husband, Nick, for all the ways he shows up for me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE i

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

TABLE OF CONTENTS iv

Introduction 1

The Theorized Black Body and Adaptable Whiteness 7

Fat Phobia and Capitalism 13

Self-Acceptance of and Joy in the Black Fat Body 25

Conclusion: Building Change Through Compassion 29

Works Cited 34

Introduction

Toward the opening of her memoir, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017), prolific Black writer, activist, and feminist Roxane Gay postulates, "In writing about my body, maybe I should study this flesh, the abundance of it, as a crime scene. … I don't want to think of my body as a crime scene. I don't want to think of my body as something gone horribly wrong, something that should be cordoned off and investigated" (20). And though Gay concludes that she does not *want* to view her body as problematic, "wrong," or criminal, there still remains the conviction that it is, in truth, a problem to be solved. Gay's quasi-labeling of her body as criminal, deserving scrutiny and shame, represents the larger notion that to be a fat Black woman+ is to be unworthy.

White supremacy's impact on individual Black bodies is well-known. Starting with the enslavement of millions of Africans and their descendants, Black women+, as property, were "incapable of actual[ly] being raped or sexually assaulted" (Adeniji 11). Then, during Reconstruction and Jim Crow, laws required Black women to "circumvent the obstacles [they] knew [they] faced," even as they attempted to change the laws (Gilmore 179). More modernly, white supremacy's violence has been evidenced through forced sterilization and medical racism, such as Henrietta Lacks's cancer cells, "taken without informed consent," still widely-used today for research; in the reality that Black mothers die at three times the rate of white mothers during labor; or finally, with the police murders of Atatiana Jefferson, India Kager, and Breonna Taylor (Baptiste et al. para. 2).[1] White supremacy has systemically stolen Black American women+'s

[1]For more information on the racism undergirding the Black maternal mortality rate, see "Working Together to Reduce Black Maternal Mortality" at https://www.cdc.gov/healthequity/features/maternal-mortality/index.html, or Tina Sulimna's "Black Maternal Mortality: 'It is Racism, not Race'" at https://ccp.jhu.edu/2021/05/17/maternal-mortality-black-mamas-race-momnibus/?gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwov6hBhBsEiwAvrvN6Lkn848-3m7Jay562YMX93LNy6jpUdV7jTR-F2l1l1mvn8VJOUaTdRoCqMAQAvD_BwE.

freedom, enacting violence that affirms Black women+ are not safe in their cars, in their homes, or in their beds. Furthermore, white supremacy's attempts to regulate Black women+'s bodies supersede their rights as citizens to be safe, fulfilled, and happy.

Contemporary fat Black women+ endure even greater discrimination than non-fat Black women+, because of their triple marginalization of race, body size, and gender identity. When referring to "women+," I draw from Black feminist Rachel Ricketts in *Do Better*, where she defines the term to include cisgender, transgender, nonbinary women/folk, and "all those who self-identify as being oppressed by misogyny" (277). Fat phobia's staunchest attack on fat Black women+ is the denial of their joy, arguing joy in the fat Black woman+'s body as both impossible and undeserving; or, as Herby Revolus establishes in his video, "Truth Hurts, Y'all Hate Fat Black Women's Joy," stereotypes like the mammy figure suggest "that fat Black women are nothing more than asexual, maternal-like beings who are to meet their bodies with disdain" (04:01-04:07). Consequently, as fat Black women+ seek to promote joy in their bodies and fight fat phobia, media repeatedly dismisses and belittles them, like with body autonomy activist and Grammy-winning singer, Lizzo. As a fat Black woman+ who celebrates her body and all bodies, she repeatedly faces public denigration ranging from fitness guru Jillian Michaels to Black men including Aries Spears (France; @ArtOfDialogue_). Fat phobia is problematic for all bodies because of the way it limits basic opportunities and privileges, but it becomes particularly dangerous at the intersection of structural racism and misogynoir—the specific kind of misogyny experienced by Black women+.

Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins have long identified "the importance of Black women's self-definition and self-valuation," which is why I draw my key terms from Black women+

themselves ("Learning from" S16).[2] In this text, the term "fat" refers to a body that is larger than what is deemed culturally acceptable, and consequently, does not conform to social dictates. Significantly, as author, blogger, and fat Black woman+ Stephanie Yeboah asserts, the label of "fat" traditionally carries moral implications—that the fat person is lazy, ugly, and undesirable. In contrast, this thesis draws from body-accepting feminists like Yeboah and treats "fat" amorally—using the label to neutrally describe someone's body ("Fat is Not"). In *Hunger*, Gay explains, "I understand 'fat' as a reality of my body. … Pretenders will lie, shamelessly, and say, 'You're not fat," … 'You're such a nice person,' as if I cannot be fat and also possess what they see as valuable qualities" (201). Importantly, fat Black women+ like Yeboah and Gay amoralize the word "fat" and maintain that fat bodies just *are*—that they are deserving of love and joy, like any body. Further, using "fat" amorally falls in sharp juxtaposition to the term "obese," most often employed by medical communities, which implies ill health, inability to function, and something to be fixed. Further, the term "fat phobia" does not, necessarily, refer to an actual fear of fatness or fat people, but instead describes the feelings of discomfort, dislike, individual bias, and systemic discrimination toward fat people. Because "fat phobia" is the term used by both the essayists and contemporary researchers I examine, it is the preferred term used in this discussion.

Black women+ have discussed systemic violence for decades, such as Angela Davis in *Women, Race, and Class*, published in 1981. Of course, many Black women+ have used their voices in an attempt to start correcting and adding themselves to the narrative, such as Hazel V.

[2]Because labels like "Black" are highly-contested in the current political climate, I want to clarify my definitions. In this thesis, "Black" refers to any individual who self-identifies as Black—not necessarily just African-Americans. As African-American studies professor Celeste Watkins-Hayes explains, "There are black people in every continent who are all over the world" (qtd. Adams para. 3). For the purposes of this thesis, "Black" does not solely refer to African-Americans; however, because the thesis focuses on Black American women+, its locus is on the Black American woman+'s experience. Thus, "Black" is often used interchangeably with "Black Americans" (both those born in the U.S. and immigrants).

Carby's observation in *Reconstructing Womanhood* of "the contradictions which were experienced by … black women who tried to establish a public presence" as far back as the nineteenth century; or Carole Boyce-Davies's note in *Black Women, Writing and Identity* of the "necessary strategy of concretizing the question of identities" (Carby 6; Boyce-Davies 2). Both Carby and Boyce-Davies draw attention to the "necessary strategy" of being the ones to define and narrate their bodies. Even in fictional settings, Black women+ have discussed and reclaimed their bodies, their beauty, like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Through the book, Morrison invites readers—particularly other Black women+—to consider the white origin of beauty standards and the costs associated with gaining proximity to whiteness. The conversation from Black women+ questioning and reclaiming their bodies is not new; thus, this thesis contributes to an existing and morphing discussion on the Black woman+'s body and identity, specifically in relation to fat phobia.

In our contemporary moment, fat Black women+ are responding more frequently and forcefully to fat phobia in books, on social media, and blogs, echoing the Black Lives Matter organization's aim in "combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy" ("About"). This article examines the nonfiction writings of fat Black women+, including Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom's *Thick*, Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body Is Not an Apology*, and Sesali Bowen's *Bad Fat Black Girl*, demonstrating one way that fat Black women+ are reestablishing their bodies as worthy of respect. I have chosen these three works for several reasons. First, all three writers are important public figures. Dr. Cottom is a respected sociology professor at the University of North Carolina

at Chapel Hill, as well as a well-published public academic.[3] Dr. Cottom also has a significant social media following, with 58,000 followers on Instagram, and 239,000 on Twitter. Likewise, Taylor and Bowen are important public figures. Alongside *The Body Is Not an* Apology, Taylor has published a workbook to go hand-in-hand with its principles, encouraging readers to act, not just read. Taylor also carries a substantive social media following, with 349,000 Instagram followers; she has also been featured in *The Huffington Post*, *Today*, *Upworthy*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Bustle*, and interviewed on *CBSN*. Bowen additionally boasts impressive public reach: she hosts a podcast (@pursefirstshow on Instagram), reaches 56,000 Instagram followers, speaks at university forums (recently, at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign), and appears as a guest on other podcasts, like NPR's "Louder Than a Riot." The significant reach and influence of these writers means their works already reach a large, built-in audience, but also effectively attract more people to the conversation. In short, the writers are being listened to and referenced—on perhaps more than any other fat Black female writers in our contemporary moment.

The writers' chosen genre, nonfiction in the form of personal essays and memoir, furthermore, is intentional and consequential. This genre invites readers into a larger conversation about fat phobia and Black female bodies in ways that fiction, poetry, or academic writing does not. The essayists invite readers into the dialogue through the genre's conversational (versus jargon-laden) nature, making it more accessible to a range of readers. Personal narratives, furthermore, disallow intellectual or emotional distancing, rendering the

[3] As of 2019, Cottom's publication venues included *Palgrave MacMillan*; the *Harvard Kennedy School Journal of African American Public Policy*; *Policy Press*; *Cengage*; *Wiley Press*; *Oxford University Press*; *W.W. Norton*; *TIME*; *Huffington Post*; *The New York Times*; *The Atlantic Monthly*; *Vox*; *NPR*; *The Washington Post*; and *Slate Magazine*. I have only listed some of her publication venues for the sake of space.

story's claims explicit, personal, and difficult to ignore. As Cottom writes in *Thick*, "The personal essay became the way that black women writers claim legitimacy in a public discourse that defines itself, in part, by how well it excludes them" (19). In essence, in both its content and form, essays and memoirs allow fat Black women+ to wrest power back and become authoritative voices on topics that otherwise remain too casual for fiction.

Additionally, these forms require readers to hear directly from the oppressed voice and body while fat Black women+ recover their voices as authoritative, which is particularly important when the conversation is about fat Black women+'s bodies. Learning from Black women+, as Collins asserts, is crucial:

> For ordinary African-American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences. Thus, concrete experience as a criterion for credibility frequently is invoked by Black women when making knowledge claim[s]. ("The Social Construction" 759)

Collins maintains that because Black women+ in America have always been represented as an object of white patriarchal imagination, it is essential to examine and engage how Black women+ represent themselves—their joys, their experiences, and their traumas. Thus, since *fat* Black women+ have been excessively represented by others' words and opinions, it is especially critical to listen to and draw from *their* words and experiences of *their* bodies and lives.

Ultimately, this thesis explores the ways fat phobia has and continues to hurt fat Black women+ emotionally, socially, and economically, arguing that these writers deploy particular strategies to name seemingly-benign yet oppressive systems and to create an informed readership willing to make changes that promote healing. Generally, these texts critique contemporary fat

phobia and the longstanding history of misogynoir, as well as assert that joy can be—and is—found in a fat Black woman+'s body. I agree with them, and in adding my voice, I argue that, although perhaps not self-evident upon first reading, the texts undertake a specific set of formal moves to advance their arguments. In particular, I contend their aims are accomplished via using first-person narrative to model the type of reflective, internal work they wish to see in their readers. Furthermore, they deploy formal strategies to both create and include readers in a community committed to change, including the use of plural pronouns, questions, and humor. In short, the writers' techniques aim to create a particular type of dual readership—those who identify as fat Black women+ and those who do not—who will be committed to advancing equality.

The Theorized Black Body and Adaptable Whiteness

For centuries, white supremacy has theorized the fat Black woman+'s body as hypersexual, morally suspicious, abnormal, and criminal, creating and enforcing systems that continually harm fat Black women+ and keep them in subordinate positions. In *The Body Is Not an Apology*, Sonya Renee Taylor explains this design well: "Our systems … do not exist in a vacuum," but "in many ways mirror the societies that made them … created and upheld by humans who have the same indoctrinations, beliefs, and shames that we all have. Those who govern are not immune to the inheritance of body shame, either as recipients or perpetrators" (51). To Taylor's point, people in positions of power—primarily white people—dictate the beliefs, practices, and even laws we have around bodies; this allows lawmakers and other powerful people to uphold white supremacy and maintain the white, thin body as the only "permissible" body. The enslavement of millions of African people and the "unrapable" nature

of enslaved Black women+ are clear examples of white supremacy determining beliefs and justifying violence toward Black bodies, affirming whiteness as human and Blackness as not.

Subhumanized by white supremacy, Black women+'s bodies—particularly, fat Black women+'s—have been made subjects of fetishization, judgment, and abuse. White supremacy's theorization of fat Black women+'s bodies as objects keeps fat Black women+ oppressed and silenced, allowing whiteness to maintain its social and economic power, spanning centuries. In 1660, an English doctor, Tobias Venner, "was the first physician to use the word 'obesity' in a medical context, calling specifically for its treatment" (Haslam 33). Specifically, Venner called "'corpulent'" bodies "'unseemly,'" and advocated the Waters at Bath to avoid this—directly implying fatness as something undesirable, problematic, and unattractive (qtd. Haslam 33). Similarly, Strings notes in *Fearing the Black Body* that art and medicine in the sixteenth century hypersexualized, and eventually, in the seventeenth century, demonized the fat Black woman+'s body because of its excessive "plumpness" next to the white woman+'s (16-7, 22, 52-3, 57).[4] Sarah Baartman remains one of the primary examples of this simultaneous fetishization and abuse. In 1810, Baartman was taken from South Africa to England in order to be displayed as "Hottentot Venus" due to her fatness and, in particular, her large bottom.[5] She was, in every sense of the word, made a spectacle for white people. Even after her death at the age of 26, her body was treated inhumanely, with her genitalia being preserved for people to study and see (Fennell and Kelsey-Sugg). Fat Black women+ were and are violently Othered and violated.

---

[4]It is worth noting that, at this time, white women+ were also depicted (particularly in art) as "plump," but white fat bodies were desirable, while fat Black bodies were undesirable, even Othered.

[5]It remains unclear whether or not Baartman was explicitly forced to Europe, or if she viewed it as an opportunity for better economic opportunities. However, Hendrik Caesars, who first started selling out Baartman's body for shows, was sometimes referred to as her "keeper," heavily suggesting ownership. Further, Pamela Scully, professor at Emory University of women's history and African studies (and author of *Sarah Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*), argues that Baartman "lived in all respects as someone who was engaged in urban slavery."

One of racism's most powerful—and dangerous—tools is its ability to adapt its tactics in the face of anti-racism. In the prologue of Carol Anderson's *White Rage*, she lays out this adaptability, asserting:

> White rage is not about visible violence, but rather … works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly. Too imperceptibly, certainly, for a nation consistently drawn to the spectacular ... It's not the Klan. White rage doesn't have to wear sheets, burn crosses, or take to the streets. Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively. (3)

Anderson's point cannot be ignored: for every step anti-racism takes forward, white supremacy—or, as Anderson puts it, white rage—adapts. It shifts its approach to be whatever will maintain its power. And as anti-racism continues to grow, racism becomes less "spectacular," less obvious—allowing it to continue its work. Anderson contends that white rage no longer needs to segregate or film *The Birth of a Nation* because it works in more "acceptable" ways: restricting voting rights, perpetuating pay gaps, and, most recently for fat Black women+, normalizing fat phobia. Though white supremacy no longer exacts many of the aforementioned theories and practices, the racist ideologies that undergird them persist in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Language in recent medical publications illustrate racism's adaptability, theorizing the fat Black woman+'s body as dangerous and criminal. These publications use language that attempts to mask fat phobia with supposed concern. For instance, they deem fatness is a "predictor of mortality," a national "health risk," and something with which Black women+ have a "high recidivism rate" after weight loss (Davis, C.E., et al. 1257; Ahima 856; Small iii, 4). The

language surrounding fat Black women+ echoes the history of criminalizing the Black body, as Michelle Alexander discusses in *The New Jim Crow*. Here, whiteness describes fatness as "recidivism" for Black women+—a term used almost exclusively for incarcerated people, or "criminals." Thus, the medical community's discourse around the fat body affirms the legitimacy of fat phobia, inviting public discrimination and violence against Black fat bodies.

Cottom and other contemporary Black writers name the ongoing linguistic criminalization and policing of Black women+'s bodies in order to draw attention to one way whiteness coerces Black women+. As early as sixth grade, Cottom recalls the ways white people—including women—policed her body through language. When she turned eleven, Cottom notes that her "waist caved in and … breasts sprung out. … It was dangerous because men can be dangerous" (40). Beyond Cottom's own wariness of men's sexually-predatory behaviors, the language assigned to her body criminalized it. She notes that while she "knew to be cautious of men," she "did not learn early enough to be cautious of white women" (Cottom 41). White women+ began commenting on her body, telling her how "wrong or dangerous or deviant [her] body is" (Cottom 41). Though she does not explicitly quote the women+, the takeaway is the same, codified through language: her fat, Black, female body—is dangerous. It is not safe to others. Likewise, In *Bad Fat Black Girl*, Bowen accounts that when she, as a fat Black woman+, "demand[s] … respect," it feels to thin people as though she's "somehow cheated the system, like it's a steal" (98-9). In both experiences, the request for a fundamental human right—respect—is deemed "unlawful" through fat phobia, carrying immediate and often fatal consequences.

In *Hunger*, Gay identifies medical racism as a source of particular violence against fat Black women+. Medical racism works in tandem with fat phobia, creating a well-disguised "aid"

to fat people; after all, seeking weight loss in extreme, unhealthy, and harmful ways gets you, as Gay puts it, close to being “normal” (8). And that normalcy grants social acceptance and power. Her writing ultimately calls out the cost of believing that weight equates health, that “our bodies were our biggest problem” (8).[6] Her first-person account of seeking out bariatric surgery, demonstrates that medicine is less committed to health than it is profit. Her doctor’s assertion that the surgery was “‘the only effective therapy for obesity’” suggested that her body was wrong and in need of treatment. Despite her belief that people are more than a body, the doctor’s authoritative pressure undermines her self-trust: “They were doctors. They were supposed to know what was best for me. I wanted to believe them” (7). Gay explicitly identifies some of the manipulative tools of fat phobia, reminding readers that although medical professionals are “charged with first doing no harm” (12), they often prioritize profit—her bariatric surgery cost “merely” $25,000. Implied in this price tag is that no cost is too much to modify and make smaller fat Black bodies so they may become acceptable and worthy. Indeed, because fat Black women+ like Gay *triply* do not conform to a white, patriarchal standard, those in power more forcefully deem them subhuman, or, as Cottom put it, “structurally incompetent” (81). Both fat bodies and Black women+’s bodies historically have been unethically “supervised” (altered) by those in power, seen in shows like *The Biggest Loser*, and in forced sterilizations of the 1970s. But because fat Black women+’s bodies *combine* these marginalized identities—fatness, womanhood, and Blackness—these tactics compound to harm them physically, emotionally, and

[6]The Health at Every Size (HAES) movement seeks to rewrite the narrative that body size is the (if any) indicator of someone’s health. Specifically, they seek to “promote health equity, support ending weight discrimination, and improve access to quality healthcare regardless of size” (per Association for Size Diversity and Health website). For further reading, see Lindo Bacon’s *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* or Caroline Dooner’s *The F*ck It Diet: Eating Should Be Easy*.

financially. In the end, these "tactic[s] … systematically devalue Black women's social worth" (Glover 34).

The anti-fat bias underlying the medical profession's supervision of fat Black women+'s bodies is perhaps most evident in the epidemic that is Black maternal mortality. Cottom's *Thick* uses her personal narrative of medical negligence rooted in anti-fat misogynoir to put a face to the statistics and cultivate empathy in her readers. Four months into a pregnancy, Cottom started spotting—an undeniably concerning event during any pregnancy. When she went to the doctor, "on the white, wealthy side of town," and was finally seen, Cottom notes that "he explained that I was probably just too fat and that spotting was normal" (82-3). So, he sent her home. Unsurprisingly, Cottom's bleeding was *not* normal, nor a result of her weight; rather, after returning to the hospital days later and repeatedly advocating for herself, they found two large tumors. She soon gave birth to her daughter who "died shortly after her first breath" (Cottom 85). Fat phobia and medical racism robbed Cottom of any semblance of "competence," humanity, or comfort. Instead, it left her with incredible emotional and physical pain, and a reminder that because "the medical profession systematically denies the existence of black women's pain, underdiagnoses our pain, refuses to alleviate or treat our pain," it labels them as "incompetent … Then it serves us accordingly" (Cottom 86). Cottom's first-hand account of how the "healthcare system's assumptions" is literally "killing black women" invites readers into her recovery room to see the material consequences of the status quo (87). Because Cottom did not die, she considers herself "lucky"; "many black women are not so lucky," she concludes (86)—leaving readers to question "Why?"

In light of the way white supremacy has theorized and instigated violent practices toward fat Black bodies, contemporary fat Black women+ writers including Gay, Cottom, Bowen, and

Taylor theorize the fat Black woman+'s body differently, critiquing centuries-long ideologies that tell them they're "wrong, dangerous, deviant" (Cottom 41), instead demanding respect. To cultivate that respect, they use a range of formal strategies to both gather and create an empathetic audience committed to change and willing to recognize the fat Black woman+'s body as inherently worthy of love and joy.

Fat Phobia and Capitalism

In order to invoke empathy in their readers, fat Black women+ writers first seek to demystify systems of oppression and make visible the harms of which those outside of their community might not be aware. For instance, capitalism largely functions invisibly to privilege some bodies and constrain others, and these writers seek to pull back the curtain on these practices. In her essay, "In the Name of Beauty," Cottom writes, "lest we forget, the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing us that he does not exist. That is why naming is political" (59). Her essay's structure and formal choices can be read as doing the necessary work of naming—of making visible how the "so-called counternarratives about beauty and what they demand of us cannot be divorced from the fact that beauty is contingent upon capitalism" (Cottom 59). This rhetorical move to name oppressive systems into people's consciousness is rooted in a history of Black feminist praxis, but as bell hooks asserts, allows "groups of women who feel excluded from feminist discourse and praxis can make a place for themselves *only if they first create, via critiques, an awareness of the factors that alienate them*" (276, emphasis mine).

Fat Black women+ like Bowen, Cottom, and Taylor draw attention to and critique capitalism's ties with fat phobia and misogynoir in order to justify and make visible the need for

such critiques. This is how they carve out space for their narratives. In doing so, they follow Audre Lorde's injunction to remember that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (111). Seeking to dismantle systemic anti-fat, anti-Black, anti-woman+ oppression does not work using the master's tools; thus, these writers work to both 1) identify those structures key to keeping the master's house of anti-fatness standing and 2) employ new tools that make their voices heard. Bowen, Taylor, and Cottom reject white supremacy and fat phobia's demand for silence and compliance in the face of harm, challenging the self-hating rhetoric it urges. For, as Audre Lorde warned at the Modern Language Association's 1977 "Lesbian and Literature Panel," the burden of "silence will choke us" ("The Transformation" 6). Lorde rejects white supremacy's advocacy of silence, noting that remaining silent—in word or action—will ruin us; it will "choke us" not to fight for a community built on acceptance and love of self and others. Such tools include asking reflection questions and inviting identification, empathy, and love, as opposed to alienation, fear, and hate.

Key to this approach is inviting in and including readers in the fight against those narratives that would deny fat Black women+ acceptance, respect, and joy. However, dismantling anti-fat and anti-Black structures like the Beauty industry remains incredibly difficult because of their deep foundations. One of the Beauty industry's most effective tools in keeping women+ compliant is coercion, for, as Cottom writes, "capital demands that beauty be coercive" (58). Cottom's essay names and capitalizes "Beauty," drawing attention to its institutionalization and structural power. Cottom's capitalization of Beauty (calling it "Big Beauty") in recognition of its institutional status and power invites readers to see it as the oppressive force that constrains women+'s already patriarchally-limited bodily autonomy and

determination (67). It is not just a concept, but an industry for profit that relies on manipulation and oppression for its perpetuation. If Beauty coerces women+, it typifies hooks's definition of "oppression" as being "the absence of choices" (273). That coercion is even more for fat Black women+ whose compounded marginalization leaves them with even less of a choice in seeking whiteness, thinness, and consequently, respect. Naming this institution for what it is is the first step in enacting change, drawing readers' attention to operations so that they might see where the true problem lies: not in their own bodies, but rather in the racist, sexist, and anti-fat institutions peddling self-hate.

Naming also assumes other consciousness-raising functions in these works, striving to arm readers with the particular knowledge they might need in order to counter these oppressive systems. For instance, Gay, Cottom, and Taylor point towards the incredible financial burden Beauty places on those whose bodies it has deemed in need of "help." Taylor explicitly names this economic burden, pointing out that because beauty is a form of social, economic, and political currency, it coerces women+ into internalizing and purchasing products to become beautiful—totaling an average of $15,000 per woman+ during the duration of her life (46). Though Taylor never explicitly breaks down the additional costs for fat women+ of color, they remain likely to bear a greater economic burden, as they 1) systemically have less wealth/money than their white counterparts; and 2) have even more "obstacles" to overcome before they can be considered beautiful.[7] She writes, "Equally sinister are the advertisements that remind us by repetition and erasure that unless we are youthful, blonde, thin, able-bodied, and muscular, with perfectly white teeth and glossy hair, we are fatally flawed and need their product" (Taylor 73).

[7]For a detailed account of the Black-white generational wealth gap and the pandemic's effects, see Christian E. Weller and Lily Roberts's article, "Eliminating the Black-White Wealth Gap Is a Generational Challenge," found on The Center for American Progress website: https://www.americanprogress.org/article/eliminating-black-white-wealth-gap-generational-challenge/.

Of course, the white beauty standard excludes nearly all women+, but it especially hurts women+ of color in additionally-marginalized bodies (e.g., those who are fat or disabled), requiring hurdles that white, able-bodied women+ do not have to clear. Taylor et al seek to educate readers on both the visible and the hidden costs of Beauty, giving them information that they may use to choose differently.

These writers also seek to pull back the curtain on the wellness industry, revealing it to be another arm of anti-fatness that is more invested in profit margins than people. Thus, not only do fat Black women+ need products to align themselves with whiteness, they also need products and services to align themselves with thinness—Taylor coins purchases of dieting programs (now disguising themselves as "lifestyle" programs), including weight-loss pills, gym memberships, and shapewear—"detriment buying," or purchases that cultivate, monetize, and rely upon self-hate.[8] "Health" demands purchases that associate "our worth and value [with] our appearance and external selves" (Taylor 49). Cottom underscores that detriment buying "can never be fully satisfied. It is not useful for human flourishing" (56). Detriment buying once again reduces fat Black women+'s bodies to capital: trafficked, traded, enslaved, and now, seeking to be made beautiful—an impossible task by design. Commodified beauty practices disproportionately harm fat Black women+ as they both target them and demand they use capital they may not have and, in fact, are less likely to have—even more so than other people of color.[9] Through educative discussions like Taylor's, these writers seek to make plain these oppressive industries so that readers are then receptive to calls for change.

[8]Consider also Weight Watchers' rebranding to "WW" in order to adapt to anti-diet culture rhetoric.

[9]Per the U.S. Treasury's website: "Using data from the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF), researchers at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis [found] that the median white family had $184,000 in wealth in 2019 compared to just $38,000 and $23,000 for the median Hispanic and Black families, respectively … Moreover, their analysis shows that the median wealth gap between white and Black families has hardly changed over the last 20 years" (Harris and Wertz).

Bowen further illuminates how the Beauty industry discourages "human flourishing" and coerces fat Black women+ to participate in order to gain social acceptance (even if contingent upon appearance). She thus invites readers to consider the ways Beauty discourages fat Black women+'s joy and growth. Bowen mirrors Cottom's argument that "beauty is for white women," and consequently acts as "an actual form of capital and currency"—granting fat Black women+ traces of social acceptance and power (Cottom 47; Bowen 25). Bowen argues such because Beauty is aligned with whiteness, determined by exclusionary standards, and rooted in ableist ideals. Being beautiful becomes a form of supremacy in which thin, white women+ are more likely to get the job, be paid more, be listened to, and be recognized as humans. Consequently, many women+ in marginalized and/or disabled bodies—including fat Black women+—seek to use beauty as a tool, something to wield and prioritize.[10] To *not* seek out beauty as a fat Black woman+ is to be further barred from basic rights and opportunities. Or, as Bowen put it, "The bitter truth is that Black women do not have the luxury of resisting the patriarchy by refusing to participate in its beauty mandates" (39). Bowen's declaration reminds readers that Beauty strips away the limited ability women+ have to make choices about their bodies—effectively preventing all women+ from ignoring it, but especially fat Black women+. They cannot afford to dismiss Beauty's demands if they want acceptance, opportunities, and authority in a world made for whiteness and thinness.

These writers also use first-person narratives to model their own experiences of anti-fatness and their awakening to another way, thus educating their readers. For instance, Cottom

[10]Fat Black women+ face unique systemic injustices, such as an even more substantial pay gap than a non-fat Black woman+ (compared to white women+). In their 2011 study, Timothy A. Judge and Daniel M. Cable found that, in line with their hypothesis, the more a woman+ weighs, the less she gets paid; the pay difference is substantial, incredibly problematic, and discriminatory. Indeed, they found that when "all else equal, a woman who is average weight earns $389,300 less across a 25-year career than a woman who is 25 lbs below average weight" (109). The gap is even more substantial when compounded as a fat Black woman+.

does this as she discusses the film industry, revealing how she came to be aware of its prejudice so that readers might follow a similar path. Cottom models how the film *Grease* taught her that beauty equates to whiteness and thinness (47). While watching the film during class (the misogyny and fat phobia in *Grease* is a topic for another day), Cottom recalls how, at Sandy's bad-girl makeover—clad in leather pants, red heels, and a thigh gap—a boy stood up and yelped, "'My hot damn, Ms. Newton-John!'" (42). Cottom writes, "I remember the scene so clearly, *because that was when I got it*. A whole other culture of desirability had been playing out just above and beyond my awareness" (42, emphasis mine). Here, Cottom shares with her readers how she came to understand whiteness and thinness as the ideal—how she was socialized into Beauty. Film presents its argument *visually*, a perfect vehicle for fat phobia, because it reinforces consumerism's culture of judgment, comparison, and self-hatred. By promoting Sandy's makeover, *Grease* affirmed that 1) women+ are only valuable when beautiful; 2) to be beautiful is to be thin and white; and 3) Beauty can literally be bought—thus entwining fat phobia, capitalism, and beauty. By sharing how that film was shown at a school, Cottom models how anti-fatness and anti-Blackness is literally taught. The film's white ideal is cemented both when the boy sexualizes Olivia Newton-John and when Cottom's teacher affirms the "correctness" of his views, "smil[ing] at him and roll[ing] her eyes, acknowledging his sexual appreciation of Sandy as normal if unmannerly" (43). Cottom's teacher condones and codifies such behavior and the Beauty ideals undergirding it. Sharing this formative moment, Cottom invites her readers into that classroom and experience; she directs them to see the images and hear the cat-calling, to recognize her young self being socialized into a violent way of thinking. And in so doing, she invites them to empathize with that younger self and condemn the lesson that she is less lovable because she is fat, Black, and female.

Further, this scene works to draw readers attention to how, as foundational Black feminist Francis Beale has argued, racism is capitalism's "afterbirth" (109). Cottom invites non-Black, Indigenous, or Women+ of Color readers to see that while *all* girls grapple with impossible beauty standards, "only the non-white girls could never be beautiful. That's because beauty isn't actually what you look like; beauty is the preferences that reproduce the existing social order. What is beautiful is whatever will keep weekend lake parties safe from strange darker people" (44). Even with that acknowledgement, Cottom draws attention to the reality that Black women+ try to reach the standard because beauty is social capital. Because the standard centers itself on thin whiteness—rendering beauty impossible for women+ of color—fat Black women+ will continuously seek out the solutions presented by capitalism. Accordingly, fat Black women+ are again disproportionately harmed by Beauty; it polices their bodies in ways the thin, white woman+ does not experience. It dictates—in this moment, through film—what their body can and cannot be or do, and how it can and cannot look. Cottom's essay names these prejudices in order to point the reader to the violence and show where it appears.

Through naming the problem and modeling a type of consciousness, Bowen, Cottom, and Taylor contend that mixed messaging about beauty standards obfuscates what the Beauty industry is doing: keeping fat Black women+ guessing so they are perpetually bound to that system. In doing so, they hope to create a readership that responds to these injustices. They respond to the catch-22 Zoë Huxford described:

> Over the last decade we've witnessed in real time the pendulum swing from a silhouette reminiscent of a sand timer to that of a waif. It may be dizzyingly relentless, but it also poses the question: *What does it mean to be desirable? And who decides what's desirable in the first place?* (para. 2, emphasis mine)

The essayists seek to answer these questions, drawing attention to Beauty's problematic practice of constantly shifting rules in order to keep consumers (particularly women+) unsettled. The writers also seek to empower readers to become competent and conscious consumers, with the hope that illuminating capitalistic beauty's predatory nature will enable women+ to identify its problems, and thus *resist* said problems.

However, the writers recognize that merely naming and critiquing capitalism's problems is not enough, as many people—particularly those who are *not* fat Black women+—resist the counternarrative presented by these essayists because of the way the institution rewards those who conform. It is easier for thin, white women+ (and men) to chalk these discriminations up to the fat Black woman+'s fault—her "laziness"—than to acknowledge the systemic, harmful practices they likely participate in. In doing so, the Beauty industry creates a dependence on its approval and power, encouraging fat Black women+ over and over again to literally buy into it. Dismissal from readers toward the essays' arguments does not solely come outside of the Black community, though it primarily does, as those in the most power (thin, cisgender white women+ and men) have the most to lose. In other words, by drawing attention to the ways some people have resisted their messages, they are modeling how *not* to respond. Instead, the examples they provide invite readers to accept the arguments they are making. As Cottom states, in speaking against these institutions, "I am accustomed to men and white people being angry with me. That is par for the course" (38). Through her experience trying to deconstruct the (overlapping) institutions of capitalism and Beauty, Cottom asserts that white folks' anger is normal, expected; attempts to dethrone capitalism and Beauty threaten the power white supremacy provides. Yet, Cottom illustrates the pushback that comes even *within* her community when she wrote an article referring to herself as ugly. In one article she wrote, Cottom argued that because she is

"unattractive," she "ha[s] a particular kind of experience of beauty, race, racism, and interacting with what we might call the white gaze" (38). In response, Black women+ rejected her assertion, prompting Cottom to "take the time to figure out [her] responsibility," because "when Black women are mad at me it is a special kind of contrition," she writes (38). After reflecting, Cottom recognized that her internalization of beauty standards differed drastically from the mainstream internalization of self-hatred; stating the reality that she does not fit the Beauty standard equated to—for many Black women+—naming herself as unworthy. Ultimately, Cottom concluded, "When I say that I am unattractive or ugly, I am not internalizing the dominant culture's assessment of me. *I am naming what has been done to me. And signaling who did it.* I am glad that doing so unsettles folks" (60, emphasis mine). True to her word, Cottom explicates her point unapologetically: while not internalizing the beauty standard, she *is* calling it out. Naming it. And that can be both difficult for fat Black women+ to recognize, but particularly difficult for them to reconcile. Cottom has made visible what was once invisible, causing discomfort.

The fat Black women+ essayists I examine recognize that naming the problem is the first step and that they must also help readers to see and believe in the problem. Having done work to "educate" readers about topics, systems, and violence of which they might not be aware, Bowen, Cottom, and Taylor then use a range of formal strategies to create an audience that will take that education and put it into practice. These practices work to either access an existing (but socially- and politically-dormant) audience, or to create a readership that will act.

One way writers do this is through the use of the plural pronouns "we" and "us" in efforts to bridge the gap between the author and readers, inviting them into their conversation. Bowen exemplifies this particularly well throughout her text. For instance, she writes that for fat Black women+, "beauty actually becomes a tool … We use it to lessen the impact of how we

may otherwise be treated" (39). Bowen's use of inclusive pronouns—the powerful, collective "we"—seeks to mitigate several obstacles. First, it affirms the validity of her perspective as a fat Black woman+ herself by placing herself in the group with those who do "not have the luxury of resisting" beauty standards, reminding readers that these experiences are real, thus building ethos. The "we" also attempts to create a sense of community amid a difficult conversation, dissolving the alienation fat Black women+ might otherwise feel as they navigate these new ideologies.

Bowen's collective pronouns also can be read as pushing back against capitalism's aggressive individualism. Such a seemingly-small move rejects the capitalistic narrative that people can be worth more than others, and the endless competitions that consequently ensue. Bowen invites fat Black women+ in particular to rise above white supremacy's individualistic narrative and to refuse to satiate its desires, arguing that "we deserve to be seen," that "there's room for all of us" (19, 49). Her collective pronouns reject individualism and promote community, belonging, and healing. They reinforce the idea of "room for all," and recognize the harm the institution of Beauty causes, particularly for fat Black women+. In doing so, Bowen underscores fat Black women+ as victims of Beauty's controlling violence, emphasizing the desire for readers to "reconsider your own preconceived notions about what fat women can and can't do" (49).

Another formal strategy these writers use in attempts to create a receptive and conscious audience is the use of questions. Questions demand answers. As opposed to a statement, questions invite a response and signal that a conversation is to be had. They also suggest that there is more to be considered—particularly so when it comes to Beauty and anti-fat misogynoir. Taylor often deploys questions in a conversational way, thereby requesting readers actively

engage with her text. For example, Taylor's book includes a series of questions she calls "Unapologetic Inquiries." The inquiries ask without hedging or polite framing why readers think, believe, feel, and act as they do. Consider, for example, Unapologetic Inquiry #15: "One way to check if our desires for bodily change are motivated by authentic self-expression or shame is to ask ourselves, 'Am I changing my body in ways that an oppressive body-shame system will reward me for?'" (Taylor 50). Taylor's Unapologetic Inquiry educates readers ("One way to check…") and pushes them to become aware of why they treat their bodies the way they do. In this way, Taylor directly invites readers to examine and reflect on the motivations for their actions and the root of their beliefs, especially toward bodies (including their own). The Unapologetic Inquiry also explicitly reminds readers that there *is* "an oppressive body-shame system" that dictates beliefs and morals around bodies. Consequently, she not only names the oppressive systems, but prods readers to critically engage with questions around them. These repeated invitations function not only for the individual reader's benefit, but work to engage readers collectively in the process. In essence, Taylor petitions readers to join her in deconstructing the master's house.

Taylor continues to push readers to directly address the intersection of capitalism and Beauty with questions. When discussing how the average woman+ spends $15,000 on beauty-related products during her life, she uses questions to invite readers to make concrete this abstract number: "If I handed you $15,000 to read this book … what would you do with it?" (46). Taylor not only poses such a reflective question, but follows up with more questions, suggesting that a range of responses exist: "Pay down debt? Put a down payment on a house? Take a vacation to some exotic location? Help your children or loved ones? Go back to school?" (46). These questions demand readers really think about that number and what they value. And

while the sub-questions are still rooted in consumption, the things Taylor lists are substantial, quality-of-life decisions—rooted in love for the self and others. Her questions invite mindfulness both in form and in subject matter. In this way, she uses them to cultivate a more engaged readership.

These essayists also use humor as a way of helping readers navigate these complex, and at times, traumatic topics. Humor provides moments of relief, relaxing the tension and overwhelm, ultimately helping readers to sit with discomfort. Humor also relies upon identification—things are funny because one has "been there," or can see a kernel of their own experience. Thus, humor can work in these texts to create a receptive audience. Returning to Taylor's earlier question on what readers would spend $15,000 on, we see the way that humor functions: "I am willing to bet five million of Bill Gates's dollars that you did not say, 'Sonya, I would buy a lifetime supply of antiaging cream!'" (46). Taylor's playful tone bids deeper consideration about this beauty consumption revelation. Here and elsewhere, her humor invites readers to approach the conversation with fewer defenses. Even the passing phrase that she'd be "willing to bet five million of Bill Gates's dollars," seems lighthearted or insignificant; yet, even in passing, Taylor reminds readers that she does not have the five million hypothetical dollars, but a white man does, thus redirecting musings on white supremacy, patriarchy, and the classist nature of Beauty through laughter.

Taylor takes advantage of the reprieve and openness this humor provides with the use of an Unapologetic Inquiry: "When was the last time you made a purchase because you didn't feel 'good enough'? Did the purchase change how you felt? If so, how and for how long?" (47). Thus, through a combination of humor and explicit pondering, Taylor encourages readers to ensure their choices are truly choices, rooted in self-love. And, as readers straddle the line of

humor and discomfort, she emboldens them to participate in the model of best-interest buying instead of detriment buying—making purchases that align with one's values. That may even include beauty products, if they help people affirm gender identity or other forms of self-expression (Taylor 49). Taylor's model of best-interest buying over detriment buying not only puts a name to the self-hatred the beauty industry encourages, but gives readers a tool to replace their previous decisions. Taylor tells readers, "I am proposing that reflecting on our purchases gives us an opportunity to investigate whether we are in alignment with our own unapologetic truth" (47). She, alongside the other essayists, are building a community of women+ that are aware and make purchases that act in line with self-love. Ultimately, the writers do so through naming the problem and drawing readers into the conversation. Consciousness of these problems is key, and bringing readers into this awareness remains a critical part of making substantial changes.

Self-Acceptance of and Joy in the Black Fat Body

Ultimately, the reason that these essayists do the formal and conceptual work they do is to promote fat Black joy as a fundamental human right and encourage others to participate in this project of individual and communal healing. Indeed, on the very first page of her book, Taylor tells the reader: "You are being called toward radical self-love," shortly explaining that "if radical self-love is an oak tree, it is an essential part of an entire ecosystem. When it grows stronger, the entire system does as well" (1-3). Radical self-love, as Taylor uses it, is the foundation, means, and end of the work of these fat Black women+, and the way they construct their texts works to awaken it in their readers and welcome into its new way of being. While Taylor never explicitly defines what she means by "radical," her use of the word echoes its

formal definition: "Of, belonging to, or from a root or roots; fundamental to or inherent in the natural processes of life" ("radical"). Taylor uses and frames the word—even drawing on the example of an oak tree, which has literal roots—to argue that self-love was the root, the original and inherent way we perceived ourselves, before fat phobia and Beauty promoted self-hatred. And she is calling readers back—to "return to their roots" and practice unconditional self-love so that others might benefit as well. The readers are thus directly invited into the practice of self-love and to consider its communal benefits as they then read all of the subsequent material detailing the things that would strive to deny that joy and love.

These writers assert that all fat Black women+ deserve their joy and invite readers to join them in the work of making a world like that possible. To do so, Taylor suggests that in addition to fighting fat phobia, readers shouldn't only fill their "newsfeed and bookshelf [with] a Wikipedia of sad, fat lives of discrimination and trauma. Why? Because fat people are thriving in their bodies. Making fat familiar means bearing witness to fat bodies in joy, pleasure, desire, nature, rest, love, movement, and nourishment" (109). Taylor calls upon readers not to ignore fat phobia, but rather to prioritize fat Black women+'s joy—to place their humanness above the messages that they do not deserve happiness. She invites readers to stray from the narrative holding up "the master's house" and instead embrace an alternative that allows for joy. And claiming in *any* capacity that there is something to be joyful about as fat Black women+ is radical.

Just as they use rhetorical tools—inclusive pronouns, curiosity, and humor—to dismiss fat phobia's claims, the essayists also use personal examples, deliberate pronouns, and joyful style and tone in order to promote their acceptance of and joy in their bodies. Bowen models her own confidence and joy in her body so readers can see what it looks like. She starts by declaring

her own confidence, writing, “When I’m naked in front of the mirror, I see a body, one of the billions of bodies taking up space on this Earth” (Bowen 87). Bowen’s assertion of confidence is devoid of judgment, affirms her body as worthy of taking up space, and suggests that body acceptance is a form of self-love. It not only models confidence, but also how she has made peace with her body by amoralizing it. Significantly, Bowen then directly addresses her readers, inviting them to learn from her hard-won example: “You have permission to be satisfied with who you are, what you look like, and what you have. You also have permission to take your time … to figure it out according to the changing circumstances of your life” (Bowen 99). Bowen’s use of “you” here functions like a friend’s admonition, reminding that “you have permission” to love yourself and your body. As such, Bowen’s address can be read as inviting the reader into a space of mutual respect, recognition, and value.

Taylor similarly addresses readers from a place of radical self-love, extending them “permission” to reclaim a childlike joy in their fat Black bodies. Having spent a good portion of her text naming oppressive institutions and ideologies, Taylor invites her readers to reclaim a form of childlike innocence that existed before structural oppression. She reminds readers that “babies love their bodies!”, and invites them to see their bodies as a baby would (Taylor 7). “Have you ever seen an infant realize they have feet? Talk about wonder! That is what an unobstructed relationship with our bodies looks like” (7). Her own excitement, conveyed through animated language and tone, prompts interest and curiosity about the potential to reconnect with one’s body. Taylor invites her readers here to recreate their world, to return to a prelapsarian state of sorts rooted in curiosity and joy, for, as she writes, “we arrived on this planet as LOVE” (7). Such a return is a rethinking, and Bowen and Taylor see radically creative potential in that.

Even with the incredible potential Bowen and Taylor identify in self-love, other fat Black women+ writers acknowledge its difficulty. The texts do not all offer a "silver bullet" for overcoming fat phobia and landing in radical self-love. Gay, for example, argues that "part of fat acceptance is accepting that some of us struggle with body image and haven't reached a place of peace and unconditional self-acceptance" (153). Gay's experience isn't necessarily filled with self-love or "joy" in the typical way we define it; rather, she echoes Patricia Hill Collins's argument that Black women+ who have "lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable" than those who have merely heard about them, thus drawing on the "criterion" of "concrete experience" as a form of authority ("The Social Construction" 759). Gay's assertion acknowledges the recursive nature of finding joy, and that it *is* work, but that it ultimately can and deserves to be found. Importantly, too, this excerpt clarifies that "joy" certainly includes neutrality, the right to claim and represent oneself in terms free of shame and guilt. Thus, her text models a type of healthy self-reflection for her readers, thereby inviting them to do the same.

Likewise, Cottom rejects the notion that she must view herself as beautiful. Thus, instead of beauty, she demands respect—her definition of joy (70-72). Cottom rejects "the implicit bid for solidarity from every single white woman" and "every overture from a man who wants to convince me that I am beautiful" (70-71). Alternatively, she wants "nice people with nice-enough politics to look at me, reason for themselves that I am worthy, and feel convicted when the world does not agree" (Cottom 71). In short, she acknowledges the harm that "the structural apparatus" enacts on marginalized bodies (Cottom 71). In this way, Cottom's approach toward joy in a fat, Black body requires that every body receives respect, creating empathy—and the right to happiness—for those whose bodies do not conform.

Conclusion: Building Change Through Compassion

In short, Bowen, Cottom, and Taylor all articulate their hope for a reader that becomes more informed and compassionate toward the unique discrimination fat Black women+ face, and one primed to use their (thin, white, etc.) privilege to create more inclusivity. At the outset, the essayists name their intentions and hopes for their writing; unsurprisingly, there is a large overlap in their central aims. For Cottom, she admits, "I do not paint ethereal black worlds where white people can slip into our narratives and leave unscathed by judgment for their unearned privilege" (25). She does not portray the "purely virtuous" portrait of the fat Black American experience; rather, she follows Langston Hughes's injunction in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" to illustrate the good, bad, and the ugly of being a fat Black woman+ in America—to reject whiteness's plea not to "shatter our illusions" (Hughes).[11] Additionally, Cottom explains, "I have never wanted to tell evocative stories. I have wanted to tell evocative stories that become a problem for power … these are arguments … they are written to persuade, to change, to effect" (28). Thus, Cottom calls out readers with "unearned privilege" (one of her primary audiences), inviting them to enact change so that "no black woman public intellectual has to fix her feet ever again to walk this world" (32). Bowen also articulates that "by the time you finish this book, hopefully you won't be tempted to question the perceived self-assurance of the next Black girl you meet," concluding that "it's time for [Black women+] to be our own master teachers and name our experiences for what they are, as we live them" (19). In the end, all three essayists' aims can be summated in Taylor's declaration that her writing will not fix readers' self-esteem or teach them how to have self-confidence, but can "change *the*

[11]Of this, Hughes wrote, "The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. 'O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,' say the Negroes. 'Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,' say the whites."

circumstances that have had us settle for self-acceptance," promising them "there is a richer, thicker, cozier blanket to carry through the world. There is a realm infinitely more mind-blowing. It's called radical self-love" (1, 4, emphasis mine). Radical self-love, for Taylor, moves beyond neutrality or respect—she wants readers to embody unconditional love, curiosity, and respect for themselves.

Furthermore, the reality that all three essayists have calls to action tells us that reading the book is not a solution in and of itself, but is a first step in helping readers become more informed, compassionate, and ready to consider harmful perspectives, privileges, and biases. The essayists not only invite change, but make the invitation to change a key component of their work. For instance, Bowen encourages readers to consider if they are committed to the work by addressing them directly, using reflective questions: "Can you make good judgment calls under pressure? Do you say what you mean and mean what you say? Are you principled when it comes to your people?" (257). Simply, Bowen invites readers to ensure their actions line up with their values, such as the belief that all people—all bodies—are worthy of respect.

Taylor, as throughout her book, remains the most direct in her request for readers to change; however, she also approaches the invitation to change with a great, *radical* love—an unconditional love for self and others. In the final pages of her book, she suggests readers resist norms and—as proposed several times already—get curious about why things are the way they are: Why are you uncomfortable with differences? How does naming unfairness (including fat phobia, thin privilege, white supremacy, patriarchy, beauty standards) work against those institutions? Illustrating these curiosities, Taylor details a time she had an opportunity to face "body terrorism"—what she coins as the perpetuation of "body shame and … support [of] body-based oppression"—in a conversation with some friends (58). After the conversation shifted to

body talk, Taylor recounts that one friend made an "unexpected transphobic comment" (126). Consequently, Taylor, as a cisgender woman+, was "given the opportunity to choose a budding act of justice over cisgender comfort" (126). That is, she was given the chance to use her privilege as a cisgender woman+ to, "with compassion," challenge a comment rooted in fear and hatred (Taylor 126). And while Taylor's example deals with biases against transgender bodies, its applicability to fat Black women+ holds; simply, as she argues, "[our] collective assignment is to challenge indoctrinations" against all body terrorism—including fat phobia (126).

Ultimately, Taylor urges that "each invitation to risk social comfort for an interpersonal act of justice disturbs the social contract of body terrorism," arguing that we have a "collective assignment" to care for each other—to enact compassion—even if that means we lose some of our privileges and comforts (126-27). Sacrificing social comfort, while critical, does not always require loudness or drastic measures; rather, Taylor distinguishes that even "a small wrinkle in the bed of privilege" allows us to make a "transformed world predicated on radical, unapologetic love" (127). Taylor's argument that even "a small wrinkle" can be transformative emphasizes that even small moves to reject harmful ideologies and systems makes a difference, such as when she corrected her friend's transphobic remark. In other words, she argues that change doesn't always need to be manifest in grandiose ways, but that our efforts ought to be consistent. Taylor writes, "There are small, everyday ways we are invited to interrupt our collusion with the comfort of body-based oppression in service of justice for all bodies" (125). In clarifying the need for consistency, not necessarily extremity, Taylor attempts to make being part of said change easier for readers, perhaps including them in what they would otherwise feel overwhelmed or scared to participate.

Taylor demonstrates an approach seen more and more as the United States struggles to discuss any topic of consequence (e.g., gun control, book banning, fat phobia) without division; she upholds the need for compassion. In advocating for this kind of communication, she echoes bell hooks on forgiveness and grace, given in an interview with Maya Angelou:

> I think this is a difficult question, how we deal with the question of forgiveness. For me forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed? (qtd. Angelou)

hooks, importantly, acknowledges the fraught nature of approaching change and correction with empathy: the contradiction of correcting and holding one accountable, while still seeing their humanity. Her question, too, of how we might actually navigate that complexity, reinforces the essayists' argument that reading these books is an initial step, but that conversation—engaging with the ideas—is what transforms people. Reflecting on the purpose of book clubs, hooks went on to clarify that in academic circles, we are accustomed to a cohort, people we regularly talk with about the texts. For those outside of academia, hooks reflected that it is often "painful" to "read something and [not] have anybody to share it with. In part what the book club opens up is that people … see that a book can lead to the pleasure of conversation, that the solitary act of reading can actually be a part of the path to communion and community" (qtd. Angelou). In short, hooks and the essayists recognize the need for reading texts like *Thick*, *Bad Fat Black Girl*, and *The Body Is Not an Apology*; they also, however, argue that engaging in compassionate conversation—believing in others' "capacity to be transformed"—is paramount. Of course, as hooks clarifies, approaching social justice with compassion does not equate to dismissing the

need for accountability; rather, the approaches sit alongside each other, emphasizing the belief that people are capable of change.

Patricia Hill Collins similarly argues that Black women's epistemology of knowing—an "alternative epistemology" —centers on what she calls the "ethic of caring" ("The Social Construction" 768). The ethic of caring, Collins posits, requires that "emotion, ethics, and reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims," inviting readers to develop "the capacity for empathy" ("The Social Construction" 766, 770). Importantly, like hooks, Collins asserts that developing empathy does not mean an abandonment of accountability for ideas or actions; instead, the "ethic of accountability" demands that "not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present those knowledge claims in a style proving their concern for their ideas, [but] people are [also] expected to be accountable for their knowledge" ("The Social Construction" 768). Thus, both hooks and Collins affirm that to make change, we must develop empathy while maintaining accountability. Doing so, of course, is not always straightforward; it requires practice, conversation, and error. But foundational Black feminists, like hooks and Collins, as well as contemporary Black feminists like Taylor, believe it can be done. And in the end, to make the lasting change the writers ask for, many individuals—especially those with privilege—must systemically and compassionately challenge a fat-phobic society.

Works Cited

"About." *Black Lives Matter*, https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/.

Adams, Cydney. "Not All Black People are African American. Here's the Difference." *CBS News*, 18 Jun. 2020, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/not-all-black-people-are-african-american-what-is-the-difference/.

Adeniji, Linda. "The Unrapeable Black Woman: How the Lack of Legal Protection Through the Centuries Promoted the Tradition of Unreported Sexual Assaults." *SSRN*, 14 Dec. 2015, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2702861.

Ahima, Rexford S., and Mitchell A. Lazar. "The Health Risk of Obesity—Better Metrics Imperative." *Science*, vol. 341, no. 6148, 2013, pp. 856–58.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. United Kingdom, New Press, 2012.

Anderson, Carol. *White Rage*. "Prologue: Kindling," Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

Angelou, Maya. "Angelou." *Shambhala Sun*, 1998, http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/249.html.

@ArtOfDialogue_. "Aries Spears says that he can't get [past] the fact that Lizzo looks like the 💩 emoji when asked about her music." *Twitter*, 26 Aug. 2022, 8:22 p.m., https://twitter.com/ArtOfDialogue_/status/1563351264527716353?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1563351264527716353%7Ctwgr%5E6996f307f720a30d31a8abb3cff49c6b88c59ce8%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.tmz.com%2F2022%2F08%2F27%2Flizzo-fiercely-defended-aries-spears-mocks-weight-appearance%2F.

Baptiste, Diana-Lyn, et al. "Henrietta Lacks and America's Dark History of Research Involving African Americans." *Nursing Open* vol. 9, no. 5, 2022, pp. 2236-2238. *PubMed Central*, doi:10.1002/nop2.1257.

Beale, Francis. "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, edited by Toni Cade Bambara, Pocket Books, 2005, pp. 109-22.

Bowen, Sesali. *Bad Fat Black Girl: Notes from a Trap Feminist*. Amistad, 2021.

Boyce-Davies, Carole. "Introduction: Migratory Subjectives." *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. Taylor & Francis Group, 1994, pp. 1-26. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/byu/detail.action?docID=168886.

Carby, Hazel V. "'Woman's Era': Rethinking Black Feminist Theory." *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 3-19. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/byu/detail.action?docID=272562.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*, vol. 33, no. 6, 1986, pp. S14–32. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/800672.

---. "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought." *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1989, pp. 745–73. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174683.

Cottom, Tressie McMillan. *Thick: And Other Essays*. The New Press, 2019.

Davis, Angela. *Women, Race, and Class*. Random House, Inc., 1981.

Davis, C.E., et al. "Body Mass Index and Body Girths as Predictors of Mortality in Black and White Women." *Archives of Internal Medicine*, vol. 152, no. 6, 1992, pp. 1257– 62.

Fennell, Marc, and Anna Kelsey-Sugg. “The Fight for Sarah Baartman.” *ABC News*, 16 Nov. 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-17/stuff-the-british-stole-sarah-baartman-south-africa-london/100568276.

France, Lisa Respers. “Jillian Michaels Slammed for Comments About Lizzo’s Weight.” *CNN*, 9 Jan. 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/09/entertainment/jillian-michaels-lizzo-weight-trnd/index.html.

Gay, Roxane. *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*. Harper, 2017.

Gilmore, Glenda Elizabeth. *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press. *HeinOnline*, https://heinonline-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/HOL/P?h=hein.peggy/gdjmcw0001&i=211.

Glover, Lydia. “Social Reproduction Theory: On Regulating Reproduction, Understanding Oppression and as a Lens on Forced Sterilisation.” *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2021, pp. 34-48. *ProQuest*, http://byu.idm.oclc.org/login/?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/social-reproduction-theory-on-regulating/docview/2519899629/se-2.

Harris, Benjamin, and Sydney Schreiner Wertz. “Racial Differences in Economic Security: The Racial Wealth Gap.” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 15 Sept. 2022, https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/racial-differences-economic-security-racial-wealth-gap.

Haslam, D. “Obesity: A Medical History.” *Obesity Reviews*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2007, pp. 31-6. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1467-789X.2007.00314.x.

hooks, bell. “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory.” *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, The New Press, 1995, pp. 270-82.

Hughes, James. “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” *Poetry Foundation*, 13 Oct. 2009, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain.

Huxford, Zoë. “Where Is Desirability’s Place In The Modern Age?” *Refinery29*, 8 Nov. 2022, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2022/11/11180051/beauty-standards-desirability.

Jordan, June. “Report from the Bahamas, 1982.” *Meridians*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 6–16. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338566.

Judge, Timothy A., and Daniel M. Cable. “When It Comes to Pay, Do the Thin Win? The Effect of Weight on Pay for Men and Women.” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 96, no. 1, 2011, pp. 95-112. *PASCAL Archive*. DOI: 10.1037/a0020860.

Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 110-114.

---. “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.” *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, Silver Press, 2017, pp. 1-6.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007.

“radical, adj. and n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2023, www.oed.com/view/Entry/157251.

Revolus, Herby. “Truth Hurts, Y’all Hate Fat Black Women’s Joy.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Herby Revolus, 31 Aug. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5orsvWH9a-M.

Ricketts, Rachel. "Glossary." *Do Better: Spiritual Activism for Fighting and Healing from White Supremacy*, Atria Books, 2021, pp.265-77. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/byu/detail.action?docID=6431993.

Small, Cynthia. "Developing Culturally Sensitive Guidelines to Address Obesity in Black Women." *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*, vol. 76, no. 2-B, 2015, pp. 1-125, *ProQuest*, http://byu.idm.oclc.org/login/?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/developing-culturally-sensitive-guidelines/docview/1617435834/se-2.

Strings, Sabrina. *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. New York University Press, 2019.

Taylor, Sonya Renee. *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-love*. 2nd ed., Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021.

Tucker, Jasmine. "It's Time to Pay Black Women What They're Owed." *National Women's Law Center*, Sept. 2022, https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/BWEPD-9.14.22-v2.pdf.

Yeboah, Stephanie. "Fat is Not a Bad Word." *Stephanie Yeboah*, June 2020, https://www.stephanieyeboah.com/2020/06/fat-is-not-a-bad-word.html.