

DISSERTATION

FAT-POSITIVE WORLDMAKING IN THE BODY POSITIVE MOVEMENT:
QUEERING, DECOLONIZING, INTERSECTING

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

FAT-POSITIVE WORLDMAKING IN THE BODY POSITIVE MOVEMENT: QUEERING, DECOLONIZING, INTERSECTING

This dissertation uses a queer rhetorical approach augmented by a critical/cultural sensibility and autoethnographic performance to examine how body positive activists, influencers, and public figures carve out moments for fat-positive (queer) worldmaking within the online body positive movement. In particular, this project explores how body positivity shifts contextually from a set of depoliticized philosophies around self-love and positive body image to moments of worldmaking via radical body politics. The primary goal of this project is to examine how the body positive movement carves out possibilities for positive representation, humanization, and liberation for fat and otherwise non-normative bodies. To pursue this goal, I engage three distinct case studies of fat-positive queer worldmaking within body positivity after situating this project as joining and contributing to broader scholarly conversations around embodied social movement rhetoric as well as disciplinary perspectives on queer worldmaking. The first case study explores how two body positive social media influencers, @Sassy_latte and Melissa Gibson, use Instagram posts and the digital radio show format to develop radical, fat activist body politics around the notion of “body justice.” The second case study focuses on hip-hop artist Lizzo and her role in the changing nature of body positivity in the current moment, analyzing how her social media, lyrics, and music videos engage in fat-positive queer worldmaking that recenters fat, Black femme bodies. The final case study takes on the character of autoethnographic performance in which I center my own body, my own journey with body

positivity and fat activism, as well as grapple with the relationship between my role as a critic and my role as part of the rhetoric I analyze. In and through these case studies, I ultimately argue that it is through particular kinds of rhetorical labor—namely decolonial, intersectional, and queer forms—that body positive rhetors make possible moments of fat-positive queer worldmaking.

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DEDICATION

For Juan and Gordo, my two sources of unconditional love.

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INTRODUCTION: BODY POSITIVITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

*“I’m not being hyperbolic when I say that body positivity saved my life.”*¹ As I read those words, I realize I could have written them myself. However, they are not my words, they are the words of popular body positive author and activist, Megan Jayne Crabbe (perhaps better known by her Instagram handle, @bodyposipanda), in an interview with *Natural Health* magazine. Crabbe describes body positivity as a movement that “teaches people that no matter how your body looks, regardless of your size, shape, skin colour, age, gender or ability, you are good enough, you have value and you deserve to feel good.”² She goes on to explain just how body positivity saved her life, recalling that

I used to do such dangerous things to myself in order to lose weight and get a physique that I thought I needed. Body positivity swooped in and rescued me, making me realise that I deserve to be as happy as I am. It’s completely changed my life, not just my relationship with my body and with food, but also because now I have this platform where I’m able to help other people every day and I’ve written a book. It’s been the most incredible rebirth for me.³

The idea of the body positivity movement being a savior or rescue or even a “rebirth,” as Crabbe puts it, resonates with many people who frequent body positive spaces and participate in body positive communities, especially those that inhabit fat bodies or other bodies deemed unworthy by western beauty standards.

Though statements like “body positivity saved my life” certainly are not uncommon, perhaps even more prevalent are articles with titles and headlines such as “How Mainstream Body Positivity Has Failed Us,” “Why I’m Trading Body Positivity for Fat Acceptance,” and “How Whiteness Killed the Body Positive Movement.”⁴ These conflicting headlines reveal the highly contested nature of body positivity as a social movement in the current moment. They also expose competing values and worldviews that exist within the movement and gesture to the

shifting and evolving nature of approaches to body politics that aim to liberate fat and otherwise nonnormative bodies.

The body positivity movement is a potent cultural force working to deconstruct, challenge, and resist oppressive meanings around bodies. Following from a long line of activism and social justice endeavors to promote social acceptance of fat and otherwise non-normative bodies, body positivity is a movement and community, largely on social media, that promotes the message that all bodies are “good” bodies worthy of dignity, respect, and love. It operates in direct opposition to thin-centric discourse that links a person’s worth to their physical beauty as determined by conventional Eurocentric beauty standards.

In 1996, Connie Sobczak and Elizabeth Scott founded The Body Positive, an organization that provides and promotes body positive resources to various communities, “because of their shared passion to create a lively, healing community that offers freedom from suffocating societal messages that keep people in a perpetual struggle with their bodies.”⁵ However, the language of body positivity did not permeate popular culture until more recently. Now, it is common to see body positivity manifesting on social media, especially through Instagram campaigns such as #effyourbeautystandards, #healthateverysize, #losehateandweight, #pizzasisters4lyfe, and #honormycurves. In other words, if you use those phrases as terms in Instagram’s search function, you will see visual representations of body positivity in its current iteration, often in the form of individuals (mostly women and femmes) posting pictures of their fat or otherwise non-normative bodies, highlighting and celebrating the aspects of their bodies deemed least acceptable by society and thin-centric discourse.

In the current moment, two perspectives dominate the discourses around body positivity—one enthusiastically positive and the other definitively negative. The positive

perspective applauds the body positive movement for promoting self-love, positive body image, and advancing the message that “all bodies are good bodies.”⁶ This perspective holds body positivity in high esteem for its broad appeal—the idea that body positivity is for everyone and that everyone can (and should) benefit equally from the movement. The negative perspective condemns the movement for promoting an “unhealthy lifestyle” and “glorifying obesity.”⁷ Though these competing discourses seem contradictory or even completely opposite of one another, they share one key logic in common: within both discourses, fat bodies are not made visible as positive, legitimate forms of embodiment. Fat bodies are either erased or vilified. In the positive discourse, fat bodies are decentered as the political subjects of body positivity, replaced by “all bodies” (a category which—in its unmarkedness—inevitably means the most privileged and normative bodies).⁸ In the negative discourse, fat bodies are condemned as inherently wrong, abnormal, and problematic.

Though the two aforementioned discourses certainly reign dominant in the public sphere, they are not the only ones that exist. Indeed, such positive and negative representations function to obscure other body positive discourses, particularly those that honor the more radical roots of body positivity that lie in fat activism, fat positivity, and fat liberation politics. This dissertation is most interested in these more radical discourses and the enactments of worldmaking they make possible.

Though tracing out the dominant discourses of body positivity is a worthy endeavor and one that scholars from various fields have begun to undertake, I am more interested in the moments of fat-positive (queer) worldmaking that occur within the movement.⁹ These moments are significant to me because they make particular lives livable, ways of being intelligible, and intimacies possible; they render the fat body as a site of possibility, humanity, and liberation

rather than a marker of death, decay, and dehumanization. These possibilities for livability, intelligibility, and intimacy are not abstract consequences—they dramatically affect how people with certain (read: fat) bodies can be in the world, including my own. I am particularly interested in how body positivity shifts contextually from a set of depoliticized philosophies around self-love and positive body image to moments of worldmaking via radical body politics. My interest in this shift as a rhetorician has to do with my inkling that what separates the more depoliticized forms of body positivity from its more radical articulations is the use of particular rhetorical activist tactics and maneuvers that de/construct meanings around bodies in particular ways. In other words, mainstream body positivity that shies away from taking a political stance rhetorically obscures fat bodies and its roots in fat activism, whereas radical body positivity rhetorically makes fat bodies and its fat activists roots visible. Indeed, visibility, in all its complexities as a dynamic of embodied social movement rhetoric, is a key theme and concern that this project grapples with in depth in the coming chapters.

Though there are many strands and articulations of fat activism in the current moment, body positivity seems to be ignored as part of that lineage (likely because of the ways body positivity has been appropriated, commodified, and politically diluted within popular discourses). However, to ignore body positivity as an important development in fat activist history erases the work of the fat, queer, Black, Brown, and disabled women/femmes that labored to make the movement possible beginning in cultural arenas such as plus-size fashion.¹⁰ Furthermore, I refuse to surrender body positivity to those who would manipulate and appropriate it toward nefarious ends. Indeed, I believe in the social movement strategy of staking claim to and reclaiming a movement's moniker so as not to erase its history and to honor the sense of collective identity that has been built around a particular label.

The primary goal of this project is to examine how the body positive movement carves out possibilities for positive representation, humanization, and liberation for fat and otherwise non-normative bodies. Ultimately, in this dissertation, I argue that it is through particular kinds of rhetorical labor—namely decolonial, intersectional, and queer forms—that body positive rhetors make possible moments of fat-positive queer worldmaking. The following three overarching claims drive this project:

[1] Fat activism exists in dialectical tension with fatphobia— it emerges, shifts, and evolves in response to the contours of fatphobia at any given time.

[2] The problems and pitfalls of mainstream body positivity are, at their core, *rhetorical* problems (that produce tangible consequences) and therefore have fundamentally rhetorical solutions.

[3] Through decolonial, intersectional, and queer forms of rhetorical labor, body positive rhetors can both transcend the pitfalls of mainstream body positivity as well as carve out fat-positive queer worlds ungoverned by problematic assumptions about bodies that pervade both dominant discourse and mainstream body positive discourse.

Therefore, the analytical chapters of this project unpack the decolonial, intersectional, and queer forms of rhetorical labor advanced by particular body positive rhetors in order to understand what these rhetorical maneuvers are, how they function, how they make particular fat-positive worlds possible, and what those fat-positive worlds look like.

This dissertation makes several contributions to existing bodies of scholarship. Broadly, helps readers across the scholarly and activist spectrums understand fat activism in the current moment and the important cultural work body positivity—as an iteration of fat activism—is performing. More specifically, this project takes a rhetorical approach to body positivity and fat

activism and, therefore, unearths the rhetorical tactics that contribute to the movement's efficacy. This is an important expansion on the literature on body positivity which has primarily sought to understand what the body positive movement is (for example, via content analyses) rather than how it acts in the world rhetorically.¹¹ Furthermore, much of the extant literature on body positivity focuses on its shortcomings around issues of depoliticization, appropriation, and commodification.¹² This project, through its focus on worldmaking, extends the literature on body positivity by identifying and examining generative moments of political possibility, making clear that criticism does not always have to primarily involve negative critique.

Indeed, the role that criticism plays in this dissertation speaks to the project's larger significance. This project employs criticism and analysis toward liberatory aims. In other words, this project does not analyze the rhetorical maneuvers of body positivity solely for the sake of building knowledge; instead, its primary goal is to better understand the movement and moments of worldmaking within the movement in order to harness those worldmaking energies toward bolstering the political efficacy and critical sensibility of body positivity for scholars and activists alike. In this way, this dissertation performs its own worldmaking work, highlighting the important interplay between academic and activist spheres and the possibilities for transformative knowledge production at the intersection where these spheres collide.¹³

I proceed in this introduction by first historicizing fat activism and contextualizing body positivity as a part of a long lineage of fat activist endeavors. I then discuss the contours of fat activism as it exists in the contemporary moment, considering specifically queer forms of fat activism as well as fat activism within "the fatosphere" to best situate an understanding of body positivity's intervention into this (counter)cultural space. I then review "on the ground" critiques of mainstream body positivity advanced by body positive activists, influencers, and bloggers in

order to illustrate the pitfalls of mainstream versions of the movement that the more radical, transformative instantiations analyzed in later chapters must respond to and overcome. Finally, I conclude with a preview of the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

Historicizing Fat Activism: Some Starting Points, Moments, and Tensions

Body positivity is a specific, contemporary instantiation that is part of a long, complicated, tenuous lineage of fat activism—a radical form of body politics that seeks liberation from diet culture, thin-centricity, fatphobia, and other forms of anti-fatness that shape mainstream discourses and treatment of bodies. Tracing this lineage is not only important from a historical standpoint, though honoring this history and positioning the current project as part of a long line of activism and epistemic rebellion is certainly important; it is also useful for understanding the nuances of body positivity in the contemporary moment by identifying cultural tensions, beliefs, and values that body positivity positions itself to counter and reimagine.

Tracing a history of fat activism might be considered futile at best for several reasons. First, fat activism often takes on ambivalent, nebulous, and ambiguous forms that do not necessarily congeal in ways that are intelligible as activism, particularly according to western logics and politics of knowledge.¹⁴ Second, and related, scholars often privilege a particular lineage of fat activism that locates its origins with The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), which was founded in 1969. Though NAAFA did (and still is doing) important work, privileging this lineage ignores more radical forms of fat activism, both historically and contemporarily, while also obscuring problematic aspects of NAAFA's praxis, including its political conservatism, history of misogyny, and centering of men's sexuality.¹⁵ Third, not all scholars agree that fat activism can even be considered a movement in its own right (perhaps as a result of the other two aforementioned reasons). For example, Helene Shugart

rejects the label of “movement” as simply an action of the “mainstream” and argues that fat acceptance is “more accurately a ranging set of perspectives and philosophies around fat... rather than an organized collectivity.”¹⁶ Even though others vehemently claim fat activism as a social movement, this debate around categorization potentially obscures fat activism’s ability to ignite social change.¹⁷

Though fat activism may not have a clear, linear history to rehearse, in order to develop a sense of where it has been, where it is today, and where it might be going, I endeavor to trace out key moments and tensions within and throughout its journey. I concur with Charlotte Cooper that fat activism is, indeed, a radical social movement.¹⁸ And, just like any social movement, it emerges, evolves, and grows in response to particular historical, social, and political exigencies. I begin a discussion of fat activism’s troubled history by parsing out such exigencies that have required fat activism’s response.

There would be no fat activism if there was no fatphobia. Dominant cultural fatphobia can be most simplistically defined as the pathological fear and hatred of fatness and fat bodies enacted at the level of the social. More specifically, fatphobia encompasses all of the social and cultural practices that serve to cement thinness as both the norm and most desirable form of embodiment as well as those that stigmatize, dehumanize, and enact bias and violence against people that inhabit fat bodies. Though fatphobia takes on specific contours in specific historical moments, its existence as a social condition has persisted over time in western contexts, since at least the late 19th century.¹⁹ Alternatively conceived of through lenses such as “fat panic” and fat oppression, fatphobia constructs a marginalized existence for fat people, emplacing them in webs of power that rob them of agency and humanity; question their morality, intelligence, and autonomy; and deprioritize their health and well-being. Therefore, early efforts in fat activism

focused on recognizing, understanding, and theorizing fatphobia in its manifold forms and locations.

Two early, consequential moments that stand outside of the NAAFA-centric genealogy of fat activism are the inauguration of fat feminism and the formation of The Fat Underground. Though fat feminism is often obscured as a generative starting point in fat activism's lineage because of fragile historicizing (including poor preservation of knowledge and inaccessible/non-existent archives), political rifts among feminists/feminisms, and occupation of the movement by normatively sized feminists, it represented a fruitful area of activism and analysis in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁰ Cooper identifies fat feminism of the 70s and 80s as a space "where fat was understood explicitly and meaningfully...as a part of a matrix of power, gender and sexuality."²¹ She elaborates that

Fat feminism is grounded in anti-imperialism, its original proponents were part of the American civil rights movement and worked within a social model of mental health that sought to identify and challenge oppressive conditions within dominant culture...In this way, fat feminism and fat activism can be regarded as de-colonising strategies because they are concerned with contesting the powerful and harmful learned, imposed occupation of fat oppression and obesity discourse on people.²²

Indeed, fat feminist spaces were some of the first to embrace an activist energy rooted in challenging oppressive, anti-fat conditions and systems.

Fat feminism channeled in and through the Fat Underground represents another key early moment in fat activism's journey. In early 1970s Los Angeles, Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran laid the foundation for what was to become the alternative fat activist group, the Fat Underground (FU).²³ The FU emerged out of thinking from feminist radical therapy and was one of the first groups to theorize fat oppression, which included parsing out the nuances of fatphobia, attending to its everydayness, analyzing fat oppression based on gender and radical lesbian identity, and crafting "a collective that sought to question power."²⁴ Built around

consciousness-raising and spectacle, the FU engaged in disobedient, unapologetic, and anti-assimilationist forms of direct action and performance.²⁵ In 1972, Freepsirit and Aldebaran composed “The Fat Liberation Manifesto,” which included demands for equal rights as well as dignity and respect for fat people, criticisms of harmful diet industries, and a call to action that reads (in all capital letters): “FAT PEOPLE OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE.”²⁶ Their mission statement, which demonstrates intersectional thinking about fatness and gender within radical politics, reads as follows:

The Fat Underground confronts the double oppression of fat women in society through our nutritional, psychological, and politically radical analysis of our condition which dispute all present myths about fat. Through media appearances, consciousness-raising and informative written materials we provide a support group for fat women who are not dieting and we provide outreach to those who wish to politically align themselves with their fat sisters.²⁷

I privilege this particular lineage of fat activism for two reasons: (1) to illustrate that theorizing about fatphobia has been at the center of fat activism from the very beginning (a reality that is obscured by privileging rights-based discourses and organizations like NAAFA as fat activism’s root), and (2) to demonstrate that the political dilution and dulling of fat activism’s radical edge is not a new phenomenon. These two points are key for understanding fat activism’s politics, tensions, and consequentiality in the contemporary moment, especially as they come to bear within the context of body positivity.

Following these two key moments—which are often referred to as being part of the “first wave” of fat activism—was a “massive proliferation of ideas, events, groups and approaches” within and across fat activist communities.²⁸ The FU continued to engage in confrontational activism, write position papers on a variety of fat-related topics, hold radical therapy retreats for the development of positive fat identity, and establish coalitions with other social movement groups throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.²⁹ Fat activism also weaved in and out of other

activist as well as academic spheres during this time, illustrated by the publication of psychoanalyst Susie Orbach's 1978 book, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, and the proliferation of early scholarship critiquing and challenging normative approaches to "obesity."³⁰ In 1983, The New Haven Liberation Front—a reformed version of the FU after the death of core member Reanne Fagan—published their groundbreaking anthology, *Shadow on a Tightrope*, which is thought to be the first anthology to come out of the fat liberation movement.³¹ In the 1990s, fat women's groups and fat support groups as well as a variety of local grassroots campaigns related to topics such as fitness, fashion, and medical advocacy flourished in fat activist spaces.³² Though it is impossible to summarize all of the labor performed by fat activists between the "first wave" and the movement's more contemporary iterations, the various moments spotlighted above provide a glimpse at the movement's trajectory before the late 1990s and early 2000s when it became overwhelmingly colored by its relationship to "obesity epidemic" discourse, which I discuss next.

Fatphobia and Fat Activism Today

Tracing out the historical trajectory of fat activism as it emerged and moved through and into various cultural spaces frames an understanding of the specific shape the movement takes in the contemporary moment, which is a primary concern of this dissertation. A key contention of this project is that fat activism exists in dialectical tension with fatphobia in ways that take on specific contours in particular historical moments. In other words, fat activism emerges, shifts, and evolves in response to the contours of fatphobia at any given time. Fatphobia's contours in the 21st century can largely be characterized by the "obesity epidemic." Even though the "obesity epidemic" seems unique as it catapults fat bodies into the sphere of medicalization—to be perceived as disease, decay, morbidity, and mortality and to be regulated and disciplined by the

medico-diet-pharmaceutical complex—it is best conceptualized as a new instantiation of an old problem. The “obesity epidemic” is simply “a rhetorical device to leverage fat panic,” and is one of the most impactful manifestations of fatphobia in today’s world.³³

In 1996, former U.S. Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, began the “war on obesity” (or at least used that language for the first time). He is also one of the first to articulate “obesity” as an “epidemic,” claiming in a speech for ShapeUpAmerica! that “we have to do something, because if you look at the shape of Americans, it’s really almost grotesque...we’ve been suffering from a new epidemic, an epidemic of disease and disability and death.”³⁴ Eight years later, at the 2004 Summit on Obesity, Surgeon General Richard Carmona, infused the “obesity epidemic” and “war on obesity” with the threat of terrorism, proclaiming: “as we look to the future and where childhood obesity will be in 20 years . . . it is every bit as threatening to us as is the terrorist threat we face today. It is the threat from within.”³⁵ A 2003 article in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* advances a similar discourse, asserting that “the United States is fighting several wars at the same time. Not only are we fighting a war against terrorism around the world, but we are also fighting a war against obesity here at home.”³⁶ In the beginning years of the 21st century, not only does “obesity” become an appropriate enemy in a state- and medically-sanctioned war, it takes on the same perversity and pervasiveness as terrorism. Deb Burgard, Elana Dykewomon, Esther Rothblum, and Pattie Thomas elaborate on the rhetorical effects of positing “obesity” as an issue of war:

In every war there must be villains and victims. War is about defining who is ‘with us’ and who is ‘against us.’ Defining these villains and victims in cultural discourse relies heavily on social stigma. Just wars are fought within the context of making something right that had been made wrong. But usually wars are fought through propaganda that demonizes specific groups of people, defining them as victimizing other groups of people.³⁷

Indeed, even though scientists, researchers, and medical professionals might prefer us to think that it is a “war against obesity, not the obese,” the nature of anti-fat discrimination makes such a position untenable.³⁸ April Herndon points out that, since “obesity is virtually always typecast as a condition brought on oneself...[then] a war against obesity...cannot be a war against a faceless pathogen. Instead, obesity is a condition of human causation and therefore necessitates a war against the group of people participating in the volitional behaviors that cause it.”³⁹ It follows logically, then, that fat activism in the 21st century largely operates as a response to the damage of “obesity epidemic” discourse, which encompasses the inappropriate medicalization of fat bodies and the moralization of thinness.

Fat activism finds itself grappling with a variety of tensions in the contemporary moment—tensions that tend to dull its radical potential but, as I will argue, make logical sense when conceptualizing fat activism as a response to the contemporary contours of fatphobia manifested within “obesity epidemic” discourse. Indeed, as “obesity epidemic” discourse seeks to paint fat people as fundamentally unhealthy (and, in turn, morally inferior and unfit for citizenship), many fat activist efforts seek to demonstrate how fat people can be healthy/perform health and therefore achieve standards of morality and citizenship. However, most of these efforts fall into the category of “assimilationist” fat activism, which “works to secure tolerance for fat rights and experiences and tries to raise consciousness about fat oppression but still possibly conceives of fat as a problem.”⁴⁰

Liberationist fat activism, on the other hand, “celebrates fatness and tries to secure for the fat a positively valued experience of difference from the norm.”⁴¹ In other words, fat liberationist approaches view fatphobic thinking and ways of knowing/acting in the world as the problem and value fatness as difference, as a politicized identity that purposely antagonizes the

norm. Fat assimilationist approaches, even in their quest for equal rights and better treatment, still fall into the trap of articulating fat people's worth in the terms set forth by obesity discourse—terms that will never fully value and embrace fatness as a positive or even legitimate form of embodiment.

A stark example of assimilationist fat activism in action that has gained visibility, traction, and popularity in recent years is the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement. HAES takes shape in direct response to the medicalization and consequent discrimination promoted by “obesity epidemic” discourse by centering “health” in the quest for just treatment of fat people, including deconstructing biomedical myths that equate health with thinness.⁴² However, even though assimilationist versions of fat activism are perhaps the most visible in the contemporary moment, they are not the only ones that exist, nor even are they the most culturally powerful. Some of the most socially and politically transformative fat activist work occurs through practices of queering and within online spaces.

Before expanding on forms of fat activism that do the work of queering, it is important to recognize that fat activism often takes shape in ways that are not easily intelligible within western conceptions of “activism” or “politics.” When fat activism takes shape as political process activism (whereby “social change is engendered through collective influence using the tools and processes of state power, for example through rights and policy”⁴³) or community building (where activists work to understand the conditions of each other's lives, develop social capital, and “set agendas for change”⁴⁴), it tends to make sense *as activism*. When fat activism emerges as cultural work—making things, performing, drawing on both existing cultural forms and creating new ones to socially transform fat—it sometimes maintains its political intelligibility.⁴⁵ However, when fat activism takes the form of micro-level acts and ambiguous

activism, it does not always enjoy the same coherence. Micro fat activism, often enacted by individuals in everyday spaces and in small, understated moments does not check the box of collective action that animates most normative conceptions of activism. However, it is still vitally important because it opens up possibilities for fat people who have faced issues of inaccessibility and exclusivity in other activist spaces and it is markedly more challenging to surveil, control, or police because of its modest scale and subtle enactment at the level of the individual.⁴⁶ Ambiguous fat activism, which includes challenges to thin-centricity that do not have straightforward context, execution, or effects and are generally difficult to identify or name are also important to recognize because they disrupt (read: queer) the assumption of fixed meanings and boundaries associated with activism. This is to say that, in the next section, as I discuss various forms of queer(ed) fat activism, some examples may not look, sound, or feel like activism—this is purposeful and necessary.

Queering Fat Activism

For as long as fat activism has existed, so too have queer approaches to this radical social movement, highlighting an important interplay between queerness and fatness that informs the foundational assumptions of this dissertation. Though some scholars may argue that queerness refers to that which disrupts the heteronormative status quo, and therefore necessarily centers questions of sex, gender, and sexuality, I adopt an expanded definition of queer that understands queer as “either (or both) a description and an action; an orientation and a practice; a mode of political and critical inquiry which seeks to expose taken-for granted assumptions, trouble neat categories, and unfix the supposedly fixed alignment of bodies, gender, desire and identities.”⁴⁷ Thus, forms and practices of fat activism that might be thought of as “queer” or doing the work of “queering” are those that both interrogate and trouble fatness’s position in the assumedly

linear relationship of bodies, gender, desire, and identities. These forms of activism tend to fall into three broad categories (with plenty of overlap between categories): fat coming out, fat disidentification, and fat/queer worldmaking. This notion of queer(ed) fat activism, including the specific forms reviewed here, serve as important touchpoints for later chapters in this dissertation.

Many forms of fat activism that do the work of queering start (or end, or evolve) with a moment of fat coming out. Cultural fatphobia necessitates fat people to pass as on-the-way-to-thin if they are to be afforded dignity, respect, and humanization.⁴⁸ Therefore, to claim a position of purposeful, lasting, perpetual fatness is a political act and such an act can be considered one of “coming out” as fat. When fat people come out, they articulate their existence as resistant to compulsory thinness. This process “allows the fat individual to embrace the identification of their physical fatness, while throwing off the stigma attached by dominant culture.”⁴⁹ Coming out as fat is similar to coming out as queer in that it does not necessarily entail claiming a static, essential identity but, rather, stakes claim in an identity position rooted in rebuking the status quo that marginalizes non-normative bodies. In this way, coming out as fat is fundamentally performative—it is a constant *doing* of fatness in direct opposition to thin-centric discourses that demand bodies behave otherwise.

A second general category of queer(ing) fat activism includes acts of disidentification. José Esteban Muñoz describes disidentification as a strategy of survival and/or resistance practiced by minoritarian subjects (particularly queer people of color) that neither forces the subject to fully assimilate within an oppressive structure nor fully oppose it and, instead, “works on and against dominant ideology.”⁵⁰ Disidentification allows marginalized subjects to recycle and rethink encoded meaning, while working “to transform a cultural logic from within, always

laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”⁵¹ Fat activist acts of disidentification involve taking some of the encoded negative meanings of fatness—immorality, inferiority, excess, grotesque—and recircuiting those meanings in ways that imagine new possibilities for embodiment. An early example of this kind of work that emerged alongside the surfacing of “obesity epidemic” discourse in the early 2000s can be found in the queer, fat girl gang The Chubsters, founded by Charlotte Cooper. The Chubsters engaged all kinds of disidentificatory practices that both embraced and reworked understandings of the fat body as grotesque, including belly smashing and shooting spud guns (toy guns that shoot pellets of potato, nodding to the “carbohydrate ruination of dieters”).⁵²

Finally, queer forms of fat activism often engender a worldmaking sensibility; they work toward crafting and cultivating “a public world of belonging and transformation.”⁵³ Queer worldmaking is often nebulous, hard to pinpoint, yet wildly consequential to activist endeavors; it “takes place in all kinds of places, at all different times, involving all kinds of people, who work toward creating a different world. It is not a strategic plan, organized by anyone, but a bottom-up engagement with the everyday.”⁵⁴ Much of fat activism’s efforts, including those that fall into the two aforementioned categories of coming out and disidentification, work to create queer/fat worlds in which fatness is no longer governed by oppressive discourses of obesity and, instead, can be embraced, reveled in, loved, desired, and embodied in ways that envision an “enhanced field of possibilities for bodily life.”⁵⁵

Examples of queer/fat worldmaking abound in online spaces, where notions of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility are malleable through community and relationality. For example, the “narrative of fat-as-transition...constructs our ability to ‘see’ the fat body” in normative

public spaces and situations in ways that have “the expected effect of hypervisibility (‘obesity epidemic’ rhetoric) and invisibility (the erasure engendered by the belief in the desirability of the eventual transformation into the nonfat body),” while “additionally render[ing] some fat subjects illegible to themselves.”⁵⁶ However, through visual representations within digital spaces (for example, photoblogs), fat subjects can renegotiate feelings of shame and experiences of abjection through the relationality of being together and being with one another’s shame. It is in this relationality that shame gains transformative worldmaking potential—“an act of becoming in relation to others through the repetition of images made possible by digital communities” that remains critically queer in its embracing of ambivalence and avoidance of claiming an essential fat identity.⁵⁷ Indeed, online spaces where fat activists both contest oppressive discourses and representations of fatness as well as transform fat politically and socially through acts of worldmaking—often referred to as “the fatosphere”—are key sites for investigating the radical, liberationist, and transformative potential of fat activism. These online spaces also mark the birthplace of the body positivity movement.

The Fatosphere

From Kathleen Lebesco’s early work on representations and negotiations of fatness in text-only online spaces to more recent scholarship on cyberspace as a site for queering fat and taking up intersectional approaches to fat acceptance, the fatosphere has long been a site of subversion, transformation, and possibility for fat activists.⁵⁸ The internet is rife with possibility for a variety of reasons. Primarily, it allows minority groups to counter normative and oppressive representations of their identities and bodies and push back against such marginalizing discourses.⁵⁹ For fat activists, specifically, the internet has provided a space for the creation and proliferation of the fatosphere, which serves as a hub of oppositional fat politics, creating

visibility and exposure for fat activism, while providing diverse representations of fat lives/identities/embodiment that counter the representational singularity of mainstream media.⁶⁰ “This recent turn toward the digital,” demonstrated in and through the fatosphere, “has led to a proliferation of online communities concerned with creating both counter-narratives and counter-images in response to the fat body’s position as the abject, excluded Other of the socially acceptable body.”⁶¹ The fatosphere—or, perhaps more accurately, fat activism within the fatosphere—pushes fatness to be something different. It sustains a digital space to “challenge the idea of what fat is, defy the normative roles of, and behaviours related to, body size, and subvert the paradigms surrounding fat and slim bodies.”⁶² The fatosphere, then, functions as a “useful tool in fat politics,” with the level of its usefulness being highly contextual and up for debate and investigation.⁶³

The fatosphere is a particularly important space to attend to as part of this project because it is the space in which body positivity emerged and where most body positive activism and advocacy unfolds in the contemporary moment. The case studies analyzed throughout this dissertation all involve forms of body positive activism that began, and to some degree continue to occur, within the online space of the fatosphere. “The *Fatosphere* acts as a hub for body positivity” and, therefore, in the next section, I discuss the ways that fat activists have harnessed the possibilities for worldmaking and liberation made possible in and through the fatosphere as well as trace out body positivity’s emergence into this online fat activist space.⁶⁴

In addition to sustaining a space for counterdiscourses and counterrepresentations of fatness, the fatosphere makes possible and nurtures specific forms of fat activist possibility. It offers opportunities for visibility through which activists, specifically, and fat folks, in general, can publicly embody fatness and craft rhetorical bridges between fat activism and other social

justice endeavors.⁶⁵ Through emphasizing the visual in digital spaces, the fatosphere opens up possibilities for the resignification of shame and renegotiation of relationality among fat activists, allowing for “an insistent testament to the liveness of fat embodiment in the present.”⁶⁶ It also makes possible fat futures, or a sense of fat futurity, particularly when fat users embrace affordances such as fat avatars—visual, digital representations of fat identity—because, when one “digitiz[es] oneself to claim fatness,” they “manipulate[e] the perceived screen divide between the user and their cyber-self to actualize fatness as part of their embodied identity.”⁶⁷ By enfleshing themselves in the digital, fat users can both claim a fat identity and fat embodiment, yet remain unconstrained by both the limits of the physical body and fatphobic discourses that preclude such self-actualization. Finally, the fatosphere has recently evolved as a space to engage in intersectional analysis and critique around fatness. For example, the Fat People of Color Tumblr page serves as a powerful example of a space within the fatosphere where fat women of color, in particular, can engage in acts of everyday resistance that include participating in explicit discourse on exclusion and privilege related to size and race, intersectional examinations of fat politics, and active resistance to the fetishization of fat bodies of color.⁶⁸

The fatosphere is ever shifting and evolving in response to the immediate exigencies driving fat activism at any given time and it is a key site for investigating what it means to be a fat activist or perform fat activism in the contemporary moment. A major development in—and perhaps the most recognizable and widely known iteration in the current moment of—the fatosphere is body positivity, also known as the body positive movement. Though many fat studies scholars warn against conflating body positivity with fat activism, fat acceptance, or fat positivity, I contend that it is important to understand body positivity as an iteration of fat

activism in the contemporary moment that, even with all its flaws, holds promise for radical liberatory fat politics.

Those scholars that resist emphasizing the overlap between body positivity and fat activism do so for compelling reasons. Many forms of body positivity, particularly the more mainstream versions, have taken tenets of fat activism and appropriated and commodified them into a set of depoliticized philosophies around individual self-love and self-acceptance.⁶⁹ However, “diverse feminist politics coexist in the Body Positivity movement.”⁷⁰ Critiques against the mainstream version—though they certainly illuminate “the extent to which movement discourse intersects with neoliberalist ideology, consumer cultures, and corporate interests”⁷¹—often do not account for other factions of body positivity that privilege fat positivity (including “a focus on the systemic discrimination that fat [people] experience”) and/or radical body positivity that focuses on “intersectionally marginalized subjects [and] wields the unique potential to illuminate the systemic forces that privilege a select few, address the root causes of oppression, and ultimately liberate all bodies.”⁷² This project is less interested in the mainstream forms of body positivity that appropriate and individualize and, instead, sets its sights on the overlap between fat-positive and radical forms of body positivity, which can be more clearly distinguished as part of the tenuous lineage of fat activism traced out above.

In order to understand *radical, fat-positive* forms of body positivity as they unfold in online spaces, one must first establish a sense of how and why *mainstream* body positivity fails to live up to its liberatory potential. Though online spaces such as the fatsphere can certainly open up possibilities for transformative and liberatory activism and worldmaking, they also always risk reproducing the same dominant, oppressive discourses and ideologies they seek to challenge in the first place and are plagued by issues of control and surveillance unique to online

platforms. Indeed, online spaces are uniquely subjected to a “digital form of disciplinary panopticism” that not only allows the monitoring, disciplining gaze more access to all of our online interactions, but also positions users as constant surveillers of one another.⁷³ In addition to this increased surveillance, users within online spaces are also dissolved into chunks of quantified, analyzable data through datification—a process that can also lead to social sorting and, therefore, discrimination.⁷⁴ Body positivity, as a primarily digital social movement, is certainly not immune to the control, surveillance, and discrimination that afflicts online forms of social and political engagement, all of which prove detrimental to efforts toward worldmaking and liberation. Moreover, beyond the constraints and challenges posed by the online nature of body positive activism, there are shortcomings unique to the movement that have dulled its radical potential and sparked commentary from academics and activists alike. In the next section, I privilege the voices and perspective of “on the ground” body positive activists and influencers to parse out exactly how the movement in its current mainstream iteration is failing to live up to its radical promises.

“On the Ground” Critiques of Mainstream Body Positivity

The scholarship on body positivity, much like the popular discourse on the movement, offers an assortment of perspectives. Some scholars view the movement as overly-commodified, rooted in logics of capitalism, and too often falling prey to logics of normativity and body compliance.⁷⁵ Other scholars understand body positivity as offering great potential for visibility politics, contestation of fatphobic discourse, and intersectional critique.⁷⁶ Much like any social movement, those who do the “on the ground” work of body positive advocacy (i.e. body positive activists, influencers, and bloggers) are perhaps best positioned to provide the most pointed and pertinent critiques of the movement because of their proximity to the issues they critique and

their lived experience of the effects of body positivity's shortcomings. Thus, to understand the movement in its current moment, particularly its inadequacies, I reconstruct various on the ground critiques of its mainstream iterations and uplift the voices of those doing the crucial activist work of "critique toward liberatory aims."⁷⁷

Much of the criticism around mainstream iterations of body positivity coalesces around the idea that the movement is politically diluted and confused, if not entirely apolitical. This criticism is animated by three distinct concerns, which I elaborate on in depth in the proceeding sections, namely that the movement: (1) reproduces Eurocentric standards of beauty and other colonial logics, (2) lacks a focus on intersecting oppressions as they relate to non-normative bodies, and (3) has an essentialized subject. As I elaborate on each of these areas of critique, I both illustrate how mainstream body positivity has come to be appropriated by thin-passing, white, and otherwise normative (cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.) women as well as demonstrate the exigence for uplifting enactments of body positive activism take explicitly decolonial, intersectional, and queer approaches—like those analyzed in the following chapters of this dissertation.

Reproducing Eurocentric Standards of Beauty & Other Colonial Logics

Many body positive activists, influencers, and bloggers point out that mainstream body positivity, even as it claims to destabilize normative visions of beauty, serves to privilege traditional, Eurocentric features. For an embodiment of this shortcoming, look no further than one of the many faces—and loudest voices—of the movement, plus-size model, Tess Holliday.⁷⁸ Though Holliday made waves as the first model of her size (read: fat) to be signed with a major modeling agency, this accomplishment becomes less impressive when acknowledging just how much she embodies traditional, Eurocentric beauty standards outside of her fatness. Her large

round eyes, petite nose, straight glossy hair, and pale skin ensure that she does not deviate too far from beauty norms and allows her fatness to become more palatable to popular audiences. Beyond Holliday, body positive bloggers have also critiqued the Eurocentricity of body positive advertisements, noting that even body positive models of color sport distinctly Eurocentric features.⁷⁹ Popular body positive influencer and writer, Marie Southard Ospina, pushes us to remember that “accurate representation doesn't just mean a larger version of the same airbrushed hourglass Eurocentric 'ideal.’”⁸⁰

Body positive bloggers also highlight the role of colonialism, specifically as it relates to and informs fatphobia, racism, and beauty standards. Hess Love, writer for the online intersectional magazine *Wear Your Voice*, asserts that “marginalizing and dehumanizing largeness is unequivocally connected with Blackness, as often times indigenous Africans, whether on the continent or internationally trafficked to be enslaved, are seen as larger, more brutish, more primitive, more able to carry profitable workloads within the intimate and overarching manifestations of capitalism.”⁸¹ Kelsey Miller, founder of the Anti-Diet project, adds to this colonial history, noting that “fatphobia is the very child of misogyny and racism. It was a concept conceived by colonists and codified by Enlightenment-era race scientists, who did not discover but *create* the idea that Africans (African women, specifically) were gluttonous, lazy, ignorant, and unable to control their ‘animal appetites.’”⁸² Love goes on to explain that all knowledge regarding bodies in the West is white-centered, shaped by years of colonialism and imperialism, and that such limited knowledge extends to the body positive movement, which explains why fat, white women often get a seat at the table and Black, Brown, and Indigenous women are left invisible.

Critiques regarding the colonial logics of fatphobia and the lack of divestment from Eurocentricity within body positivity culminate into the assertion that “colonized bodies”—including “racialized, criminalized[,] queer bodies[,] trans and gender nonconforming bodies[,] fat bodies[, and] disabled bodies”—“should be at the center of Body Positivity.”⁸³ Sherronda J. Brown, writer for *Wear Your Voice* and the *Black Youth Project*, elaborates on this imperative:

Body positivity [is] a movement which should begin with decolonizing dominant ideas of what a body is—its purpose, how it should look, how it should operate. This is imperative because these ideas are also what society draws on in order to dehumanize us. Any movement involving body politics that is not loudly and confidently affirming the people who exist in these marginalized bodies while also challenging the ideologies which directly impact them will only serve to reify the white ascendant ideals that make this work necessary to begin with. **Body Positivity is simply not doing enough if it does not acknowledge and actively contend with the dehumanizing body terrorism we experience, which is rooted in white supremacy and a police state that demands obedience, adherence, and alignment without dissent** [emphasis in original].⁸⁴

For Brown and others, decolonizing body positivity means acknowledging fatphobia’s roots within systems such as white supremacy and the police state as well as foregrounding those whose oppression has been shaped by histories of imperial violence. A decolonial approach to body positivity involves refusing to play by the rules set forth by white supremacy and colonialism and, instead, imagining new possibilities for bodies rooted in a sense of shared humanity—an approach that has yet to permeate mainstream instantiations of the movement.

Lack of Intersectionality

Many body positive influencers echo a version of the sentiment that “the intersection of marginalized identities is often missed from the conversation around body positivity.”⁸⁵ Donyae Coles, writer for *Wear Your Voice* and *Afropunk*, argues that the “body positivity movement speaks about intersectionality but it does not often show intersectionality,” going on to elaborate that body positivity has been co-opted to become more palatable to white, cisgender folks and

ultimately arguing that white, able-bodied, cis women should not be at the forefront of the movement.⁸⁶

Indeed, though many body positive activists understand intersectionality to exist at the core of body positivity's political viability, the ways in which different corporeal experiences of oppression overlap and interact with one another are largely ignored within the mainstream movement. Two critical problems that emerge as a result of mainstream body positivity ignoring the intersectional nature of embodied oppression is that (1) the movement centers more privileged bodies, rather than those that are multiply marginalized, and (2) body positivity has prioritized self-love and body image for those more privileged bodies and, in doing so, obscures the material effects of systemic oppression on multiply oppressed bodies. To the first point, Stephanie Yeboah, "multi-award-winning plus-size style blogger, Author, freelance journalist, public speaker & fat acceptance advocate"⁸⁷ underscores that

arguably, much like the feminist movement, we are now at a point where body positivity has become non-intersectional and tends to constantly prioritise the thoughts, feelings, opinions, and achievements of white womxn, with a small number of "token" non-white womxn being sprinkled throughout campaigns like parsley, in their "look at us being diverse!" quota.⁸⁸

This centering of white and otherwise privileged bodies within body positivity ensures that mainstream iterations of the movement mirror oppressive structures in society rather than dismantle them.

To the second point, mainstream body positivity also "whitewashes" multiply marginalized folks by "reducing problems of social exclusion to issues of *self esteem* and *body image*."⁸⁹ This promotion of positivity in its most literal—and subsequently, most empty—form functions as "a Band-Aid, especially for anybody who doesn't fit a white supremacist idea of beauty," according to activist Ericka Hart in her article in *Out* magazine.⁹⁰ Hart elaborates that

this Band-Aid approach “erases the experiences of historically oppressed people” and “when that mentality co-opts the movement, we leave behind Black and brown fat femmes, people with disabilities, queer people, or those who exist in all of those identities — these are body-positive issues.”⁹¹

Centralizing intersectionality has certainly emerged as a focal point for many body positive activists on the margins. For example, *Wear Your Voice* magazine launched their #BodyPositivityInColor campaign in 2019 in order to “center queer, trans/GNC, fat, and disabled BIPOC” with the intent to “interrogate how fat antagonism, queerphobia, transphobia, ableism and more connect and how they impact our daily experiences.”⁹² Moreover, Sonya Renee Taylor, founder of *The Body is Not an Apology*, explains how radical self-love and a commitment to intersectional social justice can (and must) work in tandem within body positive politics:

There’s space for that—I want you to feel great about your size 16. And I also need body positivity to mean that black people are not afraid of being indiscriminately killed during routine traffic stops, because I need to be able to feel positive that my *black* body is safe in the world. I need trans folk to be able to use the bathroom that identifies with the gender they identify with, because that is part of being positive in *their* bodies. I need mental illness to be destigmatized because *that’s* part of being positive in one’s body.⁹³

Attending to intersectionality within body positivity requires a commitment to dismantling the various and overlapping “systems of oppression that come against bodies.”⁹⁴ However, the current, mainstream version of body positivity does not seem to demonstrate such a commitment, instead focusing on individualized notions of self-love, self-esteem, and body image, prioritizing those that are least structurally oppressed, and effectively dulling body positivity’s political potential.

Essentialized Subject

Many plus-size bloggers, fat activists, and intersectional feminists that identify as part of the body positive community find that, beyond privileging Eurocentricity and lacking

intersectionality, another reason the movement fails to live up to its liberatory potential is that - revolves around an essentialized subject: specifically that of a white, slightly-larger-than-average cisgender woman who is assumed both heterosexual and able-bodied. In an interview with the *Revelist*, popular plus-size fashion blogger Stephanie Yeboah criticizes the body positivity movement remarking that, “for a movement that claims to be diverse, it seems to focus more on the exposure of conventionally attractive 'small-fat/chubby' white women.”⁹⁵ This critique reverberates among many other members of the body positive community, particularly fat women and women of color.

For example, a 2016 *USA Today* article quotes feminist, fat activist, and author of the book *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*, Lindy West lamenting

putting a size 12, hourglass-shaped white woman on the cover of your magazine, who’s just microscopically bigger than the model that you would normally see on the cover, and then congratulating yourselves on being progressive? That proves nothing...That’s just a performance without actually risking or changing anything. And it gives people who aren’t actually invested in liberating bodies the opportunity to declare victory and then quit. I don’t find that particularly empowering or interesting.⁹⁶

It is clear from the aforementioned critiques that the essentialized subject of body positivity is white and hardly plus-size. Lindy West notes how this essentialized subject is also presumed heterosexual and able-bodied based on her statement about who is not included in/liberated by the body positive movement in its current iteration: “people who are a size 32 and queer and disabled and are outside of what we think of as a ‘normal person,’ people with compounded oppressions, those are the people who need visibility and positivity.”⁹⁷

Because mainstream body positivity had begun to center an essentialized subject, it became a lot easier to commodify the movement, containing it into a neat little package that only certain people—especially celebrities and popular culture figures—could embody. Popular anonymous blogger, writer, and columnist, Your Fat Friend, points out that “body positivity

ha[s] been defined by omission...bodies like Taryn Brumfitt's, Amy Schumer's, Jennifer Lawrence's came to clarify the scope of this newly popularized movement."⁹⁸ "*Body positivity* ha[d] made its constituency clear," Your Fat Friend bemoans, "it has widened the loving embrace of beauty standards ever so slightly."⁹⁹

Crafting an essentialized subject that does not even come close to representing the most marginalized folks within body positivity not only amplifies concerns about intersectionality, but also limits the movement's political potency, falling into many of the traditional trappings of identity politics. This essentialized subject softens body positivity's potential radical edge, prioritizing those already most privileged within the movement, and reproducing the same attitude of disposability toward fat, queer, disabled, women of color enacted in the dominant culture.

The subject centered within body positivity dulls the possibilities of queer politics not only in its essentialism, but also in its reliance on heteronormative logics and its active exclusion of queer bodies. Your Fat Friend notes that those celebrities who had come to personify mainstream body positivity "were perfectly feminine, excruciatingly heterosexual."¹⁰⁰ Queer bloggers advance similar concerns, critiquing both the cis-centricity (and subsequent trans-exclusionary attitude) of mainstream body positivity, which emerges from both its focus on nonnegotiable body acceptance (something that is unavailable to many trans folks for systemic reasons) and privileging of cis-female bodies.¹⁰¹ Indeed, there are several key shifts the body positive movement must make in order to "avoid centralising a specific body," which undermines the "whole concept of celebrating all bodies in their uniqueness."¹⁰²

Sherronda Brown, in her *Wear Your Voice* piece on #BodyPositivityInColor, argues that body positivity "should allow and encourage the acceptance, appreciation, and celebration of all

the different ways our bodies can take form, with an emphasis on making space for the most marginalized people.”¹⁰³ Many activists and influencers that maintain some faith in the movement concur that centering the most marginalized—often those who are multiply oppressed—is the most useful shift away from essentializing identity politics.¹⁰⁴ Queering body positivity, therefore, entails embracing a politics of difference that resists centering an essentialized subject and, instead, prioritizes bodies that are most intersectionally marginalized. It means refusing to package bodies into neat, commodifiable boxes and it entails challenging, rather than reproducing, heteronormative assumptions about identity, embodiment, gender, and sexuality.

The critiques reviewed above reveal the various ways in which mainstream versions of the body positive movement fail to live up to its radical potential and come through on its core promise to increase representation for, recognize the humanity of, and labor toward the liberation of fat, non-normative, and multiply marginalized bodies. And, yet, these dominant approaches to body positive activism are not the only ones that exist—though their position as dominant discourses certainly helps obscure the existence of other, more radical approaches. Indeed, this dissertation is most interested in enactments of body positivity that both transcend the pitfalls of mainstream body positivity as well as carve out fat-positive queer worlds ungoverned by problematic assumptions about bodies that pervade both dominant discourse and mainstream body positive discourse. The proceeding analytical chapters analyze such enactments, focusing on the fat-positive queer worlds made possible by them as well as the specific forms of rhetorical labor that manifest such worldmaking possibilities.

Preview of Chapters

This dissertation consists of five chapters, each of which frames, engages, or reflects on a variety of practices of fat-positive worldmaking within body positivity, including the specific forms of rhetorical labor that work toward constructing such queer worlds. Following this introductory chapter is a literature review that positions this project as joining and contributing to broader scholarly conversations around embodied social movement rhetoric as well as disciplinary perspectives on queer worldmaking. This literature review chapter also includes an explication of the queer critical orientation this project takes to analyzing body positive rhetorics, including a discussion of how autoethnographic performance and a critical cultural sensibility attuned to media affordances augments the queer critical approach. The remaining chapters, then, consist of three distinct case studies and a concluding chapter that puts the case studies in conversation with one another, reflecting on what they can teach us about fat-positive worldmaking within body positivity both in the current moment as well as the future.

The first analytical chapters (chapters three and four) examine case studies of fat-positive worldmaking within the body positive movement. The first analytical chapter, “When ‘Body Positivity’ Becomes ‘Body Justice,’” focuses on two body positive social media influencers, @Sassy_latte and Melissa Gibson, including an analysis of both their social media posts as well as their radio show “Body Justice.” This chapter is interested in how these influencers have used the platform of body positivity to develop radical, fat activist body politics around the notion of “body justice.” To understand this development, I analyze both the forms of rhetorical labor employed by the influencers as well as the affordances made possible by digital media (specifically Instagram and the online radio show format) for crafting their messages. Ultimately, I argue that, through rhetorical performances and tactics that reject the logics of coloniality,

make visible overlapping oppressions, and resist stable notions of identity, @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s shift toward “body justice” enacts a form of politics from the margins that makes good on the failed promises of mainstream body positivity. I believe it is important to look at body positivity as it unfolds on social media and engaged in by “ordinary” users who go on to develop the status of “influencer” because that is representative of how the movement functions—both how it began as well as how it shifts and changes. Even though these particular influencers might not be the most well-known or most wide-reaching, the forms of rhetorical labor they engage have important consequences for both the shifting nature of body positivity as well as the worldmaking possibilities of the movement, particularly in their move toward “body justice.”

The second analytical chapter, “Lizzo’s Mainstream Body Positivity,” focuses on hip-hop artist Lizzo and her role in the changing nature of body positivity in the current moment. One of the most compelling and valid critiques of body positivity as it has been appropriated and separated from its fat activist lineage is that the movement now centers white, thin-passing (and otherwise privileged) bodies while ignoring issues of systemic and intersecting power/privilege/oppression and, therefore, has lost its radical potential. However, as Lizzo has been catapulted into the spotlight as the “queen of body positivity,” her fat, Black body is recentered in popular discourses about the movement. This chapter is interested in Lizzo as a key figure of mainstream representation within body positivity and explores how and through what forms of rhetorical labor Lizzo’s celebrity persona, particularly as enacted on social media as well as through lyrics and music videos, engages in fat-positive worldmaking that recenters fat, Black bodies. This chapter advances the argument that, through rhetorical performances of intersectional visibility and decolonial love, Lizzo recenters the body positive movement back

onto multiply marginalized bodies like hers and imagines a fat positive queer world ungoverned by the white heteropatriarchal gaze and unmarred by the wounds of coloniality.

Both of these analytical chapters utilize queer rhetorical criticism augmented by a critical/cultural sensibility attuned to media affordances to understand the fat-positive queer worldmaking work enacted by both @Sassy_latte and Melissa Gibson as well as Lizzo as made possible through specific forms of rhetorical labor. Rhetorical criticism, in general, serves as a tool for yielding insight about how body positivity moves audiences to see, act, and be in the world in ways that humanize and celebrate fat bodies. It also allows me to live up to my ethical responsibility to social justice by uplifting and amplifying voices in the body positive movement that remake the world in more just ways that celebrate bodies in all their messiness and diversity.

Queer rhetorical criticism, more specifically, allows me to harness the energies of the queer critic to both: (1) disrupt binaries and traditional categories, and (2) build alternative queer worlds. Though queer rhetorical criticism is more commonly used as a methodological orientation to disrupt specifically heteronormative binaries and categories and build alternative queer worlds for those who inhabit queer-identified bodies, this project wields the tools of the queer critic to analyze worldmaking enacted by and in service of livable worlds for bodies not traditionally thought of as queer—namely fat bodies—the implications of which are discussed in the concluding chapter. Augmenting this queer critical approach with a critical/cultural sensibility attuned to media affordances allows me to recognize the role that media technologies and popular culture play in the messages constructed by body positive rhetors, which is crucial for analyzing a social movement that unfolds primarily in the digital spaces of social media. This involves an attention to both the performances, enactments, and engagements that particular

platforms make possible as well as the impact of such affordances on the worldmaking pursuits of the body positive rhetors highlighted in this dissertation.

In these first two analytical chapters, I intentionally uplift the voices of body positive rhetors of color—specifically @Sassy_latte and Lizzo—whose experiences of racial oppression and anti-Blackness as they intersect with fat oppression (among others) position them as crucial contributors to understanding the worldmaking potentialities of body positivity in the current moment. However, it is important to consider the ethical complexities of me, a white academic, using the labor of Black women and femmes to advance my arguments and build my scholarship. First, I cannot deny that I am, indeed, utilizing the work of these Black rhetors to advance arguments about the body positive movement and am, therefore, benefitting from their labor without sharing in the full scope of their lived experience of oppression.

I do, however, share at least one dynamic of embodied of oppression with these rhetors—fatness. It is this shared experience of fat oppression (and our shared commitment to the liberation of those who inhabit fat bodies) that I believe provides a vantage point from which I can analyze the work of @Sassy_latte and Lizzo without participating in a wholly unethical and appropriative relationship with their labor. I also leverage my white privilege, particularly the agency to be heard and for my voice and arguments to be respected by (especially white) others, to uplift the voices of Black rhetors such as @Sassy_latte and Lizzo in this project. I take this dissertation as an opportunity to serve as a voice amplifier, while also maintaining a keen awareness of when it is more appropriate to pass the microphone.

The following chapter, “Enfleshing the Rhetorical through the Autoethnographic,” takes on the character of a critical autoethnographic performance. In this chapter, I center my own body, my own journey with body positivity and fat activism as well as grapple with the

relationship between my role as a critic and my role as part of the rhetoric I analyze. I believe this is an important addition to the more traditional case study chapters because I am not coming to this project from solely the position of the critic. I also position myself as an activist and as part of the body positive community and I believe my embodied position and participation in the movement has the potential to yield knowledge about body positivity that could not be gleaned by traditional means (i.e. criticism on its own). Indeed, the core contribution I offer through this chapter is an autoethnographic interrogation of the dialectical relationship between my lived experiences of fatphobia and my subsequent rhetorical enactments of body positivity in ways that open up possibilities for fat-positive futurity and worldmaking. I engage in the *doing* of body positive rhetoric (rather than just analyzing it) with the aim of using my embodied participation to more robustly understand both the movement itself and embodied social movements more broadly as well as to harness the activist and worldmaking energies of this project toward social change. By approaching this chapter through the lens of autoethnographic performance, I transcend the limitations of traditional rhetorical scholarship, adding depth to more distanced textual observations and evaluations by rooting my critical analyses in the body (my body) in ways that are both enflashed and vulnerable.

Each case study offers something unique to understanding the rhetoric of body positivity and its worldmaking potential while also building on the other case studies to answer a set of larger rhetorical questions. Focusing on social media influencers like @sassy_latte and Melissa Gibson allows us to see how body positivity functions and circulates as an everyday, resistant, and vernacular discourse online while honoring the movement's roots in social media spaces. Centering Lizzo as a mainstream example provides insight into how the movement's shifting political commitments are changing the cultural milieu on a larger scale. In doing so, this chapter

speaks to the ways in which everyday, resistant, and vernacular discourses make their way into more popular conversations and what that discursive movement makes possible in terms of worldmaking. Finally, the autoethnographic chapter attends to the more affective and immaterial aspects of body positive rhetoric and allows for discussion of what it means to be invited into, inhabit, and embody the fat-positive queer worlds made possible by body positivity.

Finally, in chapter 6, “Fat-Positive Worldmaking in Pandemic Times,” I conclude this project by reflecting on the possibilities for fat-positive worldmaking within the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Here, my rhetorical critic voice and autoethnographic voice collide to offer some final thoughts on queer worldmaking and futurity for fat bodies in a heightened moment of medicalized fatphobia.

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EMBODIED SOCIAL MOVEMENT RHETORIC & QUEER WORLDMAKING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous chapter, I sketched out the context necessary to understand body positivity as part of a long and complex lineage of fat activist endeavors. More broadly, fat activism and body positivity are both examples of embodied social movement rhetoric or, in other words, they are social movements that deploy the physical, visceral human body as a central rhetorical resource for meaning-making, argumentation, and efforts toward social change. In the case of body positivity, these efforts toward social change occur in the form of radical body politics that carve out spaces of possibility for worldmaking, specifically practices of fat-positive queer worldmaking that envision a world where fat bodies are not only made livable, but also appreciated, celebrated, and liberated.

In this chapter, I first position this dissertation as joining scholarly conversations around embodied social movement rhetoric, identifying key themes around issues of visibility, agency, and the materiality/representation of bodies that drive this project. Second, I synthesize perspectives on queer worldmaking, particularly within the fields of Communication Studies, broadly, and rhetoric, more specifically, to frame an understanding of how body positivity creates and enacts fat-positive queer worlds. I conclude by explicating the queer critical orientation the project takes to analyzing body positive rhetorics, including a discussion of how autoethnographic performance and a critical cultural sensibility attuned to media affordances augments the queer critical approach.

Embodied Social Movement Rhetoric

Fat activism, in all its contradictions and nuances, is one example of embodied social movement rhetoric, an area of inquiry that has long warranted the attention of rhetorical scholars. Scholarship on the rhetoric of social movements—which I draw on Kevin Deluca to define as collective efforts to “contest social norms, challenge the logic governing the system, and...deconstruct the established naming of the world”¹—provides a robust set of perspectives on the role of the body and mediated representations of the body in activism. Much of this work draws on notions of “body rhetoric” and the “image event,” which understand news (and other mass) media as playing a key role in making images of vulnerable and unruly bodies present and accessible to multiple audiences.² This project expands on this scholarship by considering the relationship between social (rather than mass) media and body/embodied rhetorics in ways that attend to issues of agency and visibility. To do so, this project considers questions and tensions around the following topics: the impact on embodied activist rhetorics when those that inhabit the bodies engaging in activism are also the ones crafting the mediated images to be disseminated to audiences via social media; the changed possibilities of visibility politics for bodies that are always hypervisible in the public sphere; and the role of social media in crafting opportunities for agency for hypervisible rhetors. This project uses body positivity (as an iteration of fat activism) in the current moment to grapple with these larger questions around embodied social movement rhetorics.

In the sections that follow, I first detail what it means to study embodied social movement rhetorics by establishing a critical vocabulary around concepts such as “social movements” and “embodied rhetoric” and explaining the significance of embodiment within social movements. Then, I reconstruct scholarly conversations around the key issues of visibility,

agency, and materiality vs representation within scholarship on embodied social movements in order to show both how these concepts inform the project at hand as well as how my analysis of fat-positive worldmaking within the body positivity intervenes into these areas of inquiry.

Social Movements, Embodiment, & Embodied Social Movements

What it means to study the rhetoric of social movements is a highly contested area of intellectual inquiry that has shifted and evolved over time. As an example, look no further than the tensions between proponents of the functionalist approach such as Herbert Simons and Charles Stewart who saw the rhetorical strategies of social movements as performing particular functions (i.e. meeting specific goals) and those that understand movements *as* meaning in themselves—as holding the potential to *move the social*—such as Michael Calvin McGee.³ In this project, I draw on scholarship of new social movements and counterpublics, especially the work of scholars such as DeLuca and Dan Brouwer, to distinguish two key tasks for studying social movements from a rhetorical perspective in the contemporary moment. The first task entails examining dominant discourses that shape reality and the world as we know it. The second task includes investigating resistive/counterpublic discourses that move away from such socially constructed dominant perspectives while necessitating new visions of the world and how it can be. DeLuca echoes this point, arguing that “social movements are changes in the meanings of the world, redefinitions of reality, with such realities always being constructed through the filter of rhetoric.”⁴

Embodied rhetoric, then, denotes an object of study that includes both how bodies are “constructed through rhetoric” as well as “how individuals use the body to construct rhetoric itself,” according to Brett Lunceford.⁵ The multilayered and polysemic nature of bodies-as-texts illuminates why embodied rhetorics—or rhetorics of the body—are such ripe terrain for

rhetorical scholars. Not only are bodies read in all different kinds of ways by all different kinds of audiences, they can reflect and produce a multitude of arguments at any given moment. This project, by grounding itself in theories of embodied rhetoric, regards “the body as the site of cultural inscription, self-regulation, and resistance” and considers what it means for the body to be all of those things at once.⁶ Furthermore, specifically focusing on the body and its capacities for resistance, this project takes an approach that understands embodied rhetoric as deriving “from the materiality of the body and its negotiations in relation to hegemonic rhetorical discourses.”⁷

Emphasis on the body—including its materiality and its unique ability to reflect, challenge, and negotiate cultural inscriptions and hegemonic discourses—has not always animated the study of social movements. Indeed, many scholars of social movements and social movement rhetoric have critiqued social movement theory for its detachment from the body and its tendency to overlook “the performative constitution of body action” in protest.⁸ However, by now, it is clear that social movement theorists and critics have deeply considered “the potential power of the protesting body as an agent of social change.”⁹ Much of the more contemporary scholarship on social movements, particularly within the field of rhetoric, has come to the realization that mobilization of a movement is not only—or even primarily—performed verbally and is, instead, “also generated by and through bodies.”¹⁰

Orna Sasson-Levy and Tamar Rapoport distinguish that Western Cartesian dualism is at least in part to blame for the past neglect and ignorance of the body in social movement theory because it divides “human experience into bodily and cognitive realms,” where the realm of the body gets associated with irrationality, emotionality, and femininity, and is therefore denigrated, whereas masculinity gets to proudly claim cognition, knowledge, culture, and reason.¹¹ However,

the move to focus on the body in protest is important because it allows for critics to see the ways in which social protest challenges existing social hierarchies that privilege language, cognition, and rationality over viscerality and embodiment, allowing protestors to resist co-optation by the dominant social order.¹² This is precisely why social movements that mobilize with and through the body can be so impactful—because they resist existing hierarchies by rooting themselves in marginalized bodies and the lived experiences of those bodies, eschewing co-optation by dominant discourse. However, it is important to remember that, as these marginalized bodies offer themselves to social movement causes in efforts toward social change, they are potentially targeted and subjected to practices of authoritarian policing, suppression, and surveillance.

The current dissertation project is deeply interested in the ways in which body positivity, as a digital iteration of fat activism in the contemporary moment, deploys bodies and embodied social movement rhetorics in ways that challenge and deconstruct existing hierarchies around which bodies are deemed legitimate, normal, moral, and acceptable. In order to frame larger questions about the relationship between social media and body/embodied rhetorics in ways that attend to issues of agency and visibility in the context of body positivity, I strategically reconstruct scholarly conversations around themes of visibility, agency, and materiality vs representation in the context of embodied social movements.

Visibility

Concerns about visibility—including those around invisibility and hypervisibility—drive much scholarly conversation on embodied social movement rhetorics. Visibility is a central conceptual issue in the study of social movements, for social movements are fundamentally ways of bringing attention and awareness (read: visibility) to social and political injustices.¹³ However, there is certainly no scholarly consensus on the relationship between visibility and

social/political efficacy. For example, poststructuralist thought has long cautioned against the notion of visibility and its links to representation and political efficacy. For poststructuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault, the problem of visibility is that, in the act of making oneself seen (or seeable), one capitulates to the workings of panoptic state power. According to Foucault, in making oneself visible, one “becomes the principle of...[their] own subjection.”¹⁴

Peggy Phelan’s oft-cited work on visibility makes a similar contention, criticizing the political Left for their uncritical reliance on and faith in visibility politics.¹⁵ Phelan’s critique is based on four core assumptions: (1) that “identities are visibly marked,” (2) that the “relationship between representation and identity is linear and smoothly mimetic;” in other words, “what one sees is who one is,” (3) “if one’s mimetic likeness is not represented, one is not addressed,” and (4) “increased visibility equals increased power.”¹⁶ For Phelan, these assumptions “reflect...the ideology of the visible, an ideology which erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken, and unseen.”¹⁷ Thus, visibility must be a trap.¹⁸

However, not all perspectives on visibility and visibility politics are strictly negative, especially those emerging from scholarship on embodied social movements. Visibility politics, according to Brouwer, “might be defined as theory and practice which assume that ‘being seen’ and ‘being heard’ are beneficial and often crucial for individuals or a group to gain greater social, political, cultural or economic legitimacy, power, authority, or access to resources.”¹⁹ Brouwer also acknowledges possible risks of visibility politics, prompted by critiques such as that of Phelan and Foucault, including co-optation, enforced hypervisibility, and heightened surveillance.²⁰ Visibility politics, at their core, are about gaining a sense of publicness, for “visibility politics move individuals and collectives out and away from the shadows and margins

(whether they have been forced there, have placed themselves there, or have been ignored) into the light of public spaces.”²¹

However, within even Brouwer’s relatively optimistic conception, emerges the sense that not all visibility is equal nor is all visibility inherently liberating.²² For example, his concern about forced hypervisibility conjures up a version of visibility that is oppressive in that it is marked by a sense of being excessive, of being too much. Andrea Brighenti also tussles with this tension in visibility politics, arguing that “we have to admit that power does not rest univocally with seeing or with being seen. Rather, it is the style in which seeing and being seen take place that carries the most important consequences. The exercise of power is always an exercise in activating selective in/visibilities.”²³ Thus, one of the questions driving this dissertation project is *how do the possibilities and potentialities of visibility politics change for embodied social movements made up of bodies that are always already hypervisible in the public sphere?*

Rather than intervene into the debate about the political efficacy of visibility within embodied social movements, I point to four key topoi that drive this area of study and inform the dissertation project at hand: (1) the relationship between bodies being seen and audiences seeing, (2) visibility as a form of critique or resistance, (3) visibility as possibility, and (4) the constraints and possibilities of invisibility/hypervisibility.

First, if embodied social movement rhetoric involves “protestors us[ing] their physical bodies to create a *space* from which to perform concerted actions that allow themselves to be *seen* and judged by an audience” and “the embodied protest establishes a realm in which ideas, actors, and events can be seen, with irreducible autonomy, reclaiming the rights of the governed,” then it is both a matter of audiences’ capacity to see and the protesting body’s capacity to be seen.²⁴ In other words, as articulated by Neve Gordon, “any form of resistance

is...dependent on visibility, on the ability of people to see and hear defiant acts.”²⁵ In this way, “seeing” and “visibility” are less issues of literal visibility, and more about bearing witness to social and political injustices. When the body is used as the persuasive vehicle to bring about bearing witness, both the roles of the audience and the protestor/rhetor are crucial. The protesting body must be willing to put itself on the line in the way of being seen, embracing a form of visceral vulnerability, while the audience must be willing to bear witness—to see the ways in which political injustice is written upon the vulnerable body, both materially and symbolically.

Second, scholarship on embodied social movement rhetoric suggests that visibility, even with all its flaws and limitations, can function as both critique and resistance. Kevin DeLuca’s early work on the image event—defined elsewhere as “deliberately staged spectacles designed to attract the attention of the mass media and disseminate persuasive images to a wide audience”²⁶—conceived the image event as a form of delivering bodies on the line in protest in a way that could challenge decorum in order to insert dramatic acts of spectacle.²⁷ In this way, image events use protesting bodies to engage “critique through spectacle.”²⁸ Dan Brouwer’s early work on self-stigmatization via HIV/AIDS tattoos suggests a similar point about (specifically seropositive) visibility, which “is said to enable not only individual expressiveness but also a disruption of social habits of perception and a critique upon power and the conditions of silence that homophobia and AIDS-phobia promote.”²⁹ Both of these lines of thought present visibility—as enacted through vulnerable, protesting/deviant bodies—as a way of critiquing norms, whether those norms coalesce around collective conceptions of decorum, homophobia (and other -phobias), and/or power and conditions of silence more broadly. Moreover, visibility allows embodied social movements to move from critique into the realm of resistance.

“Visibility is resistance’s condition of possibility,” as illustrated by many case studies of embodied social movement rhetoric.³⁰

The idea that visibility is a condition of possibility for resistance not only brings into view the theme of visibility as resistance, but also suggests the third topos that visibility is a form of possibility. Reading visibility as such means performing an important corrective to strict Foucaultian perspectives on visibility that have gained popularity in many fields, including rhetoric. Though visibility is traditionally discussed as a matter of discipline and surveillance, “it is important to point out that visibility – *in the sense of being seen and heard* – is also a crucial component of all other forms of power...it is power’s condition of possibility.”³¹ Gordon elaborates on this point:

Discursive practices, for instance, are meaningless and powerless if they are not visible...Put differently, discursive practices are actually created, reproduced, and upheld through visible citation and repetition of their normative fiats. Conversely, if a discursive practice ceases to be articulated by constant repetition, it loses its power and may eventually disappear. Thus, the practice maintains its power only insofar as it is visible.³²

Visibility, as matter of citationality that brings power and normativity into discursive being, is therefore the mode by which power and resistance manifest and sustain.

A final topic of scholarly conversation that drives the work on visibility within embodied social movement rhetoric coalesces around the themes of invisibility and hypervisibility, particularly the constraints and possibilities offered to bodies marked by these forms of visibility’s extremes. Invisibility, as it relates to embodied social movements, can be thought of in two ways: first, invisibility can be considered as cultural invisibility—where certain bodies, identities, and/or ways of being are able to fly under the radar without being marked by otherness. In this sense, invisibility is a privilege afforded only to normative (particularly white, cis-male, heterosexual, able) bodies and is characterized by a sense of safety.³³ Non-normative

bodies (for example, bodies of color), then, can never experience this “privilege of invisibility because of...racial embodiments and racist ideologies associated with these embodiments,” as illuminated by Bernadette Calafell and Dawn Marie McIntosh.³⁴ Those bodies that are othered along lines of race, gender, and sexuality (among other embodied markers) are, then, “always ‘public’ or on display.”³⁵

Invisibility can also be thought of as a barrier created by language that can only be transcended by bodies. In other words, embodied social movement rhetoric allows “the body [to] announce...the invisible even when the wearer remains vocally silent.”³⁶ A contemporary example of this can be seen in Joyce Rain Anderson’s work on the Standing Rock/#NODAPL protests, whereby indigenous protestors used dance and other cultural displays to make visible the invisible (i.e. unspoken) bodies of missing indigenous women.³⁷ From these various strands of thought, we see that invisibility can be both a privilege, and therefore, possibility as well as a barrier, and therefore, constraint, further confirming that there is no clear line to be drawn between visibility and evaluations of political efficacy in social movements.

Hypervisibility, much like invisibility, is another example of visibility’s extreme that comes with multiple, perhaps conflicting, connotations as they relate to embodied social movements. Hypervisibility can be defined as “the result of an individual being recognized for their ‘otherness’ or deviance from the norm.”³⁸ Hypervisible bodies, then, according to Erin Rand, are those bodies that are “always already available for public scrutiny and consumption.”³⁹ The notion of hypervisibility as a property of othered/deviant bodies has already been mapped onto fat bodies, specifically, making it a helpful heuristic for this particular dissertation project. Indeed, fat studies scholars have long grappled with the hypervisibility of the fat body; Samantha Murray contends that it “is of course always already an ‘outed’ body: it is always hypervisible,

its flabby flesh is always irrevocably seen.”⁴⁰ The major point of conflict in these conceptions of hypervisibility/hypervisible bodies is that hypervisibility is almost indistinguishable from what should be its conceptual opposite—invisibility. Both invisibility and hypervisibility become ways of thinking about the visibility politics of marginalized bodies, with both being modes through which otherness, deviance, and nonnormativity come to gain intelligibility. The hypervisible and the invisible both are extreme forms of embodiment and visibility politics that embodied social movement rhetorics seek to negotiate, humanize, and advocate for.

The four key topoi traced out above bring into view key issues, topics, and tensions around the concept of visibility and visibility politics that inform this dissertation. Questions about the relationship between bodies being seen and audiences seeing, visibility as a form of critique or resistance, visibility as possibility, as well as the constraints and possibilities of invisibility and hypervisibility drive this project and inform my approach as a critic of embodied social movement rhetoric.

Agency

Much like visibility, agency is a recurring theme that informs and drives the way scholars understand embodied social movement rhetoric. Agency, as a concept that animates much sociological and cultural studies thought, can broadly be understood as the “the socially constructed capacity to act.”⁴¹ Agency is not necessarily the unlimited freedom to act as the “self” wills but is, rather, a socially constituted capacity and, therefore, wrapped up in questions of discourse and power, especially when viewed from a Foucaultian lens. In other words, “regulatory discourses themselves construct the subject positions of agency. That is, agency is a discursive construction exemplifying the productive character of power.”⁴² Agency is an important analytical and ethical concern when it comes to the study of embodied social

movements because the agency of bodies, specifically, comes into question. The more specific question emerges: *Are bodies, in their material form, able to enact agency in ways that differ from enactments of agency traditionally associated with things like the mind and language?*

Furthermore, this project is interested in what embodied social movement strategies afford greater (or less) capacity for agency for marginalized groups/identities/bodies.

The questions posed by this dissertation project related to agency are fundamentally questions of rhetorical agency. Rhetorical agency, according to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, refers to “the capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one's community.”⁴³ Rhetorical agency is not all that different than agency as a broad concept, except that it more explicitly centers questions of audience, community, publicness, and recognition.

Questions of agency have long characterized scholarly conversations on embodied social movement rhetoric. Look no further than Kevin DeLuca's foundational work on body rhetoric. DeLuca argues that, within enactments of body rhetoric in protest, bodies “become not merely flags to attract attention for the argument but the site and substance for the argument itself.”⁴⁴ The idea of body-as-argument marks a crucial turning point in considerations of embodied rhetorical agency within social movement theorizing in that it gives agency—the capacity to act in ways that are recognized collectively and communally—to bodies, themselves, in their specific materiality and viscosity. No longer do activists' language and verbal arguments necessarily encompass the primary modes of claim-making and transformation within social movements. From the perspective of body rhetoric, bodies make arguments, “contest...social norms, deconstruct...the established naming of the world, and suggest...the possibilities of alternative worlds.”⁴⁵ In other words, bodies act and enact agency.

Similar to the concept of visibility, there are several key themes or ways of understanding agency that inform this dissertation project. The following are expanded on in the proceeding section: (1) the body as an agent of social change, (2) embodied agency exceeding language, and (3) the expanded possibilities of embodied protest as related to power structures, norms, and alternative worlds/ways of knowing.

One broad, overarching understanding about the relationship between the body and agency that characterizes the study of embodied social movement rhetoric is that the body is (or at least has the potential to act as) “an agent of social change.”⁴⁶ Though there are certainly those that see the body as simply the subject matter or carrier of social movement messages, the perspective I draw on in this project views the body as having agency in and of itself.⁴⁷ The human body—the body of the protestor, advocate, activist, and/or rebel—does not just represent social change or communicate something about social change; the body itself, in all its messiness and materiality, does things in the world and, in doing so, changes the world at the level of the social, cultural, and political. Indeed, Calafell and McIntosh assert that the bodies of marginalized folks, specifically, through the creation and performance of counterpublics “(re)negotiate dominant-hegemonic relations inflicted on their bodies, displaying embodied practices that emanate social change from a nonnormative, nonelite public understanding.”⁴⁸ The key point here is that the bodies of those engaged in social movement rhetoric are more than just a medium for change; they agentially realize change by “produc[ing], elaborate[ing], and articulat[ing] political ideology.”⁴⁹

A second way of conceptualizing agency that drives this project coalesces around the idea that the agency that bodies claim and reclaim through social movement rhetoric is often that which cannot be afforded by language or other traditional discursive means. Language, often

conceptualized as the property or product of rationality, is typically regarded as the primary tool of agency; to gain rhetorical agency, especially, one must be able to rhetorically act in the world, which often manifests as speaking in public and otherwise making public arguments. However, language and rationality are also typically regarded as the property of masculinity, whiteness, and heterosexuality, among other privileged forms of being and embodiment. Subaltern counterpublics, then, as well as their argumentative practices that exceed the boundaries of language, are often strategically excluded from the public sphere.⁵⁰

With traditional notions of the public sphere being organized around logics of language and white heteromale rationality, social movements made up of marginalized bodies and voices must find new tactics through which to make their voices heard. In other words, they have had to reinvent notions of rhetorical agency. Embodied social movement rhetoric, through which the body itself makes arguments and enacts rhetorical agency, has “expanded the definition of who is entitled to act as a political agent and shifted the...meaning of political action in the public sphere.”⁵¹

LGBTQ folks and women are two groups that have been historically silenced by language and other discursive means and have long used their stigmatized bodies to make public arguments that exceed any set of assertions they could make strictly via language. For example, as illuminated in Brouwer’s work, LGBTQ folks have engaged in “self-stigmatization” via HIV/AIDS tattoos—a conscious and willful marking of oneself as “tainted” that uses visibility to reject assumptions about the health and danger of queer bodies in ways that do not require a single word spoken.⁵² Similarly, women have reinvented rhetorical agency beyond language and through the body by deploying their various identities (as mothers, menstruators, etcetera) paired with embodied strategies such as “rhetorical demonstration[s] of pain” during childbirth,

performances of the grotesque through the #periodsforPence and #PEEOTUS hashtags, and “threats of deliberate public nakedness” during militant protest.⁵³ In doing so, these marginalized groups have opened up the potentiality to “reinsert individuals’ voices in political discourse aimed to exclude those bodies,” according to Kristin Marie Bivens and Kirsti Cole, which highlights how rhetorical agency can be stolen back using the very means of one’s oppression.⁵⁴

A final key point of understanding agency and embodied social movement rhetoric involves what embodied forms of protest and argumentation can afford social movements beyond that which is made possible by language and other traditional means. I discuss here the expanded possibilities of embodied protest as related to power structures, norms, and alternative worlds/ways of knowing. Indeed, embodiment allows protestors to push back against power structures. Embodied social movement rhetoric “can upend existing power structures, call attention to the inequality or discrimination inherent in the power structure that one seeks to supplant, [and] resist attempts to control bodies.”⁵⁵ Bodies enact agency through their capacity to “disrupt, interrupt, and exert instrumental control” over and against the dominant power structures that seek to discipline and disempower them.⁵⁶

Embodied practices of protests also have the capacity to contest norms and normative understandings of the world. For example, because masculinized logics of rationality assert that femininity is linked to the body whereas masculinity is linked to the mind, Dana Cloud argues that “women’s body rhetorics of inversion are particularly heinous affronts to civility and decorum as disciplining norms.”⁵⁷ Rather than trying to fit bodies into public spaces and discourses never meant for them in the first place, embodied social movement rhetorics seek to dismantle the very normative logics that construct such fit-ness in the first place. In doing so,

rhetorics of the body agentially birth possibilities for new ways of being in the world unconstrained by heteropatriarchal (and other oppressive) norms.

Beyond challenging power structures and norms, embodied social movement rhetorics make possible alternative worlds as well as different ways of knowing. Marginalized groups, as represented in various social movements, use vernaculars of the body to communicate embodied ways of knowing that are based in their experience of corporeal difference.⁵⁸ For example, queer groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation have long used protest strategies to present alternative ways of knowing about queer bodies—ways of knowing unconstrained by logics of heteronormativity. By practicing, promoting, and embodying these alternative queer epistemologies, queer and other vernacular embodied social movement rhetorics “suggest...the possibilities of alternative worlds.”⁵⁹ Protest, in many ways, is a productive site of worldmaking and worldmaking is certainly a productive site of embodied vernacular and counterpublic resistance. Envisioning and creating new worlds, however fleeting, as well as epistemologies lends agency to those engaged in embodied social movement rhetorics, for those that inhabit protesting bodies have a voice in shaping what those new worlds might look like and what those new ways of knowing might imagine as possible.

Embodied social movement rhetoric allows counterpublics—often made up of those in marginalized, disempowered bodies—to engage the work of “transgressing boundaries...demanding attention...and equalizing differential political power relations.”⁶⁰ This kind of activism allows bodies to maintain, regain, and/or (re)claim a sense of agency, for the meanings and messages created by and through embodied social movements are rooted in the corporeal experiences of those marginalized bodies, themselves. Progress, then, becomes a matter of empowering these marginalized bodies to both act in the world as well as be heeded by their

communities and those in power.⁶¹ Understandings of agency as related to the body and its capacity to catalyze social change, embodied agency exceeding language, and the expanded possibilities of embodied protest as related to power structures, norms, and alternative world/ways of knowing inform this dissertation and urge me to critically evaluate the agential potentialities of the bodies of body positive activists and influencers.

Materiality vs Representation

A final key point of tension animating the study of embodied social movement rhetorics concerns issues of materiality and representation. To put the driving question frankly: *should scholars of embodied social movement rhetoric invest in examining bodies as they exist materially or as they are represented symbolically?* The study of body rhetoric can be understood in the words of Charles E. Morris III and John M. Sloop as “explorations of the embodied dimensions of persuasion—by means of sharper focus on the materiality of the body, how it forms and influences discourse, or an enhanced perspective on the ways in which (gendered, raced) bodies are understood rhetorically through meanings circulating in culture.”⁶² In this way, body rhetoric is an examination of both materiality and representation; it takes as its object(s) of study both the actual, material bodies of meaning makers (rhetors, protestors, etcetera) as well as the forms and mediums through which those bodies are disseminated and circulated in culture. To further contend with this tension between materiality and representation and its application to the body positive movement, I discuss the significance of studying the materiality of the body as part of social movement rhetoric; how questions of materiality and symbolicity pose methodological considerations for critics of embodied social movements; the impact of mediated forms of communication on social movement rhetoric; the

relationship between media, bodies, and social movement messages; and important considerations for studying embodied social movement rhetoric as deployed online.

Some scholars elevate the materiality of the body as the key consideration for understanding embodied social movement rhetoric. For example, Calafell and McIntosh contend that “embodied rhetoric derives from the materiality of the body and its negotiations in relation to hegemonic rhetorical discourses.”⁶³ To put the point even more bluntly, Cloud argues that “the instrumental effectiveness of body rhetoric depends on its actual, material (in addition to symbolic...) capacity to obstruct and interrupt business as usual.”⁶⁴ For these scholars, the physical body’s insertion of itself into spaces in ways that disrupt normative expectations governing those spaces is key to what we might call “body rhetoric” and, consequently, embodied social movement rhetoric.

This tension between corporeal materiality and symbolicity becomes a methodological issue as well. Those scholars that advocate for participatory critical rhetoric—a field-based rhetorical method that, according to Michael Middleton et al., “bring[s] qualitative methods of data collection such as participant observation, interviewing, and oral history into the process of doing rhetorical criticism...afford[ing] critics the opportunity to stand with, for, and among the people whose rhetoric we study”⁶⁵—argue for an *in situ* approach to studying material bodies in context. Indeed, scholars of participatory critical rhetoric, which is a particularly useful methodological approach to studying social movements and social change as ushered forth via corporeal means, critique rhetorical scholarship on the body for its lack of analysis of actual material bodies, arguing that, “although rhetorical scholars consider how the body can be deployed rhetorically to orchestrate meaningful social change and how it participates in the advocacy of complex arguments, they mostly study representations of bodies or remain vague on

the exact object of analysis.”⁶⁶ This is not to say that examining representations of bodies is unimportant or without value, however “material bodies themselves experienced *in situ* have qualitatively different characteristics than analyzing representations of bodies.”⁶⁷ Therefore, to understand the messages constructed by and through bodies means making different methodological decisions that allow one to experience bodies in their physicality and specificity.

However, the materiality of the body is certainly only one part of a much larger equation. The forms and mediums through which bodies are made visible and intelligible to diverse public audiences have long been of interest to scholars of embodied social movement rhetoric. The notion of the “image event,” in fact, has become one common way of examining and understanding “staged protests designed for media dissemination.”⁶⁸ DeLuca elaborates that “designed to flag media attention and generate publicity, image events are more than just a means of getting on television. They are crystallized philosophical fragments, mind bombs that work to expand ‘the universe of thinkable thoughts.’”⁶⁹ The concept of the image event, when put in conversation with perspectives that privilege the materiality of the body in protest, brings into view two key questions: *first, what are the major differences between studying an image event versus studying the material bodies that comprise the content of the image? Second, how can we adapt understandings of “image events” to apply to the contemporary moment, particularly the use and proliferation of social media (as opposed to traditional/mass media)?*

With all these complexities in mind, one point seems clear: one cannot fully understand the body/embodied rhetorical elements of a social movement today without understanding the role of media in disseminating images of/information about bodies and the meaningful relationship between bodies, media, and social movement messages. Roberta Chevrette and Aaron Hess elucidate that

Understanding how words, bodies, and images together articulate collectives and impact audiences also requires theorizing rhetorical strategies of social movements as they interact with and are impacted by media. The social reliance on media technology to comprehend and circulate political rhetorics and images has reshaped processes of traditional deliberation and activism, including the ways bodies are deployed.⁷⁰

The relationship between words, bodies, images, and media within social movements is key to the project at hand, for fat activism (and body positivity as a specific iteration of fat activism) has long deployed a dynamic rhetoric that exploits said relationship. Because body positivity exists primarily online, where bodies are depicted via images and videos and accompanied by words in the form of captions and narration, the mediated nature of this rhetoric is as crucial as the bodies behind and within the content. A concept such as “image event,” however cannot fully encapsulate the deployment of bodies via digital/social media because it relies on logics of mass/news media, which differ significantly from the bottom-up production made possible within the digital sphere. Not only do these complexities compel a greater attention to the mediation of messages via social media in the context of body positive activism, they also illuminate the challenge of studying embodied rhetoric *in situ* on social media. Questions emerge such as, *how does “being there” work for forms of social media activism?*⁷¹ *Where is there? What is more important—investigating the materiality of bodies on the internet or investigating how embodied messages reach diverse audiences in the digital sphere?*

Examining embodied social movement rhetoric as it is deployed online must look differently than studying bodies in local and specific places, spaces, and locations because, as Bivens and Cole note, “the inventional strategies associated with social media...protests make available differently structured audiences and participants,” as well as different forms of argument, affective capacity, rhetorical appeals, and means of visibility and agency.⁷² However, the fact that the corporeality of activists/activism is “a simultaneously material and symbolic

process of utilizing the body as a text, a messenger, and a site of resistance” rings true across physical and digital contexts.⁷³ Therefore, the intersection of materiality, symbolicity, and mediation is of chief concern to this dissertation and should be to anyone interested in analyzing embodied social movement rhetoric online.

The questions grappled with above around the significance of studying the materiality of the body, methodological considerations pertaining to materiality and symbolicity, the impact of mediated forms of communication on social movement rhetoric, the relationship between media, bodies, and social movement messages, and the unique considerations for studying embodied social movement rhetoric as deployed online shape this project’s approach to studying body positive activism. This project takes seriously questions of materiality, symbolicity, mediation, and social movement messages and understands the deployment of social movement tactics in digital spaces to be a complex, layered process that warrants equally complex and layered analyses.

Body positivity is an example of embodied social movement rhetoric in the contemporary moment and, therefore, these key concerns, issues, and tensions around the topics of visibility, agency, and materiality vs representation lay the groundwork for the questions that drive this dissertation project. The perspectives traced out in the preceding sections provide frameworks for this project as it grapples with the relationship between embodied social movement rhetoric, the current social mediascape, politics of (hyper)visibility, and possibilities for agency within body positive activism. Body positivity is also an example of fat-positive queer worldmaking in the current moment and, as such, the next section synthesizes perspectives on queer worldmaking within the fields of Communication Studies and Rhetoric to frame an understanding of how body positivity creates and enacts fat-positive queer worlds.

Queer Worldmaking

Previously, I contended that queer forms of fat activism often engender a worldmaking sensibility and that they work toward crafting and cultivating “a public world of belonging and transformation.”⁷⁴ This dissertation organizes itself around these moments of worldmaking, arguing that the body positive movement makes possible moments of fat-positive worldmaking through the use of particular forms of rhetorical labor. I position this project, then, as part of a long, winding history of scholarly endeavors (particularly in the field of Communication) to examine and celebrate queer worlds and the possibilities and potentialities for living and thriving in non-normative bodies made possible by such worlds.

In the sections that follow, I first provide an introduction to the concept of queer worldmaking, including a brief history and definition of the concept as well as commentary on its uptake in Communication scholarship. The remaining sections then trace out two key themes within contemporary scholarship at the intersection of Communication and queer worldmaking that shape this dissertation project—the first theme being the use of queer of color theories and concepts and the second having to do with scholarship as a productive site for worldmaking.

Queer worldmaking—the process by which activists, influencers, and rhetors envision and bring into being spaces where non-normative bodies are celebrated and liberated rather than stigmatized or marginalized—is a concept that has flourished in many fields, including Communication, especially in recent years. However, it is important to note that queer worldmaking existed as a practice long before scholars put a scholarly term to it. Art, activism, the creation of queer spaces, and everyday acts of resistance against a heteronormative culture, among other forms and practices, have long worked toward the creation of alternative queer worlds that make a variety of non-normative lives livable and ways of being intelligible.

Queer scholars, then, brought the term “worldmaking” into being in order to honor, describe, and unpack these moments of queer possibility. José Esteban Muñoz offers a foundational conception of queer worldmaking as related to performance and the performative, especially as enacted by minoritarian subjects.⁷⁵ He develops this relationship most robustly in his germinal text, *Disidentifications*, arguing that, through disidentificatory performances—those that work “on, with, and against a cultural form” rather than attempting to totally assimilate within a structure or completely oppose it—minoritarian subjects can disidentify with the current world and perform a new one.⁷⁶ Queer worldmaking, thus

delineates the ways in which performances—theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternate views of the world...Oppositional counterpublics are enabled by visions, “worldviews,” that reshape as they deconstruct reality. Such counterpublics are the aftermath of minoritarian performance. Such performances *transport* the performer *and* the spectator to a vantage point where transformation and politics are imaginable. Worldmaking performances produce these vantage points by slicing into the facade of the real that is the majoritarian public sphere. Disidentificatory performances opt to do more than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality. Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world.⁷⁷

According to Muñoz, queer worldmaking requires “an active kernel of utopian possibility” and can be found in the moments in which minoritarian subjects refuse to simply survive but, instead, opt to fashion a new world via “spectacles, performances, and willful enactments of the self for others.”⁷⁸

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner offer a similar, yet distinct, conception of queer worldmaking that proves useful to the current project as well:

By queer culture we mean a world-making project, where “world,” like “public,” differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies. World making, as

much in the mode of dirty talk of print-mediated representation, is dispersed through incommensurate registers, by definition *unrealizable* as community or identity.⁷⁹

Both Berlant and Warner's as well as Muñoz's early theorizations of queer worldmaking have proven deeply resonant with queer Communication scholars. Berlant and Warner foreground concepts such as identity, public(s), and culture—all of which are of profound interest to rhetorical scholars—and focus on the ephemeral nature of queer worlds and those worlds' capacity to open up possibilities for alternative intimacies and intelligibility. Muñoz's conception directs Communication scholars' attention to minoritarian subjects that engage the labor of worldmaking through performance. Both of these imperatives pulse through the queer Communication scholarship of today and drive the purpose of this dissertation project.

The field of Communication, then, might credit Gust Yep for bringing queer worldmaking as a concept and framework to bear on its foundational assumptions in ways that have opened up a wide variety of possibilities for queer scholars and queer scholarship. In his germinal essay, "The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies," Yep draws on Berlant and Warner's original conception, defining queer worldmaking as "the opening and creation of spaces without a map, the invention and proliferation of ideas without an unchanging and predetermined goal, and the expansion of individual freedom and collective possibilities without the constraints of suffocating identities and restrictive membership."⁸⁰ In this essay, Yep offers a set of procedures for moving away from the violence(s) of heteronormativity toward more livable queer worlds, both within communication scholarship, specifically, as well as within broader areas of public life. He offers the process of moving through injury (being negatively affected by the violences of heteronormativity) to healing (unpacking and critiquing heteronormativity) to finally making queer worlds, wherein such worldmaking includes living and embodying queer theory, confronting the challenges posed by queer theory, and embracing a

communicative ethic (as opposed to a *normalizing ethic*) that “asserts that sex acts are given moral meaning by their communication context...[and] shifts moral judgements about the character of sexual desires and acts to the qualities of the social exchange and communication encounter, such as mutual consent, responsibility, respect, and reciprocity.”⁸¹

Yep’s early work on queer worldmaking set the stage for much of the contemporary work in this area of scholarship by, first, providing a workable and adaptable definition of heteronormativity and tracing out its nuances (both within Communication Studies as a field of study and more broadly in the lives of queer people) but also, more importantly, by proffering a process for healing from anti-queer violences that can be taken up by both queer people and Communication scholars of all genders, sexualities, identities, and embodiments. He also made a point to identify and address challenges that we might come up against along the way, and his anticipation of such challenges related to race, gender, and class are still being productively grappled with today. Certainly, Yep’s invitation to Communication scholars to participate in diverse worldmaking projects resonates louder and clearer today than ever and profoundly informs this dissertation project:

I invite communication scholars across the spectrum of social locations to join these theorists and practitioners in this radical project to expand, stretch, reorient, and re-map the conceptual landscape of the field of communication. I urge communication teachers and scholars to interrogate and unpack the homo/heterosexual binary, disentangle and demystify the power of heteronormativity in our scholarship, pedagogy, and cultural politics, and to create and produce historically specific and embodied racialized knowledges of the human sexual subject.⁸²

Moreover, Yep’s concluding thoughts in this essay identify queer Communication scholarship at the time as having “race problems” as he calls out queer theory for putting on a misleading “façade” of racial inclusivity, employing Muñoz’s language that race is a “queer blind spot.”⁸³ This acknowledgement is followed by the recommendation that disidentifications and quare

theory are “productive points of engagement with mainstream queer theory about racialized knowledges and experiences”—both of which have been taken up by many queer scholars of color in recent queer communication scholarship.⁸⁴

Though it seems contrary to the goals of any queer project to try to organize the path that worldmaking has taken into neat boxes, scholarship does tend toward themes and patterns (whether or not the queer worlds celebrated by that scholarship follow suit). Many queer worldmaking pursuits in the discipline of Communication take as their foundation, or at least draw upon, queer of color theories, particularly Muñoz’s theories of disidentification(s) and queer futurity. These theories are particularly helpful to this project in that they provide ways to understand how minoritarian subjects (in this case, fat activists, and especially those fat activists who embody other intersecting nodes of oppression) negotiate their position within larger power structures and envision more just, livable futures for those that inhabit bodies like theirs. A second theme within queer worldmaking that informs the project at hand congeals around the notion that scholarship and academic pursuits serve as productive sites for envisioning and creating queer worlds. Scholarship that harnesses this impulse helps this dissertation articulate its own role (and my role as a critic and scholar) in creating the fat-positive queer worlds analyzed in the coming chapters.

Queer of Color Worlds and Theories

Though an abundance of queer of color theories and concepts animate queer Communication scholarship today, three specific concepts from this theoretical tradition shape and influence this dissertation’s study of fat-positive worldmaking in the body positive movement most profoundly—disidentifications, queer futurity/futures/utopias, and queer

relationality. I discuss each of these concepts in turn and consider what they offer in terms of the theoretical, methodological, and practical goals of this dissertation project.

First, Muñoz's concept of disidentification resonates with queer worldmakers and queer scholars of worldmaking. Muñoz articulates the "worldmaking power of disidentificatory performances" and advocates for minoritarian subjects to disidentify with one world and perform a new one as a practice of survival.⁸⁵ Disidentification can be understood as a third response to interpellation that refuses to play by the binary rules set forth by either identification or resistance/counteridentification. Disidentification is a refusal to either totally assimilate within a structure or completely oppose it; rather, to disidentify is to work "on, with, and against a cultural form."⁸⁶

Queer work in Communication studies suggests that disidentification can function as a process of worldmaking and coalition-building for minoritarian subjects from different social locations.⁸⁷ By bringing a theory of disidentification together with performative methodologies, intercultural communication scholars such as Shinsuke Eguchi and Godfried Asante have carved out ways to "look at, critique, and shift embodied performances of minoritarian identities and subjectivities that reveal nuanced forms of neither assimilation nor resistance," offering a form of intercultural praxis that questions "the epistemological assumptions through which we must analyze and understand complex, contingent, and contradictory renegotiations of identity and practices of belonging."⁸⁸ This sub-area of study has also revealed the possibilities of taking an anti-anti relational approach to queerness and worldmaking in ways that reimagine queer relationality as a "political and intellectual moving toward the future."⁸⁹ Disidentification becomes intelligible as a future-making practice—a way of enacting "a futurity of self-empowerment in the present."⁹⁰

Queer Communication scholarship on disidentification also illuminates the possibilities and potentialities of disidentifying with(in) particular cultural texts. For example, Eguchi and Myra N. Roberts write about gay rapper, Fly Young Red's, rehearsal of new/alternative possibilities for black masculinity that resists dominant norms through his controversial single "Throw That Boy Pussy."⁹¹ Rooted in Quare studies, Eguchi and Roberts bring questions of identification and counteridentification to bear on the black queer world (re)made through Fly Young Red's music, revealing how such embodied texts can work on and against norms and offer new possibilities for performing black masculine identities.

Disidentification as a future-oriented practice of worldmaking that occurs in cultural texts as well as a variety of performative engagements with the world is a key foundational assumption of this dissertation project. Such an understanding urges me, as a critic, to look for moments of disidentification within the body positive movement and, rather than critique activists and influencers for failing to outright reject oppressive body norms, instead consider how advocates work "on, with, and against" such cultural forms as a practice of survival rooted in a more just and ethical vision of the future.⁹²

Second, with Muñoz's theory of disidentification driving so much of the contemporary Communication scholarship on worldmaking, it is inevitable that such scholarship looks toward queer futures and utopias in the pursuit of better, more livable queer worlds. If the "worldmaking power of disidentificatory performances" lies in disidentifying with one world and performing a new one, the temporality of a queer world exists squarely in the future.⁹³ Moreover, this future is a utopian one. Muñoz elaborates:

Disidentificatory performances and readings require an active kernel of utopian possibility. Although utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold to and even *risk* utopianism to engage in the labor of making a queerworld.⁹⁴

Much of the queer investment in the future emerges as backlash against—or at least in response to—anti-social and anti-relational queer theories that posit the future as futile. Reclaiming the futurity of queerness is a generative space for queer scholars because anti-social approaches, according to Dustin Bradley Goltz, “foreclos[e]...queer hope, queer potential, and the project of queer worldmaking.”⁹⁵ Indeed, an investment in futurity, utopia, and the “not yet” paves the path to livable queer worlds.⁹⁶

Another explanation for the hostility toward anti-social approaches within queer worldmaking scholarship could be the investment in queer of color theories that tend to value lived, embodied experiences of survival within racist, heteronormative cultures.⁹⁷ By investing in queerness as a “structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present,” queer worldmaking becomes a way of seeing and feeling the world differently, utopically.⁹⁸ Thomas Nakayama and Morris III express this point best in their articulation of the aims of *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*: “We are driven by our commitment to another world, despite how fleeting and dynamic the images of that other world might be.”⁹⁹

Fostering a sense of critical hope may be one of the most productive offerings coming out of the work on queer futures and utopias, for although “we are not queer yet...we have hope.”¹⁰⁰ Both the future, in general, and certain sub-fields of Communication scholarship can be thought of as spaces to nourish a sense of critical hope that works in the domain of “unexhausted potentials” to envision queer worlds and futures.¹⁰¹ This dissertation project harnesses a sense of critical hope and an investment in a queer(er) futurity in its understanding of body positivity as a space of possibility and potential even as the movement has not yet fully realized the more livable world it constantly envisions.

Finally, another response to the anti-relational turn in queer theory could be labeled the “anti anti-relational turn,” or, in other words, the turn to queer relationality. Queer relationality has become a popular mode of or path toward queer worldmaking in queer Communication scholarship. Gust Yep foreshadowed this turn in his sort of sequel to his work on the violence of heteronormativity in *Communication Studies*, wherein he argues that “queer relationality has become an increasingly important area of investigation” that works toward “maintaining wholeness in a heteronormative world,” healing “from the symbolic and material violences of heteronormativity, and embodying “nonheteronormative relations and social arrangements...to explore the possibilities of queer worldmaking.”¹⁰² Yep provides a way of conceptualizing queer relationality that honors its temporality, roots in the body, and sense of possibility:

Queer relationality involves spheres of intimacy, such as closeness, deep knowing, mutual attunement, sensuality, and eroticism that could range from fleeting to enduring, and spheres of desire, such as wishes, longings, needs, affinities, and yearnings that could range from internally held to externally articulated.¹⁰³

Considering various types and forms of relational performance as a methodology for scholarship emerges as a useful outcome of the scholarly work on queer relationality. Examples of this kind of work abound, from Luis M. Andrade and Robert Gutierrez-Perez’s queer of color performance and performative writing in response to the Pulse nightclub shooting to Eguchi and Andrew Spieldenner’s method of collaborative autoethnography, Eguchi and Long’s blending of autoethnography and intersectional reflexivity, and Benny LeMaster et. al’s endeavors in collaged relational autoethnography.¹⁰⁴

These experiments in method teach us that queer worldmaking could/might/should entail a sense of “radical interconnectedness,” relational performance linked to the norm/ativities of the academy governing queer racialized bodies, embracing “queer family as a temporal and present mode of relational and political resistance,” healing through coalition, “relationally derived self-

love,” as well as collaborative unlearning of cisheteronormativity.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, these scholarly endeavors are never solely scholarly in nature. They are personal, felt, and embodied and such embodied methodologies highlight how queer and/or racialized bodies “become powerful and central sites of knowledge production” in the pursuit of better, more ethical understandings of the world—another key aspect of livable queer(er) worlds.¹⁰⁶ This dissertation project, as it explores the possibility of worlds more livable for fat bodies, harnesses the energies of such embodied methodologies and uses autoethnographic performance to consider the queer relationality between my body as a critic and the body positive texts/moments of activism I study.

Queer of color theories, concepts, and approaches have proved fruitful for engaging the intersection of queer worldmaking and Communication scholarship. The concepts of disidentifications, queer futurity/futures/utopias, and queer relationality bring into view an understanding of worldmaking as a process of survival, future-making, and finding wholeness and intimacy in a (hetero)normative world. Using these queer of color theories as frameworks orients this dissertation to the ways in which body positive advocates creatively envision and construct fat-positive queer worlds at the intersection of various forms of marginalized embodiment. Next, I consider what it means to understand the creative process of worldmaking as happening through the inventional and generative process of producing scholarship.

Scholarship as a Site for Queer Worldmaking

Although there are plenty of reasons to believe that academia—the often coercive and systemically oppressive institution that it is—is uninhabitable for queers and a space of impossibility for queer worldmaking, we know that queer worldmaking can, and does, happen in many unexpected spaces, especially in its ephemerality and ever-fleeting nature. When you get enough queers in academic spaces (and believe me, there are a lot of us), you will start to see the

seeds for various and diverse queer worlds everywhere. Queer Communication scholars, holding interest in matters such as space, pedagogy, performance, theory, and criticism, continue to cultivate a growing body of scholarship that recognizes scholarship and academic pursuits as productive sites for envisioning and creating queer worlds. The perspectives reflected in this body of scholarship inform my project because I believe that this dissertation is (or at least can be) an act of worldmaking itself, and that my role at the juncture of critic, scholar, and activist plays a part in creating the fat-positive queer worlds analyzed in the coming chapters. In the paragraphs that follow, I consider the role of rhetoric, rhetorical history, and rhetorical criticism—specifically reparative criticism—as tools of queer worldmaking.

Scholars of queer rhetoric have time and again articulated the role that rhetoric, rhetorical history, and rhetorical criticism play in cultivating inhabitable queer worlds. Thomas R. Dunn, in his work on queer monuments and memorials, distinguishes the “world-changing” or worldmaking objectives of rhetoric, itself, defining rhetoric as “a highly communicative act; one which, at its heart, seeks to move audiences to see, act, and be in the world differently.”¹⁰⁷ Morris III extends this understanding of rhetoric-as-worldmaking, adding that the praxis of rhetorical history—doing, making, and (re)writing rhetorical history queerly—is included in what it means to enact queer worldmaking as a rhetorician.¹⁰⁸ Finally, Isaac West makes the case that rhetorical criticism is generative of queer worldmaking by virtue of its focus on the contingent and the particular, in its capacity to privilege rhetors that do the work of queering and playing the norms against each other, and by its potential to harness a reparative/generous approach to evaluating texts.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, the turn to reparative (rather than paranoid) criticism, in many ways ushered into the world of rhetoric by West, demonstrates a very specific example of how academic work can

“help us create the worlds we want to live in.”¹¹⁰ We see this impulse animate West et. al’s examination of the “It Gets Better” campaign, Claire Sisco King’s investigation of Norman Rockwell’s art, and John Sloop and West’s historical study of Robbie Rogers’ coming out story.¹¹¹ Moreover, my own work on fat activism has harnessed the power of reparative and generous readings of fat activist rhetoric within the body positive movement. In my analysis of plus-size model Tess Holliday’s performance of fatness online in ways that deconstruct logics of fitness that posit fat as necessarily lazy, inactive, and unhealthy, I illustrate how body positive rhetors like Holliday can “productively disrupt some norms while inevitably reproducing others.”¹¹² By contending with both moments wherein Holiday “queers normative conceptions of what health is and what qualifies as a healthy body, ultimately resignifying fat as fit,” as well as moments when her privilege and visibility comes at the cost of other, multiply marginalized fat folks, I reveal the complexity of reparative approaches to criticism, including how they can help us, as critics, work toward creating inhabitable queer worlds.¹¹³ In a broad sense, this line of scholarship teaches us that textual productions and our critical evaluations of those texts should eschew a binary conception of queerness as well as understand the limits of queer worlds in terms of who they are made for and who they make life livable for.

Scholarship, and its arrangement with other trajectories, participates in “the world’s becoming,” as Joshua Ewalt reminds us.¹¹⁴ The scholarship traced out here illustrates the ways in which academic spaces and pursuits can facilitate the making of queer worlds—a conclusion that should urge queer Communication scholars to continue to consider what queer worlds their work makes possible and what kinds of bodies/identities/ways of being those queer worlds make life livable for. Because this dissertation project orients its ontological status as an academic tool/space toward the pursuit of making fat-positive queer worlds, these aforementioned

endeavors in academic queer worldmaking via rhetoric, rhetorical history, and rhetorical (specifically reparative) criticism serve as instructive models.

Another key point of cogitation should be the limits of scholarship in creating queer worlds, as we know that queer affects such as desire are ever-escaping language and language is often the primary tool of the scholar.¹¹⁵ Indeed, queer worldmaking unfolds as diverse, ephemeral performances in the world and it is unsurprising, then, that performance, performance studies, and performative methodologies become productive ways of grasping at the aspects of queer worldmaking that cannot be contained by ordinary linguistic means. This recognition of the limitations of traditional modes of scholarship paired with a faith and trust in performance animates the following discussion of the methodological orientation driving this dissertation project.

Critical Methodological Orientation

Methodologically, this project situates itself as endeavor in queer rhetorical criticism augmented by both critical autoethnographic performance and a critical cultural sensibility attuned to media affordances. This project takes a queer methodological orientation for two main reasons: (1) because it is working from and with the idea that fat bodies are queer bodies in that they subvert normative ideals about the body, what it should look like, who it should serve, and what boundaries should constrain it, and (2) because queer criticism provides a lens for understanding the rhetorical construction of fat-positive queer worlds. Critical autoethnographic performance augments this queer methodological approach by recentering a working conception of queer/ness that is fundamentally rooted in the body and therefore never completely surrendered to what West calls the “the tyranny of the theoretical.”¹¹⁶ A critical cultural sensibility ensures that this project appreciates culture as a site of struggle and understands

rhetoric (and communication more broadly) as an enactment of power. Attuning this sensibility to media affordances, specifically, allows me to consider the relationship between media, culture, and power in a way that does not fall into the trap of technological determinism and, instead, sees media platforms as *making possible* (but not guaranteeing) particular performances of rhetoric and enactments of power in the world. In the sections that follow, I elaborate on the queer rhetorical orientation this project takes and discuss in more depth how autoethnographic performance and a critical cultural sensibility attuned to media affordances augments the queer critical approach.

(Queer) Rhetorical Criticism

This project takes a rhetorical approach to body positivity and fat activism and, therefore, unearths the rhetorical tactics and maneuvers that contribute to the movement's efficacy. By taking a rhetorical approach and wielding the tools of the rhetorical critic, I orient this project toward understanding and explaining how the body positive movement acts in the world—how it compels audiences, how it deconstructs normalized meanings around bodies, and how it crafts visions of alternative worlds. Subscribing to the definition of rhetoric as “a highly communicative act; one which, at its heart, seeks to move audiences to see, act, and be in the world differently,” my primary goal in this dissertation, as a rhetorical critic, is to yield insight about how body positivity moves audiences to see, act, and be in the world in ways that humanize and celebrate fat bodies.¹¹⁷

Rhetorical criticism, less a specific method than a collection of methodological orientations, is conceptualized in a variety of different ways across time, space, and disciplinary boundaries. As early as 1925, Herbert Wichelns defined rhetorical criticism as “the analysis and appreciation of the orator's method of imparting his ideas to his hearers.”¹¹⁸ In the contemporary

moment, criticism is often defined somewhat neutrally along the lines of “a qualitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes.”¹¹⁹ Some other similar definitions include considering criticism as “an argument that describes, interprets, or evaluates the messages to which people are exposed in public or collective ways” or “a form of interrogating, or performed response, of appreciation, interpretation, explanation, and judgement.”¹²⁰ However accurate these definitions may be, I consider them partial.

One of the key facets of rhetorical criticism, in my estimation, is that it considers “talk and mediated discourse...to be *consequential*, to have effect in the world.”¹²¹ In other words, “instances of language use *do* things.”¹²² The act of rhetorical criticism, then, “takes up a text and re-circulates it, that is, ‘says’ or ‘does’ that text differently, and asks the listener or reader to re-understand and re-evaluate the text, to see and judge it in new ways suggested by the critic.”¹²³ I concur with William L. Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary A. Copeland, who argue that rhetorical criticism “should be considered most valuable and worthwhile when it provokes its audiences to think or act differently and in socially responsible ways.”¹²⁴ Indeed, I would go as far to say that rhetorical criticism is a tool of social transformation. Rhetorical criticism has the potential to make a difference in the world, to make the world a better place. I believe both that rhetorical criticism holds the possibility for working toward a more just world and that rhetorical critics have an ethical responsibility to social justice.

Engaging in rhetorical criticism allows me to live up to my ethical responsibility to social justice by uplifting and amplifying voices in the body positive movement that remake the world in more just ways that celebrate bodies in all their messiness and diversity. Though fat bodies have and probably will continue to exist materially throughout all of history, the way in which

fatness and fat bodies are understood, felt, and treated in dominant culture is a product of discourse. Discourses about bodies, wrapped up with norms related to morality, health, citizenship, gender, sexuality, race, etcetera, link body size to certain expectations, “truths,” and ontological assumptions. Therefore, rhetorical criticism is a powerful tool for unpacking how such discourses come to be, how they circulate and operate, and how certain discourses come to be accepted as “truth” over others.

I embrace the role of the queer rhetorical critic, specifically, in order to harness the following energies that drive queer rhetorical scholarship: (1) the disruption of binaries and traditional categories and (2) the building of alternative queer worlds. As explained by R. Anthony Slagle—with an understanding of the possibilities of rhetorical criticism for queerness as noted by West¹²⁵—a goal of the queer critic is “to dismantle hierarchies by blurring the definitions of specific identity categories.”¹²⁶ This entails highlighting the ways in which people rarely fit neatly into preconceived identity categories and using that ambiguity to tip the scales away from those identities that have historically been privileged. Regardless of the particular category at hand, queer rhetorical scholars are particularly skilled at performing criticism that locates norms and normalization for the sake of deconstruction while considering possibilities for real structural social change.

This dissertation project harnesses the impulse to destabilize binaries and traditional categories by affirming “that there is subversive—and decidedly queer—potential in particular performances of fatness that allows fatness to reject and challenge standards of health and beauty.”¹²⁷ This affirmation leads me to invest in a queer understanding of fatness—or, in other words, a belief that fat bodies are/can be queer—based on the ways in which fat bodies “destabilize categories through which the body is normatively defined...are regulated by

compulsory heterosexuality, and...are medicalized, pathologized, and stigmatized akin to queer bodies.”¹²⁸

Another task of the queer critic is to play a role in queer worldmaking. In other words, queer critics should “attempt to construct a world in which...difference is not only acknowledged, but celebrated.”¹²⁹ As a queer critic, I take up this call to action in that I acknowledge and celebrate difference through the rhetors and texts I study and the orientation I take to those texts. I focus “on difference as a site of power and knowledge” and, thus, reimagine a world defined by difference that makes specific room for the celebration of queer (including fat) bodies and identities.¹³⁰ The primary goal of this dissertation is to investigate moments of fat-positive worldmaking within body positive activism. However, I also believe that the act of criticism itself serves a worldmaking purpose by engaging in transformative knowledge production wherein I, the critic, discover and amplify moments of queer worldmaking within particular communities, unpack the rhetorical means by which these alternative queer worlds are constructed, use the process of criticism and critique to bolster the political efficacy and critical sensibility of (in this case, body positive) worldmakers, and harness the activist and worldmaking energies of this project toward social change.

The tasks of the queer critic to both dismantle binaries and to reimagine and reconstruct a world more accepting of difference encourages not only a particular mode of criticism, but also an eye toward particular rhetors. In other words, the queer critic both approaches texts with the goal of queering, denaturalizing, and destabilizing identity categories but also seeks out rhetors that do this queering themselves. West elaborates on this idea when he argues that rhetors have something to teach us about theorizing corporeality and embodiment. He claims that “we should want something more from our work to help us create the worlds we want to live in as opposed

to reinscribing at every turn the dominant order of things,” and part of this task means attending to rhetors that already do the work of queering/denaturalizing/destabilizing.¹³¹ Attuning ourselves to what we can learn from the rhetor, in turn, allows us to “calibrate our critical assessments” in such a way that “recast[s] the question of normativity such that an act of queering is judged by the rhetors’ ability to productively play the norms against one another and disrupt, even if only temporarily, their normative and normalizing authority.”¹³² This impetus profoundly informs the rhetors and moments of worldmaking I have chosen to engage as case studies in this dissertation. Rather than attempt to provide examples of body positive activism that are representative of the movement as a whole, I have chosen to spotlight rhetors that are constructing fat-positive queer worlds that make intersectionally marginalized bodies livable and that queer, denaturalize, and destabilize the thin-centric assumptions about bodies that are prevalent in dominant discourse.

Methodological Augmentations

Rhetorical criticism has its limits. It is an immensely useful tool for analyzing, unpacking, and more deeply understanding a variety of texts and discourses in the world, however rhetorical criticism is predominantly a mode of analyzing rather than doing. I position myself as an activist and as part of the body positive community and I believe my embodied position and participation in the movement has the potential to yield knowledge about body positivity that could not be gleaned by traditional means (i.e. criticism on its own). Therefore, in chapter five, I augment my rhetorical critical approach with critical autoethnographic performance, wherein I center my own body, my own journey with body positivity and fat activism, as well as grapple with the relationship between my role as a critic and my role as part of the rhetoric I analyze. I draw on the work of George F. McHendry et al. and other scholars of

in situ and rhetorical field methods approaches to make this chapter (as well as the larger dissertation) into an act of “*doing* rhetoric” rather than “just observing or analyzing rhetoric.”¹³³

“Doing rhetoric”

means that the critic is engaged in rhetorical action in the field that has the potential to affect change in the moment as opposed to observing rhetoric for future potential to affect change through action-deferred... Critics who *do* rhetoric on a plane of immanence in the field not only engage political commitments in the moment but also open a space for understanding rhetoric at the level of its practice in the community they are researching and inhabiting.¹³⁴

I engage in the *doing* of body positive rhetoric (rather than just analyzing it) with the aim of using my embodied participation to more robustly understand both the movement itself and embodied social movements more broadly as well as to harness the activist and worldmaking energies of this project toward social change.

The addition of autoethnographic performance responds to the call from advocates of *in situ* approaches to place our bodies as critics into the immanent field of rhetorical action and embrace a corporeal vulnerability that is key to understanding the affective and immaterial dimensions of embodied social movement rhetoric.¹³⁵ I also believe that such an approach is key to understanding the fat-positive queer worlds rhetorically constructed through body positivity as a movement because queer worldmaking is fundamentally an affective and immaterial endeavor.

A final methodological consideration that threads through this entire dissertation is a critical cultural sensibility attuned to media affordances. A critical cultural approach, broadly, orients this project toward critically interrogating the relationship between culture, power, and cultural forces such as media. It allows me to investigate my object of study—body positive activism—as part and parcel of a larger cultural context embedded with hegemonic power systems including fatphobia, patriarchy, racism, and ableism. However, though body positivity exists within this particular cultural context, a critical cultural sensibility also reminds us that

“culture is a site of struggle,” to use the words of Henry A. Giroux.¹³⁶ Therefore, this dissertation attunes itself to the ways in which body positivity engages in struggles over “material resources, communication, politics, and power” in order to deconstruct accepted meanings around bodies and offer new meanings, ways of being, and visions of the world.¹³⁷

This dissertation also embraces a critical cultural sensibility in order to appreciate the role that media technologies and popular culture play in the messages constructed by body positive rhetors. Eschewing both technological determinism (wherein technology itself is seen to fully determine social practice) as well as social constructivism (wherein technology is seen to be fully determined by social practice), this dissertation takes a social shaping approach, which understands technology and social practice(s) as mutually shaping and constitutive. In particular, this project attunes itself to the ways in which technological affordances both shape and are shaped by social practices.

Because this dissertation sets its sights on enactments of body positivity that exist online on particular digital platforms, attending to the affordances of those particular platforms— that is, the performances, enactments, and engagements that those platforms make possible, yet are open to be taken up (or refused, or subverted) by individuals and groups of users—is key to understanding the larger messages and meanings being de/re/constructed. With such a critical sensibility at my disposal, I am able to see social media platforms as *making possible* (but not guaranteeing) particular performances of body positive rhetoric and enactments of power in the world.

By bringing together queer rhetorical criticism with autoethnographic performance and a critical/cultural sensibility, this project offers a deep analysis of body positive activism that not only appreciates the ways in which body positivity dismantles binaries and envisions fat-positive

queer worlds through specific forms of rhetorical labor and platform affordances, but also contributes to the worldmaking process itself by placing my body into the immanent field of rhetorical action and embracing corporeal vulnerability. This project acknowledges, accounts for, and even exploits the limitations of traditional rhetorical methods and pieces together a sort of methodological medley appropriate for the research questions at hand.

Notes

1. Kevin Michael DeLuca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 25.
2. Kevin Michael DeLuca, “Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36, no. 1 (1999): 9–21; John W. Delicath and Kevin Michael DeLuca, “Image Events, the Public Sphere, and Argumentative Practice: The Case of Radical Environmental Groups,” *Argumentation* 17, no. 3 (2003): 315–33.
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WHEN BODY POSITIVITY BECOMES “BODY JUSTICE”: DECOLONIAL, INTERSECTIONAL, & QUEER INFLUENCER RHETORIC AT THE MARGINS

The question “so what is body positivity today?” drives a 2017 article published in *The Curvy Fashionista*, a popular plus-size fashion lifestyle blog.¹ Through synthesizing responses from “six activists and influencers in the plus size community,” the author, Alysse Dalessandro Santiago, reaches an important conclusion—that it is not entirely clear what body positivity is today and that “maybe it never was.”² However, what all six activists and influencer could agree on was that meaningful and critical considerations of intersectionality and structural oppression are missing from the body positive conversation and that “when it comes to body positivity...this conversation isn’t over...It’s time to stop looking for answers and start asking more questions.”³

As noted in the introduction of this dissertation, body positivity, or the body positive movement, follows from a long line of activism and social justice endeavors to promote social acceptance of fat and otherwise non-normative bodies. As body positivity has increased in visibility and made its way into popular discourse and mainstream representation, its political nature and roots in fat activism have been obscured and thin-passing white women have been consistently co-opting and repackaging body positivity as a “movement” centered on politically diluted principles such as “self-love” and “body appreciation.” This depoliticization of body positivity has prompted many activists and influencers to abandon the moniker of “body positivity” in search of a label that repoliticizes the movement and roots it in understandings of structural oppression.

As this dissertation considers the shifting and evolving nature of body positivity, particularly in terms of what it is moving toward and what new opportunities for worldmaking it

makes possible as it transforms, this chapter is specifically interested in some influencers' move from "body positivity" to the moniker and framework of "body justice." Specifically, I analyze how two influencers, @Sassy_latte and Melissa Gibson⁴ have used the platform of body positivity to develop radical, fat activist body politics around the notion of "body justice." Both @Sassy_latte and Melissa started their engagement as activists/influencers with the label of "body positive" and, after several problematic and oppressive experiences and interactions with other body positive influencers, began to evolve both their politics and the ways in which they framed their politics to their audiences. Thus, "body justice" emerged as a way to bring into view questions of systemic oppression, multiple marginalizations, equity, and accountability as it relates to fat and other non-normative bodies in ways that have been obscured by mainstream body positive discourse.⁵ @Sassy_latte and Melissa engage body justice as a framework for body politics that moves beyond diluted notions of love and appreciation toward an injustice frame aimed at subverting hegemonic understandings of bodies and directing moral outrage toward both dominant discourses about bodies and those politically indecisive discourses promoted through mainstream body positivity. In this chapter, I analyze how @Sassy_latte and Melissa's shift toward "body justice" enacts a form of politics from the margins that makes good on the failed promises of body positivity through rhetorical performances and tactics that reject the logics of coloniality, make visible overlapping oppressions, and resist stable notions of identity.

Though body justice may seem like a drastic departure from body positivity, I contend that it is part of body positivity's non-linear journey to return to its roots in radical fat activism and come closer to realizing its liberatory potential for non-normative and intersectionally marginalized bodies. Indeed, @Sassy_latte and Melissa perform body justice as a radically

ambivalent approach to body politics that refuses to be neatly categorized as body positivity even as it draws upon the energy and history of body positive activism. This radical ambivalence allows body justice to exist in the liminal space between body positivity and a future “something else”—a “not yet here,” perhaps, that represents body positivity’s queer futurity and worldmaking potential that has yet to be realized.⁶ Occupying this space of radical ambivalence positions the influencers to be able to both recognize the shortfalls of body positivity as the movement has been co-opted into the mainstream as well as commit to envisioning better, more livable worlds for fat and multiply marginalized bodies.

In this chapter, I both analyze the rhetorical labor performed by @Sassy_latte and Melissa as well as comment on the affordances made possible by digital media platforms for crafting their messages, specifically in relationship to Instagram and the online radio show format. I believe it is important to examine body positivity as it unfolds on social media and is engaged in by “ordinary” users who go on to develop the status of “influencer” because that is representative of how the movement functions—both how it began as well as how it shifts and changes. Even though these particular influencers might not be the most well-known or most wide-reaching, their radically ambivalent performance of “body justice” has important consequences for the shifting nature of body positivity as it materializes the possibility of queerer, more radically fat-positive worlds.

To that end, the remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows. After contextualizing @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s roles as influencers in the body positive movement as well as their political shift to body justice, I analyze their social media posts and radio show episodes, uncovering the various decolonial, intersectional, and queer forms of rhetorical labor they use to construct and articulate the politics of body justice. Ultimately, I argue that, through rhetorical

performances and tactics that reject the logics of coloniality, make visible overlapping oppressions, and resist stable notions of identity, @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s shift toward “body justice” enacts a form of politics from the margins that makes good on the failed promises of body positivity. I then discuss how, in doing so, body justice begins manifesting the fat-positive queer world that body positivity initially envisioned, yet fell short of in its co-optation into mainstream discourse. I conclude with a discussion of the role the platform affordances of Instagram and the radio show play in the construction of such a fat-positive queer world as well as the importance of rhetorical attunement to the margins.

@Sassy_latte & Melissa: Body Justice

Recall from the introduction of this dissertation the three primary concerns that animate critiques of mainstream body positivity: (1) it reproduces Eurocentric standards of beauty and other colonial logics, (2) it lacks a focus on intersecting oppressions as they relate to non-normative bodies, and (3) it has an essentialized subject. Because of these shortfalls, mainstream iterations of body positivity remain politically diluted and confused, if not entirely apolitical, and have proven vulnerable to co-optation and appropriation by thin-passing, white, and otherwise normative (cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.) women. Thus, mainstream versions of body positivity lack the capacity to come through on the movement’s core promise: to increase representation for, recognize the humanity of, and labor toward the liberation of fat, non-normative, and multiply marginalized bodies. As the movement shifts and evolves, however, new frameworks emerge that hold potential for pursuing this goal of embodied liberation through fat-positive worldmaking—one example of such potentiality being “body justice.”

@Sassy_latte and Melissa are examples of two influencers⁷ that still occupy the space of body positivity, even as they attempt to shift to different, more productive ways of approaching

body politics and embodied oppression. Indeed, they both began their time on social media as specifically body positive advocates and have gradually renounced that moniker in favor of the lens of body justice.⁸ Perhaps what is most unique about them as influencers is that they, having met in the online spaces of body positivity, developed an interpersonal relationship and used that interpersonal connection to drive a collaborative form of activism. Their radio show, titled *Body Justice*, embodies their collaboration and offers nuanced, long-form analysis of body-related topics and issues to complement and extend their short-form social media activism.

The *Body Justice* radio show aired on FORward Radio (106.5 fm), “a grassroots, listener-sponsored, all-volunteer community-based FM radio station” local to Louisville, KY, between February 2019 and February 2020.⁹ The description of the show on the FORward Radio website reads as follows:

Body Justice is a show that addresses issues of body image and body marginalization by providing a safe space for marginalized people to engage in a conversation about how their lived experiences are impacted by the way the world perceives and engages with their marginalized bodies. Through reflective discussion and critical analysis, Melissa and [@Sassy_latte] define body justice via an intersectional lens and help us reimagine a world in which people do not experience systemic oppression based on their body size, race, gender, or ability.¹⁰

All episodes of *Body Justice* can be streamed on-demand via a SoundCloud plugin on FORward radio’s website and, therefore, presently function much like a podcast. When the episodes aired between 2019 and 2020, both influencers promoted each month’s episode with Instagram posts urging their followers to tune in. Now, Melissa’s Instagram bio includes that she is the “Co-Host of Body Justice with @Sassy_Latte,” and will often include a link to the radio show episodes as well.¹¹

The *Body Justice* radio show episodes were likely most rhetorically impactful when they initially aired, both because of the influencers’ promotion of each episode to their audience and

because of their timing—this moment in 2019 marks the beginning of @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s shift away from body positivity toward the “something else” of body justice. However, each episode is still an important rhetorical artifact in the current moment because audiences can move easily from @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s short-form Instagram posts to the longer, more nuanced analyses in their radio show if they find that the political commitments of body justice warrant more time and attention. The episodes in their entirety are available and easy to access via links on FORward Radio’s website. In the following sections, I parse out the decolonial, intersectional, and queer rhetorical performances and tactics that thread through @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s social media and radio show content to reveal the ways in which their shift toward “body justice” enacts a form of politics from the margins that makes good on the failed promises of body positivity.

Decolonizing Body Justice

Since many of the critiques launched at body positivity point to the ways the movement upholds hegemonic Eurocentric standards of beauty and other colonial logics, a reframing through body justice must work from a decolonial perspective, which should, at the very least, “expose the Eurocentrism and imperialism of Western discourses.”¹² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in echoing sentiments of Frantz Fanon, argues that decolonial approaches to activism “can only be engaged through active withdrawal of consent and resistance to structures of psychic and social domination,” which provides a framework for understanding how activists might enact decolonial epistemological approaches.¹³ Darrel Wanzer-Serrano brings this approach into the context of discourse and rhetoric, specifically, noting that a decolonial rhetoric “exhibit[s] epistemic disobedience by delinking coloniality and rejecting neoliberal hegemonies.”¹⁴ For Wanzer-Serrano, such epistemic disobedience opens up the possibility for “an ethic of decolonial

love that resists modernity/coloniality's unrepentant homogenizing force."¹⁵ Decolonial forms of rhetorical labor, thus, critique and resist western/imperialist structures of domination, reject neoliberal hegemonies, and transcend western/white-centric homogenization.

@Sassy_latte and Melissa decolonize approaches to body politics that are common in more mainstream versions of body positivity through their radio show and social media posts by (1) performing social justice as a conversation, and (2) privileging story over argument. By performing social justice as a conversation, the influencers engage epistemic disobedience in ways that invite communities to engage with issues of body marginalization on their own terms and, by privileging story, they challenge colonial modes of meaning-making, marking "body justice" as an explicitly decolonial body politics from the margins.

Social Justice as Conversation

One way that @Sassy_latte and Melissa reject the terms set forth by coloniality occurs as they transcend western homogenization and engage in epistemic disobedience through framing social justice as a conversation. This reframing of activism as a conversation—rather than a struggle for victory or the winner-takes-all attitude that is all too common in western epistemologies of power and resources—invites communities to engage on their own terms, honoring their shared humanity and centering the perspectives of marginalized groups.

By explicitly naming their radio show and larger activist efforts as spaces of discussion and conversation, @Sassy_latte and Melissa frame body justice as an ongoing effort that welcomes the possibility to work through difficult topics, ask questions, lean into discomfort, and embrace unfinalizability. For example, in their first radio show episode, @Sassy_latte describes their approach to activism as holding "safe spaces online for people to have these open discussions and ask critical questions of one another, and also to kind of investigate

accountability within those spaces.”¹⁶ Melissa advances a similar goal in her description of her approach to activism and the body justice radio show, claiming that “I kind of want to just have a space where we can kind of work through those issues or questions and have a conversation about.”¹⁷ Moreover, they both go on in that episode to describe the space as: a conversation rather than a “presentation”, a space for having “difficult conversations,” and a place to “get uncomfortable.”¹⁸ Elaborating on what “conversation” means to them, @Sassy_latte provides two helpful explanations:

I think that when you phrase social justice, in the mindset of it being a conversation, it means that you can misspeak, you can misunderstand, you can make mistakes, you figure out how to make amends and backtrack and sort of like regroup.¹⁹

Not all conversations have to have a beginning and an end. And, I think like, that, again, that's just part of the culture, we kind of want to have the final say, and we want to be right, you know what I mean? Like, again, it just goes, everything just goes back to that sort of duality mindset where there's a right and a wrong, and there's a force and opposing force, and there's nothing else involved. I think that like, not all conversations necessarily have to come to an end, not all conversations have to be resolved.²⁰

This repeated and explicit naming of body justice politics as a conversation and discussion eschews dualistic western notions of right vs wrong and, instead, invites a variety of perspectives, experiences, and differences in ways that honor the lived experiences of marginalized folks.

Framing social justice as a conversation that invites a variety of perspectives and voices to participate resonates with many feminist approaches to rhetoric, especially “invitational rhetoric.” Invitational rhetoric “challenges the traditional definition of rhetoric as persuasion, the conscious intent to change others” and gain control over them by, instead, privileging the exchanging of perspectives and seeking to “generate understanding among individuals with different perspectives.”²¹ Though framing social justice as a conversation in the ways that @Sassy_latte and Melissa do certainly challenges traditional modes of persuasion and privileges

the exchanging of perspectives, this particular tactic of decolonial rhetoric places more significance on the positionality of those involved in the conversation. Indeed, critical scholars have critiqued invitational rhetoric for presupposing equality among all interlocutors in an invitational rhetorical exchange which, due to historical dynamics of power, rarely ever actually exists in a rhetorical situation.²² The decolonial practice of framing social justice as a conversation as performed via body justice politics, instead, recognizes that interlocutors are never fully equal due to dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, body size, class, etc. and, thus, explicitly centers the voices and perspectives of those most marginalized by historical patterns of oppression. Performing social justice as a conversation, thus, embraces the invitational move to include differing perspectives while also contesting assumptions rooted in whiteness about civility, equality, and self-determination that constrain many established feminist rhetorical approaches, making it an explicitly decolonial approach that is informed by feminist praxis.

Indeed, embracing disagreement and differing perspectives while centering the voices, perspectives, and epistemologies of marginalized people characterizes @Sassy_latte and Melissa's shift to decolonial rhetorics of conversation. They regularly intersperse their radio show episodes with reminders such as "this isn't the end all be all," "we're just one experience," "we have different experiences," and "we disagree a lot, we're very different."²³ They also model healthy disagreement through regular interjections about how they disagree with one another as co-hosts. They, then, pair these moments of healthy, regular disagreement with explicit moves to center marginalized voices. For example, in their first radio show episode, @Sassy_latte reminds listeners "that body justice involves kind of giving voice and representation back to marginalized people," elaborating later that "it's not about negating the experience of people who are not in marginalized bodies, but it is to celebrate the experience of people who've been forgotten,

who've been disappeared, who've been gaslit, who've endured systemic abuse, and kind of just giving them a platform that just otherwise doesn't exist outside of the safety of a social justice movement specifically meant for that group of people.”²⁴ By pairing invitations to disagree with this explicit uplifting of marginalized voices, @Sassy_latte and Melissa engage in epistemic disobedience that rejects colonized ways of knowing that homogenize knowledge and empower only the powerful to speak credibly on topics of public interest.

These interspersed reminders about the conversational nature of body justice and its commitment to embracing a range of perspectives and experiences allow @Sassy_latte and Melissa to make good on their promise for body justice to be a safe space that encourages open discussion—one that poses and considers (rather than definitively answers) critical questions about body politics. They allow, and even encourage, their listeners to exist in discomfort, rather than resolving issues for them. This welcoming of discomfort is, then, echoed in the form of the radio show through awkward silence, @Sassy_latte and Melissa talking over each other, and shifts in tone as disagreement occurs. The show feels uncomfortable at times, yet it never relinquishes its focus on open discussion. There are moments when the hosts misspeak, misunderstand each other, and make mistakes, including moments where they must backtrack and either take accountability for their misinterpretations or ask for clarification from their co-host.

Perhaps, most importantly, the influencers highlight the ongoing nature of social justice conversations—their lack of resolution, their unfinalizability. An illustrative example can be found in their May 2019 episode of *Body Justice* when @Sassy_latte explains to their listeners and their guest on the show, Dr. Melissa Fabello, that “Melissa [Gibson] and I actually disagree a lot. Melissa feels like there's absolutely no need for allyship, and I am in the middle.”²⁵ The

influencers then spend the entire episode tussling with the idea of allyship within body positive and body justice advocacy, sharing their perspectives, hearing their guest's stance, and, ultimately, concluding the episode with still differing positions on the value of allyship. In their willingness to wade in the discomfort of questions unresolved, @Sassy_latte and Melissa distinguish body justice not as an answer to the problems of body marginalization that pervade our culture but, instead, as a starting point and a welcoming space for asking different kinds of questions and considering other types of knowledge.

Privileging Story Over Argument

In the spirit of considering other types of knowledge, a second rhetorical tactic that @Sassy_latte and Melissa use to move beyond colonial rhetorical frames is privileging story over traditional forms of argument and meaning-making. A common thread that animates many decolonial visions of rhetoric is the notion that “defining rhetoric in terms of persuasion promotes violence.”²⁶ Considering rhetoric as persuasion privileges a sense of conquest, of imposing our reality, truth, and meaning onto another person without their explicit consent and, therefore, “helps legitimise...the violence that is at the core of the western/European worldview.”²⁷ Decolonial approaches to rhetoric, then, must privilege other purposes of rhetoric, especially those other ways of meaning-making practiced by marginalized and colonized groups.

Story offers an alternative method of meaning-making that, instead of seeking conquest, “allows listeners to make their own meaning.”²⁸ Rachel Jackson, drawing on decolonial Indigenous rhetorics, describes story as “a decolonial strategy that disrupts the categories of modernity/coloniality that seek to divide us by providing a transrhetorical mode independent of thesis statements, evidence, and academic discourse.”²⁹ She goes on to elaborate on the transrhetorical function of stories—i.e. the ways they make possible “rhetorical movement and

change/exchange”—arguing that they function “across space and time to shape community identities, inspire communal actions, and foster both movement and movements toward decoloniality.”³⁰ Stories, then, offer a decolonial form of meaning-making that allow activists and influencers to move away from colonizing rhetorical modalities like thesis statements and academic forms of evidence while inviting their audiences into the meaning-making process and transcending limitations of space and time. For body justice activism specifically, stories allows @Sassy_latte and Melissa to engage in decolonial meaning-making from a variety of angles, including highlighting emerging problems within body positivity, asking new questions about body politics, offering semi-developed perspectives about the future of body justice, and modeling a relational and collaborative community that demonstrates deep trust toward marginalized people. Stories essentially serve as a starting point for reflection, critique and political action for body justice activism that allows the influencers to “live within their truths” without epistemologically dominating others.³¹

@Sassy_latte and Melissa center storytelling, especially telling the stories of their own oppression, as a powerful decolonial rhetorical modality and make their investment in storytelling explicit from the beginning of their radio show. Indeed, in their inaugural episode of *Body Justice*, while explaining the purpose of the radio show, they explain that “we want a space and we want to tell our story, and we don't want anyone else telling us it for us,” contending that storytelling is “what we really need to...keep centered here.”³² Moreover, in their second episode, which aired on March 13th of 2019, @Sassy_latte begins by explaining that “we feel so passionate about storytelling, we want to tell some of our personal stories as well as the stories of other people around us who have sort of overlapping experiences” and ends the same episode with an elaboration on this point:

We just really believe in the power of storytelling. We just think that so many stories of marginalized people get lost or they're altered, again, just within our existence, they're stripped of their value, of their specific value, as it ties to a marginalized identity in order to make the general population feel comfortable and proud of us, or feel inspired by us. And so, we just really want to get back to sort of raw storytelling where we're living within our truths.³³

By making explicit the importance of storytelling through statements such as “we just really believe in the power of storytelling” as well as presenting the telling of their own stories as a way of performing the authenticity of their truths, @Sassy_latte and Melissa mark body justice as a space ungoverned by the rhetorical violence of persuasion.³⁴ Body justice, both as a radio show and as a concept, signifies a space where stories are shared and valued as important resources for meaning-making and as a starting point for marginalized community building and political action.

Once distinguished as a space that privileges storytelling as a rhetorical resource, the rest of the radio show episodes make good on the promise to share stories and use them to build community as well as inspire action and resistance. For example, in their July 2019 episode of *Body Justice*, Melissa and @Sassy_latte collaboratively recount a story about how they engaged with the #bopoinfluencer bingo chart. The #bopoinfluence bingo chart, as they describe, was an Instagram image template that circulated in body positive spaces the year prior. Melissa explains that bingo charts, in general, emerged on Instagram as a kind of “tongue in cheek way of picking up on stereotypes that were associated with different groups of people.”³⁵ Essentially, the options on the bingo chart represent stereotypical—and generally problematic—manifestations of mainstream body positivity often performed by those deemed as “influencers.” As @Sassy_latte explains, some of those options included things like “self-care disguised as diet culture, body positivity is about loving yourself, love your curves and your glitter stretchmarks, gets famous and then has weight loss surgery, hates the word fat, #ad.”³⁶

After chronicling the backlash they received from some of their followers for sharing the #bopoinfluencer bingo chart on Instagram, the arc of Melissa and @Sassy_latte's story shifts to describe the conversations it triggered between the two influencers, themselves, and the questions it raised for them about the state of online body positivity. Ultimately, they engage a nuanced conversation about the commodification of bodies and activism, the trivialization of fat experience, and the fight for visibility within a movement that was quickly leaving bodies like theirs behind.

At no point during this exchange—this performance of collaborative storytelling—do @Sassy_latte or Melissa make any clear, definitive arguments about the shortfalls of body positivity as evidenced by the #bopoinfluencer bingo backlash. Instead, they use this shared story to accomplish several other decolonial rhetorical goals. First, they highlight emerging problems within the movement with comments such as “a lot of us were feeling really, like it had been co-opted and...trivialized.”³⁷ They also take this collaborative storytelling opportunity to ask new questions—for example, “how do you keep the representation that you have fought and carved out for yourself, when you're now in a space that like, where you're no longer significant?”³⁸ Finally, the influencers use their reflections on this story to offer semi-developed perspectives on the topic at hand, noting that “I think when the space became commodified, and it wasn't about like radical self-love and radical self-representation, and when the space became depoliticized and commercialized instead, I feel like in a lot of ways fat people had no choice but to sort of compete, like we do in the world in general.”³⁹ @Sassy_latte and Melissa mobilize the story itself as a resource for further reflection and as a starting point for critique of mainstream body positivity as a form of political action. The story of the #bopoinfluencer bingo debacle also

brings into the view the evolution of ideas (such as representation and visibility) as they move from the rhetorical sphere of body positivity into the realm of body justice.

Moreover, @Sassy_latte and Melissa also utilize their stories toward community building through exposing the commonality of particular personal narratives. For example, in their August 2019 episode of *Body Justice*, @Sassy_late invites Melissa to share the story of her experience with a particular form of fatphobia, stating “I’m curious about your personal experience with intentional weight loss.”⁴⁰ @Sassy_latte, then, leads into their question with, “I think like, we’ve all been there, you know what I mean? So, I am definitely curious about your story.”⁴¹ Melissa then proceeds to recount her story, starting her experience as an eight- or nine-year-old receiving a gym membership from her parents and moving through interactions with various weight loss programs and diets while framing her narrative as “a very common story.”⁴²

By framing harmful experiences with intentional weight loss through statements like “we’ve all been there” and distinguishing Melissa’s personal narrative as “a very common story,” the influencers highlight the relational nature of experiences of fatphobia. They encourage their listeners to move beyond isolation and shame and, instead, embrace their stories as a way of relating with one another through commonalities as a foundation for community building. In doing so, @Sassy_latte and Melissa establish body justice as a space of community built upon common experiences and narratives of marginalization.

Stories function as a rhetorical resource within the space and practice of body justice that build community and inspire action, specifically as they highlight the shortcomings of mainstream body positivity while offering possibilities for moving forward. In this way, stories both operate transrhetorically and mark a specifically decolonial approach to meaning-making within body justice discourse; they eschew the conquest-oriented nature of strategies such as

thesis statements and academic forms of evidence and, instead, privilege narratives, experiences, and the newly available perspectives and ways of thinking made possible by sharing those narratives openly with an audience. The radio show form allows @Sassy_latte and Melissa to tell their stories collaboratively—they can build on one another’s narrative, intersperse the recounting of each story with another’s reflections, and tell their individual stories in a way that allow them to merge as one common experience. In doing so, they model what the community imagined by and through body justice can look like—one that is relational, collaborative, and trusting of multiply marginalized people. Moreover, the storytelling the influencers perform in their radio show consistently links to their visual storytelling done via Instagram posts. They often reference their previous Instagram posts, expanding on the story told, offering additional context, and reflecting on what they have learned since making the posts. In doing so, not only does their storytelling on *Body Justice* operate transrhetorically and decolonially, it also links to their performances of embodied decolonial rhetoric via social media.

By performing social justice as a conversation and privileging story over argument, @Sassy_latte and Melissa engage in decolonial forms of rhetorical labor rooted in a sense of epistemic obedience that allows them to delink from coloniality and its structures of domination. In doing so, the influencers carve out body justice as a decolonial rhetorical space where the lived experiences of marginalized folks are honored and those lived experiences serve as a starting point for political organizing and transformation. By using body justice as a conceptual space to highlight the shortfalls of body positivity and offer a path forward, @Sassy_latte and Melissa perform the possibility of a fat-positive world ungoverned by the logics of coloniality.

Body Justice as Intersectional Rhetoric

In addition to decolonial forms of rhetorical labor, much of @Sassy_Latte and Melissa's work infuses their activism with intersectionality, overcoming the inadequacies of mainstream body positivity that tends to ignore overlapping forms of systemic oppression and the ways in which those comes to bear on multiply marginalized bodies. I have argued in depth elsewhere that intersectional rhetoric mobilizes the theoretical and analytic principles of intersectionality through embodied rhetorical praxis to make nuanced political arguments about oppression on multiple axes.⁴³ Therefore, intersectional forms of rhetorical labor serve to acknowledge and make visible how multiple layers of marginalization work together and compound one another to produce experiences of oppression that are distinct from any singular form of discrimination.⁴⁴

Intersectional rhetoric constitutes a convergence between intersectionality as an analytic sensibility and as a form of embodied rhetorical praxis by manifesting junctures between discourse and materiality, linking theory and experience, and blending academic and activist spheres. By bringing into view how rhetors link discourse and materiality, intersectional rhetoric "illuminates how various rhetorical tools and devices can serve as discursive instruments for mirroring material experiences of oppression."⁴⁵ By connecting theory to experience, this form of rhetoric "locates the body as a valuable site of knowledge production and rhetorical construction that allows rhetors to make compelling claims about how oppression comes to bear materially upon marginalized bodies."⁴⁶ Finally, by emphasizing how the intersectional rhetor works at the crossroads of academic theorizing and activism, intersectional rhetoric demonstrates how "concepts such as intersectionality...travel and transform across intellectual spheres."⁴⁷ As I reveal in the proceeding sections, @Sassy_Latte and Melissa utilize all three features of intersectional rhetoric throughout their radio show episodes and social media posts and, in doing

so, reject the universalizing tendencies of mainstream body positive advocacy and redirect the focus of body justice activism onto multiply marginalized bodies in all of their complexity.

Discourse and Materiality

Intersectional rhetoric uses creative manipulations of language to represent the materiality of embodied oppression. Thus, the intersectional rhetor

uses discursive strategies, tools, and devices to exemplify, mirror, and conjure up material experiences of multiple oppressions in order to make the corporeality of marginalization legible in language. Language is a helpful analytical tool for intersectional aims, but it can never quite encapsulate the embodied experience of moving through the world as a multiply marginalized person. Therefore, the intersectional rhetor creatively uses, misuses, and manipulates the signifying system of discourse to come as close as possible to touching the material, embodied experience of intersectional oppression.⁴⁸

One specific way @Sassy_latte and Melissa craft a link between discourse and materiality is through regular, meaningful positionality statements, which allow them to “rhetorically choose the margin as well as assert [their] ethos as location.”⁴⁹ Indeed, both @Sassy_latte and Melissa begin their first episode of *Body Justice* with clear, explicit statements that position them in relationship to axes of power related to body size and race (as well as a few others in @Sassy_latte’s case, specifically). Melissa positions herself as coming “from a perspective of being a fat white woman,” and @Sassy_latte considers her experiences at the intersection of “being fat, but also...queer and fat, or nonbinary and fat, or disabled and fat and Black.”⁵⁰ This kind of intersectional location work does not just animate their first radio show episode, but is peppered throughout subsequent episodes and social media posts with repeated reminders about speaking from the experience “as a fat woman,”⁵¹ in Melissa’s case, and statements such as “I am a smaller fat person,” “being fat, Black, non-binary,”⁵² and “as a Black person”⁵³ for @Sassy_latte.

The intersectional space crafted by the radio show hosts urges their guests to echo this rhetorical move. For example, in their first episode of 2020, their guest Baby Fat is sure to distinguish that she “experience[s] fatness as a...cisgender white woman” before navigating a conversation about visibility, accountability, privilege, trauma, and marginalization within body positive spaces.⁵⁴ As a more extended example, in their episode with Dr. Melissa Fabello on May 8th, 2019, the hosts asked their guest to “describe yourself and your marginalizations versus your privileges, just so that people can have a context, because you know, this is on air and nobody can see what we look like,” eliciting the following response from Dr. Fabello:

Yeah. So, I am a... so many identities, okay. I am a cisgender woman who's bisexual/pansexual/queer. I'm more or less able, but I deal with mental health issues. I'm middle-class, very highly traditionally educated, white, thin, what am I missing? Those are several of my identities. I hold more privileges than I do marginalizations in the world.⁵⁵

Elsewhere, I have argued that positionality statements are “important rhetorical maneuvers that allow intersectional rhetors to translate their experiences of struggle at the margins into embodied ethos.”⁵⁶ They serve “as a discursive act that rhetorically conjures up...[the] material experience of being on the margins of society” and allows rhetors to articulate their ethos and credibility in and through their location at the margin.⁵⁷ @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s use of positionality statements certainly accomplishes all of this and more, including layering their arguments with an acknowledgement of privilege related to embodied experiences such as being white, being a smaller fat person, and being cisgender (in the cases of Melissa, @Sassy_latte, and Dr. Fabello, respectively). These rhetors position themselves at the margins, while also recognizing moments in which their experiences, bodies, and identities orient them closer to the center, thus empowering their audiences to read their claims as existing on a multifaceted map, located within various points of privilege and marginalization.

Positionality statements, as used within @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s radio show and social media posts, locate their voices and subjectivities within a complex field of privileges and oppressions, ensuring that they can never speak for all people, especially those more marginalized than them in specific ways. Moreover, when they use positionality statements to acknowledge that they are speaking from a position of privilege, they empower their audiences to question their credibility and validity, rather than speak authoritatively on topics that affect them less severely due to certain privileges.

Theory and Experience

Not only does intersectional rhetoric manifest a juncture between discourse and materiality, it also “emerges at the point at which theory converges with bodily experience in rhetorical practice—the point at which rhetoric uses the experiences of the body to make sense of, make visible, and materialize the theoretical tenets of intersectionality.”⁵⁸ It favors experiential, embodied knowledge and uses the body as evidence—as “proof” of claims about the overlapping nature of oppression. To engage the intersectional rhetorical tactic of linking theory to experience, “the intersectional rhetor uses their body as evidence, taking the...knowledge production made available from the body-as-starting-point to construct a sort of ‘body rhetoric’ that uses the multiply oppressed body as the ‘site and substance’ of the intersectional rhetor’s argument.”⁵⁹ @Sassy_Latte and Melissa link theory and experience by invoking their own embodied interactions with the world to more deeply theorize overlapping forms of oppression as related to body positivity and body justice.

@Sassy_Latte and Melissa’s use of positionality statements, as explained above, gestures to their consistent centering of their own embodied experiences. However, they do not stop at simply positioning or locating themselves in webs of privileges and oppression, they often

recount specific moments, events, and experiences within their lives that inform their conceptions of and approaches to body justice. This rhetorical move overlaps with the use of decolonial storying that I discussed earlier, however it is a distinct form of rhetorical labor that uses personal, embodied experiences—whether or not they are told *as stories*—for the specific purpose of building a body of evidence from which the influencers can “theorize” the political aims of body justice. Through this form of intersectional rhetorical labor, their lived experiences become “proof” for their claims about the imperative of body justice politics.

For example, in their first radio show episode, @Sassy_latte recounts their general experience in online body positive spaces to theorize the unlivability of those spaces for their marginalized body:

My personal experience within the body positivity community is that I experienced a lot of sort of like, underhanded racism, and I realized that I wasn't allowed to talk about the racism that I was experiencing. Because everybody, their response to my being upset about racism was always that I should just try to focus on the bigger picture and focus more on the community and not be divisive, and all of those things. And so, I just realized that trying to have my needs met as a Black non-binary person, it just felt like an impossibility within that space, because it felt like I had too many marginalized identities for me to be allowed to exist comprehensively in one space. It was kind of like parts of my identity could be celebrated and unpacked in different spaces, but not all at the same time within body positivity. And that's really kind of what intersectionality is all about. It's about looking at a person comprehensively and recognizing that somebody could be you know, living in, you know, poverty, and fat and disabled and Black at the same time and what does their story look like? And how are they experiencing multiple, conflicting and simultaneously existing systems of oppression?⁶⁰

@Sassy_latte invokes their experience with mainstream body positivity to theorize why that space proved unlivable for bodies like theirs, coming to the conclusion that mainstream body positivity could not meet the needs of their multiply marginalized body (i.e. “I had too many marginalized identities”). In doing so, @Sassy_latte distinguishes a core pitfall of mainstream body positivity—that it has proven willing to grapple with, “celebrate,” or “unpack” only one aspect of a persons’ identity, rather than working through multiple, intersecting facets

simultaneously. This narrative, which appears early on in their repertoire of radio show episodes, paired with other, more specific instances of singular (non-intersectional) thinking within body positivity, allows @Sassy_latte's experience of exclusion in that space to serve as evidence in support of the argument for body justice.

Both @Sassy_latte and Melissa's social media posts center on lived experiences too, inviting others to witness their entanglements with privilege and oppression on a day-to-day basis. Both their Instagram pages provide insight into their life and the kinds of things they deal with in the banality of the everyday and how those banal experiences in the ever-evolving webs of privilege and marginalization inform their theorizing of what body justice is and what it should do.

For example, in a post from September 23rd, 2019, Melissa captions an image of her in professional attire (a high-waisted, navy-blue pencil skirt with a white, short sleeved wrap blouse) and a backpack tossed over her right shoulder with reflections on her experience as a law student. Her eyes stare seriously into the camera as the caption begins "law school doesn't often make me feel bad ass."⁶¹ She goes on to expand on her experience as a law student, specifically what she views as problematic within law school education: "lack of critical analysis, the inauthentic interactions with other students, the competitive language used in most conversations, lack of understanding of privilege, etc."⁶² The remainder of the post goes on to explain how Melissa's empowerment in the space of law school relies on her having a sense of autonomy, of her being able "to be the determiner of my life and feelings and not allowing others to define who I should be."⁶³ She then uses this experience and these reflections as they relate to the autonomy of marginalized groups to advance the following claim about body justice:

And that's why I fight for body justice and the autonomy of everyone. Because those of us in marginalized bodies don't get to tell the world who we are and be believed. We are

stripped of our identity as an individual and burdened first with the stereotypes and stigma of our visible marginalizations. Empowering myself is not simply about loving and accepting myself but about fighting for my autonomy and my humanity.⁶⁴

In this post, Melissa uses her experience within a space of relative privilege to theorize the importance of autonomy within body justice politics. By situating herself within the privileged space of education while highlighting the experience of being a fat woman who is often stripped of autonomy and humanity—a rhetorical move emphasized by the inclusion of a full body picture of her fat body in professional clothing—Melissa uses the particular moment where privilege (education) meets oppression (fatness) to make nuanced claims about autonomy for marginalized people within body justice. In this process, she also identifies and critiques body positivity’s inability to prioritize autonomy and empowerment through her subtle statement that “empowering myself is not simply about loving and accepting myself,” which gestures to mainstream body positivity’s misplaced focus on self-love and acceptance. Once again, body justice is offered as a space that accounts for intersecting forms of privilege and oppression and uses the marginalized, disempowered body as a starting point for theorizing liberation.

Both @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s radio show episodes and social media posts mobilize lived, embodied experience as the ultimate evidence for claims about body justice and who must be at the center of body justice politics—particularly multiply marginalized fat folks. By using embodied experiences as a starting point for theory-building around body justice, they construct body justice as a space rooted in the embodied epistemologies of multiply marginalized groups.

Academic and Activist Spheres

Alongside their moves to link discourse and materiality as well as theory and experience, in true intersectional rhetorical form, @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s content also works to blend academic and activist spheres in their move from body positivity to body justice. They take up

the job of the “intersectional rhetor...to bring their awareness and deep intellectual understanding of intersectionality into their politics, crafting a bridge from academia to activism.”⁶⁵ They mobilize their understanding of intersectionality as a theoretical framework to drive body justice activism and, in doing so, “bring the theory and consequences of intersectionality to life for audiences through examples and analysis that are audience-appropriate and -specific.”⁶⁶

@Sassy_latte and Melissa blend academic and activist spheres in a variety of ways through their radio show and social media content. For example, they often bring academic language into their discussion of body justice politics. Indeed, in their first radio show episode, they frame the show as a space where they and their listeners can “critically analyze” and “critically assess” mass mediated messages.⁶⁷ This language of critical analysis and critical assessment sounds much like what one might hear in a lecture hall or read in an academic article. However, here, this language brings the spirit of the lecture hall and article into activism. Moreover, Melissa regularly invokes her academic experience, mobilizing her “Master’s in Women’s and Gender Studies” and her thesis on fatness and the body positive movement as forms of academic-based ethos.⁶⁸ However, the most significant and consistent way both influencers merge academic and activist approaches is by using their radio show as a space to define complex terms to increase the accessibility of their arguments and perspectives for their listeners. In doing so, the influencers invite their listeners to participate in and become a part of a counter-knowledge production project around issues of body politics.

In their first radio show episode, @Sassy_latte and Melissa dedicate a substantial amount of time defining what may, indeed, be their most important key term as radio show hosts—“body justice.” Melissa goes first, describing body justice as being “about recognizing the different

experiences of people based on the way that their body looks, and understanding that there are justice issues...that there's oppression, and there's marginalization.”⁶⁹ After some more

elaboration on Melissa’s part, @Sassy_latte adds that

I definitely have that same definition in mind. I also think like for me, whenever I think about body justice, I also think about the ways in which people in certain bodies are not held accountable for the oppression that they sort of commit, or I guess commit over other groups, so, for me, I when I think about body justice and systemic oppression, I also think about a sense of equity for people who are in marginalized bodies.⁷⁰

The influencers then go on to define other foundational concepts that inform their activist work, especially “body positivity” and “intersectionality.” @Sassy_latte explains that “body positivity is unique in that it specifically recognizes fatphobia as a form of systemic oppression, and I don't think that there is another space that specifically recognizes fatphobia as systemic oppression.”⁷¹ After providing a firm definition and intellectual history of the concept of intersectionality, tracing its naming by Kimberlé Crenshaw while also gesturing back to its use by queer women of color who were left out of mainstream feminism in the 1960s and 70s, @Sassy_latte continues on to explain what it looks like to bring these two concepts—body positivity and intersectionality—together:

So, intersectionality is both a praxis and some people consider their identities to be intersectional, in other words, they experience overlapping systems of oppression simultaneously... we really want to make sure that we're looking at situations comprehensively, and that really means not specifically focusing on fatness, not specifically focusing on Black community issues, individually, but just always trying to be mindful of an overlap there, because often times, there is an overlap, and if we're not paying attention to those overlaps, any kind of awareness we try to spread or conversations that we try to have, they'll always kind of fall short... if I'm spreading awareness about fatness, I do want to include what it means to be fat and Black or fat and queer or fat and trans, because I think that all of those things will overlap in that they have fatness as a commonality, but they'll also look very different because of the intersecting marginalized identities.⁷²

@Sassy_latte and Melissa do this definitional work in other episodes as well, taking time in their March 2019 episode to elaborate on the concept of “systemic oppression” and diving

back into the notion of intersectionality as “a tool of praxis” the next month.⁷³ By defining key terms that inform their activism and arguments in ways that promote both intellectual depth and accessibility, @Sassy_latte and Melissa disturb the hierarchal flow of information that attempts to confine knowledge production to the ivory tower. For example, for those listeners interested in social and political issues related to fatness, the influencers expose them to the idea that examining fatness intersectionally entails considering “overlapping systems of oppression,” including questioning “what it means to be fat and Black or fat and queer or fat and trans” without ever having to open a book or wade through dense academic language.⁷⁴ Instead, @Sassy_latte and Melissa explain these concepts clearly and provide examples for added depth of understanding. This definitional work allows the influencers to circulate several academic concepts to a diverse public audience through the lens of body justice activism. In doing so, they make their audiences part of a counter-knowledge production project that privileges the accessibility of ideas and empowers listeners to learn more, deepen their understanding, and use that new depth of understanding to enrich their body positive (or body justice) activism.

All three features of intersectional rhetoric—manifesting junctures between discourse and materiality, linking theory and experience, and blending academic and activists spheres—do distinct, yet complimentary work within @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s activist content, allowing them to make arguments about overlapping forms of oppression. The influencers embrace the role of the intersectional rhetor to redirect the focus of body justice activism back onto multiply marginalized bodies and away from the slightly-larger-than-average, white (and able-bodied, heterosexual, etc.) women who often take up space in mainstream body positivity and centralize the ways in which thin-centricity affects them most readily. Intersectional forms of rhetorical labor ultimately bring attention to the ways in which structures of oppression interact to more

harshly come to bear on particular bodies, including the bodies of the influencers themselves. This not only rejects the universalizing perspective of body positivity in its current, mainstream form, but also empowers those interested in body justice to apprehend the complexity of multiple, interacting forms of marginalization through accessible, audience-appropriate content.

Queering Body Justice

The third set of critiques aimed at mainstream body positivity concern its essentialized subject. However, the fact that said essentialized subject is a white, slightly-larger-than-average cisgender woman who is assumed both heterosexual and able-bodied seems to be a concern best addressed by intersectional forms of rhetorical labor, which I have already discussed. However, the fact that body positivity coalesces around an essentialized subject at all begs the work of queer rhetorical approaches. Indeed, queer(ed) forms of rhetorical labor function in two primary ways—to challenge essentialized notions of identity and to disrupt normative binaries.

@Sassy_Latte and Melissa’s work accomplishes these goals in a multitude of ways, constructing body justice as a queer approach to body politics and never letting the movement center on stable notions of identity.

Two specific queer forms of rhetorical labor that @Sassy_latte and Melissa utilize to challenge the essentialized subject of mainstream body positivity include: (1) refusing neat packages, and (2) embracing a politics of difference.

Refusing Neat Packages

“Challenging essentialized notions of identity and disrupting normative binaries” both come to fruition in the queer rhetorical tactic of refusing neat packages.⁷⁵ Hetero- and otherwise normative (i.e. anti-queer) ways of thinking attempt to essentialize bodies, identities, narratives into neat, palatable, consumable packages that resonate with widely held concepts of normalcy.

Queer approaches, instead, resist this essentialization and assimilation into normalcy and refuse the neat packages offered via the normative.

@Sassy_latte and Melissa refuse neat packages in their radio show and social media content in several ways and, in doing so, offer body justice as a way of queerly rethinking body politics. For example, in their first radio show episode, @Sassy_latte critiques the ways in which mainstream body positivity tries to “make everything nice and neat” by upholding only certain narratives about bodies.⁷⁶ They then articulate the *Body Justice* radio show as an alternative to that nice neatness—a space that makes room for all kinds of different narratives:

And...rather than finding ways to neatly package it or police it, rather than doing those things, we're going to like stand back and cheer people on and allow them to tell their stories, no matter how heartbreaking, or how celebratory they might be⁷⁷

Moreover, they present this approach to body politics as a way to “queer the conversation on critical discussions and critical thought,” demonstrating a firm understanding of both the normative constraints that limit more common conversations about bodies as well as the need for queer approaches that refuse to be packaged or policed.⁷⁸

The refusal of neat packages also manifests in the *Body Justice* radio show in the form of conversations about embracing messiness and imperfection, challenging essentialized notions of fatness, and challenging dominant narratives. For example, in their episode on June 12, 2019, @Sassy_latte and Melissa regularly refer to the difficulty of having conversations about allyship in body politics, but champion the importance of having such conversations even though “it gets messy.”⁷⁹ Similarly, in their July 2019 episode, Melissa discusses how her social media posts “show the messy bits of my life,” elaborating that

I show the bits of my life that are like, well, here's a snap of like a picture you know, of me. I'm not photo shopping it and I'm not doing anything. A) I might be drunk, you know, like, whatever it is like, who knows? Like, I want to share all of that because I

want, and I want to share the joy, I want to share with the good times, but I also want to share the like, times that are messy and heartbreaking and hard. And I also just, I want to, like thrive and all of that, like, I don't feel like any of that is me, messing, me making mistakes, like, or me showing parts of my life that I'm ashamed of. And I'm not, because I'm not I'm not ashamed of any parts of that life, like, I'm a whole person, I am not always going to get it right.⁸⁰

By refusing to only share content that fits within normative narratives about things like confidence, joy, and life, Melissa encourages her followers to embrace her as a whole, imperfect, messy person. This translates to the political goals of body justice, which also deal in wholeness, imperfection, and messiness.

Melissa engages a similar move when challenging essentialized notions of fatness in the February 2019 episode of their radio show in which she critiques the ways in which mainstream body positive advocates and influencers must “fit into a certain kind of fatness” and, in doing so, are stripped of their autonomy and complete experience as fat people.⁸¹ Her critique of this essentializing of fatness rests on its inability to celebrate fat people in their wholeness—“of all that they are, even the parts that are hard, even the parts that don’t serve a purpose for the entire movement.”⁸² By critiquing mainstream body positivity for essentializing the fat experience and only uplifting fat bodies that “serve a purpose,” Melissa reveals body justice as a space that embraces difference—difference in terms of embodiment and experience—and one that refuses to play by capitalist rules of usability and exploitability.

Finally, in the April 2019 episode of their radio show, the influencers reveal that body justice politics queerly refuse neat packages by also challenging dominant narratives. Indeed, as they discuss the utility of self-care within mainstream body positivity, Melissa discusses how depoliticized notions of self-love and confidence are essentially useless to her daily experience and her activism. Instead, she explains that

what really does, actually, change the way that I interact with the world is when I feel empowered. When I feel like I'm working towards creating a better world for myself and for people who look like me. When I'm challenging narratives.⁸³

Not only does this particular discussion gesture to the worldmaking imperative of body justice politics, it also names “challenging narratives” as a queer approach to empowerment and social change. Many of the more marginal forms of body positivity labor to challenge narratives around bodies, especially fat and otherwise marginalized bodies, and that work is named in the *Body Justice* radio show as a mode of activism that has both personal and community-wide effects.

Refusing neat packages, whether by embracing messiness, challenging essentialized notions of fatness, or challenging dominant narratives, allows @Sassy_latte and Melissa to queerly reconfigure body justice politics away from an essentialized subject in ways that honor diverse embodiments and experiences, embrace marginalized people in their wholeness and imperfection, and mobilize queer rhetorical tactics toward activism and social change.

Embracing a Politics of Difference

What separates queer approaches to activism and politics from traditional identity politics is a move away from advocacy based in collective identity to a “politics of difference,” according to queer critics like Anthony Slagle.⁸⁴ By reconceptualizing identity in ways that embrace difference and diversity, queer forms of activism “transcend...the essentializing and totalizing nature of identity politics” and make room for those bodies that have been excluded from other movements.⁸⁵

Body justice politics, unlike mainstream body positivity that coalesces around an essential subject/identity/body, embrace difference and diversity by centering those that are most intersectionally marginalized. Instead of relying on an essentialized notion of identity—including an essentialized notion of fatness—body justice politics keep overlapping experiences of

marginalization at their center. In doing so, body justice marks itself as a form of activism that is less concerned about articulating who it is for and more focused on unpacking the complexity of overlapping, intersecting forms of oppression that come to bear on marginalized bodies.

This centering of the most multiply marginalized bodies animates much of @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s radio show and social media content. For example, in their April 2019 episode, they discuss the power and empowerment of centering their activism on “politicized identities.”⁸⁶ This move to “politicized identities” is markedly different than identity politics because it encourages listeners to recognize the ways in which their bodies are differently positioned due to experiences of privilege and oppression (rather than simply holding a particular identity).

@Sassy_latte explains

like, even privileged identities are still politicized, and maybe the politicization of a privileged person's body is not always to their detriment, because they don't experience systemic oppression, but those identities are still politicized. If you are a woman, your identity and your body is still politicized.⁸⁷

In this case, identifying as a woman is not what matters but, rather, the experience of women’s bodies being made political is what must drive activism.

This notion of woman as a political identity is echoed in one of @Sassy_latte’s Instagram captions, posted on March 9th, 2019 under an image of @Sassy_latte wearing a lavender wig and bright pink makeup—the image, itself, aligning with the influencer’s goal of using Instagram to facilitate “critical discussions on body politics & racial justice w/o sacrificing femininity.”⁸⁸ In their discussion of what it means for women to engage in politics together and lift each other up, @Sassy_latte questions what it means to uplift other women and who that action is really for. They end their caption with “if uplifting women doesn’t include black, fat, trans & GNC, poor, disabled, women and sex workers... then WHO are ○ women uplifting? And if it’s not everyone who politically aligns with womanhood, then it shouldn’t be a standard y’all hold any

of us to either.”⁸⁹ Once again, their audience is encouraged to understand the concept of “woman” as a political subjectivity rooted in diverse experiences of oppression—one that is explicitly intersectional—rather than a personal identity that white, cis, and otherwise privileged women have co-opted as part of mainstream movements like feminism and body positivity.

Melissa made an Instagram post with a similar message in January 2017, after the first Women’s March. It includes an image of her standing next to three friends of varying gender expressions and they are all holding up a sign that states “We March For” and goes on to a list a variety of groups/causes, including Black lives, queer lives, Fat Lives, Trans Lives, Indigenous Lives, NoDAPL, Persons with disabilities, and Immigrants, undocumented folks, and refugees. The first paragraph of the caption reads:

Women and gender non conforming persons represent every single one of these identities. They are mothers, lovers, activists, sex workers. Some of them don't live in America, we march for you. Some of them live here without papers, we fight for you because your humanity cannot be "legal" or "illegal". Some of them have vaginas, some don't. Some of them have been incarcerated, we fight for you. If the women's march was simply about your pussy, your politician, or your experience as a white cis-gendered woman in general, the March only served to further normalize white feminism. We need to be critical of this, we need to recognize the importance of decentering our white bodies and experiences.⁹⁰

Here, we see Melissa explicitly articulating the political identity of woman as a subjectivity rooted in difference. She details various different experiences that all exist under the umbrella of what it means to be a woman and uses this listing of differences to encourage an intersectional approach to feminism that centers the most marginalized and decenters privilege. This intersectional approach to feminism, then, lays the foundation for the political imperatives of body justice. Indeed, this centering of the most marginalized as part of body justice politics is a key rhetorical theme in @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s content as well.

@Sassy_latte and Melissa both regularly bring their radio show conversations back to questions like “what does that [issue/concern/topic] look like for a marginalized person?” while also specifying different types of marginalization related to dynamics such as race, class, gender, sexuality, body size, and so on.⁹¹ This rhetorical move also manifests in the form of critiquing mainstream body positivity for not digging into the complexities of multiple forms of marginalization. By focusing on specific forms of marginalization related to particular bodies (i.e. bodies of color, fat bodies, poor bodies, non-binary bodies), @Sassy_latte and Melissa continue to keep body justice rooted in difference—difference in terms of corporeal experience and interactions with oppression—and refuse to reinforce the essentialized subject of mainstream body positive identity politics that has, for so long, hindered body positivity from promoting a queer form of politics that celebrates diversity and understands lived experience as intersectional.

The use of queer forms of rhetorical labor allows body justice to sidestep questions about who body positivity is for and, instead, promotes a focus on embodied experiences of systemic oppression that come to bear on certain marginalized bodies. Challenging essential, stable notions of identities such as “woman” by rooting womanhood in experience allows body justice to reframe its politics toward confronting structures that cause marginalization rather than being preoccupied with deciding who “counts” as oppressed by things like thin-centricity and diet culture.

Fat-Positive Queer Worldmaking via Body Justice: Liminality, Ambivalence, and Futurity

Part of the reason mainstream body positivity came to be seen as somewhat apolitical is that its political subject remained ambiguous. As a branch of fat activism, one might assume that the political subjects of all forms of body positivity were fat folks. However, as thin-passing white women co-opted the movement, prioritizing their voices and visibility, that assumption

was quickly debunked. Body justice, however, promotes a clear set of political subjects: those most harmed by the processes and logics of colonization, those who are multiply marginalized, and those who experience systemic oppression stemming from forces such as thin-centricity and diet culture. The various forms of rhetorical labor analyzed above serve to make visible this set of political subjects, refusing the diluting powers of apolitical frameworks such as “body love” or “body appreciation.” Indeed, body justice marks itself as unconcerned with love or appreciation, instead articulating itself as an injustice frame aimed at subverting hegemonic understandings of bodies and directing moral outrage toward both dominant discourses about bodies and those politically indecisive discourses promoted through mainstream body positivity.

Body justice need not be understood as something wholly different or apart from body positivity, however. Instead, I contend that body justice is part of body positivity’s non-linear journey to return to its roots in radical fat activism. @Sassy_latte and Melissa, specifically, perform body justice as a radically ambivalent approach to body politics that draws upon the energy and history of body positive activism while refusing to be categorized as body positivity, yet also not quite existing as something else altogether. Body justice thrives in the liminal spaces betwixt and between body positivity and a future something else. Therefore, body justice represents the “not yet here” of body positivity’s queer futurity—a space loaded with worldmaking potential that has yet to be fully realized, but that @Sassy_latte and Melissa consistently reach for and labor toward.⁹²

One reason I reject the complete separation of body justice from body positivity has to do with the question of audience. Both @Sassy_latte and Melissa built their followings in the space of body positivity and as body positive influencers/advocates. Their fans and followers looked up to them as voices in the body positive movement and, therefore, when they paradigmatically

shifted to *body justice*, their link to body positivity and interpellation as body positive leaders did not simply disappear. Body justice became a new way for their audiences to think about the body positive spaces and conversations @Sassy_latte and Melissa had long cultivated, rather than a completely new and distinct form of activism or politics.

Indeed, the platform affordances of social media—particularly Instagram—and the online radio show play key roles in @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s arguments and their fostering of a fat-positive queer world through the lens of body justice. Social media, especially Instagram, is the space in which body positivity—as an idea and as a movement—really originated and started to make a cultural impact on conversations about and representations of bodies. Body positivity emerged into mainstream, popular culture largely through Instagram hashtag campaigns, which typically involved users posting images of themselves paired with captions about their bodies that celebrated non-normativity and rejected thin-centric, body shaming, diet culture-infused logics. By cultivating their following on Instagram as the body positive movement was ramping up, @Sassy_latte and Melissa were on the cutting edge of body positive activism and were able to take advantage of its newness and novelty, its promises and potential.

The use of Instagram posts allows them to draw their followers in with compelling images and punchy captions, only to then offer those followers more in-depth, long-form critique in the *Body Justice* radio show. Indeed, this particular set of platform affordances might be another example in which the intersectional rhetorical tactic of blending academic and activist spheres reverberates. The short(er) form images + captions made available via Instagram posts work well for hashtag activism, thus allowing influencers like @Sassy_latte and Melissa to gain traction in the movement and as well as cultivate a dedicated following. However, short-form posts (and the impossibility of keeping up with such a large volume of comments) make it

difficult to dig into social and political issues with much depth and nuance. However, once their following was solidified, they then offered that audience a different platform to consume their content—the radio show. Functioning much like a podcast and allowing listeners to navigate to a link, click a button, and listen to an hour-long conversation between the two influencers, the *Body Justice* radio show allowed @Sassy_latte and Melissa to develop a comprehensive, extended critique of mainstream body positivity while also offering body justice as a radically ambivalent shift toward a queer futurity for the movement that does important worldmaking work. Instagram and the radio show—and their respective affordances—thus, work in tandem to draw followers in via short-form hashtag activism and then provide them with the opportunity to deepen and expand their understanding by listening to in-depth discussions.

Ultimately, body justice takes the foundational commitment and goal of body positivity—to increase representation for, recognize the humanity of, and labor toward the liberation of fat, non-normative, and multiply marginalized bodies—and enacts a form of politics from the margins that comes through on the movement’s promise. It works to construct a world that both recognizes the shortfalls of body positivity as the movement has been co-opted into the mainstream and commits to doing better. It imagines a better world—the world that body positivity initially envisioned—through specific forms of rhetorical labor, namely the decolonial, intersectional, and queer rhetorical performances and tactics analyzed above. By engaging such forms of rhetorical labor that reject the logics of colonialism, make visible overlapping oppressions, and resist stable notions of identity, @Sassy_latte and Melissa create the conditions of possibility for a fat-positive queer world that actively contests the pitfalls of mainstream body positivity, offering body justice as a decolonial, intersectional, queer space for politics, activism, and discussion.

Conclusion

This dissertation is interested in amplifying moments of worldmaking within body positive spaces that advance radical forms of fat positivity, recognizing that these moments often occur at the margins of mainstream discourse, rather than the center. @Sassy_latte and Melissa certainly are not the most popular, well-known voices in the body positive movement and, yet, their performance of body positive activism via body justice honors the fat-positive, anti-racist, decolonial, and queer roots of radical fat activism and therefore warrants analysis in understanding how fat-positive worlds are constructed and maintained. Body justice repoliticizes questions of embodiment, deconstructs problematic logics within popular and mainstream body positive discourses, and rhetorically reconstitutes the political subjects of body politics. Body justice, even as it exists within the liminal space between body positivity and a future “not yet here,” comes through on the promises that body positivity lost sight of as it made its way into mainstream culture.

Fat-positive queer worlds are imagined, created, and maintained in online spaces all the time; however, to really see them, one must rhetorically attune themselves to the margin—a space of radical agency and visibility. The case of @Sassy_latte and Melissa and their endeavor towards body justice can teach us much about embodied social movement rhetorics and queer worldmaking, in particular, how rhetorics of the body move from representations in Instagram images to lend ethos to arguments made on a radio show in pursuit of radical, fat-positive worlds. The margin—as it encompasses spaces like Instagram and radio show episodes—proves, once again, to be a space for transformative knowledge production by and about marginalized bodies. The margin, and the fat-positive queer worlds carved out in that space, is fundamentally a rhetorical construction—it is envisioned by marginalized rhetors and produced via particular

forms of rhetorical labor, in this case, decolonial, intersectional, and queer rhetorical tactics and maneuvers. The implications of the rhetorical nature of margins and queer worlds is a critical nexus of inquiry to be considered throughout this dissertation.

In this chapter, I have centralized body positive influencer rhetoric at the margins to bring into view how body positivity functions and circulates as an everyday, resistant, and vernacular discourse online while also honoring the movement's roots in social media spaces. @Sassy_latte and Melissa and their performance of body justice within the liminal space between body positivity and a queerer futurity that makes good on the failed promises of mainstream body positivity offers one illustrative case study of how fat-positive worldmaking occurs in the constantly shifting and evolving cultural arena of body positive activism. In the chapter that follows, I consider how these everyday, resistant, and vernacular discourses make their way into popular discourse—and popular culture, more specifically—by examining hip-hop artist, Lizzo's, rise to the status of “queen of body positivity.” As I analyze her enactments of intersectional and decolonial forms of rhetorical labor across her social media, lyrics, and music videos, I consider the implications for body positive activism when fat, Black femme bodies like Lizzo's make their way back to the center.

Notes

1. Alysse Dalessandro Santiago, “Body Positivity in 2017: Examining Body Positivity With Plus Size Activists and Influencers,” *The Curvy Fashionista*, March 18, 2017, <https://thecurvyfashionista.com/body-positivity-plus-size-activists-influencers/>.

2. Dalessandro Santiago, “Body Positivity in 2017.”

3. *Ibid.*

4. In this chapter, I refer to @Sassy_latte and Melissa by the monikers they proclaim in both their social media and radio show content. @Sassy_latte does not generally reveal their given name, likely due to privacy and trolling concerns. I refer to Melissa Gibson as Melissa (rather than her last name, Gibson) because the first name reference more closely aligns with how she presents herself via her influencer persona.

5. See @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s first episode of the *Body Justice* radio show for their definitions and a discussion of “body justice”: Sassy Latte and Melissa Gibson, “Body Justice With Sassy Latte And Melissa | February 13, 2019,” *Body Justice*, on Louisville’s FORward Radio, February 13, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/wfmp-forward-radio/body-justice-with-briana-and-melissa-february-13-2019>.

6. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

7. Though the term “influencer” can often denote someone who cultivates a “brand” on social media and uses that brand to affect the purchasing decisions of their audience members and followers, I conceptualize the term in a different, less commercialized way that resonates more within vernacular activist circles. In this chapter (and the dissertation project, more

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broadly), I conceptualize “influencer” as a label for someone who has voice, reach, and credibility within a certain community/to a certain audience. They exist somewhere on the spectrum between ordinary social media user and celebrity, having more pull and influence than your average user, but not necessarily having the visibility or popularity to gain celebrity status. Within body positive activism, influencers are those social media users that serve as opinion-leaders on issues of body politics and disseminate their ideas to audiences of thousands, tens of thousands, and even hundreds of thousands of people (depending on how large their following is).

8. @Sassy_latte and Melissa started their careers as influencers as specifically body positive advocates, having built an audience and following around that particular political commitment. Therefore, even though they both opt for the more radical and politicized label of “body justice,” they are still interpellated as part of the body positive movement and perform important work for the movement through their fervent critiques of it. I analyze their influencer content as part of body positivity, particularly to understand the movement’s shifting and evolving nature, both because it signifies a worldmaking move for body positivity performed through specific forms of rhetorical labor and because that rhetorical labor occurs within a space and to an audience that still frames it as part of the body positive movement.

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10. “Body Justice,” FORward Radio, accessed January 19, 2021,
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12. Raka Shome, “Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An ‘Other’ View,” *Communication Theory* 6, no. 1 (1996): 41.
13. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.
14. Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 27.
15. Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords*, 184.
16. Sassy Latte and Melissa Gibson, “Body Justice With Sassy Latte And Melissa | February 13, 2019,” *Body Justice*, on Louisville’s FORward Radio, February 13, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/wfmp-forward-radio/body-justice-with-briana-and-melissa-february-13-2019>.
17. Sassy Latte and Gibson, “February 13, 2019.”
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. Sassy Latte And Melissa Gibson, “Body Justice With Sassy Latte And Melissa | July 7, 2019,” *Body Justice*, on Louisville’s FORward Radio, July 7, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/wfmp-forward-radio/body-justice-with-sassy-latte-and-melissa-july-7-2019>.

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22. Jennifer Emerling Bone, Cindy L. Griffin, and T. M. Linda Scholz, “Beyond Traditional Conceptualizations of Rhetoric: Invitational Rhetoric and a Move Toward Civility,” *Western Journal of Communication* 72, no. 4 (2008): 434–62; Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud, “The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality,” *Western Journal of Communication* 73, no. 2 (2009): 220–26.

23. Sassy Latte and Gibson, “February 13, 2019”; Sassy Latte and Melissa Gibson “Body Justice | Dr. Melissa Fabello on Allyship | Part 2 | June 12, 2019,” *Body Justice*, on Louisville’s FORward Radio, June 12, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/wfmp-forward-radio/body-justice-featuring-dr-melissa-fabello-on-allyship?in=wfmp-forward-radio/sets/body-justice-with-briana-and>.

24. Sassy Latte and Gibson, “February 13, 2019.”

25. Sassy Latte and Melissa Gibson, “Body Justice | Dr. Melissa Fabello | Allyship | May 8, 2019,” *Body Justice*, on Louisville’s FORward Radio, May 8, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/wfmp-forward-radio/body-justice-with-sassy-latte-and-melissa-may-8-2019>.

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27. Rodriguez, “A New Rhetoric,” 177.

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32. Sassy Latte and Gibson, “February 13, 2019.”

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34. *Ibid.*

35. Sassy Latte and Gibson, “July 7, 2019.”

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56. Otis, “Intersectional Rhetoric,” 376.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, 372.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Sassy Latte and Gibson, “February 13, 2019.”

61. Melissa Gibson (@yourstruelymelly), “Law school does not often make me feel bad ass,” Instagram, September 23, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B2w50KRgS_4/.

62. @yourstruelymelly, “Law school.”

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68. Sassy Latte and Gibson, “March 13, 2019.”

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Notes—*continued*

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**LIZZO’S MAINSTREAM BODY POSITIVITY:
INTERSECTIONAL VISIBILITY POLITICS AND DECOLONIAL HEALING**

Even though the #effyourbeautystandards hashtag had started trending on Instagram and Twitter in 2015, the idea of a fat (and by fat, I do not mean chunky, plus-sized, thick, or any other euphemism for slightly larger than average), Black, dark-skinned woman winning Grammys, twerking in mainstream music videos, and performing for global audiences at the MTV Video Music Awards in front of a gargantuan inflatable butt was nearly unimaginable. For so long, logics of whiteness and thin-centricity have dominated mainstream media representation, impeding both fat and dark-skinned artists and entertainers from gaining traction and popularity and all but ensuring those that exist at the intersections of various marginalized body types remain largely obscured from visibility. Fast forward to 2021, however, and hip-hop artist Lizzo, in all her fat, Black, dark-skinned glory, is dominating both the charts and award shows, all while rarely wearing a pair of pants.

Samantha Irby, in her piece on Lizzo as 2019 *Time* Entertainer of the Year, describes the feeling and consequence of Lizzo’s mainstream visibility perfectly:

Seeing her body as I’m casually scrolling through Instagram is like a shot of emotional adrenaline. Open my largest vein and pump that photo of her naked in a bathtub filled with Skittles directly into it. It feels revolutionary, even now, to watch a fat woman love herself so openly. We’ve been conditioned to expect the “good fatty”—the “Excuse me, I’m so sorry, look at me eating a salad!” kind of fat girl who feels like she has to perform some sort of disordered eating to get love, let alone fame. Lizzo loves her back rolls and doesn’t care whether you do too. (Though you should!)¹

Lizzo, born Melissa Viviane Jefferson, is an increasingly popular woman hip-hop artist known for hit singles such as “Good as Hell,” “Truth Hurts,” and “Juice.” Though Black women have been pushing the boundaries of mainstream representation within hip-hop in relation to normative expectations about gender/femininity, race, body size, and respectability for many

years, Lizzo surpasses all the transgressive women that have come before her in the sense that she is the most visibly fat, Black woman hip-hop artist to have gained mainstream popularity. Because of this, she raises important questions about how fat, Black femme visibility is changing in the current cultural moment. Indeed, Lizzo is an important case study for this larger dissertation because, not only does she challenge normative logics of mainstream media representation rooted in anti-Black racism, sexism, and colonization that have long disempowered Black women—especially fat Black women—robbing them of agency, power, and humanity; Lizzo’s performance of celebrity is also one of the first and few to bring the energies of body positivity visibly into the realm of entertainment media. While focusing on social media influencers like @Sassy_latte and Melissa in the previous chapter brings into view the ways in which body positivity functions and circulates as an everyday, resistant, and vernacular discourse online while honoring the movement’s roots in social media spaces, centering Lizzo as a mainstream example provides insight into how the movement’s shifting political commitments are changing the cultural milieu on a larger scale. Thus, this chapter emphasizes the ways in which resistant body positive discourses make their way into more popular conversations and considers what that discursive movement makes possible in terms of worldmaking.

However, it is important to note that, even though Lizzo certainly draws on the energies of body positive activism, her relationship to the movement proves ambiguous at best. Lizzo admits that “the body positive movement is doing the same thing” she is in many ways, adding that “we’re growing together, and it’s growing pains, but I’m just glad that I’m attached to something so organic and alive.”² However, Lizzo has also shied away from being associated with the politics of body positivity. For example, in a 2017 interview with Sway Calloway, Lizzo

explains that when audiences take songs like her hit single “Scuse Me” as a political message of empowerment for “big black girls,” it’s amazing to her how the “littlest statements can be taken as political.”³ She elaborated on her (still relatively vague) position on body positivity in a 2019 with *Allure* magazine, explaining

The body-positive movement is the body-positive movement, and we high five. We're parallel. But my movement is my movement... When all the dust has settled on the groundbreaking-ness, I'm going to still be doing this. I'm not going to suddenly change. I'm going to still be telling my life story through music. And if that's body positive to you, amen. That's feminist to you, amen. If that's pro-black to you, amen. Because ma'am, I'm all of those things.⁴

It is unclear whether Lizzo has intentionally taken on the role of “leader in the body positive movement” but, regardless of intent, audiences certainly associate her as a key figure within the movement.⁵ Commentators laud Lizzo as a “body positive icon,” “the body-positive MC who's healing the nation,” and even the “poster-girl for the body positive movement.”⁶ Additionally, media critics have labeled three of her recent singles—“Scuse Me,” “Water Me,” and “Fitness”—body positive anthems.⁷ Not only is Lizzo significant in terms of mainstream representation and visibility, she is also one of the few celebrities/entertainers to bring the tenets of body positivity specifically and visibly into their popular cultural works and performances. Body positivity, especially its more radical forms, has long dwelled in the secluded corners of social media platforms such as Instagram, having yet to really infiltrate popular culture within entertainment media in any meaningful way. To be sure, there are positive representations of fat people in television, film, and music videos and, of course, there are a handful of popular fat artists.⁸ However, celebrities that take up a fat activist sensibility and thread it throughout their entire celebrity persona (from Instagram to music videos to public appearances) are few and far between, which positions Lizzo as an important case study for understanding this new shift in the body positive movement.

Of particular importance to this project is the way Lizzo’s popularity, visibility, and influence on body positive politics responds to the critique that body positivity is and has been losing its political edge due to sanitization by mainstreaming and capitalism as well as co-optation by thin-passing white women.⁹ Just five years ago, before Lizzo’s music started to climb the charts, the closest thing body positivity could claim to a “household name” might be someone like Tess Holliday, the fat plus-size model who started the #effyourbeautystandards hashtag campaign and became the first model of her size to be signed with a major modeling agency. However, as I have argued elsewhere, Holliday in many ways embodies the shortcomings of the most highly critiqued strands of body positivity due to both the privilege and visibility afforded to her as a “a white, straight, cisgender, married woman with conventionally attractive European facial features”¹⁰ as well as the ways in which she “conforms to the ‘good fatty’ stereotype, eclipses issues of race as they intersect with fatness, reifies a heterosexual economy of desire, and rests her rhetorical claims on ableist assumptions about the body.”¹¹

The shift in mainstream representation of body positivity from centering bodies like Tess Holliday’s to someone like Lizzo is significant and revealing. It reveals something about the changing politics of body positivity and how those politics are more closely honoring their roots in fat activism by centering and uplifting multiply marginalized bodies. Lizzo’s role in this shift is important as well—not necessarily her role as an individual person, but her larger celebrity persona and its impact on cultural conversations, visibility, and representation. In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which Lizzo’s celebrity persona rhetorically engages intersectional visibility politics as well as acts of decolonial love toward a telos of healing. Ultimately, I argue that, through these rhetorical performances of intersectional visibility and decolonial love, Lizzo recenters the body positive movement back onto multiply marginalized bodies like hers and

imagines a fat positive queer world ungoverned by the white heteropatriarchal gaze and unmarred by the wounds of coloniality. To that end, this chapter unfolds in several sections. First, I contextualize Lizzo's representation and visibility within a broader historical trajectory that begins with anti-fatness and anti-Blackness as they converge in the colonial imagination and moves forward into the contemporary movement via controlling images of Black women in media. I then analyze Lizzo's rhetorical performances of intersectional visibility politics and decolonial love and conclude with a discussion of her cultural impact, paying specific attention to what it means for the changing politics of body positivity, particularly as the movement gains traction in mainstream popular culture.

Anti-fatness and Anti-Blackness: Interrelated Forces of Colonialism

To understand the significance of Lizzo's intervention into mainstream visibility, it is important to trace out the logics of racism and fatphobia, especially as they collide under the larger umbrella of colonialism, that have multiply precluded fat, Black women from enjoying agency, positive representation, and political visibility throughout history and in the current moment. Indeed, Lizzo is of particular importance as a celebrity figure because she is at the forefront of burgeoning efforts in the contemporary moment to resist particular racist, fatphobic, colonial logics that emerged as early as the 18th century, yet still shape the kinds of representation and visibility afforded to fat, Black women and femmes today. In the following sections, I provide a narrative historicization of the rise of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness in the colonial imagination and discuss how those forces shape the landscape of media representation today. Specifically, I point to the story of Sarah "Saartjie" Baartman to illustrate the interrelation of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness in the colonial imagination. I read her story alongside Lizzo's rise to fame in the contemporary moment to emphasize both Lizzo's role in dismantling these

logics as part of the shifting nature of body positivity as well as the potentiality of fat positive queer worldmaking to heal the wounds of colonial violence. Reading them together allows me to distinguish Lizzo's visibility and claims to sexual agency and autonomy as distinctly subverting the violently anti-fat and anti-Black logics and constraints that produced the conditions of possibility for Baartman's exploitation in the 19th century.

Fatness & Blackness in the Colonial Imagination: The Story of Saartjie Baartman

Sarah "Saartjie" Baartman, more commonly referred to as the Hottentot Venus, was a Khoikhoi woman from the Cape Colony in South Africa. In 1810, Hendrik Césars and Alexander Dunlop took Baartmann to London to exhibit her as part of the Picadilly Circus because of her visually "deviant" body.¹² Most Londoners had never seen an African person before; nonetheless an African woman whose large, dark, Black body served as a visual marker of her (and all Africans') deviance. Even after her death, many of her body parts, particularly her buttocks and sexual organs, continued to be exhibited as part of a museum display in Paris until 1974.¹³

Baartman's story is one of colonial violence in the form of objectification, exploitation, and dehumanization, both in life and in death. Audiences flocked to gawk at her "enlarged" buttocks (termed steatopygia) and "elongated" labia (referred to as her "Hottentot Apron"), caring little about the person attached to those parts, including whether or not she was even alive. They simply wanted the chance to view her corporeal features that stood in stark contrast to European visions of beauty, which are also tied up with beliefs about morality and humanity. The preservation of parts and pieces of Baartman's dismembered body serve as a glaring indication of Europe's "obsession with Black female sexuality" as part of larger "efforts to deem Black women subhuman" during this time.¹⁴ Through practices of scientific racism, wherein Baartmann's "enlarged" labia and buttocks were linked to enlarged sexual desire and sexual

primitivism, her fat, Black body was classified as hypersexual, sexually deviant, primal, and erotic.

Many scholars have taken up the story of the exploitation and injustices enacted against Baartman to speak to the ways in which, in history and cultural imagination, Baartmann stands in symbolically for Black femininity/Black women, marking Black womanhood as hypersexual and deviant.¹⁵ However, I believe that we can glean a much deeper understanding of how fatness and Blackness exist in the colonial imagination from Baartman's life story and the conditions that lead to and surrounded her exploitation, specifically: the parallel rise of anti-Blackness alongside anti-fatness, the role of "race science" in equating fat and Black bodies, the discursive creation of "civilized" bodies in direct opposition to "savage" bodies along lines of race and size, and the relationship between the transatlantic slave trade to the global colonization of aesthetic/beauty standards.

Perhaps one of the most insightful and useful advances in the pursuit of historicizing both anti-Blackness and anti-fatness is the realization that these two forces emerged not only at the same time historically, but also in an interrelated, mutually constituting fashion. Indeed, Sabrina Strings points to the rise of the transatlantic slave trade as one of two "critical historical developments [that] contributed to a fetish for svelteness and a phobia about fatness."¹⁶ The transatlantic slave trade ensured that many Europeans' first experience with African people was governed by a logic of hierarchy and dehumanization—Black skin signified enslavement and white skin signified freedom. Black bodies were inherently "other." Anti-Blackness is, thus, a direct and inevitable result of the global colonial project that was the transatlantic slave trade. Moreover, one key way in which European colonizers distanced themselves from dark-skinned "others" was by identifying bodily "differences" between the two groups. Indigenous Africans

such as Baartmann were distinguished for their seemingly larger characteristics—in her case, her large buttocks and labia. They were also distinguished by what colonists viewed as their excessive desire and consumption of both food and sex, linking their largeness to moral and intellectual inferiority. Largeness became unequivocally connected with Blackness and racial inferiority and, therefore, proper performances of whiteness required embodied thinness. Anti-fatness emerged precisely as a result of anti-Blackness as “it was treated as evidence of barbarism of a nonwhite affectation.”¹⁷

Baartmann’s story also provides insight into the *how* as it relates to the historical equating of Blackness with fatness that ultimately produced the interrelated forces of anti-Blackness and anti-fatness. Here, I am specifically referring to “race science” or, perhaps more accurately, scientific racism of the 18th century. It is important to note that the field of “race science” developed chronologically alongside the peak of the transatlantic slave trade.¹⁸ The original goal of race science was to “pin down fundamental physical differences between Europeans and non-Europeans” and the earliest iterations of this endeavor involved “an intense focus on the women in various categories.”¹⁹ Strings elaborates that “these differences were to serve as proof of European superiority” and, therefore, “the racialized female body became legible, a form of ‘text’ from which racial superiority and inferiority were read.”²⁰ Therefore, the poking and prodding of women like Baartmann in the pursuit of “science” and public knowledge was enacted in service of an already foregone conclusion—that of her physical and mental inferiority. However, by using her largest features as physical “proof” of both her Africanness (read: otherness) and, therefore, inferiority, Baartmann’s body was one of many used to link fatness to Blackness in the European colonial imagination via practices of scientific racism.

The categorizations created and deemed valid by race science then came to produce discursive boundaries between “civilized” and “primitive” or “savage” bodies where, of course, white, European, thin (and typically masculine) bodies represent the peak of what it means to embody “civilized,” whereas bodies that deviate from that norm via Blackness, fatness, femininity, or a combination of those markers move further toward the “primitive” or “savage” end of the spectrum.²¹ A woman like Baartmann became so profoundly exploitable because, by inhabiting a body that fell into the categories of “primitive” and “savage” by all accounts, her subhuman status in the colonial imagination was secured.

Finally, Baartmann’s story provides a vantage point from which to consider how the transatlantic slave trade influenced, shaped, and ultimately led to the global colonization of beauty standards. Though European art throughout the 16th century depicted voluptuous Black bodies as prized beauties, the influence of the slave trade gradually pulled both Blackness and fatness toward associations with dimwittedness, lowbrow breeding, and, ultimately, savagery.²² It follows, then, that fat, Black bodies—though known for raising questions around desire and producing a “mixture of fascination and revulsion...as explorers [read: colonizers] ventured further into Africa towards the end of the 18th century²³—could not possibly continue to exist on the positive end of the aesthetic spectrum. Fat, Black (with the two being essentially conflated) bodies became the epitome of everything that a good, moral, intelligent, and attractive European is not. Ultimately, these aesthetic standards made their way to U.S. America on the back of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. Between Europe and U.S. America, the majority of western colonial powers had deemed fat as ugly, grotesque, and monstrous, enacting a colonization of beauty standards that has since only worsened and spread with the rise of globalization.

These colonial logics of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness still haunt us today, influencing both the global obsession with Eurocentric visions of beauty as well as the hypersexualization and dehumanization of Black women's—especially fat, Black women's—bodies. Saartjie Baartman is a key historical figure whose story of exploitation highlights how these logics unfolded violently upon fat, Black bodies in the past, prompting scholars and critics to examine the ways in which such logics persist in the contemporary moment, albeit changing and evolving alongside new historical and cultural contexts. Indeed, one need not look farther than media representations of Black women (and fat, Black women, specifically) to see how logics of hypersexualization, dehumanization, and Eurocentrism persist today, as well as how Black women have made notable strides to contest these harmful logics and present themselves as empowered sexual subjects.

Fatness, Blackness, and Womanhood in Media Representation

As a celebrity and popular cultural figure, Lizzo is not only significant because of her role in the shifting politics of body positivity, but also because of her disruption of logics of mainstream representation that have long constrained and demeaned Black (especially fat, Black) women in specific contexts, particularly hip-hop. Fat Black women's bodies have been historically dehumanized and hypersexualized, robbed of sexual agency and always subject to the white capitalist heteropatriarchal gaze.

Indeed, a vast body of scholarship illuminates that media typically represent Black women through “controlling images”²⁴—stereotypical representations of Black women as too sexual (or not sexual enough), too loud, not white enough, yet always subject to the white gaze. Controlling images such as the Jezebel, the Sapphire, and the Mammy, thus, both uphold and continue to perpetuate the discipline and stigmatization of Black women's sexuality.²⁵ The

Mammy, in particular, serves to denote the fat Black women's body as an illegitimate form of embodiment in western culture, specifically in relationship to the patriarchal and racialized hierarchies that idealize a particular mode of (white) femininity.²⁶ The Mammy becomes an example of a controlling image of Black womanhood that keeps such hierarchies in place and, in doing so, shapes conceptions of both white and Black womanhood.

Controlling and disciplining images permeate representations of Black women in hip-hop in very specific ways. Much of the scholarship on Black women in hip-hop focuses on the objectifying and exploitative images and lyrics that position Black women "as mere appendages to the male hip-hop artists."²⁷ However, to say that all images of Black women within hip-hop are objectifying and exploitative misses the nuanced role of women in hip-hop, particularly women hip-hop artists. Indeed, Lizzo's transgressive embodiment within media representation, and especially hip-hop, follows from a long line of Black women artists creatively negotiating "hegemonic and counterhegemonic themes [that] often occur simultaneously and are interconnected, resulting in a complex, often contradictory and multifaceted representation of Black womanhood."²⁸ For example, scholars point to artists such as Missy Elliott and Nicki Minaj as Black women that "have redefined their own sexuality, taken agency, and written their own script."²⁹ Throughout the history of hip-hop, Black women have labored to change the ways that audiences view Black women's sexuality as well as subvert the male-enforced sexual roles expected in hip-hop culture.

This is all to say that, throughout the history of hip-hop, Black women have found ways to assert their agency and status as subject. Lizzo is not the first Black woman hip-hop artist with a noticeably transgressive body working to refigure what agency means in the very masculine dominated arena of hip-hop and we should understand her celebrity persona as part of a long

history of Black women in hip-hop taking control of their own bodies, sexuality, and agency. Yet, even as Black women in hip-hop have found ways to disrupt normative media representations by asserting their sexual agency and subjectivity, this disruption has not yet extended to *fat* Black women in hip-hop. Such lack of representation illuminates why Lizzo is so culturally significant—because her celebrity persona reclaims sexual agency for fat, Black women’s bodies, specifically, within hip-hop by extending body positivity into that cultural sphere.

The transgressive nature of Lizzo’s embodiment within mainstream popular culture/hip-hop is best understood when contextualized within the historical rise of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness in the colonial imagination, which brings into view the ways that fat, Black women have been multiply precluded from enjoying agency, positive representation, and political visibility. Fat, Black women’s poor position in terms of media representation is but a contemporary chapter of a centuries long story that starts with the transatlantic slave trade and moves globally via forces of colonization. I trace out this particular narrative historicization to explain precisely why the liberation of all bodies—the purported telos of body positivity—must take as its starting point the bodies of fat, Black women who embody the oppressive forces of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness as well as the spaces where the two forces converge. For anti-fatness cannot be dismantled without an integral attention to race and racialized bodies since anti-fatness is inherently a product of white supremacy.

Lizzo: Recentering Body Positivity

Lizzo is a key figure within this historical progression starting with the nexus of racism and fatphobia emerging from the transatlantic slave trade and moving through the contemporary moment through oppressive forms of media representation. She represents a radical shift away

from the fat, Black feminine body being treated only as an object (for violence, sex, and consumption) to a representation of fat, Black femininity that claims subjectivity and autonomy while refusing to be governed by the colonial logics that have for so long dehumanized bodies like hers. Lizzo does this decolonial work within the rhetorical space of body positivity and, in doing so, challenges dominant colonial logics as well as the logics within body positivity that have long valued thin-passing white bodies over bodies like hers.

Indeed, body positivity, even though it sets its sights on challenging problematic logics of representation and marginalizing beauty standards, its co-optation and normalization into the mainstream is marred by those same oppressive discursive regimes that it tries to disrupt. Rather than empowering fat, Black women through positive representation, mainstream forms of body positivity tend to ignore them in favor of centering the bodies and voices of women who are white, slightly larger than average, and even thin-passing. Rather than deconstruct colonial beauty standards, mainstream body positivity allows those standards to reproduce themselves by overlooking the history and effects of colonization on the way we think culturally about bodies while also decentering those whose bodies live this history most violently. Therefore, radical forms of body positivity must shift away from centering privileged bodies and reproducing colonial beauty standards by investing in explicitly intersectional and decolonial approaches to politics, visibility, and activism. In the following sections, I analyze how Lizzo embodies this shift through rhetorical performances of intersectional visibility and decolonial love and, in doing so, recenters the body positive movement back onto multiply marginalized bodies like hers and imagines a fat positive queer world ungoverned by the white heteropatriarchal gaze and unmarred by the wounds of coloniality.

Lizzo's Intersectional Politics of Visibility

*"I can't wake up one day and not be black. I can't wake up one day and not be a woman. I can't wake up one day and not be fat. I always had those three things against me in this world, and because I fight for myself, I have to fight for everyone else."*³⁰

*"Keep changing the world. Your mere existence is a form of activism. And your identity, depending on the intersection, makes that activism just a little bit more hard but a little bit more worth it. My name is Lizzo. My activism is representation. And I live at the intersection of black, fat, femme, and free."*³¹

The quotes above incarnate Lizzo's status as an intersectional rhetor—someone who “manifests a convergence between intersectionality as an analytic sensibility and embodied rhetorical praxis.”³² Whether or not she has used the word “intersectionality” publicly, Lizzo demonstrates a profound knowledge about the intersection of Blackness, fatness, and womanhood/femmedhood based in lived experience of multiple marginalization, and that knowledge manifests clearly in her music, advocacy, and music-as-advocacy.

Intersectional politics of visibility, which exist as both a form and extension of intersectional rhetoric, are distinguished by two features in my estimation: First, they shift away from single-issue visibility politics that foreground a singular experience of privilege/oppression over others in favor of a consistent and central focus on overlapping privileges/oppressions. The first quote of Lizzo's above is a strong example of this in how she focuses on Blackness, fatness, and womanness always working against her at the same time. Second, intersectional visibility politics oppose intersecting forms of oppression. For example, in the case at hand, something like the white heteropatriarchal gaze, which represents the overlapping forces of whiteness/anti-Blackness, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and beauty standards, becomes an intersecting form of oppression that can, therefore, only be combatted by politics of visibility that are also intersectional. In this section, I analyze two specific forms of rhetorical labor Lizzo uses that construct an intersectional politics of visibility: (1) assemblaging the big butt and the fat, Black

body, and (2) dismantling the white heteropatriarchal gaze through the performance of *feeling herself*.

The Big Butt and the Fat, Black Body: An Intersectional Assemblage

One way that Lizzo constructs an intersectional form of visibility politics is by re-articulating the big butt—by which I am referring to both a corporeal symbol and a lived form of embodiment—with the fat, Black body. The big butt has been culturally disarticulated from both Blackness and fatness, appropriated and commodified by white culture. Through her infamous social media “belfies” (butt-selfies) as well as her costuming and dance moves, Lizzo rhetorically assembles the big butt with the fat, Black body in ways that radically depart from dominant practices of representation and visibility. Ultimately, through this assemblage, Lizzo honors the intersectional embodiment of fatness, Blackness, and womanness and re-links the big butt to the humanity of Black women in ways that eschew co-optation while claiming an autonomous fat, Black feminine subjectivity.

The big butt experiences a precarious position in popular culture “as it operates within a global economy of colonization, racialization, and exoticization.”³³ The big butt as a mode of embodiment and a cultural symbol has been identified as a site of both otherness—via hypersexualization and objectification—as well as empowerment for Black women.³⁴ However, now that the big butt has been co-opted by white culture—i.e. “deemed the ultimate fashion accessory” for white women who appropriate Black aesthetics— “it has become the latest gentrification of body parts.”³⁵

The big butt’s problematic appropriation is a product of its disconnection from both embodied Blackness as well as embodied fatness. The big butt may have perhaps been a site of empowerment for Black women in the early days of hip-hop, but has since become a “fashion

accessory”—something that white and non-black women (ahem, Kim Kardashian) can try on for size, co-opting Black aesthetics in ways that reproduce logics of colonization, exoticization, and objectification and ignoring the full humanity of Black folx and their bodies. The big butt also earns more praise when articulated with/on a white body, further evidencing its disconnection from embodied Blackness. Big butts, though technically a manifestation of fatness themselves, have also been disconnected from embodied fatness as they earn praise and status when articulated with/on a thin body. Look no further than the discourse around thin musical artist and actress, Jennifer Lopez’s, plump behind or Sir Mix-a-Lot’s famous line in “Baby Got Back”: “when a girl walks in with an itty bitty waist and a round thing in your face, you get sprung!”

The big butt articulated with a fat, Black body stands in stark opposition to the common and glorified representation of thin (often white) bodies with presumably artificially altered derrieres—at least in the contemporary moment, lest we forget Sarah Baartmann and her notable behind. Thus, to bring together—to assemblage—the big butt with the fat, Black body marks a challenge to the dehumanizing co-optation of Black aesthetics via intersectional practices of visibility. Lizzo’s infamous social media “belfies” as well as her costuming and dance moves in her music videos exemplify this assemblaging of the big butt with the fat, Black body. I analyze each of these aspects of her celebrity persona and visibility in turn.

“Lizzo's feed is filled with ~bootylicious~ (can we bring that word back yet?) posts, from twerking videos to in-your-face belfies. Her music is great, but we can't deny that her booty is *also* a work of art!”³⁶ states an article in the *Revelist* from May 2018. A follow-up examination on my part confirms this claim. Indeed, one glance at Lizzo’s Instagram page at the time of this writing without scrolling yields at least three twerking videos and one belfie. Her butt takes center stage of her social media from all angles—standing, sitting, leaning, stationary, moving.

Though of course her social media is peppered with other kinds of images as well, including full body photos, professional glamour/modeling shots, humorous videos, singing videos, and shots from her music videos, her belfies and twerking videos are a consistent feature of her feed and her followers are sure to see at least one a week.

Lizzo's belfies and twerking videos mark a radical departure from mainstream representations of big butts. In each belfie, her butt, round and voluptuous, is framed between her equally voluptuous thighs on the bottom and her back rolls above. It is unclear where her back ends and her butt begins. That is not an issue, however, for her butt does not exist as a solitary object, disconnected from her fat, Black human body. It is, instead, part and parcel of her as a specifically fat, Black woman. Her butt, in short, is part of her larger fat, Black woman assemblage.

In each Instagram twerking video, both her thighs and belly jiggle vigorously along with her butt. Her butt cannot be isolated as an object as it moves in concert with—pushing and pulling against—the other fat on her body. The fat of Lizzo's thighs provide a shelf for each buttcheek to rest on and the crease of her belly runs softly along her side and continuing through to her backside. It all moves together. This continuity of both fat and movement is made visible by her clothing choices in each video—a thong bodysuit, a one piece bathing suit, thong underwear and a crop top, and the like.

It is not only Lizzo's social media posts that bring the symbolism of the big butt in continuity with her fat, Black body. Her music videos do similar rhetorical work via costuming and dance moves. In the music video for "Fitness," Lizzo spends most of her time clad in a half-leather, half-fishnet body suit, though we get a glimpse of her briefly in the middle of the music video topless, with black underwear-like bottoms, mid-rise boots, and a floor length sheer black

veil. In “Scuse Me,” she spends about half her time wearing all white in a church and the other half draped in a green and cream toga that leaves most of the left side of her body exposed. In “Boys,” Lizzo performs several costume changes, the most notable of them include a leopard print bra-top and brief-bottom set with a sheer robe as well as well as completely nude, using just her hand to cover her naked breasts. Perhaps her most iconic music video costume yet appears in “Tempo,” and involves a variation on the American cowgirl look, featuring a blue, white, and silver sequined two-piece, a blue faux-fur cape, metallic silver cowboy boots, and a white cowboy hat.

In each video, Lizzo brings her twerking skills from the dark corners of social media onto the mainstream screen to various degrees. In “Tempo,” she lifts up her faux-fur cape to expose her butt, twerking and slapping it along to the beat. In “Scuse Me,” she twerks in her toga, dampened by the water of a hot spring which causes her toga to cling to both her jigging butt and naturally hanging stomach. In “Fitness,” Lizzo assumes a twerk-like position—bent over at the waist, back arched—before feeling up her curves with her own hands slowly and seductively. Other dance moves that she incorporates as frequently as twerking are her infamous thigh jiggle and body bounce which unfold pretty much exactly as they sound—she will often jiggle her bounteous thighs to the beat of her own music or just bounce her entire body, creating a ripple effect among thighs, breasts, belly, and butt.

To speak of Lizzo’s embodiment in her music videos this way can feel (and possibly read as) objectifying. However, the wiggling and jigging of her whole body, the hanging of her stomach, and the bouncing of her breasts and butt mark such an important divergence from mainstream representation of Black women’s bodies in hip-hop and other mainstream media. Twerking, as it has made its way into mainstream music media, is typically performed by thin

bodies where the only body fat visible is on the dancer's butt; the thin, taught stomach and legs jiggle a sizable butt, reproducing the disconnection between the big butt and embodied fatness. However, Lizzo's politics of visibility, characterized by her semi-nude, nude, and otherwise scantily clad and notably fat body ensure such a disconnection cannot be made. Her big butt is one with her fat body and they only exist as mutually constitutive aspects of a larger material whole. That larger whole also encompasses her Blackness, as she is not one to hide her dark skin, natural hair, or otherwise notably Black features.

This aspect of Lizzo's visibility politics can be understood as an intersectional assemblage. An assemblage "forms when two or more bodies – human and non-human, meaning people, things, words, ideas and actions – come together so that individual elements are no longer single subjects but entangle in a nuanced way to become something else through its togetherness."³⁷ Because the big butt has become culturally disarticulated from the fat, Black body, the bringing together of these two things—both in their material, embodied as well as symbolic forms—marks a radical change in practices of representation and visibility. Lizzo embodies the togetherness of the big butt and the fat, Black body through social media posts and music videos, denying their singularity and embodying the power of their assemblage. In the contemporary moment, divorcing the big butt from embodied fatness and Blackness allows it to be appropriated and objectified. It becomes a literal object that others can try on and discard. Assembling the big butt with the fat, Black body, instead, honors the intersectional embodiment of fatness, Blackness, and womanness, re-linking the big butt to the humanity of Black women. No longer is the big butt a co-opted (or co-optable) aesthetic, it is a marker of what it means to embody Black womanhood in a particular way.

This assemblage gains even more symbolic capacity when considered alongside the history of big butts and fat, Black bodies—a profoundly colonial history that demonized and dehumanized Black bodies for unruly bodily features such as big butts. To revisit Baartman, the dehumanization of her fat, Black body culminated in the dismemberment of that body, literally separating her big butt from the rest of her to display as proof of Black women’s inferiority. Lizzo’s refusal to allow such separation to persist symbolically in media representations of her fat, Black body directly contests the violent colonial logics that severed Baartman into pieces, emphasizing instead the wholeness of fat, Black women’s intersectional embodiment. Lizzo’s assemblaging of the big butt with her fat, Black body marks a reclamation of power, agency, and humanity outside of the terms offered by coloniality.

“Feeling Myself”: Dismantling the White Heteropatriarchal Gaze

Recall that a defining feature of intersectional visibility politics is that they oppose intersecting forms of oppression. As a celebrity, Lizzo is constrained by forms of oppression related to representation and agency, particularly the white heteropatriarchal gaze. The white heteropatriarchal gaze, as a concept, refuses the singularity and universality of the “male gaze” and, instead, recognizes that gazing practices are not only gendered, but also racialized and sexualized. The white heteropatriarchal gaze encompasses overlapping forces of whiteness/anti-Blackness, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and beauty standards as they relate to media representation and audience gazing positions and practices. Lizzo, as a fat, Black woman in the public eye, is constantly filtered through this gaze, which seeks to strip autonomy and legitimacy from bodies that fail to live up to the gold standard of being white, thin, heterosexual, and otherwise conventionally attractive. Rather than try to measure up to that impossible standard—what Audre Lorde calls the “mythical norm”³⁸—Lizzo engages in rhetorical practices of

visibility that refuse to play by the terms set forth by such an oppressive standard. One such refusal takes the form of a mode of dancing that I term *feeling herself*.

Feeling herself is not just an adaptation of a Lizzo lyric³⁹ and is also not simply a mode of dancing where Lizzo literally feels her own body up and down with her hands, though it often manifests as such. *Feeling herself* is a mode of dancing that pairs sexuality with empowerment and agency and is an intersectional rhetorical tactic that comes through most explicitly in Lizzo's visuals, particularly her music videos, and is often amplified through her lyrics. Lizzo's music videos have been lauded by fans and music videos for their powerful (and empowering) visuals and bodily aesthetics. Her music video for "Fitness" has been described as a "visual celebration of all things Lizzo."⁴⁰ The same commentary elaborates that "when she isn't standing alongside her fellow powerful women, Lizzo is seated on various athletic benches explaining the pride she feels for her own body... She's taking joyous and confident ownership of her physical form. Her confidence isn't framed as an accomplishment or a threat, it's a fact."⁴¹ The music video for "Fitness" features Lizzo clad in a half-leather, half-fishnet body suit, surrounded by a variety of diverse women (both in terms of color and body size), dancing suggestively while *feeling herself*. The music video for "Scuse Me," after a shot of Lizzo in a church looking fabulous in all white attire, moves to scenes of her, flanked by several other visibly fat and gorgeous women, wearing a toga while dancing, twerking and, once again, feeling herself, while conjuring images of Greek goddesses. The music video for Lizzo's "Boys" features Lizzo dancing with her backup dancers in various stages of undress, most notably in a leopard print bra-top and brief-bottom set with a sheer robe as well as well as completely nude, using just her hand to cover her naked breasts.

All of Lizzo's music videos have at least one thing in common: a fat, Black femme body on display, yet unconsumed by the dominant white heteropatriarchal gaze. Part of this is because

such a dominant gaze implies a thin, white, female object.⁴² Thus, Lizzo's unapologetic fatness already marks a rejection of the dominant gaze. Her fatness paired with her unapologetic Blackness amplifies this rejection. Furthermore, the general tenor her dancing (and that of her backup dancers) communicates a relative unconcern for whether or not they are pleasing a heterosexual cis-male viewer.

A particularly notable moment that exemplifies such unconcern occurs in the first minute of Lizzo's "Boys" music video, when her and her backup dancers turn around after standing facing urinals in a presumably men's restroom and slam their hands to their pelvises in what YouTube users have referred to as a "suck it" motion before vigorously jiggling their inner thighs. This type of dancing diverts from that of typical hip-hop imagery, which focuses on big breasts, round buttocks, and shapely hips and, instead, glorifies the undeniable corpulence and wobbliness of Lizzo's fleshy inner thighs. Moreover, this move communicates an unconcern for gender role expectations around femininity by engaging in a brief moment of gender-bending through the act of pelvic thrusting in the space of a masculine-coded restroom. Similar visuals and movements thread throughout Lizzo's music videos, creating a repertoire of her *feeling herself*.

This unconcern for the desires of the dominant heterosexual cis-male viewer is then paired with sexual empowerment in many of Lizzo's song lyrics. For example, in "Fitness," as Lizzo dances and *feels herself*, she repeats the lyrics "but I don't do this for you," and, as those lyrics resound auditorily, the same message "I don't do this for you" appears in big, red, capital, bold letters, layered atop the various visuals of diverse bodies and bondage.⁴³ If it was unclear whether Lizzo's *feeling herself* was intended for the heteropatriarchal gaze, those big, red words drive her more subversive message home. A similar example appears in the music video for

“Boys” as Lizzo dances, *feeling herself*, while images of diverse men appear across the screen. The lyrics chant “baby I don’t need you” and then proceed to elaborate on all the boys Lizzo likes (spoiler alert: it’s all the boys), ultimately positioning her as the *gazer*. It is important to note, though, that her lyrics only take on an explicitly political and subversive message when paired with the music videos’ visuals: images of a Fat, Black, femme body acting overtly sexual, yet unconsumed by the white heteropatriarchal gaze.

Feeling herself, as a rhetorical practice of intersectional visibility politics, accomplishes a threefold goal; it (1) repudiates the white heteropatriarchal gaze, (2) articulates an intersectional political subject of body positivity, and (3) marks a fundamental change in representations of fat, Black women in media, generally, and Black women in hip-hop, specifically. Rather than attributing Lizzo’s contribution to body positivity to her lyrics that communicate general messages of self-love and body appreciation, these visuals send an overtly political message: that fat, Black, femme bodies are meant to be seen and are meant to be embraced as sexual agents. This only becomes revolutionary in contrast to the history of mediated representations of fat, Black femme bodies, which are never (or, at least, almost never) afforded any sexual agency, often presented as decidedly desexualized/asexual through the image of the Mammy. Furthermore, within hip-hop specifically, though various women artists have subverted norms enforced by the white heteropatriarchal gaze, those artists have not been visibly fat in the way that Lizzo is. Thus, not only do these music videos produce Lizzo’s fat, Black femme body as sexually agentic, they offer her body—an inherently political, resistive, and intersectionally oppressed body—as a “poster-girl” for the body positive movement.

Lizzo's Decolonial Love

Lizzo's intersectional politics of visibility do important rhetorical work to combat negative representations of fat, Black women in the media. However, do not forget that those negative representations exist within a much larger historical and cultural context marked by the violences of colonization. As discussed prior, both anti-fatness and anti-Blackness are products of colonization. Therefore, anti-fat and anti-Black beauty standards—which shape and are shaped by normative ideas about morality, intelligence, and humanity—are exertions of colonial power/coloniality in the contemporary moment, thus illustrating the effects of global colonization.

If we are to consider thin-centric, white supremacist beauty standards as evolving from the history of the transatlantic slave trade and scientific racism (i.e. forces of global colonization), then body positivity must take a decolonial approach in its attempts to deconstruct normative and oppressive beauty standards. In Lizzo's case, I argue that this decolonial imperative manifests through rhetorical enactments of *decolonial love*. A cursory listening of Lizzo's music reveals recurring themes of self-love, both as a personal practice as well as a message oriented toward others to do the same. This focus on self-love and appreciation may appear apolitical and, therefore, might seemingly align with the most watered-down versions of body positivity. However, if we are to understand Lizzo's messages of self-love as acts of *decolonial love*, they can be viewed as embodying a potent affective, subversive, political force.

Love, as a force of affective politics and community-building, has long animated Black feminist thought and scholarship. Decolonial love, specifically, threads through much decolonial theory, especially Chicana feminism and third-world feminist thought. The premise undergirding the subversive and political possibilities of decolonial love rests on an understanding of love as

an oppositional consciousness and “a technology for social transformation.”⁴⁴ Chela Sandoval recognizes the “rhetoric of love” as a “means of social change.”⁴⁵ She argues that love can function as a “political apparatus...a political technology, a body of knowledges, arts, practices, and procedures for re-forming the self and the world.”⁴⁶ Sandoval asserts that “it is love that can access and guide our theoretical and political ‘*movidas*’—revolutionary maneuvers toward decolonized being.”⁴⁷

Decolonial love can be understood as an affinity—“an alliance and affection across lines of difference that intersect both in and out of the body”⁴⁸—that unifies groups of people through a shared telos of emancipation.⁴⁹ Decolonial love is markedly different from hegemonic or colonial love that “fetishizes the beloved object and participates in the oppression and subjugation of difference.”⁵⁰ Decolonial love,

by contrast, originates ‘from below’ and operates between those rendered other by hegemonic forces. In its acceptance of fluid identities and a redefined but shared humanity, decolonial love promotes loving as an active, intersubjective process, and in so doing articulates an anti-hegemonic, anti-imperialist affect and attitude that can guide the actions that work to dismantle oppressive regimes.⁵¹

Decolonial love, thus, is a potent force of political potentiality oriented toward a better, more ethical world for all—a world characterized by liberation, emancipation, intersubjectivity, care, and anti-imperialist affective relationalities. Decolonial love is a project of and toward decolonial worldmaking that sees difference as a source of beauty and power.

“If I’m Shinin’, Everybody Gonna Shine”: Intersubjectivity as Decolonial Love

A key feature of the subversive, anti-imperialist capacity of love is its embracing of interrelationality and intersubjectivity. Loving decolonially involves embracing the “other,” both within and outside of ourselves and harnessing difference for its political power. Love is a key feature of epistemic decolonization, a process grounded in ethical forms of interrelation and

intersubjectivity “premised on imagining a ‘third way’ of engaging otherness beyond Western binary thinking” that seeks to rehabilitate the relationship between self and other.⁵²

Lizzo’s music and social media persona consistently shift away from the colonial binary of self vs other and, instead, promote an ethic of intersubjectivity as part of her larger rhetorical enactment of decolonial love. Nowhere more clearly (or simply) does this ethic appear than her iconic “Juice” lyrics: “If I’m shinin’, everybody gonna shine.”⁵³ Indeed, one of the primary messages emanating from every aspect of Lizzo’s celebrity persona is the lesson that we must love ourselves and one another and that the relationship between self and other is key to restoring our own happiness as well as the betterment of the world more broadly.

Body positivity, for Lizzo, is an intersubjective politics that affirms the inherent worth of my body, your body, and our bodies, particularly as they work to survive in a world that causes them daily violence. One way she builds this connection across bodies is by articulating her journey to self-love as a journey interconnected to others. For example, on June 11, 2020, Lizzo posted a video on Instagram (originally posted to Tik-Tok) presumably responding to Biggest Loser celebrity trainer, Jillian Michaels’ comments about her size and health. The video begins with various clips of Lizzo exercising and quickly moves to clips of her posing in lingerie, swimsuits, and other revealing outfits before shifting back to shots of her exercising. Lizzo narrates the video by explaining that she has been “working out consistently for the last five years,” but that she is working out to have *her* ideal body type, not *your* ideal body type.⁵⁴ She goes on to explain that her body is “none of your fuckin business” and that she is beautiful and strong and that those who seek to judge others for their bodies should “look at your fucking self and worry about your own goddamn body,” finishing with the statement that “health is not just determined on what you look like on the outside...Health is also what happens on the inside, and

a lot of y'all need to do a fucking cleanse for your insides...Namaste, have a great day.”⁵⁵ This narrated video depicts the product of Lizzo’s self-love work from clips of her admiring her own body to the message that other people’s opinions are the problem, not her body. But it is the caption that connects this self-love journey of hers to others’:

Since this is goin around the internet let me just say: I DONT POST THINGS LIKE THIS FOR ME. IDGAF ABOUT TROLLS THAT BODY SHAME ME. I DO THIS FOR THE PEOPLE WHO GET BODY SHAMED EVERY SINGLE DAY WHO DONT HAVE MY PLATFORM OR HAVE THE SAME PATH TO CONFIDENCE I HAD. I KNOW THAT I AM HERE TO DEFEND AND REPRESENT YALL. BECAUSE I LOVE YALL AND I DONT WANT YALL TO GO THROUGH THE SELF HATRED I WENT THROUGH. AND IF POSTING MY JOURNEY AND CUSSING IGNORANT INSECURE WANNABE “COMMENT SECTION DOCTORS” OUT IS WHAT I GOTTA DO TO MAKE SURE FAT SHAMING IS SHAMED THEN THATS WHAT IM GONNA DO. Ok love u bye. S/O my trainer [@marcusely](#) who is patient and respectful of my goals.⁵⁶

This caption makes clear that Lizzo endured a journey from self-hatred to self-love and now takes as her responsibility the imperative to “defend” and “represent” others because of the platform she is afforded. She identifies posting about her journey as one of the key ways she represents others, shows love for them, and ensures they have a path out of the same kind of self-hatred she experienced. “I don’t post things like this for me,” Lizzo clarifies, “I do this for the people who get body shamed every day.” Lizzo loves decolonially by connecting her struggles to the struggles of others—rather than defaulting to the colonial way of thinking that presents one’s struggles as individual and unique—and seeks to call out (and cuss out) fat shaming wherever it festers to make the world a better and more ethical place for others to live in their bodies.

This same impetus of interconnected struggles emanates from her Instagram post from January 22, 2020, which depicts an image of her on the cover of *Rolling Stone* with a caption that includes a quote from her *Rolling Stone* interview, which reads: “As a black woman, I make music for people, from an experience that is from a black woman... I’m making music that

hopefully makes other people feel good and helps me discover self-love. That message I want to go directly to black women, big black women, black trans women. Period.”⁵⁷ In this caption, Lizzo articulates her music as both a force for making others feel good but also helping her discover self-love. She also identifies specific populations she hopes to liberate through her music—big black women and black trans women. Once again, she illustrates that the struggles of her and others are connected and that the music she produces is part of the process of extending love to both her and others.

Another way that Lizzo fosters a sense of intersubjectivity through decolonial love is by recognizing the mutuality of liberation among her and others, especially among her and other big Black women. This departs from colonial logics that posit others’ success and liberation as a threat to one’s own. This sense of mutuality is expressed clearly in the caption of an Instagram post from November 26th, 2020 that is accompanied by three photos of Lizzo posing suggestively in a bright red lingerie bodysuit from three different angles. The caption rehearses the following quote from Nelson Mandela: “And as we let our own light shine,[/]We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.[/]As we're liberated from our own fear,[/]Our presence automatically liberates others.” - accepting my roses 🌹.”⁵⁸ The first two lines, which depict the notion of encouraging others to shine by letting one’s own light shine, reprise the same spirit of Lizzo’s aforementioned Juice lyrics (“If I’m shinin’, everybody gonna shine”). However, this particular caption adds more depth to this sense of interrelationality by linking one’s (in this case, Lizzo’s) liberation to the liberation of others.

Lizzo reinforces both this sense of mutual liberation as well as the interconnectedness of her struggles with others by ensuring that the spaces she fosters make room for others’ self-love journeys, safety, and affirmation, especially in her digital spaces. Though her concerts have

certainly been described as feeling like “worshipping at the church of self-love,” Lizzo, herself, articulates her Instagram page as a “safe space” and a “self-love activation station”—a message complimented by a video of her playing the flute sans pants.⁵⁹ She also articulates her broader movement as a space for others, both in an Instagram post and in an interview with *V magazine*, through the following quote: “So my movement is for everyone. It’s about inclusion. And if I am going to fight what I have been marginalized for, I am going to fight for all marginalized people.... Because fuck boxes; I’m too big to be put in one anyway. I’m a fat bitch.”⁶⁰ This quote cogently brings together her telos of mutual liberation (“this movement is for everyone”), her recognition of interrelated struggles (fighting for “all marginalized people”), and the space she actively creates for such personal and collective work to happen (“my movement”).

Lizzo’s cultivation of a sense of interrelationality and interconnectedness seems purposeful. Consuming her content creates the feeling that we, as her followers, have a cheerleader, therapist, and fearless activist in your corner all at once. Because this form of decolonial love feels purposeful, it feels real and almost personal. Indeed, Lizzo affirms this seemingly personal feeling and relationship in a recent interview with *Urbanology Mag*, stating

And there’s people who have been hitting me up who’ve been using my music, not just for therapy, but for activism in their lives and making their lives actively better. And, it’s a big deal because I’ve decided that’s why I do it, you know. And, it’s not just for fat Black girls. It’s for everybody. You will be surprised at how many white girls — like thin white girls — are just like, “Thank you.” People who don’t look like me. Men saying thank you. Gay men are like thank you. I’m making this music and all these people are connecting with it from all different walks of life and I don’t know man, it feels really good.⁶¹

After all is said and done, I feel good, Lizzo feels good, and millions of her followers feel good. We feel loved because we feel seen and we feel empowered to change the ways we think about our own bodies and the bodies of others because of the sense of interconnectedness cultivated by Lizzo’s lyrics, posts, and interviews. We have gone to the church of self-love, seen

what liberation can look like, and are offered the tools of personal liberation through Lizzo's depiction of her own journey. It is only then that we can embrace the next step in the process of decolonial love—healing.

“This Music is Medicine”: Healing as Decolonial Love

Another key feature of decolonial love is a focus on the process of healing. Specifically, decolonial love involves “heal[ing] the wound that rejects the other within” in order to “embrace...the ambiguity and unknowability of the other, and to unleash the transformative power of that love.”⁶² Decolonial love sets out to heal all kinds of wounds, both embodied and epistemic, particularly those wounds “occasioned by the hierarchical division of the world into colonizers and colonized.”⁶³ Healing the relationships with our minds and bodies as well as the minds of bodies and others becomes another step in rejecting the violences of coloniality and, instead, transforming the world through more “ethical, loving, and human relation.”⁶⁴ Lizzo performs decolonial healing through her celebrity persona by infusing her music with “medicinal” and therapeutic qualities as well as through offering, performing, and encouraging self-care as a practice for healing the wounds of coloniality, especially for those in marginalized bodies.

Not only does Lizzo often use words like “healing” in relationship to her music, she also frames her art as “medicine.” In an Instagram post on May 19th, 2019, Lizzo pairs the following quote and caption with an image of her on the cover of *Essence* magazine:

These songs are for my big Black girls. Everyone can enjoy them, but I want to help us. This music is medicine and I'm trying to get it to my sisters. It's so exciting to me to finally be at a level where I have exposure to my Black sisters, my big sisters, my Black trans sisters. It's not about being poppin'. It's not about being famous or fashion. It's about being better and making sure that this world can hear us and respect us.⁶⁵

Lizzo presents her music as medicine specifically for her Black sisters, big sisters, and Black trans sisters, implying that these oppressed groups have specific ailments in need of treatment. Lizzo articulates these wounds around issues of being heard and respected—epistemological wounds embodied by others that are multiply marginalized that her music can begin to heal. Though elsewhere she articulates her music and her movement being for “everyone,” she consistently orients the medicinal qualities of her music toward specifically marginalized groups. For example, in another Instagram post about her interview with *Essence* magazine, Lizzo explains that “this is a big one for me because for so long I felt like my music wasn’t reaching black people and it was breakin my heart. To be an [@essence](#) COVERGIRL means this musical medicine I got is finally being heard by EVERYONE 🥰💣🎉 thank you!!!”⁶⁶ Thus, her increased representation and fame is not presented as a benefit solely for her, but it is part of her larger goal to get “musical medicine” out to audiences of Black people who are positioned to benefit from Lizzo’s healing powers the most. In offering her therapeutic music to Black and multiply marginalized people, Lizzo not only offers those groups resources for healing, but also works to heal the colonial wound that separates her from others.

As Lizzo labors to heal the wound between self and other, she also provides insight into what it looks like to heal the colonial wound that separates ourselves from our own embodied beings. She does so, primarily, by performing and encouraging acts of self-care, particularly in her song lyrics and interviews about her lyrics. For example, the chorus of “Water Me” repeats “I don’t get dehydrated, I moisturize it daily/I am my inspiration/I am my inspiration.”⁶⁷ Lizzo begins “Scuse Me” with the lyrics, “Look up in the mirror, oh my god it’s me/So much Prada on me, I’m a prodigy/I’mma do my thing, no apologies/Coconut and rose in my skin regime.”⁶⁸ Finally, she has a whole song dedicated to the theme of self-care entitled “Coconut Oil,” where

the title is not only a reference to a common step in one's skin-care routine, but is also "an ode to Black sisterhood and to celebrate your Blackness."⁶⁹ This theme extends to the larger album as well, which is also titled *Coconut Oil*. Lizzo explains the connection between the album and self-care in her interview with *Urbanology Mag*, stating

I realized that this album was a little package or an ode to self-care and I was like, "What better way to represent self-care than coconut oil?" which is a part of my daily routine. Every time I shower, I make sure I coconut oil up, deep condition hair with coconut oil. There's just all these uses and it's all these techniques for self-care and that's really been where I've been focusing on this last year.⁷⁰

Throughout Lizzo's lyrics and her commentary on her own music, she pairs mantras of self-empowerment (for example, "I am my inspiration" and "I'mma do my thing, no apologies") with active practices of self-care (like moisturizing, coconut oil, skin-care, and hydration). Her music becomes a manual for how to engage self-love in ways that are distinctly Black. This is made clear by the fact that she links her album *Coconut Oil* to a celebration of Blackness. Even though body positivity has been critiqued for its focus on self-love at the expense of cohesive political interventions, self-love and self-care must be understood to resonate differently across lines of marginalization such as race and body size. Indeed, when thin-passing white women co-opt body positive hashtags and wax poetic about skincare and exercise, the movement loses its political edge. However, when a fat Black woman affirms the beauty, worth, and desirability of her body and the bodies of other fat Black women and makes this affirmation actionable through practices of self-care, her focus on self-love can and should be read as a radical form of decolonial love that seeks to heal the wounds caused by coloniality and colonized beauty standards. In other words, self-care for marginalized bodies is a form of decolonial love that has radical and transformative possibilities for collective politics, including body positivity.

Lizzo's music both models how to care for marginalized bodies and implicitly argues for others to do the same. This is the medicinal quality of her music that she points to in many of her interview appearances. Self-care becomes the primary set of practices one can mobilize toward healing the wounds of coloniality. Taking care of a body that has been deemed worthless and undesirable by globally colonized beauty standards—and, therefore, unworthy of care—marks a refusal to play by the terms set forth by coloniality. Lizzo makes this refusal seem fun and accessible to her multiply marginalized fans and she consistently empowers them to choose themselves and choose to prioritize their healing. In a 2017 interview with *Vogue*, Lizzo contends, “any body a good place to be if you're listening to and taking care of it. I am, for the first time, listening to it and giving it what it wants: from vitamins, to positive reinforcement, to sunlight, to rest. I think it likes that, so it's being nice to me back.”⁷¹ Body positivity, for Lizzo, is a part of the healing process or perhaps it is a healing process itself. It is a movement of self-care. She elaborates, “that’s what the body-positive movement is. It’s showing the actual journey of women learning to love themselves, and seeing this positive result in the end. Love songs are really important, but self-love songs are even more important, and we don’t get enough self-love songs.”⁷² Thus, when self-care is read as an actionable practice of decolonial love for marginalized bodies, it is clear that Lizzo’s music and celebrity persona harness subversive and transformative potential.

Lizzo’s Fat Positive Queer World: Healing the Wounds of Coloniality

Through rhetorical performances of intersectional visibility and decolonial love, Lizzo recenters and repoliticizes the body positive movement. More specifically, she recenters body positivity back onto multiply marginalized like hers. Lizzo’s deployment of intersectional visibility politics allows her to reclaim power, agency, and humanity outside of the terms offered by coloniality/colonized beauty standards and mainstream representations of fat, Black bodies.

Her assemblaging of the big butt with the fat, Black body honors the intersection of fatness, Blackness, and womanness, in particular, as a space of power, agency, and humanity. Her use of the rhetorical tactic of *feeling herself* repudiates the white heteropatriachal gaze while marking a fundamental shift in representations of fat, Black women in media, specifically hip-hop. These reformulated politics of visibility coalesce to send the overtly political message that fat, Black, femme bodies are meant to be seen and embraced as sexual agents. This overtly political message, then, shapes the politics of body positivity by making Lizzo and her body (an inherently political, resistive, and intersectionally oppressed body) visible as the poster-girl or leader of the body positive movement, as evidenced by the uptake of her art by audiences and media commentators.

Lizzo's deployment of rhetorical performances of decolonial love cultivates a sense of interconnectedness which empowers her followers to change the ways we think about our own bodies and the bodies of others. Lizzo offers audiences a vision of what liberation can look like characterized by relationality, love, and care and she offers us the tools toward our personal liberation through depictions of her own journey to self-love which becomes the first step in the healing process that is body positivity. Lizzo's vision suggests the possibility of a world where our relationships with our bodies and the bodies of our others are not ruled the dictates of coloniality and, instead, envisions a world focused on healing. Lizzo's music and the self-care encouraged through her lyrics become the medicine that can heal us from the wounds of coloniality. Her promotion of actionable steps for self-care offers a way for multiply marginalized subjects to take agency over their own subjectivity and co-create the loving, ethical worlds they deserve to live in. Enacting care and love for multiply marginalized bodies becomes

a political imperative for body positivity and holds transformative potential toward a more ethical world.

The fat positive queer world imagined through Lizzo's celebrity persona is, thus, one ungoverned by the white heteropatriarchal gaze and unmarred by the wounds of coloniality. It is a world in which fat, Black femme bodies are made visible in their full humanity and embraced as agentic. Lizzo's fat positive queer world uses feel good music and the imperative to self-care toward a telos of healing. In so doing, Lizzo's music and celebrity persona offers the possibility of a more ethical world that operates outside of the terms of coloniality by privileging intersubjectivity and care.

Instagram, lyrics, and music videos are the three primary platforms and formats through which Lizzo communicates her vision of a fat positive queer world. The platform affordances of Instagram allow her messages to take on a seemingly more personal, authentic, and vulnerable tone. Social media create a sense of closeness and intimacy not accessible through other media contexts.⁷³ Thus, social media become a rich area for performances of authenticity on the part of celebrities. Even though the most seemingly authentic or real performances of celebrity are still highly mediated, Lizzo deploys a form of authenticity that I label real, raw, and ratchet as a “performative strategy that secures a liberatory space for black women,” while moving beyond “cramped cultural spaces like the politics of respectability” to increase that sense of intimacy and realness, making her celebrity persona as communicated through social media particularly powerful.⁷⁴ This performance of authenticity imbued with intimacy and realness then translates to her songs and music videos since the driving message she communicates stay the same, even as the medium through which it is communicated changes.

Song lyrics and music videos, then, extend Lizzo's reach as a celebrity by affording her mainstream visibility. Both her messages about self-care and body positivity as well as her sense of authenticity is offered up on a silver platter to diverse audiences via hit singles and music videos. Moreover, the music video platform foregrounds Lizzo's physical body in all its fat, Black femme glory, allowing her interventions into body positivity to become intelligible as specifically *embodied* activist rhetorics. Music videos provide the opportunity for Lizzo's embodied body positive activist rhetoric to transform the bounds of visibility, agency, and representation for Black, fat women and femmes in the ways described above precisely because of the affordances of mainstream media.

Conclusion

*"I want people to feel that closeness, because if you can love me as much as you do without knowing me, and without me being like this archetype of modern beauty in media, then you can love yourself."*⁷⁵

One of the primary driving assertions of this chapter as it contributes to the larger dissertation project is that, in order to meaningfully work toward creating livable worlds for multiply marginalized fat people, radical forms of body positivity must shift away from centering privileged bodies and reproducing colonial beauty standards by investing in explicitly intersectional and decolonial approaches to politics, visibility, and activism. Lizzo's deployment of intersectional politics of visibility and decolonial love challenges the problematic logics of representation and marginalizing beauty standards that permeate both dominant fatphobic culture and mainstream versions of body positivity. Lizzo's celebrity persona empowers fat, Black women through positive representation and refuses the terms of coloniality and colonized beauty standards through the imperative to love and care for multiply marginalized bodies. In these ways, Lizzo's performance of body positivity recenters the movement back onto bodies like hers and honors the movement's roots in radical fat activism.

Lizzo's association by audiences as a key figure and even a leader in the body positive movement crafts a link between body positivity and Lizzo's body with all its particular intersections. Her feel-good music that continues to gain popularity among diverse audiences, then, continues to bring visibility to body positivity, creating a cycle of mainstream visibility. This mainstream visibility is likely also linked to Lizzo's enactments of decolonial love with the link between the two characterized by the affective force of love, care, and affirmation.

Just as @Sassy_latte and Melissa honor the decolonial, intersectional, and queer roots of radical fat activism within their performance of body justice, Lizzo harnesses many of the same energies, linking them to body positivity through her appointed role of "leader" within the movement, and bringing body positivity into mainstream visibility via popular hip-hop music. In doing so, Lizzo's celebrity persona and rhetorical performance of body positivity provides insight into how embodied social movement rhetorics evolve as they travel between and across cultural spheres and as they get articulated through particular kinds of bodies. Specifically, as body positivity is moving into mainstream popularity via Lizzo's hip-hop music, one would expect it to experience further commodification, co-optation, and appropriation. However, because it is making its way into this cultural sphere through Lizzo's embodied rhetorical performances of intersectional visibility and decolonial love as articulated from and through a fat, Black femme body, the movement, instead, retains its capacity to center, uplift, and envision fat positive queer worlds for multiply marginalized bodies. Thus, in the case of body positivity—and perhaps embodied social movement rhetorics more broadly—the rhetorical tactics employed as well as the bodies they derive from prove to be of equal critical importance.

Is Lizzo a perfect advocate for body positivity? Absolutely not. In fact, she often disavows the movement altogether. However, the rhetorical work her celebrity persona performs

models a different way of being—a fat positive way of being that affirms the humanity and agency of fat, Black femmes while working toward healing the fatphobic and anti-Black wounds of coloniality. In doing so, Lizzo crafts a space of transformative political potential and fat positive worldmaking made possible by intersubjective love and care.

Now that I have examined two key moments of fat positive queer worldmaking performed through—or at least via harnessing the energies of—body positivity, I turn next to my own experiences within and as a result of the body positive movement as key objects of rhetorical and autoethnographic study. In the two preceding chapters, I centered the voices of multiply marginalized body positive figures that have significantly impacted both my understanding of what body positivity is and who it should serve as well as my lived, embodied experience in the world as a multiply marginalized fat person. In particular, I took care to uplift the voices of body positive rhetors of color whose experiences of racial oppression and anti-Blackness as they intersect with fat oppression (among others) position them as crucial contributors to understanding the worldmaking potentialities of body positivity in the current moment. In the next chapter, I insert my own voice as one worthy of examination and one that can offer an en fleshed perspective on the contours of body positive rhetoric. I weave story, theory, performance, and analysis to more extensively position myself as a scholar and activist of body positivity, justify the importance of autoethnographic methods for deepening understandings of embodied social movement rhetoric, trace out the contours of fatphobia from an en fleshed perspective, and perform the possibilities for a fat positive queer world before an audience.

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**ENFLESHING THE RHETORICAL THOUGH THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC:
TRACING THE CONTOURS OF FATPHOBIA AND PERFORMING THE
POSSIBILITIES OF FAT-POSITIVE QUEER WORLDS**

Being There

I'm sixteen years old and I have just been prescribed an appetite suppressant by my family doctor at my mom's request. I don't remember the name of the medication, but I can't imagine that it's still legal to prescribe. The initial few days are exciting—for what seems like the first time in my life, I barely think about food. Every now and then, I feel my stomach rumble, but I am able to ignore it. These first few days, I barely eat a thing...and the pounds start dropping. By day 4, I have lost almost 10 pounds. Later that same day, I suddenly realize that I am at school, but I have no idea how I got there. My car is in the parking lot, so I must have driven. I tell my mom that I am losing chunks of time and that I feel like I am on crack. She asks how much weight I've lost and congratulates me. I learn, in that moment and in no uncertain terms, what I have been on the verge of understanding my entire life—that weight loss is the most important goal I can achieve in life and that it is to be attained at all costs. After a few more days of feeling strung-out and panicked while losing as much time and memory as I lose weight, I secretly stop using the medication.

Being Here

I am sitting here, writing a dissertation about body positivity and fat activism, and I am constantly aware of the relationship between my own embodiment (and, more specifically, my own lived, embodied experiences) in relationship to my object and topic of study. Much as there are few cisgender and heterosexual folks writing about queer theory and perhaps only a handful

of white scholars writing meaningfully about issues of race, my engagement with fat studies and fat activism is acutely connected to my positionality as a fat person. I am not making a judgement about this fact; however, I am aware that I can never distance myself from this topic. My body, mind, and archive of lived experiences shape how I approach this topic and this dissertation project reciprocally impacts my understanding of those elements of myself as well. I am deeply, personally, intimately, viscerally connected to the body positive movement and I would be betraying my research, my audience, and myself to ignore that connection, rather than explore what it means and what possibilities it holds.

The vignette above depicts my first attempt at performative autoethnography. I view this chapter and its endeavor in performative autoethnography as a methodological augmentation to what this project has engaged thus far—primarily (queer) rhetorical criticism supplemented with a critical cultural sensibility attuned to media affordances. The simple answer to why I feel the need to bring autoethnography to this project is that, because this topic is so close to me and has impacted my life in transformative ways, I believe that my experience has something to add to scholarly understandings of the body positive movement. After all, autoethnography is, at its core “cultural analysis through personal narrative.”¹ Indeed, my narratives offer added depth to more distanced textual observations and evaluations because they are rooted in the body—they are embodied and en fleshed. Moreover, I recognize that I, and people like me, are part of the texts I have chosen to study. We are text, context, audience, and rhetor simultaneously. Thus, autoethnography also deepens analysis of body positive activism in my case because it allows me to “invite readers into the lived experience of a presumed ‘Other’ and to experience it viscerally,” where exploring my complex role as “presumed Other”/rhetor/scholar/writer makes possible a visceral experience of the impacts of body positive rhetoric.²

Beyond deepening understanding of body positive activism through interrogating my own experiences with the movement, this chapter harnesses the vulnerability and riskiness of performative autoethnography to engage in worldmaking before an audience. To ensure that this dissertation does not just analyze moments of worldmaking, but actively engages in them, I write from a place of vulnerability in ways that expose me to both the pain of my past fatphobic experiences and the risk of placing my politically marked fat body on the line for scrutiny. There is no queer hope without pain and there is no queer future without a willingness to risk losing everything in the not-yet-queer present.³ Thus, for the sake of my own survival and in order to pay homage to a movement that made such survival imaginable, I perform the possibilities for a fat-positive queer world before you, using my stories and analysis of those stories to chart a path forward.

Autoethnographers “do not distinguish research from living life.”⁴ In that spirit, I jump back into life—my life—and use a series of touchstone narratives to contextualize and amplify my scholarly assertions about body positivity. In doing so, I weave story, theory, performance, and analysis to position myself as a scholar and activist of body positivity, justify the importance of autoethnographic methods for deepening understandings of embodied social movement rhetoric, trace out the contours of fatphobia from an enfleshed perspective, and perform the possibilities for a fat-positive queer world before an audience. Today, I tell my story; and, along the way, I explore and work to “understand the kinds of knowledge that are located in the body” through storytelling.⁵

Beginning

I was never a petite or dainty child; I was always tall and sometimes chunky. When I was in elementary school, my mom would regularly joke about my yearly growth-surts, commenting

that I would grow out (i.e. grow chubbier) then grow up (i.e. grow taller). I began to rely on part two of that process. It was okay that I was chubby right now because, soon, that extra chub would stretch vertically and I would have an acceptably thin-ish body again. Finally, one summer, I grew out, but not up.

Fat activism exists in dialectical tension with fatphobia in ways that are specific, historical and contextual. This is a guiding assertion of this dissertation, one that informs the goal of tracing out fatphobia as it has impacted my lived, embodied experience in the world. Fat activism emerges, shifts, and evolves in response to the contours of fatphobia at any given time. That is to say that fat activism would not exist without fatphobia. And though this is certainly the case in a much broader sense—i.e. socially, politically, and especially culturally—it is also true at a much more micro level. Indeed, *my* engagement within body positive and fat activism is a result of *my* experiences of fatphobia. In other words, my intervention as a fat activist is situated dialectically with my experiences of fatphobia. My role as a body positive rhetor is as much about a phentermine prescription at sixteen years old and microaggressive comments from my mother in elementary school about my growth spurts as it is about my social media presence and hashtag activism in the current moment. However, the methodological constraints of rhetorical criticism barely allow me to meaningfully explore how I engage in the invention and production of rhetoric as a scholar-activist, let alone investigate the relationship between self and culture that shaped the conditions of possibility for such invention and production. Indeed, that is where autoethnography proves especially useful.

From the beginning, I position this project (and this chapter, specifically) as responding to calls from McHendry et. al and other scholars of *in situ* and rhetorical field methods approaches to engage in the act of “*doing* rhetoric” rather than “just observing or analyzing

rhetoric.”⁶ As a reminder, “doing rhetoric” means engaging in rhetorical action in the present in ways that hold the “potential to affect change,” enact “political commitments in the moment,” and open up “a space for understanding rhetoric at the level of its practice.”⁷ By the end of this chapter, it will become abundantly clear how I *do* body positive rhetoric—how I affect change in the moment by creating and sharing body positive content, how I pursue my political commitments to fat activism in practice, as well as how I am situated within body positive and activist communities. However, the rhetoric that I *do* can easily become a text for others to study. Much like my work in the preceding chapters, any skilled rhetorical critic can create an archive of my posts, study them, analyze them, evaluate them, and write up a compelling piece of criticism that unpacks my rhetorical arguments in all their visual, textual, and embodied glory. However, something that no one else—not a single other person/scholar/critic/activist in this world—can do is autoethnographically interrogate the dialectical relationship between my lived experiences of fatphobia and my subsequent rhetorical enactments of body positivity. That, then, is the core contribution of this chapter and it is one that has crucial implications for understanding body positivity as a worldmaking project.

Being There

I'm in my early teens and I beg my mom to let me get on Weight Watchers. I've seen people lose weight while still enjoying food on this program and that's all I want in life. This moment reminds me of when I was about 8 years old, begging my mom to let me to join Curves with her. The only other fat girl in my grade got to go to Curves with her mom and she seemed happy. My mom said Curves wasn't for children, but I knew the real issue was that we couldn't afford it. This time, my mom scrapes together the money for me to get on the Weight Watchers plan, complete with the fancy little “points” calculator and weekly check-in meetings. I feel completely

out of place at the meetings as the only young person there; everyone else is in their forties or older. I can't relate to what anyone is talking about—kids, jobs, aging. All I know is how proud I am the first week when I drop two pounds, just like you're supposed to. I had banked all my extra weekly points for the most mouth-watering meal I can think of—a double bacon cheeseburger, large fries, and a Coke from Wendy's. My mom is happy with my progress, so she takes me to claim my extra points in the form of a large combo meal on the way home from the weekend Weight Watchers meeting. However, once I order my meal—two patties, two slices of greasy bacon, and hot, melty cheese on a soft, sesame seed bun paired with crispy fries and an ice-cold Coke—I look over to see that my mom is fuming. She is disgusted with what I ordered. I am so confused. I am allowed to have this on the Weight Watchers plan...I banked the points! She screams at me about my inability to control myself—of course, I couldn't get a regular cheeseburger with my cheat points, I had to get a double bacon cheeseburger because I lacked all willpower. I unlock the door of my mom's moving car and fling my body out onto the street, leaving my meal with her, and begin to walk home.

A similar situation happens with us later in my teens when I order a foot-long sandwich at Cheba Hut instead of a six-inch sub. This time, she screams at me about my order in front of two of my close friends and one of hers.

Being Here

Microaggressions from mom...

...as an elementary schooler.

...at Wendy's and Cheba Hut.

...in the form of a dangerous pill...

...As I write this chapter, I finally track down the name of the appetite suppressant I was prescribed as a teen—phentermine. Yes, it is still legal in the U.S. and it is still widely prescribed for short term use for weight loss. A quick Google search reveals that common side effects of the drug are “rapid or irregular heartbeat, delirium, panic, psychosis, and heart failure.” Like I said, weight loss must be achieved at all costs—including your health, your sanity, and even possibly your life.

Interrogating and Understanding

As I mentioned previously, I am drawn to autoethnography because it allows me to interrogate the cultural via the personal. As Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner articulate, “autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.”⁸ Ellis elaborate on this point, discussing the “back and forth” motion of the “autoethnographer’s gaze”:

First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.⁹

Being able to more deeply understand culture—both its oppressive facets, such as diet culture, fatphobic discourses, and weight bias as well as its moments of subversion and resistance, such as that which occurs through activist engagements—via taking a critical lens to my personal experiences is appealing. However, my investment in autoethnography goes beyond needing to understand culture via self and vice versa. I am also invested methodologically in autoethnography as a useful augmentation to more traditional modes of rhetorical criticism because it allows for—it explicitly makes space for—(1) intersectional reflexivity and

interrogation of power dynamics via lived experience and social location, (2) vulnerability for researcher/writer and reader, and (3) embodiment and embodied knowledge.

First, as a scholar invested in intersectionality as a theoretical foundation of all the work that I do, I constantly seek ways to better understand, articulate, and account for my own positionality. In particular, I strive to more explicitly and meaningfully address the ways in which my body, my work, and the relationship between the two are implicated within a complex web of interwoven dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression. Autoethnography, particularly *critical* autoethnography, allows me to work through and within this web because, at its core, it “require[s] researchers to acknowledge the inevitable privileges we experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity.”¹⁰ In other words, “we write as an Other, and for an Other.”¹¹ Critical autoethnography requires a kind of intersectional reflexivity that explicitly names and honors the specific manifestations of privilege and oppression that have shaped our lived experiences. An intersectional understanding of power, thus, is written into what it means to do critical autoethnography in ways that do not animate other analytical or narrative methodologies. This is echoed in Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe’s point that autoethnography can and should be “a means to enhance existing understandings of lived experiences enacted within social locations situated within larger systems of power, oppression, and social privilege.”¹²

Second, autoethnography carves out spaces for vulnerability—an affect that is not often invited into scholarship or the research process. Perhaps the question that arises here is: why would one want scholarship to be vulnerable? The answer to this question directly relates to this dissertation’s larger interest in worldmaking. If queer worldmaking is a future-oriented praxis rooted in notions of queer hope, queer potential, and investing in the possibility of livable queer

worlds—even as they exist in the realm of the not-yet here—I cannot imagine what queer worldmaking looks like without vulnerability. Queer worldmaking is about the pain of living in (hetero)normative worlds that render certain—your/my/queer/fat—bodies unintelligible. Queer worldmaking is about holding out hope for a futurity, a utopia, that is never quite within grasp. This act of exposing oneself to pain and hope simultaneously is a form of vulnerability only comprehensible to marginalized groups—i.e. those who inhabit non-normative bodies. Autoethnography is one of the few scholarly methods that both “often centers on pain,” while also not always allowing pain to take over.¹³ Indeed, as autoethnographers “write to find the truths of our experiences,” we are offered the possibility to work through pain via the “therapeutic, embodied, performative, and queer” writing process, thus potentially lessening the grip of pain on our minds and bodies.¹⁴ Moreover, writing vulnerably helps readers be vulnerable and, if I want my readers to be open to hoping for and even creating more livable queer worlds, I must support, embrace, and craft the conditions of possibility for their vulnerability.¹⁵

Finally, autoethnography is an embodied methodology that brings the body of the scholar to the forefront of scholarly invention and production. Divorcing knowledge (in the form of scholarship) from the body reproduces Cartesian mind/body dualism in ways that obscure the importance of lived experience for informing theory and analysis. This disconnect animates much traditional rhetorical scholarship; as I read a rhetorical criticism essay, I often know nothing about the critic’s body—what its relationship to the text is, how it is implicated in webs of power, privilege, and oppression, what it knows and feels in relationship to the text, or what set of lived, embodied experiences and knowledge it brings to the table. As Brett Lunceford conveys it, “when we act as critics, we often present ourselves as disembodied voices.”¹⁶ However, “our voices are always embodied once they begin telling a story.”¹⁷ Nevertheless,

storytelling via autoethnography does not simply happen without careful crafting. In other words, “stories do not appear on their own. They are lived, told, and re-produced in embodied experiences shared by/with others.”¹⁸ Indeed, the relationship between body and story is precisely what makes autoethnography such a transformative addition to other, more traditional scholarly methodologies—bodies undergo lived experiences and then, as we open the passageway between body and mind, we communicate knowledge in the form of a carefully crafted narrative. That narrative is, then, essentially our mind and body’s way of working together to better understand the world around us in ways that merge lived, embodied experience with theory.

Performing

If autoethnography uses storytelling to merge lived, embodied experience with theory, and therefore adds depth to scholarly analyses via lived experiences, a key point of consideration involves how a story—the story—is conceptualized and told. This is where performance and performative writing prove useful, while adding another layer of creativity, embodiment, and critique:

Narrative performance is not a disembodied invention waiting to be found by any knowledgeable observer and analyzed within a neutral or stable context. Rather, it is through our participation in performing narrative . . . that we come to understand the context within which we locate relations which constitute a doing and a thing done. . . . Performing narrative is radically contextualized: in the bodies and voices of participants; in its situated and material conditions. . . and in the consequences storytelling poses for legitimation and critique of personal, social, and cultural norms and institutions.¹⁹

Performative autoethnography, then, is not simply about the content of the story. It is about our agency in crafting and performing the narrative, it is about our social location in relationship to cultural context, it is about the added context of our voices and bodies, and it is about the possibility that performative storytelling offers for critiquing norms and relations of power.

Performative autoethnography offers me agency as a scholar/writer/marginalized person, both in relationship to the stories I tell as well as the interactions the stories represent. As Tami Spry explains, “performing autoethnography has allowed me to position myself as active agent with narrative authority over many hegemonizing dominant cultural myths that restricted my social freedom and personal development.”²⁰ In other words, though our marginalized positionalities often deny us agency within our lived experiences and interactions with the world, performing autoethnography allows for agency in the form of narrative authority—i.e. the ability to tell the story the way I need to, on my terms, in ways that promote personal power and autonomy at the expense of hegemonic control. Spry also elaborates on how autoethnography can help one claim agency over lived experiences and interactions with others by providing a space for reflexivity on the part of the researcher and contextualized interpretation on the part of the audience:

This work has literally saved my life by providing me the means to claim reflexive agency in my interactions with others in contexts. In autoethnographic performance, the body is like a cultural billboard for people to read and interpret in the context of their own experience.²¹

As I narratively shift from tales of trauma to accounts of academic and activist awakenings, I exercise agency over my own story and begin the process of fat-positive queer worldmaking before you, my audience.

Awakening

It's the last year of undergrad and I'm sitting in my favorite class—queer studies. This class blows my mind every Tuesday and Thursday, opening my eyes up to all kinds of ideas and perspectives that, in their messiness and liminality, somehow help me make sense of the world around me and my place in it. We are having a discussion about what constitutes a queer identity and whether straight/cis people can claim queerness. I have yet to name myself as queer, with my

pansexual awakening to occur about a year later in my life/story/journey. In discussing how queerness disrupts boundaries, dismantles binaries, and challenges normative assumptions, I raise my hand and ask the question: “are fat bodies queer?” My professor mentions that there is an area of scholarship called “fat studies” wherein scholars have been tussling with this question for a while. Fat studies? Really? That exists? It seemed outlandish. Little did I know, that question—the question—would catalyze my future scholarly trajectory. It would serve as the foundation of my master’s thesis, many of my seminar papers in graduate school, my doctoral dissertation, and my first two published articles. At that moment in my queer studies class, I am not far-removed from old-habits like dieting and before-and-after weight-loss pictures. However, the question catalyzes my subsequent dive into fat studies, fat activism, and the body positivity moment. The question—a seemingly discreet moment of scholarly curiosity—would forever change my life and it laid the foundation for queerer worlds beyond the confines of diet culture and thin-obsession that had reigned over my life thus far.

The question—one that marked the key shift in my journey from person-who-is-fat-and-rejects-fatness-as-a-mode-of-survival to self-proclaimed fat activist and scholar—is important, not just because it makes for a good “origin story,” but also because it demonstrates a moment of embodied knowledge laying the foundation for future worldmaking. Indeed, the question, being the moment of scholarly inquiry that it was, emerged from an enfolded understanding of fatness as an embodied performance that dismantles norms and boundaries. Embodied knowledge privileges the body, especially the marginalized body, as a site of knowledge production.²² It was my experience of fatness, of existing in and navigating the world in and through a fat body in ways that rarely adhered to normative expectations about what bodies should do/look like and who they should serve, that prompted this question. My body, in all its fleshy glory, knew there

was something queer about fat and *knew* that probing fat's queerness could be the key for unlocking the door to a different future, a different world. Indeed, I was not posing the question theoretically; I did not need to know whether fat bodies could be reasonably categorized as queer under the guiding tenets of queer theory. What I was really asking was: do fat bodies queer (as a verb) things/understandings/spaces in the world? In other words—do fat bodies do queer work? Do they engage in the act of queering? And I wanted to know this, not to write a paper (though I did go on to do plenty of that), but to understand my place in the world more deeply and to understand what possibilities fatness held for transforming the world around me.

This moment, packed into a four-word sentence that seemed to linger on the tip of my tongue for years to follow, provided perhaps the first glimmer of the queer, fat-positive world in front me that was just ever so out of reach. This moment exemplified the step of the worldmaking process that Gust Yep argues comes after injury—the healing step—the step where we unpack and critique and demystify and question and pull it all apart until the pieces are so fragmented they can only be put back together in a completely new formation.²³ This moment, *the question*, emerged from a sense of “enfleshed knowledge” and instilled in me the sense of critical hope—an investment in a possible fat-positive utopia—that I needed in order to keep going and to keep questioning.²⁴ And, much as I discuss in the introduction to this dissertation, *the question* revealed to me that academia could be a potentially transformative site of worldmaking, as it was clear that there was so much potential wrapped up in exploring the intersection of queerness and fatness through scholarship. However, let us not forget the forces (people, spaces, assumptions, expectations) within academic spaces that also thwart worldmaking, for academia is an institution, after all, and institutions are rarely invested in liberation or utopias...

Emerging

It's the second semester of my first year of graduate school and I am THRIVING. I choose to forget how difficult my first semester was and the moment of panic in which I felt like I knew nothing and started searching for jobs on Craigslist and making plans to move back home with my parents because there was no way I was going to succeed on this path. I got my bearings sometime that first semester and now, in this second semester, I know I am in the right place in life. After securing an advisor for my master's thesis, I have to decide what I am going to write about. I have already written about body positivity, fat activism, and queer theory in one of my classes—I never can seem to get away from the question—and that seems like an intriguing niche through which I can carve out my scholarly identity and purpose. My peers don't really understand it. I remember telling a couple of master's students who are a year more advanced than me about my proposed thesis topic (fat activism) as well as a paper I was writing about queer embodiment and bathrooms. They looked confused, if not disturbed by the topic of fatness/fat activism and then proceeded to praise me on how interesting my bathroom paper sounded. I have one peer in my graduate cohort who, herself, is perhaps one of the most fatphobic people I've ever met. Being in the same room with her is toxic. She regularly talks disparagingly about fat bodies, justifying her verbal poison with the context that she used to be fat. I can't believe some of what I tolerate coming out of her mouth. Though, she seems to always stop one step before actually saying something directly fatphobic about me. That is probably smart on her part. I could probably squish her like a bug if I wanted to—you know, because I'm fat...

Situating

...at this point in my life, I am writing about body positive and fat activism, but not yet sure of how I might fit into these movements. I admire them, yes. I believe they are important, no, crucial. However, I am so conflicted by my own body, unable to see over the walls that diet culture has built around me to contain me and keep me complicit. This year, I begin to position myself within two new identities—disabled and queer. I begin to face the reality that the chronic pain I have experienced since my early teens is, indeed, chronic (if not life-long), and that it is a disability rather than a manifestation of some moral failing. I realize that I've had the same pain in the same places while doing the same movements whether I am 150 or 300 pounds. I am, simply, disabled. I also come out as pansexual—a very confusing realization and process to move through while in a heterosexual relationship with an opposite-gender partner of then five (now 10) years. Ensnared in this web of fatness, disability, and queerness, I move deeper and deeper into body positivity, predominantly as a consumer of content, grasping for some lifeline, something to make it all make sense.

Experiences of fatphobia did not cease simply because I followed an academic career path or because I took the initiative to integrate the study of fatness and fat activism into my scholarly identity. Instead, they simply shifted form; they evolved to align with my new context. Fatphobia manifested in the form of a self-hating colleague that would talk disparagingly about her previously larger body and the large bodies of others, then slip into hushed tones and averted eyes when I walked by her desk. It manifested in condescending looks from graduate students my senior who couldn't fathom fatness being a worthy area of study. It manifested in the reality that there was not a single fat faculty member in my department, and very few in my discipline writ large. Surrounding me are often only thin bodies and the women, especially, are painfully

thin—a constant reminder of the form of femininity I am expected to conform to but never can or will. The lack of representation is suffocating. It quite literally threatens my survival, both in the space of academia, but also more broadly.²⁵

However, there's only one thing harder than holding a marginalized identity in academia—that is, holding more than one simultaneously.²⁶ It seemed like, overnight, I went from being just fat to being fat AND disabled AND queer, even though we all know identity and embodiment are far more nuanced and fluid than that. Perhaps accepting and *claiming* my fatness opened the door to being able to accept and claim my disability and queerness. Whatever the case, I was suddenly caught up in a web of difference. I was different than everyone around me. I was different than what an academic is supposed to be. I was different than what a woman—a daughter, a sister, a partner—is supposed to be. I was overwhelmed by the layers of difference that my body was holding. Feeling like I was about to explode, I reached for a lifeline. I didn't know what survival for intersectionally marginalized (oppressed? subjugated? non-normative? What's the lingo here?) bodies like mine could look like. Perhaps I never knew what survival looked like for bodies like mine. I was, after all, categorized by popular and medical discourse as “morbidly obese”—a classification that paints me as a walking vector of disease and decay. What does survival look like for the diseased? For the decaying? For the unwell?

Surviving

By the time I am studying body positivity from the perspective of a graduate student, researcher, and writer, I have already consumed a lot of its content via Instagram and online digital media platforms. Though I would go on to completely smother myself with body positive and fat-positive content, I had dipped my toes in as early as 2014-2015, as undergrad was ending and grad school was beginning, and when the #effyourbeautystandards movement, led by fat model

Tess Holliday, was gaining cultural traction. I didn't yet know my place in the movement, but I knew the movement's place in my life. To be quite frank, it saved my life. I don't know how long a person can live with the impression that their body is wrong and bad and abnormal and that the world would be better off without people like them. I don't know how long a person can go on when everything around them—friends, family, popular culture—is telling them that they are unworthy of life, love, and happiness unless they can make a change that they feel is perpetually out of reach. I don't know how long a person can survive when their survival is deemed a mistake, a failure, a glitch in the matrix. All I know is that I was coming up on my inability to go on—to survive, to live. My relationship with my body and with food/nourishment was ravaged from the moment my baby fat refused to melt away. Any possibility of self-esteem or self-directed love was similarly torn away from me from a young age. I was out of reasons to try to keep going. My tank was nearing empty. That is, until I saw the first few posts on Instagram tagged #effyourbeautystandards. I witnessed people that looked like me—and people that didn't look like me, but that certainly equally deviated from society's norm—living, loving, surviving, and even thriving. I saw them dancing and posing and harnessing sensual energy. I saw them being and existing. I saw fat rolls paired with smiles. I saw large, dimply thighs carrying heavy bodies across and around the world. I saw possibility. For the first time in my life, I saw the possibility of something else—a better life, a worthy existence. For the first time in my life, I saw a future for myself.

I am not exaggerating when I say that the body positive movement saved my life.

Manifesting

Body positivity saved my life.

It was my lifeline.

It ensured my survival.

Queer worldmaking is about survival. It is about, first and foremost, creating and cultivating and carving out spaces for queers (and all those who do the work of *queering*) to survive—to live, to BREATHE. Why? Because (hetero)normativity is antithetical to queer(ed) life. It kills us softly, reminding us every time we come up for air that we deserve the hate, the pain, the violence, the suppression. Queer worldmaking is first about survival in the present and then about envisioning queer utopias in the never quite reachable future.

I study body positive and fat activism because I owe these movements my life. They are the queer worlds that make possible my survival in a precarious present and they are the continual promise of a better, more livable future. I repay these movements by doing my part to manifest that future—that fat-positive utopia—through scholarship, activism, pedagogy, and existence. That is, quite frankly, why this dissertation exists.

I turn back first to a couple of standout academic experiences and then back towards later stages of my “activist awakenings” to consider what role I’ve played, am playing, and will continue to play in manifesting fat-positive queer worlds and futures.

Queering

I am at my first NCA.²⁷ I land in Philadelphia one day after the 2016 election. I have so many overwhelming feelings—shock, sadness, and fear mostly. I try to make the most of the conference experience, something completely foreign to me. I find solace in the omnipresent sense of trepidation in the air. It feels like solidarity. I attend the NCA Scholars’ Office Hours, hoping to meet at least one renowned queer scholar. I do meet one and she asks me about my research interests. Nervous words start tumbling out of my mouth and I realize that I just brazenly called myself a queer scholar. I ask her, “can I refer to myself as a queer scholar?” She looks at me a

bit puzzled and replies, “sure.” Little did I (nor probably did she) know, I was, indeed, a queer scholar. I am a queer scholar, now with a little more cred. At this first conference, I also attend my first performance panel. I am enchanted, obsessed. I want to do that. I want to do scholarship with not just my mind, but also with my body, with my feelings, emotions, and experiences. I consider applying for PhD programs in performance. My scholarly identity is slowly piecing itself together.

I began to carve out my identity as a body positive fat activist²⁸ within the bounds of my already emerging identity as a queer, rhetorical scholar. I clung to queerness and queer theory as a starting point for this work because of my obsession with challenging norms, blurring binaries, and dismantling normative assumptions, especially those related to bodies and embodiment. I eventually developed what, to me, was a nuanced understanding of queerness that did not explicitly link it to gender and sexuality, but also did not fully divorce it from those conceptual vectors. I determined that queer encompasses embodied ways of being—identities, modalities, compartments, enactments, performances—that challenge normative assumptions about what bodies should do and look like as well as who they should serve. Within this definition of queer, fat fit.

As I carved out my queer scholarly identity while simultaneously embarking on a journey to unpack my queer embodied identity—not just as a pansexual person, but also as a fat, disabled person with fatness and disability being queer bodily compartments under my newly identified conception—I also held on to rhetoric as a productive means through which to understand, interrogate, and even perhaps enact body positive fat activism. Queer rhetorical criticism, especially, helped me orient myself to the ways in which fatness, fat bodies, and fat activism

disrupt normative binaries and traditional categories and, perhaps even more importantly, how they work to build alternative queer, fat-positive worlds.²⁹

However, I always had a gnawing sense that rhetoric and its established methodological affordances could never quite grasp that which I needed to blend my academic and activist work in ways that were meaningful, both personally and politically. It was when I came across Bernadette Calafell's essay on keeping rhetoric honest and accountable through performance that I realized that I couldn't—I wouldn't—be a rhetorical purist. I was captivated by the methodological intersection of rhetoric and performance, which Calafell articulates as “a homeplace that brings together the theory of the flesh with a critical rhetorical perspective immersed in the politics of the performative...[where] personal experience is valued as are other forms of knowledge production and representation.”³⁰ Calafell elaborates

Performance works from the ground up as it situates us in the everyday. Through this it works to reconfigure relations of power. It works against dominant conceptions of knowledge by locating itself in and theorizing through the body. It offers us a critical interpretive tool and lens. It is not an ornamentation or accessory to rhetoric. It embodies and drives a sustained critique of discourse...Rhetoric needs performance to keep it critical and accountable.³¹

Bringing rhetoric and performance together as I explored the intricacies of fatness seemed to promise a path forward that allowed for a constant overlap of the analytical, the personal, and the political, though always rooted firmly in the body. It would allow me to

Interpret, critique, and theorize

Honor, know, and embody

Reconfigure, resist, and dismantle.

I wanted my scholarship to be accountable to my politics. I wanted my politics to be accountable to my lived experience. This was (is) my path forward.

Feeling

The following February, in 2017, I go to my first meeting of the Western States Communication Association annual conference in Salt Lake City. Because of my first NCA experience, I show up to this conference (and every subsequent conference) with the goal of attending as many performance panels as possible. In Salt Lake, I attend one panel in which several performers discuss fatness as a marginalized identity. They perform their bodies; they perform their fatness. Through performative autoethnography, my trauma and the possibilities for my liberation are both simultaneously manifested right in front of me. I can almost touch it! Each conference I attend—each performance—strips down the layers of the wall I've put up around myself until my most vulnerable pieces are exposed. I attend panels, sob, and process the trauma of a life of wanting to be less, sometimes wanting to be nothing. I attend one heart wrenching panel a subsequent year in which one performer discusses the trauma of fatphobia. They recount feeling the desire to cut away at their fat—to literally take a blade to their viscera and start sawing away at flesh. The blood drains from my face. I thought I was the only one that had such sick desires. I flash back to various moments in college when I would sit at the side of my bed, sobbing softly so that my partner wouldn't hear me, while holding a blade—a razor, a knife, scissors—against the flesh of my stomach, praying to a god I've never believed in to give me the strength to start cutting away. I had sat on that same brink of self-harm since I was a little girl, always too afraid to follow through and hating myself for being a cow(ard). I'm ripped away from my painful memories by the performance in front of me. The performer leans into these difficult feelings in order to emerge from them, more whole. I also emerge from their performance more whole.

Performance continues to impact my life and shape my sense of purpose as an activist and academic. As I realize how impactful autoethnographic performance has been (and continues to be) on me as well as everyone else in the audience during these fleeting moments of healing within musty conference hotel rooms, I pledge to bring this form of knowledge production into my own work. My work doesn't, and won't, feel whole without it. I can't work through the trauma inherent in fat embodiment without also performing the possibilities of healing and futurity, both for myself and for others—the worldmaker in me simply won't allow it.

I grapple with what this means for myself as an academic and budding activist. I read Tami Spry's work on performative autoethnography, where she claims that the autoethnographer “must be ready to walk the talk of [her] scholarship by putting [her] politically marked body on the lines of the printed text” and goes on to explain that “this kind of embodied methodology is—and should feel—risky.”³² This methodological imperative seems to parallel the activist imperative to be ready and willing to put your “body on the line” for causes that you deem worthy of fighting for. I consider the ways I have (or have not) been willing to put my body on the line for the cause of fat activism. I consider what it means to put a fat body on the line, especially in the context of social media activism. I consider the vulnerability of posting pictures of my fat body online in ways that explicitly claim and center my fatness.

Enacting

It's January 25, 2017. At this point, I have been smothering myself and my social media feeds with body positive content. Fat. Bodies. EVERYWHERE. They are beautiful, they are lovely, they are sensual, they are whole. I walk down the hallway of my apartment and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I like what I see. I see recently dyed hair and dark lipstick. I see an outfit that looks impractical for winter, but is keeping me comfy—black tank top and shorts and a long,

maroon cardigan. My cardigan, lips, and hair all match—it's a look. I also see—GASP—a sliver of tummy. My tank top doesn't quite meet my shorts and the little bit of belly fat peeking out reminds me of the images I see on those body positive accounts. They look adorable. I look adorable. I realize that a piece of wall art with the word "LOVE" peaks out behind me as a I glance in the mirror. It's all too perfect. I snap a picture of this moment, archiving it digitally for posterity. It's not for posterity, though, I decide. It's for Instagram. I'm going to post my first, body-positive, belly-bearing picture. The "LOVE" sign behind me in the photo inspires me to write a painfully cliché caption about love and self-love and inner beauty. I use the hashtags: #allbodiesaregoodbodies, #selflove, #selfcare, #alittletummyneverhurtnobody. The post garners several likes and some girl from high school I barely ever knew comments "I admire you" with heart face emojis.

While writing this, I come to a somewhat embarrassing realization. My tummy sliver picture from 2017 was not, in fact, my first "hashtag BOPO" post. After combing through my personal archive—some might just refer to this as their Instagram page—I realize I posted my first "fatkini" pic in April of 2015. Yes, that is a portmanteau of "fat" and "bikini." Maybe I didn't count this post in my mind because, even though a vulnerable chunk of belly is exposed and my soft pink and light purple stretch marks reach ever so slightly above the top of my bikini bottom, I am wearing a cardigan in the photo. Who wears a cardigan with a bikini? Notable moments from this caption include "your size should never dictate what you wear or how you feel" and "thank you to @effyourbeautystandards and @bodylovee for giving me the courage to say 'fuck you' to our fat shaming society and wear a suit I love" paired with the hashtags #effyourbeautystandards, #bodypositivity, and #losehatenotweight. Though this post garnered several comments, mostly from other plus-size and fat women/feminine spectrum folks, I think I

buried the memory because I was embarrassed that it took me nearly two years to post another similar picture. Maybe I was also conflicted because, just two months prior, in February of 2015, I had made a post that is now painful to view—one that chronicled my journey with weight gain (complete with pictures of me at my smallest and heaviest and everything in between) as well as fatphobic gems in the caption such as “I love my body now and always however, I am extremely unhealthy” and “I’ve lost a few pounds so far but this is only the beginning of my journey...”

Slivers of belly fat exposed.

Corpulent and confident, a body on display.

A body on the line?

As I amble into the realm of body positive social media activism, my body joins an archive of texts, connected by hashtags and enacted in moments of vulnerability. As I consider my motivation to manifest the fat-positive queer worlds necessary for the survival of people like me, I also consider how these enactments of activism—these fleeting moments of placing my vulnerable body before a public, even if that public is just my small group of Instagram followers—can enrich my scholarship. You see, my activist and academic engagements almost always overlap in some way, two facets of my identity in a constant state of blurring. This constant overlap resonates with scholarship on *in situ* rhetoric, especially as it relates to embodied social movements. Scholars of *in situ* rhetoric call for other scholars that study activism and social justice to place their bodies as critics into the immanent field of rhetorical

action and embrace a corporeal vulnerability that is key to understanding the affective and immaterial dimensions of embodied social movement rhetoric.³³

That's exactly what I'm doing. I'm "*doing* rhetoric," as McHendry et al. would say, which

means that the critic is engaged in rhetorical action in the field that has the potential to affect change in the moment as opposed to observing rhetoric for future potential to affect change through action-deferred... Critics who *do* rhetoric on a plane of immanence in the field not only engage political commitments in the moment but also open a space for understanding rhetoric at the level of its practice in the community they are researching and inhabiting.³⁴

I'm engaging in rhetorical action; I'm constructing complex visual and textual rhetorical artifacts toward a telos of social justice in the form of fat acceptance. I'm working to affect change in the moment, even if that change may only be a slight shift in one or two of my followers' perspectives on fat bodies (or their own bodies). I'm engaging my political commitments in the moment by joining an activist community online and, in doing so, I'm developing an understanding of body positive rhetoric at the level of practice. I'm no longer simply studying this movement, I am a part of it, even if in a very small way.

I'm doing the rhetoric, but am I doing *the work*?

Claiming

It's April 25, 2018—my 24th birthday. At this point, I have written a master's thesis on the body positivity movement and have been involved as a participant, if not activist, in the community for a few years. Over the last few months, I've posted a couple of black and white photos in various stages of undress paired with captions consisting of Lizzo lyrics. Yes, I'm that cliché. But I'm also visible; I'm vulnerable. I will not be erased. I will not be diminished. I will take up space. I snap a picture of me in my skivvies in my apartment's bathroom and place a black and white

filter over it. I post the picture to Instagram with the caption: “Year 24 of my life shall consist of: less clothing, less holding back, more anger, more vulnerability. Happy fucking birthday to me.”

I am not a leader in the body positive movement. I am not an influencer. But what I am is a micro fat activist, and that is still a valid form of engagement and participation in this larger movement. Charlotte Cooper, as she traces out what fat activism is and the different forms it takes, identifies five main categories of fat activist engagement: political process activism, activist communities, cultural work, micro fat activism, and ambiguous fat activism. Micro fat activism, though it may not be as recognizable nor has it gained the same legitimacy as, say, political process activism, still represents a “dynamic way...in which fat activists take fat activism into their own hands.”³⁵ Cooper explains that

Micro fat activism takes place in everyday spaces, is generally performed by one person, sometimes two, but rarely more, and happens in small, understated moments. Micro fat activism requires few material resources and...it is an activism that can engage people who might find other forms of activism inaccessible or exclusive...Micro fat activism is underscored by thought and intention, but it is not always public...This is the work of gently—or not so gently!—drawing people’s attention to micro-oppression...and bringing fat consciousness to other conversations...Micro fat activism could be understood as a form of minority influence, it acts as a method of opinion changing...it represents actions that encourage, demonstrate or communicate an alternative way of being.³⁶

I am a micro fat activist. I perform body positive fat activism in the everyday spaces of my Instagram feed, but also in everyday spaces such as work, family, and relationships. For example, in professional settings, I challenge and refigure the bounds of professional dress by adorning my fat body in “unflattering” dress clothes and often sparking conversations with my colleagues about the conceptual binaries drawn between professionalism and fatness. I regularly push my family members to think beyond their fatphobic belief systems. Indeed, I was raised in the typical fitness-centric (and therefore violently fatphobic) Colorado household and it has taken years to bring my immediate family to consciousness about body politics and I still work at them

a bit more each day. I intentionally infuse each of my close relationships with a body positive ethic and a fat-positive political imperative. To be close to me means actively renouncing fatphobic ways of thinking and being.

I am a micro fat activist because other forms of activism are inaccessible to me, in many ways and for many reasons, but especially as a disabled person. Though I am not one to shy away from a march or a protest, I cannot build my activist identity on those kinds of physical engagements. My physical body is unpredictable and vulnerable. I engage primarily online because digital media affords me visibility without pushing my physical limitations. I am a micro fat activist because I primarily do the small, often thankless work of shifting, molding, pushing, pulling, and changing opinions among those that are willing to listen to me, one fatphobic thought at a time. But, above all, I am a micro fat activist because my choice to exist and engage with the world as a proudly, explicitly, unmistakably fat person encourages, demonstrates, and communicates an alternative way of being.³⁷ Cooper reminds us that

Micro fat activism is real activism in its own right because it has powerful effects...it is also more difficult to place under surveillance, to police, to control, and to criminalise. It is similarly subversive because it is accessible. The immediacy of micro fat activism, particularly in its quiet relational qualities and use of assertiveness strategies produces embodied esteem within its practitioners and supports them in creating liveable lives for themselves and others.³⁸

I am a micro fat activist and I am a worldmaker. Through ephemeral and relational engagements with the world, I work toward creating livable lives for myself and others who inhabit fat bodies.

Micro fat activism represents a significant way that I do the work, but am I putting my body on the line? Do I need to put my body on the line? What is the line? I am reminded of an interview with activist Nia King, in which she points out the privilege inherent in being able to place your body on the line for a cause, because it implies that your body isn't "*always* naturally...a site of battle."³⁹ My body is always already a site of battle, however. It is the site

upon which our culture battles about what kinds of bodies are worthy and right and desirable. It is the site upon which battles around the meaning of health and beauty unfold. My body is, therefore, always on the line and it is always simultaneously hypervisible and invisible—hypervisible in its deviance and invisible in its humanity. Putting it on display via Instagram posts simply allows me to craft my own narrative about my body, to intervene in the constant battle by inserting my own take—and asserting my own voice—on its meaning.

Manifesting: Part II

It's March of 2019. I am beyond excited because a friend from college that I had all but lost touch with recently reached out to see if I wanted to do a photoshoot with her since she is trying to hone her photography and editing skills. She will soon go on to start a side hustle as an inclusive, body/fat-positive photographer that offers "lens space for marginalized folks." Coincidentally, this person is close friends with a graduate student in my field that I had just connected with because of our shared interest in fat studies. Her and I are slotted to be on a panel together at NCA later that year. My photographer friend asks if her friend (the other graduate student) can come to the photoshoot and also get pictures taken. Since I plan to use this opportunity to start building out my repertoire of body positive images—which typically involve photos in various stages of undress—I tell my photographer friend that, of course, her friend can tag along, as long as she is "on board with my lack of pants." We all show up to the Airbnb together later that month and, once again, I find my activist and academic identities blending and blurring. I want to participate in this photoshoot to bring visibility and voice to my fat, marginalized body. I am an activist. In the process, I connect with a colleague who I will go on to work with in various professional capacities—our relationship having started with a lot of vulnerability and very little clothing. I am an academic. My photographer friend takes stunning

pictures of me and my colleague, both individually and together. I often look back at these photos fondly—hair tussled, eyes full of life, fat belly and thighs on display. There is one photo of my colleague and I sitting at the small dinner table at the AirBnB, caught in a candid cackle. We're wearing lingerie from the same line at Cacique so it all looks very purposeful and polished (though the matching lingerie was, in reality, a total coincidence). My photographer friend captions the photo for her photography Instagram page, "Laughing at all the men who think 'fat' is an insult or that their opinion even matters." I share the photo and the caption to my own page and add the hashtags: #fatandhappy, #fatandunbothered, #fatties, #baddies. I get an enthusiastically and overwhelmingly positive response to this photo set when I post it to Instagram. My mom comments "Absolutely gorgeous!!" on one of the posts. Fellow plus size women and femmes gush over the beauty of these photos in the comments. They are my audience. I am their worldmaker. I am the promise of a better future for bodies like theirs; I manifest that future right before their eyes, clad only in lingerie and a smile.

Being Here

This last narrative is perhaps most representative of where my body positive fat activism lies today. It is emerging from the secluded corners of micro fat activism into what Cooper would call activist communities as well as cultural work. "Activist communities" denotes a form of fat activism that honors the relational community building work between activists and emphasizes the "gendered and embodied work...of converting abjection into asset."⁴⁰ Engaging in activist communities is a "gesture of defiance" and an "act...of survival," wherein activism occurs through witnessing and affirming the humanity of one another, rather than taking cues from the dominant culture.⁴¹ In this moment of community, my old friend, new colleague, and I

did the work of community construction—the relational work of witnessing one another and resisting dominant expectations about fat bodies together, defying and surviving simultaneously.

We also engaged fat activism as cultural work—“the act of making things”—in this case, “art and photography that makes fat embodiment and fat activist community visible.”⁴² Cooper recognizes the potential fat cultural work holds for “socially transform[ing] fat.”⁴³ These photos, in their mix of beauty, vulnerability, and boldness transformed my social relationships with many of my followers, including my own mother, and brought fat bodies, especially my fat body, into visibility and gave it an activist voice.

Like I said, this is much of what fat activism looks like for me these days, augmented by my academic work on the subject as well. I make fat art through photographs of my body posted to semi-public social media pages, I narrate my body and confer it agency through Instagram captions, and I build my fat activist community by relating and creating with others. This may sound like a destination; however, for me, it is only the beginning.

Queering/Decolonizing/Intersecting

This dissertation is organized moments of body positivity that queer, decolonize, and bring an intersectional approach to representations, enactments, and performances of fatness. And yet, I cannot claim that my own activism always does these things. In conceiving this chapter, I initially thought that queering/decolonizing/intersecting would be the lenses through which I discussed my own activist journey—both in terms of how I enact activism now and how I came to those enactments through my own embodied journey. Instead, these verbs reveal more about the work I have yet to do and, perhaps even more importantly, contextualize and justify the case studies I have chosen to represent and the voices I have sought to uplift in this dissertation.

You may have noticed that all the subheadings in this chapter are verbs. This is not by accident—the verb form is meant to characterize the constantly iterative process of body positive and fat activism. Body positivity and fat activism are not destinations; they are journeys. They are about the *doing* rather than the done. And they are journeys that can always *do* better.

I have used this chapter to chronicle my own process of coming to consciousness through body positive fat activism. Through performative autoethnography, I used my experiences of fatphobia growing up to contextualize the form my activism takes and provided insight into the fat-positive queer worlds that I needed to manifest in order to ensure my own survival and the survival of other bodies like mine. However, there is always more work to do. Indeed, *the work* is a never-ending process. And if we know the most transformative work—the most radical, transgressive, liberating work—unfolds through processes of queering, decolonizing, and intersecting (much as this dissertation argues), then I must adopt a particular activist imperative moving forward. I must work toward and come through on a very specific set of promises.

Promising

As a body positive fat activist that is invested in manifesting fat-positive queer worlds that materialize the possibilities of survival for bodies like mine, **but also and especially bodies more marginalized than mine along multiple axes**, I promise to:

Disrupt, disturb, and dismantle
Norms of embodied decorum, representation, and comportment
And manifest queer worlds
At the point where my vulnerable body brushes utopia

Queering

Recognize the colonizer within me
Hold her accountable
And uplift the voices of those most affected
By the global colonization of beauty standards

Decolonizing

Continue to unpack

My own privilege

For, even though, I am queer, fat, and disabled

I am also white, middle class, and educated

Intersecting

Notes

1. Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, "Introduction: Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice," in *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*, ed. Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014), 17.
2. Boylorn and Orbe, "Introduction," 15.
3. Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 280.
4. Boylorn and Orbe, "Introduction," 15.
5. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "Performance Studies," in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2004), 50.
6. George F. McHendry Jr et al., "Rhetorical Critic(ism)'s Body: Affect and Fieldwork on a Plane of Immanence," *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 4 (2014): 298; See also Danielle Endres et al., "In Situ Rhetoric: Intersections Between Qualitative Inquiry, Fieldwork, and Rhetoric," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 6 (2016): 511–24; Michael K. Middleton, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Danielle Endres, "Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods: Challenges and Tensions," *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (2011): 386–406.
7. McHendry Jr et al., "Rhetorical Critic(ism)'s Body," 298.
8. Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research (2nd Ed.)*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2000), 739.
9. Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 37–38.

Notes—*continued*

10. Boylorn and Orbe, "Introduction," 15.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 19.
13. Ellis, *The Ethnographic I*, 110.
14. *Ibid.*, 111; Boylorn and Orbe, "Introduction," 18.
15. Ellis, *The Ethnographic I*, 138.
16. Brett Lunceford, "Rhetorical Autoethnography," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 1/2 (2015): 6.
17. Lunceford, "Rhetorical Autoethnography," 6.
18. Nicole L. Defenbaugh, "Revealing and Concealing Ill Identity: A Performance Narrative of IBD Disclosure," *Health Communication* 28, no. 2 (2013): 161.
19. Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 30.
20. Tami Spry, "Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis," *Qualitative Inquiry* 7, no. 6 (2001): 711.
21. Spry, "Performing Autoethnography," 719.
22. See pgs. 373-74 and 377 of Hailey Nicole Otis, "Intersectional Rhetoric: Where Intersectionality as Analytic Sensibility and Embodied Rhetorical Praxis Converge," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 105, no. 4 (2019): 369–89 for a discussion of "embodied knowing" in relationship to intersectional rhetoric.

Notes—*continued*

23. Gust A. Yep, “The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies: Notes on Injury, Healing, and Queer World-Making,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2–4 (2003): 26-31.

24. Spry, “Performing Autoethnography,” 724; A sense of queer critical hope can be gleaned from Robert Gutierrez-Perez and Luis Manuel Andrade, “How Queer (of Color) Is Intercultural Communicaiton? Then and There, Jotería the Game as a Praxis of Queerness, Advocacy, and Utopian Aesthetics,” in *Queer Intercultural Communication: The Intersectional Politics of Belonging in and across Differences*, ed. Shinsuke Eguchi and Bernadette Marie Calafell (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), especially their depiction that “we are not queer yet...we have hope” on pg. 190.

25. See the 2020 forum on “Communication and the Politics of Survival,” edited by Robert Mejia, in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* for in-depth analyses of forces within academia broadly, and within the field of Communication specifically, that thwart survival for marginalized groups as well as ways in which those same groups demonstrate resiliency.

26. Robert Mejia reminds us of the intersectional dynamic of survival, especially within academia and the field of Communication, noting that “survival has always been intersectional—raced, classed, gendered, sexed, (dis)abled, and colonized—and if *we* are to survive this twenty-first century, we need scholars with the experience and training to be at the forefront of the field.” See Robert Mejia, “Forum Introduction: Communication and the Politics of Survival,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 4 (2020): 363.

Notes—*continued*

27. NCA is an acronym for the National Communication Association and also serves as a shorthand for the association's annual convention.

28. I use the term "body positive fat activist" purposely to gesture to the ways in which my activism exists in a liminal space within and between these two, sometimes overlapping sometimes disparate, movements. Though not all body positive activism is fat activism and not all fat activism is body positive, mine is both. I am unable to choose a "side" or label, even though there are important and valid reasons to make a distinction between the two.

29. See R. Anthony Slagle, "Queer Criticism and Sexual Normativity: The Case of Pee-Wee Herman," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2–4 (2003): 129 for a discussion of the queer critic's role in dismantling "hierarchies by blurring the definitions of specific identity categories"; See Isaac West, "Queer Generosities," *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 5 (2013): 538–41 for a discussion of the queer critic's role in the process of worldmaking.

30. Bernadette Marie Calafell, "Rhetorics of Possibility: Challenging the Textual Bias of Rhetoric through the Theory of the Flesh," in *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods & Methodologies*, ed. Eileen E. Schell and K.J. Rawson (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 106.

31. Bernadette Marie Calafell, "Performance: Keeping Rhetoric Honest," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2014): 116.

32. Spry, "Performing Autoethnography," 725.

33. McHendry Jr et al., "Rhetorical Critic(ism)'s Body."

34. *Ibid.*, 298.

Notes—*continued*

35. Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Bristol, England: HammerOn Press, 2016), 79.
36. Cooper, *Fat Activism*, 78–81.
37. *Ibid.*, 81.
38. *Ibid.*, 82.
39. "Interview: Nia King, 'Bodies on the Line,'" interview by jamie-m, April 27, 2013, <https://mixedreader.com/2013/04/27/interview-nia-king-bodies-on-the-line/>.
40. Cooper, *Fat Activism*, 61.
41. *Ibid.*, 67.
42. *Ibid.*, 68.
43. *Ibid.*, 69.

CONCLUSION: FAT-POSITIVE WORLDMAKING IN PANDEMIC TIMES

As I sit here considering how to conclude this dissertation, the United States just passed its one-year anniversary with the global COVID-19 pandemic. If someone had told me that I would be writing the vast majority of this project in isolation, sometimes under government ordered stay-at-home ordinances and other times voluntarily quarantined from the rest of the world to avoid a highly-contagious, potentially deadly virus, I don't think I would believe it. In March of 2020, I left my desk on campus at Colorado State University to go on Spring Break, not knowing that that was the last time I would step foot on campus except to collect my things later that Summer. The pandemic transformed public life as we know it and has taken the lives of almost 2.5 million people across the globe at the time of this writing.

Sometimes it is difficult to determine what is more awful about the COVID-19 pandemic—its death toll or everything else it stole from us in its path of carnage, including our collective sense of safety and security and many of the small joys in life. I haven't hugged my parents in almost a year. I couldn't embrace or even be near my grandma when I saw her for the last time before she passed away. I don't leave my house except to walk around the block or run short errands. I panic every time I hear a cough. I often wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, gripping my chest as it swells with anxiety. But I am not alone in these experiences—so is the nature of collective trauma.

Though I share this trauma with the world, I also experience byproducts of the pandemic that are unique to only certain groups: heightened ableism and fatphobia. In what I assume was an attempt to quell public fear and panic in the early days of the pandemic, discourse quickly emerged around the reassurance that only elderly people and those with underlying health

conditions were dying from the virus. In other words, if you're a young, healthy person, there is nothing to worry about. Coded (and sometimes not so coded) within this early rhetoric was an attitude of disposability toward elderly and disabled people: *old and disabled people may have to die, but that's simply the reality of a pandemic like COVID-19*. Coded even more deeply in this discourse was a willingness to sacrifice “high-risk” individuals if that meant retaining the quality of life most people were accustomed to, evident in the resistance to stay-at-home orders and mask mandates early in the pandemic: *why should I have to stay at home or wear a mask when there's almost no way I'll die from this virus?* Early on, in true minoritizing fashion, the pandemic was painted as a problem only for already vulnerable people.¹

Then, young, healthy people started dying.

Even as the virus began to claim the lives of all kinds of people—young people, old people, chronically ill people, presumably healthy people, fat people, thin people—reliance on ableist notions of disposability reigned dominant. In late August 2020, then-president Trump retweeted the appallingly false claim that, according to the CDC, “only 6% of all the 153,504 deaths recorded actually died from Covid” and that “the other 94% had 2 to 3 other serious illnesses and the overwhelming majority were of very advanced age.”² Not only were disabled folks deemed disposable—a necessary sacrifice in the fight against the virus—they were also used as ploys by Republican politicians to ignore the severity of this public health crisis for the sake of the “economy” (or whatever buzzword best obscures said politicians’ selfish, often financial, interests).

The violent ableism inherent in early COVID-19 discourses was quickly joined by its close conceptual cousin, virulent fatphobia. Though medicalized fatphobia is certainly nothing new, it took on a novel shape in the wake of COVID-19. The same discourse that painted

old/disabled/ill people as expendable in the midst of a global pandemic quickly raced to present fatness as an “underlying condition” of one’s choosing that rendered one equally disposable. Early studies that employed suspicious data collection practices and refused to account for a variety of significant confounding variables found that people with a high BMI were at a greater risk for complications from infection with COVID-19, including death.³ At the same time, many states released COVID-19 care rationing guidelines indicating that both fat people (those with a BMI over a particular range) and people with certain disabilities would be deprioritized if care and resources should require triaging.⁴ Such triage guidelines coded rhetorics of disposability into tangible, medical practice, ensuring the continued vulnerability of fat and disabled people throughout the course of the pandemic.

As the shape of fatphobia shifted before our very eyes, so too did the contours of body positive and fat activism. Almost as soon as popular and medical discourse began blaming fat people (and disabled people and people of color, etc.) for their high-risk status in relationship to COVID, images began circulating on social media with the hashtag #NoBodyIsDisposable. Such images often included fat bodies and bodies with visible disabilities paired with captions advocating against discrimination in triage plans and practices and for better government support and regulation (in the form of stay-at-home orders and regular compensation) to halt the rapid spread of the virus that was claiming the lives of those in our communities.

Though the sentiment that “No Body is Disposable” can be traced back to disability justice advocate Patty Berne’s 2017 usage of the phrase in the context of Sins Invalid (a disability justice performance project), social media users and activists breathed new life into it in 2020 in the wake of COVID-19 with the hashtag campaign. Born from such efforts was the nobodyisdisposable.org website, which provides resources to fight against and/or survive care

rationing as well as advocate for vaccine access for groups marginalized by the pandemic, including “disabled people, fat people, elders, and people with AIDS or other illnesses.”⁵

At the beginning of the pandemic, in a flurry of fear, anxiety, and dread caused by an unpredictable and insatiable virus, I had all but resolved that I was going to die. I am fat and disabled. If I contracted the virus from the person who delivers my groceries or from my partner who is an essential worker, I would be the last to get a ventilator. I spent those first couple months numb, bombarded with the constant reminder that my body was unworthy, expendable, *disposable*. I had no sense of futurity. And, then, I logged onto Instagram and saw the first few posts tagged #NoBodyIsDisposable on my feed.

A fat-positive queer world wherein fat and disabled bodies (along with many other marginalized bodies targeted by COVID rhetorics of disposability) had a future manifested before me. From selfies reminding me of the inherent worth of all bodies, including my own high-risk body, to advocacy campaigns instructing me how to demand medical care in the ICU, a counterdiscourse was emerging—one that gestured to the not-yet-here of a fat-positive queer utopia in which I, and all other fat and disabled people, had a chance at surviving this pandemic. Of course, not all of us did survive. Many members of marginalized communities perished at the hands of the virus, and medicalized ableism and fatphobia have not been eradicated. And yet, the possibility for our survival—the “active kernel of utopian possibility” we needed to get up and fight another day⁶—emerged in the vulnerable, heart-wrenching posts tagged #NoBodyIsDisposable. A world where no body is, indeed, disposable is the only world I accept to live in. It’s the world I fight for every day through moments of micro fat activism, activist community, and cultural work.

Fat-Positive Queer Worldmaking in the Body Positivity Movement

As is highlighted by the rise and shifting form of medicalized fatphobia in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this dissertation maintains that fat activism exists in dialectical tension with fatphobia— it emerges, shifts, and evolves in response to the contours of fatphobia at any given time. This dissertation also argues that it is through specific forms of rhetorical labor that fat activism is able to respond to the social, political, and cultural needs created by evolving manifestations of fatphobia in ways that carve out the possibility for fat-positive queer worlds that center the survival and futurity for the most (mainly multiply marginalized) fat people in a given historical moment.

The problems and pitfalls of mainstream body positivity are, at their core, *rhetorical* problems that produce tangible consequences. As detailed in the introduction, mainstream forms of body positivity merit critique from activists for privileging Eurocentric features and obscuring the impact of colonialism and anti-Blackness on anti-fatness; centering privileged bodies and overlooking the effects of systemic oppression on multiply oppressed bodies; and upholding an essentialized, palatable subject. In mainstream body positivity's tendency to privilege, center, and uphold certain bodies and issues while obscuring and overlooking others, it unintentionally reproduces the same logics of coloniality, universalism, and normativity found within dominant discourses about bodies that it set out to challenge in the first place. Privileging, centering, and upholding as well as obscuring and overlooking are all fundamentally rhetorical actions—they describe the ways in which body positive discourse circulates and influences diverse audiences. These rhetorical actions then produce the tangible effect of failing to hinder—and perhaps even aiding—forms of systemic oppression enacted toward multiply marginalized fat people.

The upside of any given rhetorical problem, however, is that there are also fundamentally rhetorical solutions. This is not to say that it is easy to rhetorically shift the discourse of a given movement or community. However, it does mean that, if enough rhetors within a movement or community engage in the rhetorical labor necessary for political transformation, a new world is always on the horizon. Such is the case for body positivity. Indeed, the case studies in this dissertation suggest that decolonial, intersectional, and queer forms of rhetorical labor can both (1) transcend the pitfalls of mainstream body positivity, and (2) carve out fat-positive queer worlds ungoverned by problematic assumptions about bodies that pervade both dominant discourse and mainstream body positive discourse.

@Sassy_latte and Melissa Gibson demonstrate how, by rejecting colonized forms of meaning-making, rendering overlapping oppressions visible, and resisting stable notions of identity, body justice enacts a form of politics from the margins that makes good on the failed promises of body positivity. Body justice acknowledges the ways in which mainstream body positivity has failed to increase representation for, recognize the humanity of, and labor toward the liberation of fat, non-normative, and multiply marginalized bodies (as the movement set out to do in the first place) and demonstrates how decolonial, intersectional, and queer forms of rhetorical labor can push beyond the commodification and co-optation of body positivity that fostered such failure. The case of Lizzo, then, illustrates how intersectional visibility politics and acts of decolonial love can be deployed to challenge normative logics of mainstream media representation rooted in anti-Black racism, sexism, and colonization. In doing so, Lizzo's celebrity persona emphasizes the power of recentering body positivity back onto multiply marginalized bodies like hers. Finally, my endeavor in performative autoethnography clarifies that body positivity (like all forms of fat activism) is not a destination but, rather, a journey—and

one that can always strive to do better. Extrapolating from both the case of @Sassy_latte and Melissa’s body justice activism and Lizzo’s performance of body positivity within mainstream entertainment, this dissertation asserts that the most transformative work—the most radical, transgressive, liberating work—on body politics unfolds through processes of queering, decolonizing, and intersecting. Therefore, to do better body positive activism means taking up the call to engage in intentionally queer, decolonial, and intersectional forms of rhetorical labor that prioritize the survival and liberation of multiply marginalized fat people.

These forms of rhetorical labor, then, produce particular kinds of queer worlds. Queer worldmaking occurs when counter-publics imagine and bring into existence spaces of possibility for ways of being outside of the normative.⁷ Queer worlds are organized around counter-discourses, rather than dominant discourses, and are, therefore, constituted rhetorically via both embodied and symbolic forms of meaning-making. Minoritarian or marginalized subjects hold the power to disidentify with the current world and perform a new one, which means that worldmaking always requires “an active kernel of utopian possibility.”⁸ Indeed, an investment in the promise of futurity, utopia, and the “not yet” paves the path to livable queer worlds.⁹ The case studies in this dissertation highlight both the rhetorically constituted nature of fat-positive queer worlds and consider what it means for such worlds to always exist in the realm of the future, the “not yet here” (indeed, the “not yet queer”).¹⁰

The fat-positive queer world imagined and labored toward by @Sassy_latte and Melissa is one that body positivity initially envisioned, but fell short of in its co-optation into mainstream discourse—a world wherein fat, non-normative, and multiply marginalized fat people enjoy positive representation, humanization, and liberation. Through decolonial, intersectional, and queer forms of rhetorical labor, @Sassy_latte and Melissa establish body justice within

the liminal space between body positivity and a fat-positive futurity that is always “not yet here,” yet still worthy of reaching for. Lizzo’s celebrity persona also imagines a fat-positive queer world, specifically one that is ungoverned by the white heteropatriarchal gaze and unmarred by the wounds of coloniality—a world in which fat, Black femme bodies are made visible in their full humanity and embraced as agentic and one that operates more ethically outside of the terms set forth by coloniality by privileging intersubjectivity and care. She performs the possibility of such a world via social media posts, lyrics, and music videos—bringing it to life before a mainstream audience and demonstrating what a fat-positive utopia can look like if only bodies like hers remain front and center(ed).

I also imagine a fat-positive queer world via performative autoethnography—one that aligns in purpose with the worlds imagined by @Sassy_latte and Melissa as well as Lizzo, but perhaps diverges in terms of method. Though I certainly demonstrate how fat-positive queer worldmaking occurs at the micro-level via social media posts circulated to audiences (albeit with much less reach than the other rhetors discussed in this dissertation), I also reveal how scholarship plays a role in the envisioning and manifesting of queer worlds. By putting my body on the line and sharing my journey in all its vulnerability, I do *the work* of envisioning a fat-positive queer world before an audience and model what it looks like for other scholars and activists to do so as well. My promise at the end of the previous chapter to engage in the rhetorical labor of queering, decolonizing, and intersecting in pursuit of survival and futurity for fat bodies is not just a promise; it is also an invitation to others to do the same, assuming they are also invested in the same fat-positive possibilities, futures, and utopias.

Another key point of consideration when it comes to the rhetorically constituted fat-positive queer worlds imagined by influencers, activists, and celebrities involves strategic

manipulations of the language of “body positivity” to accomplish specific goals. In particular, a certain level of rejection—or, at the very least, moving away from—the label of “body positivity” animates both the case of @Sassy_latte and Melissa as well as Lizzo. On one hand, @Sassy_latte and Melissa turn away from body positivity and, instead, orient their activism towards “body justice,” signaling an inability for “body positivity,” as it stands, to fulfill their political goals. Lizzo, on the other hand, maintains a conspicuously vague relationship to body positivity, often articulating herself and her music as parallel to the movement, but never fully claiming or refusing the label.

Both @Sassy_latte and Melissa as well as Lizzo, to some degree, perform radically ambivalent approaches to body politics that refuse to be neatly categorized as body positivity even as they draw upon the energies and history of body positive activism. This radical ambivalence allows both the influencers and Lizzo’s celebrity persona to exist in the liminal space between body positivity and a future “not yet here” that represents body positivity’s queer futurity and worldmaking potential that has yet to be realized.¹¹ This refusal to be classified or labeled establishes both @Sassy_latte and Melissa as well as Lizzo’s forms of activism as queer in themselves if we consider queer to be “an orientation and a practice[,] a mode of political...inquiry which seeks to...trouble neat categories.”¹²

The refusal of categorization that threads through the case studies in this dissertation also reveals an overlap between the various queer, intersectional, and decolonial forms of rhetorical labor that make possible moments of fat-positive worldmaking. Indeed, queer forms of rhetorical labor explicitly challenge neat categories and essentializing notions of identity, intersectional forms oppose the singularity of identity by considering multiple, interconnecting dynamics of privilege and oppression, and decolonial forms reject binary ways of thinking set forth by the

terms of coloniality. This challenging of essentializing categories and binaries essentially mirrors the first focus of queer rhetorical criticism identified at the beginning of this dissertation, emphasizing the point that queer criticism is a useful, generative approach to exploring issues of fatness and rhetoric produced by those who inhabit fat bodies. The second focus of queer rhetorical criticism—the building of alternative queer worlds—is, of course, a core investment of this dissertation in its entirety, further suggesting an onus for queer rhetorical critics to take seriously questions of fatness, fat bodies, and fat activism as well as for scholars of fat studies to embrace the critical import of queer analytical approaches.

The chapters in this dissertation also highlight versions of body positive activism (or, perhaps more precisely, enactments of body politics that exist in the liminal space between body positivity and a “not yet here” fat-positive futurity) that point back to the movement’s radical roots in fat activism/fat liberation. @Sassy_latte and Melissa do this in two key ways. First, they promote a clear set of political subjects for body justice activism— those most harmed by the processes and logics of colonization, those who are multiply marginalized, and those who experience systemic oppression stemming from forces such as thin-centricity and diet culture. They use specific forms of rhetorical labor to make visible this set of political subjects, refusing the diluting powers of apolitical frameworks such as “body love” or “body appreciation” that have pervaded mainstream body positive discourse. Second, and relatedly, they articulate body justice as an injustice frame aimed at subverting hegemonic understandings of bodies and directing moral outrage toward both dominant discourses about bodies and those politically indecisive discourses promoted through mainstream body positivity. @Sassy_latte and Melissa grasp the radical roots of fat liberation in their politicization of marginalized bodies and their subversion of dominant, hegemonic discourses about bodies.

Lizzo's performance of body positivity marks a return to the movement's radical roots by recentering the movement back onto bodies like hers and taking up rhetorical space as a "leader" within the movement (even as the role of "leader" is cast upon her by audiences more than it is necessarily claimed by Lizzo, herself). Mainstream forms of body positivity often conveniently "forget" who the movement initially set out to uplift and liberate as well as who the movement was started by—namely fat, Black women, femmes, queer folks, and other fat people of color (i.e. those most marginalized by fatphobia as it overlaps with other forms of systemic oppression). Through her creative manipulation of logics of visibility and representation, Lizzo's celebrity persona empowers fat, Black women and femmes while establishing her body and bodies like hers as a focal point for body positive activism. By recentering bodies that the movement sought to uplift in the first place (and that fat liberation politics also center) within mainstream entertainment media, the case of Lizzo highlights the critical importance of both the rhetorical tactics employed as well as the bodies they derive from in orienting body positivity back toward its political roots. In other words, because of the power of representation, if the political commitments of the movement are filtered through bodies that experience more dynamics of privilege than oppression (for example, white, slightly larger than average, thin, able-bodied cis-women), they will not and cannot accomplish the same radical, transformative work as when articulated from and through multiply marginalized bodies like Lizzo's.

My performative autoethnography offers a slightly different perspective on this subject. As I chronicle my journey with body positivity, I show how even less radical, mainstream versions of the movement still hold transformative worldmaking power. Body positivity made possible my survival in a precarious present and held the continual promise of a better, more livable future—at least for me and body. However, as I came into my own as an activist, I had to

consider that survival for bodies like mine was never enough. Because of the privileges I enjoy as a white, educated, cis-ish person, a movement that stops at prioritizing my survival leaves out many more bodies than it includes. Thus, I promise to join forces with iterations of body positivity (or whatever form of body politics that envisions fat-positive queer worlds for multiply marginalized bodies) that grasp the movement's radical roots via the labor of queering, decolonizing, and intersecting in order to make survival and livable futures possible for bodies more marginalized than mine.

Finally, the case studies in this dissertation suggest that the affordances of particular media platforms play a key role in the worldmaking possibilities of performances of body positivity and other forms of fat-positive body politics. @Sassy_latte and Melissa's performance of body justice across Instagram posts and radio show episodes harnesses the energy of social media—the space where body positivity largely started and one that allows them to draw their followers in with compelling images and punchy captions—while also creating a space for more in-depth, long form critique. Through Instagram posts, the duo can take advantage of hashtag activism, thus allowing them to gain traction and cultivate a dedicated following. Then, the radio show episodes allow them to develop a comprehensive, extended critique of mainstream body positivity while also offering body justice as a radically ambivalent shift toward a queer futurity for the movement.

Lizzo's moves toward body positive worldmaking are made possible by the affordances of Instagram, lyrics, and music videos. The intimacy and accessibility made possible by Instagram posts allows Lizzo to perform a real, raw, and ratchet form of authenticity for her followers that not only creates a sense of vulnerability and closeness, but also allows her to speak back against cultural politics of respectability. This performance of authenticity imbued with

intimacy and realness then translates to her songs and music videos since the driving message she communicates stay the same, even as the medium through which it is communicated changes. Song lyrics and music videos, then, extend Lizzo's reach as a celebrity by affording her mainstream visibility with music videos, in particular, foregrounding her physical body in all its fat, Black femme glory. Thus, these two mediums allow the fat-positive queer world articulated by and through Lizzo's music and larger celebrity persona to be seen, heard, and felt by a mainstream audience, demonstrating the possibilities for embodied body positive activist rhetoric to transform the bounds of visibility, agency, and representation for Black, fat women and femmes.

My autoethnography further amplifies the platform affordances of social media/Instagram posts as they relate to advancing body positivity and manifesting fat-positive queer worlds. Through Instagram posts, my body joins an archive of texts, connected by hashtags and enacted in moments of vulnerability. Instagram posts allow me to engage as a micro-fat activist, which is particularly important since other forms of activism often prove inaccessible to me due to my disabled body. Through micro-fat activist engagement online, I am able to do the labor of worldmaking; through ephemeral and relational engagements with the world, I work toward creating livable lives for myself and others who inhabit fat bodies. Moreover, Instagram posts allow me to move beyond micro-fat activism into the realm of activist communities and cultural work. Through making fat art through photographs of my body posted to semi-public social media pages, I narrate my body and confer it agency through Instagram captions, and I build my fat activist community by relating and creating with others. In this way, I am able to navigate issues of visibility as they relate to my fat body, especially the precarious position of always being simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. Putting my body

on display via Instagram posts allows me to craft my own narrative about my body, to intervene in the constant battle of meaning-making over bodies like mine by inserting my own take—and asserting my own voice—on its meaning. Finally, body positive Instagram posts allow me to engage in *in situ* rhetoric and therefore links the worldmaking I do in the world as a micro-fat activist to the worldmaking energy of my scholarship on body positive activism. By joining an activist community online via Instagram posts, I am able to develop an understanding of body positive rhetoric at the level of practice which then informs my scholarship in transformative ways.

This dissertation both makes a case for and encourages a closer critical look at the rhetorical nature of body positivity's pitfalls and potentialities; the fat-positive queer worlds created by the intersectional, decolonial, and queer form of rhetorical labor analyzed in the preceding case studies; the transformative political power of radically ambivalent performances of body politics that exist in the liminal space between body positivity and a "not yet here" fat-positive futurity by reaching back toward the body positive movement's radical roots; and the role of platform affordances in worldmaking endeavors. These summarize the broad contributions of this project whereas, in the next section, I consider specifically what this project contributes to both the study of embodied social movement rhetorics as well as queer worldmaking.

Contributions to Embodied Social Movement Rhetoric and Queer Worldmaking

The primary focus of this dissertation has been to examine moments of fat-positive worldmaking within the body positive moment. Because body positivity is a form of embodied social movement rhetoric, questions of visibility, agency, and the relationship between media, bodies, and social movement messages prove pertinent when considering the movement's power

and potentialities. Moreover, this project has much to contribute to the burgeoning scholarship on queer worldmaking in communication, both in its examination of body positivity's enactments of queer worldmaking as well as its endeavor to perform queer worldmaking itself. To expand on these points, I revisit questions and claims raised in the literature review and address them with the insight and perspective cultivated through the case studies of this dissertation.

This project has produced novel insight on three key tensions that animate scholarship on embodied social movement rhetoric. These tensions call into question: (1) the changed possibilities of visibility politics for bodies that are always hypervisible in the public sphere, (2) the role of social media in crafting opportunities for agency for hypervisible rhetors, and (3) the impact on embodied activist rhetorics when those that inhabit the bodies engaging in activism are also the ones crafting the mediated images to be disseminated to audiences via social media.

The three aforementioned tensions are related and I will discuss them as such. Scholarship on social movements and visibility offers the insight that hypervisible bodies are those bodies that are “always already available for public scrutiny and consumption.”¹³ The fat body, specifically, is perpetually hypervisible in that it is “always already an ‘outed’ body...[it] is always irrevocably seen.”¹⁴ Though the fat body, in its materiality, is always hypervisible, what often remains invisible is its humanity and agency. This dissertation affirms the simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of the fat body and recognizes that such bodies cannot necessarily benefit from the logic of traditional visibility politics wherein allowing one's body to be seen and represented affords a sense of agency and voice. Instead, as illustrated by the case studies in this dissertation, fat bodies must find a way to rhetorically shift the visibility

forced onto their bodies in ways that highlight the humanity of those in fat bodies and give them a voice.

@Sassy_latte and Melissa use both the *Body Justice* radio show and their social media posts as public enactments of embodied social movement rhetoric that allow audiences to observe and empathize with their lived, embodied experiences, critique and resist problematic logics about fatness, and perform the possibility of a fat-positive world wherein fat, non-normative, and multiply marginalized fat people enjoy positive representation, humanization, and liberation. In this way, the influencers creatively manipulate the hypervisibility afforded to their marginalized bodies by encouraging audiences to bear witness to their oppression while also embracing the power of visibility to rhetorically function as both critique and a “condition of possibility.”¹⁵ As will be discussed below, much of this creative manipulation of visibility stems from the influencer’s rhetorically savvy use of social/digital media technologies.

In a very different set of maneuverers, Lizzo’s celebrity persona rewrites the hypervisibility of fat bodies that denies their humanity by transcending the logics of colonization that stripped humanity from fat bodies in the first place—logics that are also bound up with histories of anti-Black racism. Through rhetorical performances of intersectional visibility politics, Lizzo brings together fatness, Blackness, and womanness and emphasizes the wholeness of fat, Black women’s intersectional embodiment. By encouraging her audiences to tap into their own humanity via practices of decolonial love, she claims the intersection of fatness, Blackness, and womanhood as one where humanity is born and where it flourishes. In doing so, she rejects the colonial binary that paints fat, Black women’s bodies as hypervisible, but their personhood as invisible, writing humanity back onto these bodies that have been demeaned by colonial histories

of both anti-fatness and anti-Blackness. She does this rhetorical work in both her music videos and lyrics, but some of its most transformative impact occurs through her social media posts.

My autoethnographic account also addresses the binary of fat *body* as hypervisible/fat *person* as invisible. I acknowledge this logic and proceed to reflect on my use of Instagram posts to both craft my own narrative around my body and to intervene in battles around the meaning of my body by asserting my own voice via social media pictures and captions. In the case of my own experience with body positive activism, I demonstrate how social media can be a space of creative rhetorical invention wherein fat people and activists forward alternative narratives about their body and, in doing so, use the visibility of their body in these public online spaces to shift towards positive representation and make space for their voices to be heard. Each of these instances forward the same conclusion about the changed possibilities for bodies that are always already deemed hypervisible—that those who inhabit such bodies can creatively manipulate the visibility of their bodies through intersectional, decolonial, and queer forms of rhetorical labor and, in doing so, activate the possibilities for visibility to function as a form of critique and resistance as well as destabilize logics of hypervisibility/invisibility that marginalize fat (and otherwise non-normative) rhetors.

These changed possibilities of visibility politics for fat bodies, illustrated by the cases of @Sassy_latte and Melissa, Lizzo, and my own experience with the body positive movement, also speak to the second tension animating scholarship on embodied social movement rhetorics—the role of social media in crafting opportunities for agency for hypervisible rhetors. In all three cases explored in this dissertation, social media (particularly Instagram) afforded body positive rhetors the possibility of rejecting traditional politics of visibility forced onto their

bodies by dominant discourses and, instead, allowed them to enact agency over the way their fat bodies could be seen and perceived by audiences.

@Sassy_latte and Melissa used Instagram to build a following within the body positive movement and then utilized the affordances of the radio show as a digital media platform to engage long form critiques of both dominant discourses and mainstream body positivity. Both Instagram and the radio show platform serve as spaces for the influencers to forward alternative narratives about fat bodies rooted in intersectional, decolonial, and queer approaches to social justice. In the case of Lizzo, her profile as a mainstream artist certainly gained her increased visibility in terms of quantity of audience members and followers. However, her use of social media adds a more seemingly authentic and personal voice to her messages about bodies and establishes a space for her to ignore and resist politics of respectability that dominate in mainstream spaces. By allowing her to operate in a space that is less governed by (though, of course, not totally immune to) oppressive expectations around respectability, social media affords Lizzo the possibility to perform her fat body and identity more radically, with more agency, and in ways that more intimately connect to the humanity of other fat people.

Finally, my autoethnographic account also suggests different opportunities made available for my hypervisible fat body via social media. By providing a space to both forward my own, personal narrative about my body rooted in an affirmation of the value and worth of fat bodies and assert my own voice in conversations about body politics, Instagram as a social media platform allowed me to act as an active agent in the process of meaning-making around bodies (especially my own body). Not only did it afford me a space to present my body in a positive manner, it allowed me to narrate my body's place in the world of public discourse via captions. All three of these case studies support my intervening claim that the platform affordances of

social and digital media create opportunities for enactments of agency on the part of fat (and otherwise non-normative, marginalized, and specifically hypervisible) rhetors and that greater attention to *how* such platforms make these opportunities possible warrants greater attention in future scholarship on embodied social movement rhetorics.

The aforementioned tensions around visibility, agency, and social media also connect to the final tension animating understandings of embodied social movement rhetoric—the impact on embodied activist rhetorics when those that inhabit the bodies engaging in activism are also the ones crafting the mediated images to be disseminated to audiences via social media. This tension arises in response to embodied social movement theory and criticism that focuses on the influential role of the “image event” or, in other words, the way in which news (and other mass) media make images of vulnerable and unruly bodies present and accessible to multiple audiences.¹⁶ Image events bring attention to social movements by staging deliberate spectacles “designed to attract the attention of the mass media and disseminate persuasive images to a wide audience.”¹⁷ However, with the proliferation of social media and other digital media platforms, activist communities are utilizing other ways of making their bodies, issues, and arguments visible that exist outside of and beyond mass media. Image events create dramatic acts of spectacle and work well for bringing attention to a social movement. The use of social media to advance embodied activist rhetorics seems to work differently, however; it seems less concerned with drama and spectacle and more about humanizing the bodies represented via social media posts and messages (at least in the case of body positivity).

The case studies here suggest that, when those that inhabit the bodies engaging in activism are also the ones creating and distributing the mediated images and messages for a social movement, the focus of the social movement shifts away from earning attention and

legitimacy to be granted by the dominant audience and, instead, prioritizes a sense of humanity, vulnerability, and intimacy as well as futurity and worldmaking for the marginalized groups doing the activist work. In shifting away from concepts like the “image event” to focus on the forms of bottom-up production made possible within the digital sphere in movements like body positivity, this dissertation points to a trend in contemporary social movements that involves the use of new media technologies to make activism primarily a matter of worldmaking for those in marginalized bodies rather than an issue of seeking legitimacy from those with institutionalized power.¹⁸

Keeping with the theme of worldmaking, this dissertation makes several contributions to disciplinary scholarship on queer worldmaking. Specifically, it compels an investment in queer of color theories that work in the realm of the “not yet here” of futurity, utopia, and critical hope, it expands the “queer” in queer worldmaking to encompass fat bodies, and it demonstrates new possibilities for enacting worldmaking in and through scholarship.

Queer of color theories, especially those that focus on queer futurity, queer utopias, and critical hope, prove crucial for theorizing the fat-positive queer worldmaking enacted through certain performances of body positive activism (especially the case studies in this dissertation). As mentioned previously, the case studies of @Sassy_latte and Melissa as well as Lizzo consider what it means to for fat-positive worlds to exist in the realm of the future—the “not yet here” and, therefore, the “not yet queer.”¹⁹ By investing in the promise of futurity and utopia and harnessing a sense of critical hope that works in the domain of “unexhausted potentials” to envision queer worlds and futures, body positive figures like the ones analyzed in this dissertation constantly labor toward a queerer, more livable world where fat bodies are humanized, affirmed, and liberated.²⁰ And, even though they never quite reach that end-point—

that destination—it is in the rhetorical labor *toward* such fat-positive queer worlds that radical and transformative political change happens. Indeed, this dissertation suggests that some of the most powerful worldmaking occurs in the liminal space between body positivity and a “not yet here” fat-positive futurity and therefore compels scholars to look for worldmaking as it occurs in other spaces betwixt and between what is and what could be.

A second contribution that this project makes to disciplinary scholarship on queer worldmaking involves the specificities and nuances of fat-positive worldmaking. Indeed, much scholarly work on queer worldmaking, especially within communication and rhetoric, theorizes worldmaking as a response to heteronormativity and, therefore, pays close attention to queer worlds that make life more inhabitable for queer-identified people and bodies. However, there are less scholarly perspectives that consider queer worldmaking as it is enacted by and in service of livable worlds for bodies not traditionally thought of as queer. Though I have argued elsewhere that the fat body can (and, in many ways, should) be considered queer, it is not necessarily a body that encompasses a queer identity.²¹ Therefore, this dissertation not only theorizes the ways in which worldmaking occurs by and for bodies outside of specifically queer identities (along with the impact of such worldmaking for a diversity of bodies), but also expands the “queer” in queer worldmaking to encompass bodies that are queer in the verb sense of the word—i.e. bodies that do the work of *queering*, which fat bodies exemplify in their destabilization of categories and boundaries “through which the body is normatively defined” and constrained.²²

Finally, this project adds to a growing body of literature that considers scholarship as a productive site of worldmaking. By uplifting the voices of multiply marginalized body positive rhetors who perform radical and transformative work for the movement and utilizing “critique

toward liberatory aims,” this dissertation demonstrates how rhetorical analysis can be used as a tool of worldmaking.²³ I follow in the footsteps of queer rhetorical scholars who engage in reparative readings of texts in order to emphasize body positive rhetors who do the work of queering as it relates to fat bodies and underscore that criticism does not necessarily need to privilege negative critique; indeed, by excavating moments of fat-positive worldmaking performed by body positive influencers and celebrities, this dissertation lends legitimacy and importance to such enactments of body politics by conscribing them to the scholarly page. Therefore, this dissertation supports the argument that reparative reading can serve as a tool of queer worldmaking in itself, especially when such readings engage texts created by multiply marginalized activist rhetors.

Additionally, my role at the juncture of critic, scholar, and activist plays a crucial role in creating the fat-positive queer worlds analyzed in this dissertation. Though anyone can analyze body positive texts, my experience as someone whose life has been significantly impacted by these texts and whose body, mind, and soul tangibly benefit from the possibilities for survival and livable queer worlds made available through body positive rhetoric positions me as uniquely suited to argue for the worldmaking power of this movement and the specific instantiations analyzed here. Moreover, not only do I engage in worldmaking in the pages of this dissertation by uplifting the voices of multiply marginalized body positive rhetors and by utilizing critique toward liberatory aims, I also use the insight I have gained by analyzing such texts to shape my performance of body positive activism in the world. In this way, I seize the opportunities of *in situ* rhetoric to not only better understand “rhetoric at the level of its practice in [a] community,” but also to “affect change in the moment” in ways that are more ethical and hold more radical potential.²⁴ This more radical, ethical approach becomes clear at the end of my autoethnography

when I pledge to engage in body positive activism that is more intentionally intersectional, decolonial, and queer—an impetus that is profoundly shaped by the analytical work performed in earlier chapters. Therefore, this dissertation suggests worldmaking can and should occur in the pages of scholarly writing and, yet, such scholarship can and should also compel more ethical *in situ* activist engagements in the world.

I will also note that this dissertation affirms the limits of scholarship in creating queer worlds. Indeed, queer affects and ways of being are ever-escaping language and, therefore, traditional tools of the scholar, including and especially rhetorical criticism, often fall short of performing the worldmaking work that is so crucial to this project. Therefore, this dissertation uses performative autoethnographic methodologies to not only augment its analytical insights, but to demonstrate how such methodological approaches prove useful in manifesting queer worlds. In other words, I assert that the labor of queer worldmaking can unfold in the pages of scholarly work, but only when said scholarship enacts critical queer hope through acts of vulnerability and embracing the riskiness of putting one's marginalized body on the line—all of which are more readily available through approaches such as performative autoethnography than through other, more traditional modes of scholarship.

This dissertation makes key contributions to scholarship on both embodied social movement rhetoric and queer worldmaking, including where these areas of scholarship converge. This project also highlights areas for future development in the study of body positive worldmaking, especially as the movement constantly shifts and evolves alongside the contours of fatphobia as well as the changing affordances of digital media platforms.

Future Developments for Body Positive Worldmaking

Because of the ephemeral nature of worldmaking, there will always be new spaces and moments to look to for its enactment. Indeed, fat-positive queer worldmaking within body positivity constantly yields new potential case studies and new voices emerge in the movement almost every day, especially as body positivity shifts and evolves. As scholars look to the future of body positive worldmaking, I propose there are at least four key developments to pay attention to that have the potential to generate new knowledge on body positive rhetoric, queer worldmaking, and fat liberation politics—namely, the evolution of body positive worldmaking in response to new contours of fatphobia, future forms of body positive worldmaking as filtered through mainstream voices, body positive worldmaking enacted via even *newer* new media technologies, and the possible abandonment of body positivity altogether for alternative approaches to embodied liberation.

A key contention of this dissertation is that fat activism exists in dialectical tension with fatphobia— it emerges, shifts, and evolves in response to the contours of fatphobia at any given time. As the opening narrative of this conclusion reveals, the contours of fatphobia are indeed changing in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic and, therefore, new forms of fat-positive worldmaking are developing. Body positive worldmaking in this very moment looks different than it might have a year ago. Hashtag campaigns like #NoBodyIsDisposable have emerged that compel attention to the violences of medicalization unique to COVID-19 like, for example, care rationing policies and procedures that render fat and disabled people less worthy of life-saving care. Such new instantiations of body positive/fat activist politics also foreground a new set of intersections as they challenge rhetorics of disposability that, in the mist of COVID-19, have presented fat bodies, disabled bodies, and bodies of color (as well as bodies that are

multiply marginalized along these lines of identity) as disposable in pursuit of U.S. American values such as “freedom.” Scholars of body positivity, fat activism, and intersectional rhetorics would be prudent to pay attention to these activist rhetorics as they evolve in the face of a new brand of COVID-19 fatphobia and its aftermath.

Second, body positivity is also evolving as it makes its way more firmly into mainstream discourses and is filtered through different bodies and the identities those bodies hold. Specifically, a handful of celebrities have spoken out in the last couple of years in fervent support of fat acceptance and activism. These instances of fat liberation politics being articulated in mainstream discourse through privileged celebrity voices and identities marks a turning point away from public figures’ tendency to advocate in favor of watered-down forms of body positivity like the ones critiqued by @Sassy_latte and Melissa. For example, Jameela Jamil (best known for her role as Tahani on NBC’s *The Good Place*) has claimed space as a body positive activist since her founding of the “I Weigh” campaign in 2018. And even though fat activists have critiqued her approach to body politics as problematic in many ways, she is one of the few celebrities specifically identifying fatphobia as a significant issue and sparking conversations around the demonization of fat bodies. Additionally, Matt McGorry (best known for his roles as John Bennett on *Orange is the New Black* and Asher Millstone on *How to Get Away with Murder*) has emerged as quite the intersectional activist, speaking up for causes such as Black Lives Matter, feminism, prison abolition, climate change, as well as fat activism. Identifying himself as an “actor, abolitionist, activist, & feminist” on his Instagram page, McGorry has recently brought conversations around fat liberation to the foreground of his public persona. In May of 2020, *Medium* published an extended piece written by McGorry for their “Human Parts” column on his “journey toward radical body positivity.”²⁵ The piece both chronicles his struggles

with diet culture and internalized fatphobia as both a bodybuilder and an actor as well as advances strong assertions about the future of body positivity. McGorry urges

the movement for “body positivity” cannot only center thin white people, or on a narrative exclusively about “self-love.” Self-acceptance alone does not break down the walls of oppression that harm the most marginalized. And so, while self-acceptance is a valuable goal, those of us with the most privilege must consistently work to challenge our own biases that allow us to paint these movements in broad strokes of individualism. Likewise, as a white person working to be an anti-racist accomplice, or a man working to be a feminist accomplice, my goal cannot simply be to “empower women” or “empower people of color.” The systems and culture itself, along with our own beliefs, must be shifted to imagine a world where all people are free, not just better able to survive within oppressive systems.²⁶

All of a sudden, someone who inhabits a significantly privileged body—as a straight (and straight-sized), white, cisgender man—is speaking up for a more radical version of body positivity rooted in fat liberation that centers multiply marginalized people. Though fat activists of color have been making these arguments for years (many of which McGorry actively cites in his essay for *Medium*), the messages gain different rhetorical power when filtered through McGorry’s privileged celebrity voice, especially a voice that emerges from a kind of body that has remained relatively silent on issues of fat liberation throughout the movement’s history. As scholarly inquiry on body positivity, worldmaking, and fat liberation continues, figures like Jamil and McGorry serve as culturally significant popular figures for future analysis.

A third area for future development entails looking to newer new media technologies and platforms for performances of body positive worldmaking. Indeed, when I began this project in the mid twenty-teens, Instagram was the primary digital platform used for body positive advocacy and was the space where most well-known body positive hashtag campaigns gained visibility. With the introduction of new digital media platforms—and therefore new platform affordances—the opportunities for worldmaking within body positivity are shifting and evolving. For example, the short-form video social media platform Tik-Tok, which has erupted in

popularity in the last couple of years, provides users with a space to perform body positivity primarily through edited videos, rather than the image + caption combination used most commonly on Instagram.²⁷ Though many of the same platform pitfalls plague both Instagram and Tik Tok, as pointed out by Rebecca Jennings' *Vox* article examining the influence of algorithms on the sanitization and commodification of online body positive content, the platform affordances of a video-centric platform like Tik Tok have yet to be explored in much depth.²⁸ This poses another area of inquiry for scholars of media, communication, and rhetoric interested in body positivity as it shifts and evolves in the 2020s.

Speaking of the shifting and evolving nature of body positivity, it is clear from the case of @Sassy_latte and Melissa that some previously “body positive” activists are giving up the body positive label altogether and opting for something totally different—and often something that better encapsulates radical body politics rooted in fat liberation. For @Sassy_latte and Melissa, that shift looks to be a turn toward “body justice.” For others, it may simply entail a return to older language such as “fat activism” or “fat liberation” that more clearly centers fat bodies and engaged political labor. Whatever these shifts may look like, however, they are worthy of further study and suggest exciting possibilities for radical embodied activism in the not-so-distant future.

The Future of this Project

This project is not the final word on fat-positive worldmaking within body positivity, nor is it my final word on the subject. A robust path of future scholarship exists beyond the pages of this dissertation, even as it draws on the conclusions and arguments advanced here about the transformative power of intersectional, decolonial, and queer forms of rhetorical labor for carving out fat-positive queer worlds within body positive activism.

Once again, I point to the ephemeral nature of worldmaking to suggest that an indefinite amount of case studies could augment the analyses engaged here. Indeed, fat-positive queer worldmaking is occurring around us all the time, and it takes a special rhetorical attunement to the margins to pick up on these moments of radical transformation before their fleeting nature renders them a thing of the past. The margin, the actual space and location of marginality, is a “site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.”²⁹ In this dissertation, I have uplifted three moments of body positive rhetoric at the margins, specifically those that have affected my life and prospects for futurity and survival as a multiply marginalized fat person. However, the privileges that I possess due to my whiteness, level of education, class status, and cis gender presentation (among others) obscures other performances of radical body politics at the margin from my view. Feminist standpoint theory reminds us that we all hold only a partial view of the world, but one is able to develop a more complete (albeit still always incomplete) view of the world and culture from the perspective of their marginalized status(es). Therefore, I hope to collaborate with other multiply marginalized scholars of fat activism and communication/rhetoric so that we may merge our rhetorical attunement to the margins made possible by our specific experiences of privilege and oppression to uplift a greater range and diversity of body positive rhetors for further study.

Another future I imagine for this project entails bringing it off of the academic page and into activist spaces. Indeed, I hope to circulate the work I have done here in body positive and fat activist spaces online via Instagram posts, blog posts, and perhaps even Tik Tok videos if I find that I have the creative capacity to do so. Though I yearn for this dissertation to prove useful and generative to scholars across a variety of disciplines, I will have failed at my duty as a fat activist if I do not use the knowledge and perspective I have developed here to shape better, more ethical

engagements within activist spaces in the world. Therefore, an immediate future plan for this project is to develop short form posts to disseminate via social media platforms (paired with body positive images of my activist-scholar body) as well as blog posts to be submitted to popular intersectional activist outlets such as *Wear Your Voice* so as to harness the worldmaking energies of this dissertation project toward tangible change in the world.

A COVID Coda

As I sit here writing the final words of this dissertation, my phone pings with a notification from *Yahoo! News*. It tells me that Colorado has updated its phases for the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. I am officially slotted to receive my vaccine in a phase beginning at the end of March 2021. This phase includes people 50 years of age and older, student-facing higher education employees, frontline essential workers in a variety of fields, those whose job ensures continuity of local and state government, those who received a placebo during a vaccine trial, and people between the ages of 16 and 49 who have at least one high risk condition as determined by the state of Colorado.

I am not over 50. Though I am a higher education employee, I am not currently student-facing. I am not a frontline essential worker nor does my job ensure continuity of local or state government. I did not receive a placebo during a vaccine trial. And though I am between 16 and 49 years of age with various chronic health conditions, I do not have any of the health conditions deemed by the state of Colorado to categorize someone as “high risk...” that is, except one. Though I refer to myself proudly as “fat,” medicalizing discourses insist on classifying me as *having* “obesity” (defined by a BMI over a certain range). And *having* “obesity”—something that which I absolutely do not buy into as a condition, illness, or comorbidity in itself—is what qualifies me to receive a vaccine in just a few short weeks. Oh, the irony.

A critical reading of “obesity,” as forwarded by many of the fat activist voices uplifted in this dissertation, reveals it as a “rhetorical device to leverage fat panic” rather than an actual instantiation of diagnosable disease.³⁰ As a fat activist and scholar of fat studies, I know that my weight alone does not equate to my health—and especially not my worth—in this world and that the CDC’s spotlighting of “obesity” as a risk factor for COVID is unethical, irresponsible, and plays right into the medicalization of fat bodies and the moralization of thinness that has long plagued popular discourse. And yet, I cannot help but be thankful that having that “o-word” on my medical chart means not having to wait extra days/weeks/months to receive a COVID vaccine. You see, once you’ve spent a year resolved that you are going to die from a deadly virus and then something comes around to give you glimmer of hope, it is all but impossible to push that glimmer away even if it risks reinforcing harmful, stigmatizing narratives about marginalized bodies.

Though “obesity” is not an epidemic like the medico-diet-pharmaceutical complex would have us believe, the harm and violence committed against fat bodies at the hands of medical professionals certainly is. Stigma, neglect, and a variety of other causes proven to produce poor health outcomes all travel through the hands of those who pledged to “do no harm” onto fat bodies, putting people like me at higher risk for complications from deadly viruses like COVID-19—not because we are fat, but because medical professionals treat our demise like an already foregone conclusion. Therefore, accepting a vaccine predicated on the unethical diagnosis of my fat body as “morbidly obese” is understandable, right? My futurity and survival are worth a momentary reinforcement of the violent structures that seek to snuff out bodies like mine...right?

These are the conversations animating many circles of fat people and activists right now. Worldmaking, especially fat-positive worldmaking, takes on a whole new meaning in the current

moment when the promise of a future tomorrow has been wrenched away more forcefully than usual, later to be replaced with a glimmer of hope in the form of a COVID-19 vaccine. I think again about the #NoBodyIsDisposable campaign. Just as they advocated for more humane, care-oriented, and justice-focused approaches to COVID triage procedures, they also fought for the prioritization of marginalized people—including and especially fat people—in vaccine distribution. They imagined a future where fat, disabled, ill, and other high-risk people were at the top of the list for vaccine access with the hope of securing a future for these high-risk groups, and that worldmaking work payed off in many states, though of course not all.

Worldmaking is not a linear process. It is a doing in the present for the future, even if that future is never quite reachable and the queer world itself is fleeting and temporary.

#NoBodyIsDisposable activists engaged in body positive advocacy in the most harrowing peaks of the COVID-19 pandemic and, though they did not necessarily achieve their ultimate vision of all high-risk and marginalized folks receiving immediate access to vaccines, some of the folks did end up being prioritized, even if we have to accept a harmful, medicalizing label along the way.

Perhaps this story is simply a reminder that, any time futurity for a marginalized group whose survival seemed previously unfathomable appears possible—even as a glimmer—there is hope. Perhaps it is a call to action to carefully examine the painstaking rhetorical labor performed by and through #NoBodyIsDisposable to manifest a queer world for a variety of marginalized bodies—rhetorical labor that surely parallels that of the case studies analyzed in this dissertation in its distinctly intersectional, queer, and decolonial approach. Or, perhaps this story is more personal and I am, once again, embracing the voice of the performative autoethnographer to both highlight fat-positive worldmaking that carved out the possibility for

my survival as well as participate in the worldmaking process, itself, by elevating this example of radical transformation to the academic page. Indeed, it is all of those things. And most of all, this story is a reminder that the work of worldmaking never ends; so long as there are marginalized people in the world, there is the potentiality of better, brighter, more ethical, and more livable worlds for them. And even if such worlds are not yet here, the promise of their possibility is enough to keep us going.

Notes

1. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, a “minoritizing” view presents an issue as only being a concern to an oppressed minority as opposed to a “universalizing view” which considers how all people, regardless of minority/majority status, are affected by an issue. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, many popular discourses painted only a distinct minority of “high-risk” people as vulnerable to the virus, which quickly was revealed as untrue.

2. Christie Aschwanden, “Debunking the False Claim That COVID Death Counts Are Inflated,” *Scientific American*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/debunking-the-false-claim-that-covid-death-counts-are-inflated1/>.

3. See the following for critiques of studies on COVID-10 and BMI that ignore confounding systemic factors: Christy Harrison, “Covid-19 Does Not Discriminate by Body Weight,” *Wired*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/covid-19-does-not-discriminate-by-body-weight/>; Cat Pausé, George Parker, and Lesley Gray, “Resisting the Problematisation of Fatness in COVID-19: In Pursuit of Health Justice,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 54 (2021).

4. See the following for a discussion of how care rationing guidelines, especially those that employ scoring systems and use “benefit” as the primary triage criterion, can ultimately explicitly and implicitly discriminate against fat people (and disabled people) in a variety of ways: Madeline Ward, “Fatphobia, Women, and COVID-19,” *Blog of the APA*, July 15, 2020, <https://blog.apaonline.org/2020/07/15/fatphobia-women-and-covid-19/>.

Notes—*continued*

5. “Fight Discrimination in COVID-19 Triage,” #NoBodyIsDisposable, accessed February 18, 2021, <https://nobodyisdisposable.org/home/>.
6. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 25.
7. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 548.
8. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 25.
9. Claire Sisco King and Isaac West, “This Could Be the Place: Queer Acceptance in *Lars and the Real Girl*,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 3 (2014): 62–63.
10. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.
11. Muñoz, 1.
12. Jackie Wykes, “Introduction: Why Queering Fat Embodiment?,” in *Queering Fat Embodiment*, ed. Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray (Routledge, 2016), 4.
13. Erin J. Rand, “An Appetite for Activism: The Lesbian Avengers and the Queer Politics of Visibility,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 36, no. 2 (2013): 134.
14. Samantha Murray, “Doing Politics or Selling Out? Living the Fat Body,” *Women’s Studies* 34, no. 3/4 (2005): 273.
15. Neve Gordon, “On Visibility and Power: An Arendtian Corrective of Foucault,” *Human Studies* 25, no. 2 (2002): 132.

Notes—*continued*

16. See the following for emphasis on/analysis of “image events”: Kevin Michael DeLuca, “Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 26, no. 1 (1999): 9–21; John W. Delicath and Kevin Michael DeLuca, “Image Events, the Public Sphere, and Argumentative Practice: The Case of Radical Environmental Groups,” *Argumentation* 17, no. 3 (2003): 315–33.

17. Davi Johnson, “Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 Birmingham Campaign as Image Event,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2007): 2.

18. Roberta Chevrette and Aaron Hess gesture to this shift as well in their discussion of the rhetorical strategies of social movements and the ways in which the use of media technology to circulate political rhetorics “has reshaped processes of traditional deliberation and activism, including the ways bodies are deployed.” See Roberta Chevrette and Aaron Hess, “‘The FEMEN Body Can Do Everything’: Generating the Agentic Bodies of Social Movement through Internal and External Rhetorics,” *Communication Monographs* 86, no. 4 (2019): 418.

19. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

20. Dustin Goltz, “Investigating Queer Future Meanings: Destructive Perceptions of ‘The Harder Path,’” *Qualitative Inquiry* 15, no. 3 (2009): 565.

21. Hailey Nicole Otis, “Tess Holliday’s Queering of Body-Positive Activism: Disrupting Fatphobic Logics of Health and Resignifying Fat As Fit,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 43, no. 2 (2020): 161–63.

22. Otis, “Tess Holliday’s Queering of Body-Positive Activism,” 161.

23. *Ibid.*, 176.

Notes—*continued*

24. George F. McHendry Jr. et al., “Rhetorical Critic(Ism)’s Body: Affect and Fieldwork on a Plane of Immanence,” *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 4 (2014): 298.

25. Matt McGorry, “My Journey Toward Radical Body Positivity,” *Medium*, May 22, 2020, <https://humanparts.medium.com/my-journey-toward-radical-body-positivity-3412796df8ff>.

26. McGorry, " My Journey Toward Radical Body Positivity."

27. See the following for Tik Tok’s official statement on its intention to support body positivity: Tara Wadhwa, “Coming Together to Support Body Positivity on TikTok,” *Newsroom | TikTok*, September 23, 2020, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/coming-together-to-support-body-positivity-on-tiktok>.

28. Rebecca Jennings, “The Paradox of Online 'Body Positivity,’” *Vox*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22226997/body-positivity-instagram-tiktok-fatphobia-social-media>.

29. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 149.

30. Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Bristol, England: HammerOn Press, 2016), 3.