

6-2021

## **Navigating the fat queer body: the impact of cultural discourses on identity construction and belonging**

Gabriella Ann Mulder  
*DePaul University*, [gabriellamulder17@gmail.com](mailto:gabriellamulder17@gmail.com)

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Navigating the Fat Queer Body: The Impact of Cultural Discourses on Identity Construction and  
Belonging

A Thesis

Presented in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

June, 2021

BY

Gabriella Ann Mulder

Department of Women's and Gender Studies

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

DePaul University

Chicago, Illinois

### **Abstract**

Dominant discourses about fat bodies construct the fat body as undesirable, a failed thin body, and immoral. Similarly, the culture of the United States constructs the queer body in very particular ways. This thesis explores how normative discourses and ideas about fatness and queerness come together to impact fat queer people's experience with their gender expression. A thematic and discourse analysis of fat queer people's personal narratives shows that fat queer people are impacted by how others view their gender, that finding community can create space for new imaginings of their bodies, and that for some, the most liberatory thing to do is to reject all categorization.

### **Acknowledgements**

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of my cohort, who supplied me with company, laughter, affirmations, love, and friendship. Getting through this last year and a half would not have been possible without your willingness to hop on a zoom call any day of the work and cowork with me. I am also indebted to my chair, Dr. Beth Catlett, whose comments, insight, support, and flexibility made this thesis possible. I would also like to thank Dr. Heather Montes Ireland and Dr. Sonnet Gabbard for their flexibility and insight with my thesis project. Thank you to my family and friends who willingly listened to me gripe about my thesis for the past year, who talked through ideas with me, and provided much needed love and comfort. Finally, to the queer fat activists and scholars who are doing the work now and those who have gone before us – thank you for your activism, for your energy, for your words. I am constantly inspired by the people in this community.

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## Introduction

One of the most persistent messages I have received about my body over the course of my life is that there is something fundamentally wrong with it and, by extension, me. I have consistently been told that my body is undesirable in a multitude of ways, because as a fat, queer, white woman, I fail at meeting proper notions of white femininity. When you grow up fat in the United States, you quickly learn that you have failed by being fat and thus need to do everything in your power to become thin. We are taught from a young age that in order to be considered a good child, friend, partner, or even citizen, we must be thin. Growing up in the United States, you cannot escape messages about how your body should look, who is considered attractive, and how your worth is determined based on your body, identity, and desirability – messages that are centered in white, middle-class aesthetics and gender norms. Similarly, we also receive messages about what it means to be queer and to look queer – these messages, too, are often based in white, middle class, thin modes of expression, centering those identities as normative. These messages come to us through the representation of queer people in television, movies, books, news media, and social media. Discourse around proper queer bodies is based on representations of queer bodies and the promotion of white, middle-class, thin queer people as representative of the whole queer community. This discourse affects mannerisms, clothing, speech, and personal stylings. Conforming to these notions, which is easier for some and completely inaccessible to others, means that you will be more easily read as queer by those around you – which can result in both discrimination and community solidarity. Of course, by definition, if you identify as queer then you have a queer body. While many are working to deconstruct notions of “proper” queerness, the concept of what it means to look queer still exists and thus permeates the cultural consciousness, changing and shifting over time and within subcultures. There have been articles

written, jokes made, and TikTok memes produced about wanting to dress or present a certain way, just so someone will know that you are queer. In this, we see that queerness can be legible on the body. This desire to be read as queer is based in wanting to be visible and identifiable to other queer people, and thus feel a sense of community. However, this can also be a struggle if your body is non-normative – if you are a person of color, fat, disabled. Personally, I have always felt that reading queerness onto my body is more difficult because I am both fat and femme. So, while current queer trends, shaped by white queer middle-class fashion ideals, like wearing mom jeans with a flannel and Doc Martens might read as both queer and feminine on a thinner body, on my body this would read as queer but masculinizing – an effect which produces gender discomfort within me. Yet wearing something that suits my femme sensibilities and makes my body feel more feminine might create feelings of gender euphoria within me but would make it hard to read my body as queer.

So, how do we mediate our gender expressions through our queerness and fatness? Utilizing personal essays written by fat queer people and published on the web, along with a review of secondary literature, I draw on the politics of desirability or, the way in which how “desirable” your body is (based on normative notions of beauty) affects how you are treated as a subject, along with fat liberation to understand how we construct our identities. Within this thesis, I use the term queer in two specific ways: first, as an identity marker, to signify someone as having a queer sexuality, that is, not being heterosexual. Second, as a verb - to queer something, meaning, to make it non-normative or reject the heteronormative construct. I define gender identity as someone’s internal sense of their gender, and gender expression as the clothing, mannerisms, accessories, and general external stylings that someone uses in order to express their gender. I focus on how concepts of the queer body and the fat body intersect to

impact choices we make about our gender expression. How do we construct our ideas of what it means to be queer as a fat person, especially when so much of the normative standard for queerness is white and thin? What does it mean to exist as fat and queer in this world? How do we negotiate our identities? How do we negotiate our gender expression based on our conceptions of normative queer bodies? Utilizing fat feminist histories, fat queer histories, and modern writings by fat people, I explore these questions and bring in discussions of common discourses around the fat body.

### **Historical Foundations**

Fat people face discrimination in most aspects of our lives, driven by a cultural disgust of fatness, or fatphobia. Tovar (2018) defines fatphobia as “a form of bigotry that positions fat people as inferior and as objects of hatred and derision” (16-17). Anti-fatness and fatphobia function on the interpersonal, cultural, and structural levels. Like with other forms of systemic oppression, fat people can internalize fatphobia and this in turn affects our self-perception. Internalized fatphobia can compound with feelings about what it means to be or to look queer - and so can lead to anxiety around the question of legitimacy. Fatphobia interacts with other forms of oppression as well, creating different effects for different people based on race, class, gender identity, and disability.

Fat people are stigmatized as being lazy, unproductive, mean, unable to control themselves, unhealthy, and poor workers, negative associations which lead to discrimination within the workplace, at the doctor’s office, and in other social spheres (Gassam Asare 2019). These negative discourses about fat people are connected to the neoliberal notion of personal responsibility and the need for people to be productive members of society. Neoliberalism, as a function of late-stage capitalism, functions in part by focusing on economic privatization, social

service reduction and privatization, as well as a focus on personal responsibility, which absolves the state of any commitment to its citizens and ignores the impacts of systemic discrimination (Duggan 2003). By placing the onus of losing weight on the fat person, as something that must be done in order to be seen as worthy of respect and human dignity, any failure to comply is viewed as a personal failing. This neoliberal view of fatness permeates several aspects of our culture, locating the problem of fatness within the fat person - if you can just become thin, or find individual acceptance for your looks, if you could just become a fat consumer, then your problems would be solved. Our ideas about fatness are not just individual feelings - they are cultural discourses which posit fatness as bad, as immoral, as a failure. Fatness is seen as undesirable – thus, fat people are seen as undesirable.

Fatness is not protected as a social category on the federal level (Gassam Asare 2019). Michigan, for example, is the only state in the United States that explicitly bans weight-based employment discrimination – in 49 states, you can be discriminated against in employment settings because of your weight (Martin 2017). The social stigma against fatness and the imperative to become thin underpins the U.S.'s diet culture, which, according to Tovar (2018), is “the marriage of the multi-billion dollar diet industry (including fitness apps, over-the-counter diet pills, prescription drugs to suppress appetite, bariatric surgery, gyms, and gym clothiers) and the social and cultural atmosphere that normalizes weight control and fatphobic bigotry” (25). Diet culture requires that consumers believe their bodies need to be fixed and thus turn to diets to achieve thinness. The capitalist diet industry is not based in a sincere desire to create a healthier populous, but in capturing a base of consumers who will continually invest their money in the products sold by diet companies. It relies on a sense that one needs to be healthy, and that we achieve health only through thinness, to sell their products.

We also see fatphobia in media, where most popular actors are thin and white, some of whom might play fat characters in fat suits, as a way of mocking fat people (as can be seen in the popular sitcoms *Friends* and *New Girl*). Fatness in the media is typically treated with derision, as a topic to be joked about (Fremont 2017; Ashley 2018). Fat people are underrepresented in entertainment media and are often associated with negative qualities when they are present (Puhl and Heuer 2009). Additionally, when a fat actor does appear, they are in a minor role and stereotyped: as the fat comedic sidekick, the fat man with a hot wife, the insecure fat friend, or as the fat main character whose whole role revolves around being fat (Fremont 2017; Ashley 2018; Puhl and Heuer 2009). There has been a shift in some current media, where fatphobia against a main character is treated as wrong, but this shift is recent (Fremont 2017).

In our language the word “fat” is hurled like an insult, used to shame everyone from children to grown adults for their bodies. Fat people are stereotyped as being “lazy, unmotivated, lacking in self-discipline, less competent, noncompliant, and sloppy” (Puhl and Heuer 2009). In the medical industry, medical professionals treat fatness as an epidemic and the majority hold anti-fat views (Phelan et al 2015; Puhl and Heuer 2009). Often medical fatphobia prevents fat people from receiving adequate medical care – weight requirements for surgery can prevent fat people from receiving care, including gender affirmation surgery for fat trans people, which strips them of their bodily autonomy. When this intersects with misogyny and anti-Blackness, it can have devastating impacts for fat Black women in particular (Tomiyama, Carr, and Granberg 2018; Phelan et al 2015). Indeed, a common shorthand for health, the BMI, has been shown to be a poor indicator for health and to have negative consequences for the healthcare of people of color (Stern 2021).

Elsewhere, we see fatphobia in the fashion industry through separate plus-size clothing lines, stores, and higher prices – and these clothes are limited in their style, presenting a traditionally feminine look that does not appeal to all fat people. Standard size seats on airplanes, in theaters, on trains, and at restaurants are not made with fat people in mind. Additionally, fat people experience discrimination and hate speech while simply out and about, attempting to live our lives. These experiences and more are part of many fat people’s daily lives. Fatphobia is unavoidable in our culture and thus has a deep impact on how we view our bodies. The Fat Liberation movement came into existence because of the discrimination that fat people routinely face.

#### *The Beginnings of the Fat Liberation Movement*

Fat Studies scholars pinpoint the beginning of the Fat Liberation movement to the 1960s in the United States, during a period in which many social movements were taking place, from the second wave of the feminist movement and gay liberation, to the Black power movement and anti-war movements. A brief exploration of this history is necessary to set up the historical and cultural context within which my project exists. For the purposes of this paper, my research is concentrated within the United States – I am drawing on my own experiences as a fat, white, queer cisgender woman who grew up and lives in the United States as the foundation for my work. However, it must be noted that this common narrative, which places the roots of Fat Liberation within the United States, is a narrative that centers whiteness and the United States (Farrell 2020; Cooper 2016). Indeed, while telling and re-telling this specific narrative can lend prestige to the field of Fat Studies, it is not the full story – further research and scholarship is needed in this field, specifically research that does not focus on the West, as other Fat Studies scholars have noted (Farrell 2020; Cooper 2016; Rinaldi, Rice, and Friedman 2019). Many of the

fat liberation organizations discussed below focus on fatness and gender as *the* sites of oppression, often ignoring how whiteness impacts their experiences of fatness. For them, fatness and gender are the most salient of their identities. This is in stark contradiction to women of color, who note the intersections of fatness, race, class, and gender as multiply constituted identities (Farrell 2020). For the purposes of this paper, however, I will be focusing on drawing the outlines of the fat liberation movement and its intersections with feminist and lesbian movements in the United States. Historical accounts of fat activism are difficult to find, so I owe a great debt to fat feminist and queer activists and scholars who have done the work to make some of these histories more accessible.

A common starting point when determining the “beginning” of the fat liberation movement in the U.S. would be to begin with the Fat-In, on June 3, 1967 in Central Park. What began as a passing comment by radio host Steve Post soon became an actual event once listeners wrote in stating how much they loved the idea. The event itself hosted around 500 people who came together to protest fat hatred (Cooper 2016, 137). What followed were a “series of isolated protests against dominant medical and social models of fat” which resulted in the formation of the National Association to Aid Fat Americans, now the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) in 1969 (Simic 2015, 17). Both Cooper and Simic note that NAAFA, while one of the first fat acceptance organizations, ended up being more social than political in practice, which caused some discontent among fat feminists at the time (Simic 2015, 18; Cooper 2016, 141-2). Indeed two “fat admirers,” Llewellyn Louderback and William Fabrey, founded NAAFA in 1969 because of the discrimination their wives faced as fat women (Cooper 2016, 140). Louderback did publish a book, *Fat Power*, which was “a lively and accessible read, [which] argues that fat hatred is ingrained in media, medicine, fashion and weight loss

industries" (Cooper 2016, 141), issues which fat activists today still fight against. Still, as Cooper argues, the book is "pre-feminist and heteronormative, and its politics are naïve, particularly around race and class" (141). A fat movement that was specifically feminist, and therefore political, became necessary due to the social nature of NAAFA, their problems with hypersexualizing and fetishizing fat women within its membership, and the marginalization of women, especially lesbian women, within the organization (Cooper 2016, 143; Simic 2015, 18).

In the early 1970s, Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran (who has also gone by and published under the names Vivian F Mayer and Sara Golda Bracha Fishman), Jewish feminists who lived in Los Angeles and who were members of NAAFA and the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective, formed The Fat Underground, a more radical organization which asserted that "American culture fears fat because it fears powerful women, particularly their sensuality and their sexuality" (Fishman 1998; Cooper 2016). The Fat Underground drew on theories from the radical therapy movement – namely the idea that we need to change society, not ourselves. Freespirit and Aldebaran were inspired by the concept of radical therapy and wanted to interweave it with a discussion of fatness, because it "was critical of the medicalization and de-politicization of ordinary human experience and oppression, it was a social model of mental health, it sought systemic change, and was based in a Marxist approach to power" (Cooper 2016, 147). A feminist approach to radical therapy added an analysis of gender to this critique. They formed a problem-solving group as a part of the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective, named the Fat Women's Problem Solving Group – and from that group the Fat Underground was born (Cooper 2016 147-9).

The Fat Underground was influential in fat activism, known for their disruptive protests, position papers that provide counterdiscourses to dominant ideas of fatness, and commitment to

providing community for fat women. I utilize the concept of “counterdiscourse” here to demarcate specific ideas that permeate the cultural consciousness in the Foucauldian sense of the word. Foucault (1990) asserts that discourse connects ideas to flows of power – as how we think about and discuss ideas change, so do the flows of power. Common discourses around fatness circulate and uphold white beauty ideals, which connects body size, race, and class to worth. These discourses envision a normative body – our attachment to these dominant discourses relates to the power they hold and the desire to be seen as desirable and normative. Counterdiscourses around fatness aim to challenge these ideas of fatness and thus challenge the flows of power. These counterdiscourses are cultural formations that impact how we discuss fatness and, in many cases, counter dominant cultural discourses around fatness which posit it as something negative. The Fat Underground was the first organization to create a theory around fat oppression; they also allied themselves with other struggles against systemic oppression such as racism, capitalism, imperialism, and they firmly situated themselves within second wave feminism. They created their group without formal leadership and remained critical of power, which “resulted in a dynamic space where fat feminists were able to reflect and act together, and this produced some of the most vigorous fat activism of the movement to date” (Cooper 2016, 150-2). The Fat Underground consisted of women who identified as feminists, some as lesbian feminists, and received pushback from both of those communities due to their commitment to fat liberation (Cooper 2016, 156). The Fat Underground had disbanded by 1976, after about three years of existence, but that did not mean the end of the movement (Cooper 2016, 157).

At the same time, thanks to connections made with the Fat Underground, fat feminisms and fat lesbian feminisms were developing along the West and East coasts, strengthening the movement and its ties to lesbian feminisms. It is through the growth of these groups that an

analysis of fat oppression and liberation was carried on and spread throughout other parts of the United States. In 1975, Karen Scott-Jones (later Karen Stimson) reached out to the Fat Underground and then went on to write essays on fat feminism for the chapter of the National Council of Women (NOW) that she was part of on the East Coast (Simic 2015, 19). On the other side of the country, in 1975 the San Francisco Women's Center created a consciousness-raising group specifically for fat women, which then spawned two other groups, one specifically for older fat women and one for fat lesbians (Cooper 2016, 168). The Fat Liberation Front came into existence in the late 1970s, founded by Aldebaran, Sharon Bas Hannah, and Karen Stimson in New Haven, Connecticut. Aldebaran later went on to found Fat Liberator Publications in 1978, which helped to create a line of national distribution and communication, breaking up some of the isolation that had previously kept a national fat liberation movement from starting (Simic 2015, 19). Also in New England was the Boston Area Fat Liberation (BAFL) group, founded by Judith Stein around 1979 (Cooper 2016, 169). In 1979, Stein hosted workshops and discussions at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a second wave lesbian feminist space, around the topic of fat feminism, which helped to introduce the concept to the Midwest, develop the concept of fat feminism further, and shows the ties between lesbian spaces and fat feminism in the earlier years (Cooper 2016, 172). BAFL and the New Haven Fat Liberation Front held two meetings in April of 1980 - The Feminist Fat Activist's Working Meeting and The New Haven Fat Women's Health Conference. Out of these convenings, we see the emergence of Fat Activists Together (F.A.T.) a group which then went on to publish *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* in 1982 – a quintessential fat feminist text, and one of the first, which brought wider attention to the fat liberation movement and contained original essays and materials from the Fat Underground (Cooper 2016, 169-170, 175).

*1980s to the 1990s*

In the 1980s, a fat liberation movement arose that focuses on fighting fat oppression and raising awareness within feminist communities. For example, Stein successfully lobbied for fat politics to be included in the second run of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* instead of the anti-fat and pro-diet rhetoric that was present in the first edition (Simic 2015, 19). Groups and collectives allied with lesbian feminist and feminist communities continued to pop up in the 1980s, such as Freespirit's Fat Lip Reader's Theater in 1981, which is notable for its commitment to making the connections between fatness and disabled embodied experiences explicit, as well as groups such as Life in the Fat Lane, and We Dance in the late 1980s (Simic 2015, 22; Cooper 2016, 168, 92). This time also saw several one-off events, such as fat swims, readings, exhibitions, and clothing swaps, meant to build community and provide access to hard-to-find commodities (Cooper 2016, 95, 168).

The 1990s brought about a shift in fat activism. With the emergence of third wave feminism, zine culture, and the internet, the different communities that fat activism thrived in and how it spread changed. Zines, in particular, were essential to the continued spread of fat activism, as they provided a platform that could reflect the "diverse fat perspectives within a queer subculture [and create] a subculture and constituency of its own: 'fat dykes'" (Cooper 2016, 86). Fat activism showed up in both queer feminist zines as well as zines that were explicitly for fat feminist activism – and these "publications address a range of issues, from clothes shopping and street harassment to diet culture and self-acceptance, [as well as] sex (and sexual pleasure) as an integral part of their diverse political projects" (Hester and Walters 2015, 2). Thus, in the 1990s, we also see a shift towards explicitly claiming the sexuality of fat people, as shown through zines such as *FaT GiRL*, Heather McAllister's Fat-Bottom Revue and Big

Burlesque, and the 1994 publication of *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes* (Cooper 2016, 182; Simic 2015, 22-3).

*FaT GiRL: A Zine for Fat Dykes and the Women Who Want Them* ran from 1994 until 1997 and was published by FaT GiRL collective in San Francisco but had international as well as U.S. based contributors (Hester and Walters 2015, 3). *FaT GiRL* helped to further this “fat dyke” identity, while creating a space for multiple political sexual orientations – meaning, they included pieces from both newer fat queer activism, which included trans and genderqueer folks, as well as older radical fat lesbian activism. They were able to use computers and online technology to spread their message - they tapped into zine publishing and queercore and did not need to rely on lesbian magazines or mainstream publication in the same way that activism in the 1970s and 1980s did (Cooper 2016, 181-2). *FaT GiRL* was also known for publishing explicit photographs of fat people because the collective “wanted to present a diverse array of fat lesbian bodies and to challenge cultural norms of appropriateness” (Hester and Walters 2015, 3). It was a space that centered queer fat sexuality, while centering fat queer people as desiring subjects and subjects of desire. While *FaT GiRL* ended in the late 1990s, fat activism continued to blossom in zine culture and queer spaces. We see some legacies of this zine culture today in the fat-o-sphere, a colloquial term for blogs, websites, and social media run by and for fat people. Through these blogs, individuals create community, fight for fat acceptance, and produce their own counterdiscourses around fatness and sex (Hester and Walters 2015, 3-4). Both zines and the fat-o-sphere are spaces with a low barrier to entry, where anyone can become part of the community, and where counter-cultural discourses can take place – qualities that allow counter-culture movements to spread and take hold.

NOLOSE is one of the more prominent fat queer organizations that is still active today. It was founded in 1997 by Dot Nelson-Turnier as the National Organization of Lesbians of Size Everywhere because of fatphobia in the lesbian community, marking a shift in how lesbian communities, which were often thought of as being more fat accepting, treated fat queer people. Today is simply known as NOLOSE (“About NOLOSE”; Cooper 2016, 183). In the 2000s, NOLOSE board members began discussions to queer the organization and promote better inclusion of all identities, changing their policy to be accepting of transgender people and then later, in 2011, they again changed their policy to be inclusive of all gender identities (“About NOLOSE”; Cooper 2016, 184). Simic (2015) argues that “Fat Liberation never entirely disappeared, but fat feminism has clearly been more visible since the 1990s” (24). The early 2000s also brought about the establishment of Fat Studies as an academic field of study (Simic 2015, 28).

### *Body Positivity and Fat Liberation*

While the fat liberation movement began around the same time as the second wave of the feminist movement, and while there was some overlap between them, the mainstream feminist movement remained hostile and dismissive towards fat women and the fat liberation movement. Wykes (2014) notes that fat activism grew out of the fact that the mainstream women’s liberation movement either ignored or was hostile to the issues raised by fat women about fat discrimination (2). While the feminist movement was ignoring fat liberation, they were accepting and praising books such as *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (Orbach 1978) and *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf 1990). Neither book provides an in-depth analysis of fatness like the fat liberation movement does, but both books deal with issues of embodiment, bringing discussions of body image among women into the mainstream. Indeed, literature on women’s bodies within Western culture mostly

focuses on discussions of the pressure to be thin and analysis of eating disorders, but with minimal mentions of fat people (Wykes 3, 2014). Wykes notes the importance of this work but that it still “persistently centered on a normatively slender body, marginalizing or erasing fat bodies except as the constitutive and often invisible ‘other’ against which the norm was defined” (Wykes 3, 2014). Cooper also notes that the rise of body positivity and discussions of body image in the mainstream U.S. feminist movement in the 1990s and early 2000s pushed fat feminist activism to the side (Cooper 2016, 181).

Body positivity, as a movement today, is predominately led by thin white women, which focuses on loving yourself and your body, rather than on ending discrimination. While some fat bodies have made it into the mainstream beauty scene, these fat bodies are often “smaller fats” or fat people who are closer to thinness and who achieve all other markers of our modern concepts of western beauty – they are white, feminine, and have an hourglass figure. While fat Black women are integral to fat liberation and body acceptance movements, when “Black women’s bodies are acknowledged [in the body positivity movement] it is to pathologize them” (Taylor 2017). In body positivity, the focus is not on liberation, but rather assimilation. Some argue that, as a movement, body positivity recreates systems of oppression such as white supremacy and reinforces the notion that acceptance is liberation. Fat activists argue that the body positivity movement is not enough and the constant attention to it become quite exhausting, as it feels like fat activism is constantly stuck in a “101” state around the concept of “love your body” (Cooper 2016, 193). Body positivity is still the prominent method for discussions of body size within the mainstream U.S. feminist movement, and larger U.S. culture. Since body positivity tends to focus more on internal feelings, it pushes a counterdiscourse of “all bodies are good bodies” as a mandate to feel good about yourself, countering the diet culture discourse that our bodies are

imperfect and need to be fixed. While these counterdiscourses can be useful for raising self-esteem and helping people heal their relationships with their bodies, body positivity does not seek to liberate fatness, nor does it center the experiences of fat people. However, some counterdiscourses that are often seen in the body positivity movement, such as “love your body” still have radical potential. When you are told all your life that your body is horrible and in need of drastic changing, the mantra to “love your body,” to “accept your body” can feel quite radical. So, while the movement itself may fall short from achieving liberation and structural transformation, some of the counterdiscourses it produces may still have radical potential

Fat liberation, on the other hand, focuses on cultural and structural attitudes about fatness as well. By challenging the dominant views of fat bodies, activists and theorists seek to reframe the conversation around how we discuss bodies for, “the fat body is not merely lazy or self-indulgent: it is inscribed by culture, and it is a reflection of oppression as surely as is the body of the rail-thin anorectic” (Hartley 2001, 70). Counterdiscourses around fatness arose as soon as fat activism arose. These were ways for fat activists to make sense of their feelings and politics around fatness - alternative explanations that rejected common narratives around fatness. These counterdiscourses are based in alternative ways of knowing, most prominently fat people’s lived experiences. While dominant narratives around fatness tend to come from medical professionals and thin people, these counterdiscourses originate from within the community – from fat liberation organizations or collectives, from fat activists, from body positive activists, and so forth.

The Fat Underground, for example, wrote a series of position papers on different subjects from medicalization to sexism, providing their own analysis for how fatness affects the body. The Fat Underground’s focus was also on reframing how they themselves thought about their

bodies and the beauty attached to it (Fishman 1998). Counterdiscourses that arise from the fat liberation movement thus draws on a political analysis of fatness, noting that fatness is political and therefore fat hatred is also political. Fat liberation draws on the "... influential theories of stigma, oppression and deviance to develop its political vocabulary and critique" and the counterdiscourses reflect that (Simic 2015, 22). For example, the counterdiscourse "fat people are not failed thin people" engages with and dismisses the neoliberal notion of personal responsibility, a notion that was present in Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, instead arguing that fat people are whole, valuable people who are not morally bad for "failing" to lose weight. This counterdiscourse also pushes back against the racist notion that "that the real civilized person was thin [which] manifested itself by the early part of the twentieth century in African American professional women's lives" (Farrell 2020, 36). By rejecting the notion of failure, the counterdiscourse works to reassert the humanity of fat people. Our view of fat bodies is based in our social and historical location, and thus is a shifting frame. As LeBesco and Braziel (2001) note, "what counts as fat and how it is valued is far from universal: indeed, these judgements are saturated with cultural, historical, political, and economic influences" (2).

From the 2000s to today, the type of fat activism that we see occurs both within the academic space that is Fat Studies, as well as on the internet – via blogs and social media accounts dedicated to discussions of fatness. It is important to note that people within the fat-o-sphere are a mix of fat liberationists and body positivity activists, meaning some work more towards assimilationist principles (body positivity) while others are more radical (fat liberationists). These spaces create new counterdiscourses around fatness that counteract the dominant cultural discourses around fatness. Broadly speaking, we can draw a few different themes around fatness from these counterdiscourses. These counterdiscourses work to assert fat

people's human rights, to discuss the medicalization of bodies, and to discuss desirability politics. These discourses also work on various levels, from structural to individual. Counterdiscourses that are aligned with fat liberation tend to be more radical, advocating for structural change, while counterdiscourses aligned with body positivity tend to focus more on confidence and feeling at peace or good in your body. However, these are not hard and fast lines – they are blurred by activists and fat people, as well as by the fact that you cannot easily separate some of these ideas. For example, the counterdiscourse “all bodies are good bodies” can be a phrase used to build confidence in your body, but it also ties into larger discourse around desirability and the “worth” of bodies, which relates to how fat people are treated in society and interacts with racism, ableism, and sexism. We see these narratives then fitting into larger discussions of desirability politics and the medicalization of fat people’s bodies.

These historical foundations provide context for the culture fat queer people currently inhabit – this was the time when analyses of fatness were catching on and coming together in activist spaces. While many fat queer people might not know the history of the fat liberation movement or the names of the activists who came before us, their legacy is felt through the counterdiscourses that we see passed around and perpetuated in our conversations about fatness. It is because of fat activists, fat writers, fat speakers and artists that we have a fat liberation movement, or even a body positivity movement, to learn from, to draw from.

### **Existing Literature**

The academic field of fat studies is relatively new, having begun during the late 1990s, early 2000s. However, while the field is new, some of the themes explored are not – themes which question identity construction, assimilation and liberation, and rights-based discourse. These themes are echoed in the historical moments of the fat liberation movement – in the

writings of not just fat activists, but activists from other concurrent liberation movements as well. While scholars have produced a rich literature examining fatness in multiple ways, the specific intersection of fatness with queer sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression is relatively under-researched within the academy. However, there is a rich literature within the field of fat studies among three other themes which are of importance to this study: moralizing the fat body, intersections among fatness, gender identity, and sexuality, and representation and visibility.

### *Moralizing and Racializing the Fat Body*

The field of fat studies critically engages with discussions of how fat bodies are marked, and thus moralized, in our society. Within the United States, fat bodies are marked by different identity categories such as gender, race, class, body shape, and disability. Normative bodies are those that are white, thin, straight, cisgender, able bodied, and male. At times, this category of normative can be expanded to allow bodies that are usually considered “undesirable” entrance – for instance, fat cisgender women who are white, straight, and able bodied can be accepted as “desirable” or “beautiful” if their fatness is primarily located in their chest and hips, creating a desired hourglass figure. Any fat body that does not conform still fails at producing a normative and acceptable body. This type of expanding the category still creates a category of “other”. LeBesco (2001) notes that one cannot widen the idea of who a “proper subject” is without being exclusionary. As such, she argues not for replacing the subject, but for tearing down the structure of subject/object, a liberationist approach to these categories that requires their destruction instead of assimilation (78).

Scholars of fat studies and critical race studies have shown that our concepts of desire, sexuality, gender, and weight are based in Western thought and the construct of whiteness. Diet culture and fatphobia operate via control of the body – they rely on molding or constructing the

body, as people are constantly trying to achieve a set norm. Bodies that exist outside of that normative ideal are considered less desirable and as failures, and thus are treated as less worthy. Braziel and LeBesco (2001) posit that “our perception of fat is not natural ... it is a function of our historical and cultural positioning in a society that benefits from the marginalization of fat people” (2-3). The ways that bodies are conceptualized across cultures and how those conceptions shift when borders are crossed varies – notions of fatness rely on the physicality of the body but are also flexible concepts that change depending on where you are locating the body (Lloyd 2014). However, tracing the history of fatphobia in the West shows that it is inherently linked to ideas of white supremacy. Body shame and fatphobia are thus connected to the larger structures of racism, white supremacy, classism, and misogyny (Tovar 2018). The rise of eugenics gave a new platform for white supremacists to spread their ideas about the correct way to have a body. Eugenicists claimed that “mental and physical characteristics, such as intellect and beauty, were inherited” and thus “it made sense for only the best of the human bloodlines to breed” (Strings, 158). These claims followed from earlier claims about race and bodies, with the goal still being to promote whiteness. When deciding which categories of people were “fit” to reproduce, eugenicists claimed that only Nordic/Aryan Americans were eligible, and their “tendency to slimness was seen as an indication of such fitness” (Strings, 156-7). These white supremacist ideas of who was “fit” to reproduce directly influenced how eugenicists and physicians sought to control the bodies of white women and discourage the reproduction of nonwhite women. There were times when physicians could not agree on whether middle- and upper-class white women should be thin or fat – but what they could always agree on was that their diets and health was of the utmost importance. For if upper- and middle-class white women made the wrong health choices, then the nation would suffer (Strings, 194). This serves to

connect race with fatness, fatness with health, and individual choice with both fatness and health. Eventually, these claims became medicalized, to further justify the control of weight – what had started as a way for social theorists and white European men to claim their elite status was now being codified into medical discourse.

The basis for this medicalization still took the white body as the default – the body against which all others were to be measured. Strings notes that the first U.S. “normal weight” table was created entirely with data from white, middle-class men (Strings, 188). Indeed, the Body Mass Index tables which are a standard part of medical health analysis have been shown to be racist because it was based on a very small sample size of only white men – and still they are considered an ideal way to tell if someone is healthy. When a study was done which found that black women had higher BMIs in the U.S., their size once again became associated with disease and “black women were to become the focus of fear, anxiety, and degradation over the size of their bodies” (Strings, 202 - 3). This medicalization of bodies contributes to the discourse of concern trolling or faux concern about health that still occurs today. As fatness continued to be medicalized, the concern often focused on middle- and upper-class white women – and left the bodies of women of color out of the conversation, mainly due to the eugenics idea that non-white races would simply die off (Strings, 194-5). When medical research did study nonwhite bodies, it still mainly served to compare them to white bodies and to place the blame for any adverse health outcomes on the individual, instead of the social, economic, and environmental systems that oppress people of color (Strings, 201).

Although current medical and social discourse argues that fatphobia is medically justified, an assessment of historical thought around race shows that fatphobia is a product of centuries of this white supremacist thought. As Strings (2019) says, “the phobia about fatness

and the preference for thinness have not, principally or historically, been about health ... they have been one way the body has been used to craft and legitimate race, sex, and class hierarchies” (6). Strings pinpoints it even further, noting that fatphobia in the United States is a product of the “racial scientific literature [which] since at least the eighteenth century has claimed that fatness was ‘savage’ and ‘black’” (209-10). Race scientists made claims that body size, skin color, and intelligence were all connected, often linking fatness, specifically in Black people, to laziness and low intellect (77). These linkages provided evidence to their claims of European superiority and enabled them to falsely claim concrete differences between Europeans and non-Europeans. This created a standard to which women were held – and it meant that “the racialized female body became legible, a form of ‘text’ from which racial superiority and inferiority were read” (67). Through this, race science and white supremacy came together to create an ideal type of woman – white, thin, upper-class, and heterosexual.

Systems of oppression are perpetuated by individuals and are felt on an individual level – in terms of racism, for example, “whiteness or light skin can soften fat-negative bias, whereas dark-skinned women may experience increased hostility due to the combined effects of colorism and fatphobia” (Tovar 2018, 68). According to Taylor (2017), “part of the machine of size discrimination is stripping White Women of that status as punishment for fatness” – white women are no longer seen as beautiful by the dominant culture, because in their fatness, their bodies resemble those of women of color, who historically have been excluded from dominant categories of beauty. White supremacy, misogyny, and fatphobia are interconnected – fatphobia works to control women through how they view their bodies and their self-worth, and white women are continually investing in systems of white supremacy because of the status and power they enjoy over women of color (Tovar 2018, 72).

The culture of the United States looks at body size as evidence for humanity and morality and then tells us that the problem is on an individual level, leaning into neoliberal rhetoric (Tovar 2018, 58). When race scientists created an ideal type for white women, they also moralized bodies and decided which bodies were considered “bad”. Discourse about the ideal type of body worked to enforce what a legitimate body was and impacted women of all races, albeit in different ways. Rhetoric which associated fatness with Blackness also moralized these identities, which was used as justification for bigotry against Black women. In these ways, anxieties about race and class were transmitted through discourse on bodies and their ascribed morality. These discussions served as a form of social control, which “has been used to both degrade black women and discipline white women” and shows that fatphobia impacts people differently based on their race (Strings 2019, 211). The morality of the fat body is continuously being inscribed upon the fat body – it becomes a reminder of deviation from the norm, of breaking social mores (LeBesco and Braziel 2001; Hartley 2001). Hartley (2001), notes that the female body is structured as an object of the male gaze, which results in women internalizing fatphobia and enacting the male gaze on themselves and those around them. Thus, when fat women “let themselves go” by becoming or accepting fatness, they reject social norms and are “perceived as violating socially prescribed sexual roles and that violation is a threat to existing power structures” (64-5). Women’s bodies are thus public property and fatness becomes a moral issue.

Theories of the fat body become tied up in theories of what is considered desirable – here feminist theories focus on a heteronormative society where the focus of desire is based in a gendered and racialized gaze. Hartley (2001) argues that fat women are explicit reminders what women should not or cannot be according to the male gaze. She also asserts that a fat body is seen as something that is grasping more than is allowed and therefore “comes to represent all that

must be avoided and all that is denied to women in American society” – namely, that women should not be seen to take up more space than they are given, nor should they deviate from the strict beauty standards (66). Within this frame of thought, women who are fat are considered “‘unfeminine’, are treated with derision in our society, and that derision is tied inextricably to the personal freedom of women” (63). McMillan Cottom (201) pushes this further, stating that “‘beauty isn’t actually what you look like; beauty is the preferences that reproduce the existing social order [and thus] ... beauty’s ultimate function is to exclude blackness” (44 - 45) A queer of color critique is useful here for it extends the work of women of color feminism “by investigating how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital” (Ferguson 122, 2013). Thus, it is not just the male gaze that must be contended with, but also the white gaze – a gaze which will always have a preference for whiteness, will reinforce white stylings and white bodies as normative, and is invested in the continuation of the nation-state and capitalism. Beauty becomes a normative investment of the nation-state, meant to keep whiteness in power – Black bodies are thus gendered and sexualized differently because of how beauty functions. bell hooks (1997), in discussing the commodification and sexualization of Black women’s bodies, notes that since Black female bodies are “undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable, the Black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant” (117). Here, hooks shows that conceptions of worth are tied to commodification and sexualization, two concepts that are also raced and gendered, also showing that Black female bodies do not meet the normative ideas of what bodies are desired by the nation-state.

*Intersections among fatness, gender identity, and sexuality*

There is also much discussion in fat studies on the role fatness plays in gendering bodies, with scholars noting that fatness can be read as both masculinizing and feminizing, depending on where it falls on the body, how others perceive your gender presentation, and societal expectations which vary by race, class, age, and gender. How fatness affects gender can produce gender euphoria or distress within a person and can also work to challenge or destabilize the gender binary. Some fat queer femme women tend to find their fatness feminizing, while others view it as masculinizing (Taylor 2018, 467-8). The way fatness shapes a body, such as appearing as breasts or thickening hips, creates a gendered association – thus for some fat/trans people, their fatness sometimes prevents their gender identity from being properly read or recognized (White 2019, 113). White (2019) notes that this can be more fraught for non-binary people, some of whom assert that passing as non-binary is nearly impossible because we categorize bodily characteristics into the gender binary. They do note that an “androgynous” body model can be read as non-binary, but this model is always thin, white, and able-bodied which thus creates a fear that non-binary people who “fail” this will be seen as illegitimate (White 2019, 117). Meanwhile, some fat femmes know their fatness affects their gender and makes it non-normative – it queers gender in a way (Taylor 2018, 466). Taylor (2018) also argues that, because fatness can be read as both masculinizing and feminizing, it destabilizes the gender binary (469). White, on the other hand, notes that some trans and non-binary people try to shape or re-distribute the fat on their bodies in order to create a body shape that is more in-line with their gender identities. Doing so can reproduce the gender binary, as well as racialized and classed ideas regarding bodies (White 2019, 114-5).

Fat studies meets queer theory in the form of scholars theorizing how fatness queers embodiment. Fat studies scholars utilize queer theory's broad interests in critiques of sexuality, gender identity and performance, heteronormativity, and subjectivity and power (Butler 1990; Foucault 1990; Warner 1993; Cohen 1997). The literature on queering fat embodiment focuses on how fatness is inherently queer because fat bodies subvert the idea of what a normative body should be (Hartley 2001; LeBesco 2001). Wykes (2014) argues that "non-normative bodies challenge and disrupt – that is to say, queer – the disciplinary power of normative categories" (5). In particular, fat women "fail" to be feminine because of their fatness and thus queer fatness and bodies (LeBesco 2001; Hartley 2001). Taylor (2018) found that fa(t)shion helps fat femmes challenge gender and sexuality norms and notes that queer fat femmes face a sort of "double" invisibility due to their fatness and their queerness (473). In this way, fatness and fashion are being used to reject normative conceptions of gender and sexuality, thus queering them. Kent (2001) and LeBesco (2001), meanwhile, utilize a queer theory lens to change how fatness is viewed or constructed. LeBesco (2001) queers fatness by making fatness a political condition and arguing for viewing fat bodies as bodies that matter. Kent takes issue with the lack of discourse around how to live as a fat woman, stating that too much of the discourse is about dying as a fat woman (132). She critiques mainstream media's representation of fat people, pointing to the influence of the diet industry as well as the dual presence of the word fat but the erasure of fat bodies (Kent 2001, 133). Current representations of fatness are hyper-medicalized, with a focus on fat people's "health", and a constant stream of fat bodies as the before picture. This places fat bodies as something to be escaped, something to erase – as an object, not a subject (Kent 2001, 134). This shifts the focus off of the mortality of the fat body and instead focuses on potential queer futures for the fat body. LeBesco constructs the fat body as a political

subject in its own right. Her goal is to shift from theorizing fatness as medical or scientific to social or cultural, and to show how to live in a fat body (LeBesco 2001, 75). Kent also explores these questions of queer futurity, using the theory of abjection to focus on the shifting relationship between the body and self that occurs when one redefines what a good body is. Kent aims to push fat theorization away from a medical approach and towards a feminist theory that critically investigates the role of the self and embodied subjectivity.

### *Representation and visibility*

The fat liberation movement and fat activists have been critiqued for their failure to address the intersections of identities, specifically regarding the role race plays in the way fatness is viewed. Among more “mainstream” fat liberationists, white bodies are centered while fat people of color and the work they have done is ignored (Tinsley 2016). Williams (2017) also notes that the mainstream fat acceptance movement is overwhelmingly white, that fat white women do not recognize their white privilege, and that fat white people tend to compare fat oppression to racial oppression, which ends up erasing fat people of color from the narratives. McCalphin and Tango (2019) note that the needs of women of color and their experiences must be fully incorporated into a movement that usually only focused on white women, “because until our needs and experiences are incorporated into the size positivity movements, the oppression of people based on body size remains” (148). McCalphin and Tango note the need for women of color to be leaders of the fat acceptance movement, to create a world that is “accessible for *all* fat people” (139). They push back against the notion that being a woman of color means your fatness is celebrated or accepted and note that, for women of color, fatphobia is always racialized (McCalphin and Tango 2019, 141-4).

The field of fat studies is also critiqued for being too focused on cisgender women (Rinaldi, Rice, Friedman 2019). Rinaldi, Rice, Friedman note that the field of fat studies has failed at having an intersectional analysis of fatness, noting that the “normative subject of the field, still tends to be a young(ish), white, cisgender woman, and typically one who is from the Global North” (2). They also note that this failure extends to fat activist spaces as well. White (2019), meanwhile, specifically notes the lack of attention to transgender fat people in the literature, arguing that there needs to be more attention to this intersection and to “... address the question of how fatness and gender work together in the production of bodies that are then legible as male, female, or both/neither” (110). Additionally, White notes that fat acceptance groups tend to focus more on women or femme-presenting people, so agender and trans masculine people feel left out of these spaces (White 2019, 112).

While the field of fat studies and fat activist spaces still need to be more inclusive, they do succeed in some ways at creating more representation and visibility. The advent of social media and the social internet has helped tremendously in this regard, creating a space for counterdiscourses about fatness to arise. Dominant discourses “produce fat and queer bodies (and fat queer bodies) as ‘unfit’ both physically and morally” (Wykes 2014, 4). Counterdiscourses act as a way to reclaim fatness. LeBesco (2001) argues for the use of rhetoric to control the discourse around fat people - allowing fat people to be part of the discussion of how they are inscribed with meaning (81). This, she argues, is a way to claim the fat body as significant and bring it into the cultural lexicon. Counterdiscourses can generally be split into two broad categories – assimilationist approaches and liberationist approaches. An assimilationist approach to fatness may seek to subvert normative categories but instead end up reifying them by “asking to be seen within frameworks of beauty and desirability” (Murray

2005, 161). Most fat liberationists and activists would consider body positivity to be more of an assimilationist approach. Williams (2017) argues that fat people of color tend to fall more in line with liberationist approaches to fatness (14). Liberationist counterdiscourses refuse normative categorization and instead focus on creating structural change (Murray 2005).

Within fat studies there is a concentration on the fat-o-sphere as a site of discourse production and identity management. The fat-o-sphere produces a number of counterdiscourses which combat normative social discourses about fat people. Connell (2012) discusses how queerness and fatness intersect with fashion blogging, as a form of social counterdiscourse that diverges from traditional fashion discourse. Connell argues that these users are creating a counterdiscourse around what fashion is for fat bodies, flaunting fashion rules for fat bodies and creating their own space for celebrating their bodies. Williams (2017) describes how the Tumblr “Fat People of Color” uses an intersectional approach to fat acceptance and body positivity, creating an inclusive discourse that seeks to represent the full breadth of experiences of fatness – this asserts self-definition and is a space for fat people of color to construct their own narratives. Through analyzing this Tumblr, Williams finds that women of color engage with fat activist frameworks in a different way than white women, which she suggests means that “women of color may view their bodies differently and abide by a different set of normative beauty ideas than do white women” (Williams 2017, 2). Similarly, Gentles-Peart (2020) analyzes how Black Caribbean women view their bodies and combat racist colonialist ideals, utilizing what she calls “*emancipatory thick body politics*”, discourses that challenge and resist the dehumanization of thick Black female bodies and highlight the ways in which they differ from some contemporary celebrations of Black women’s bodies” (308). These discourses thus become a way for thick Black Caribbean women to shape their understandings and discussions of their bodies.

Fatness is constructed within the United States as an epidemic, as morally wrong, as a sign of failure. It has been constructed and named as something to be feared and avoided – yet fat studies and fat activism actively challenges these notions and seeks to create counterdiscourses of fatness. Still, our normative constructions of what a proper body looks like – namely, thin, white, cisgender, and straight – means that non-normative bodies have stigma attached to them and that they are considered undesirable. Fat studies scholars argue that fatness queers the body, by actively rejecting normative categories of subjectivity. Fat studies scholars also argue that the fat body is gendered by its fatness, in part informed by societal gender norms. This thesis explores how fat queer people are impacted by societal perceptions and norms of their bodies. How do fat queer people then view their gender expression as they are impacted by social discourses around fatness, queerness, and gender? This project utilizes existing social movements of fat activism as a guide, along with my own placement in those communities, to explore how fat queer people think about their gender in the context of both their fatness and their queerness. I focus on fat queer people in the United States, because of my own placement in the U.S., as someone who grew up fat and queer and is thus familiar with how the United States treats both fatness and queerness.

### **Methods and Methodology**

This project focuses on personal narrative essays written by fat people living within the United States, who identify as both fat and queer, published between 2012 and 2021. Through an analysis of 15 pieces of media – 13 personal narratives, one roundtable discussion, and a thread on the Fatshionista LiveJournal, I hope to better understand how fat queer people make meaning out of their gendered experiences. The sample size of this research is small - it is not meant to be

a comprehensive or generalizable study. Rather, this is meant to be the beginning of an academic exploration of queer fat people's experiences with gender.

Each narrative was found online – 14 came from digital publications and the last was published on the blogging site LiveJournal. These narratives were found via different online search methods. When appropriate, I utilized the search feature on specific online magazines, such as Autostraddle and Wear Your Voice Magazine, that I knew contained writings from queer people. I used a virtual form of the “snowball” technique, sourcing personal essays, blogs, social media, or zines referenced in other essays, blogs, social media, academic papers, or zines that I was reading. When using a search engine, such as Google or the feature on the aforementioned websites, I used different combinations of the terms “fat” and “queer” – if I was specifically looking on a queer website, I only searched “fat”. If I was specifically looking on a fat website, I only used the term “queer”, “LGBTQ”, “lesbian”, “gay”, “bisexual”, and the like. At times, I added the term “gender” to these searches, or would search for specific queer gender terms, like “femme” or “masc”. This research was conducted during the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, but the pieces were not all written during that time. A few of the authors whose pieces I am using published these pieces under different names than they currently use. In these instances, I am using the name these authors go by in the present day in all my references for them. Additionally, some of these authors might have a different relationship to their gender, sexuality, or fatness now than they did when these pieces were written. These identities and our relationships to them are not static, but fluid. I can only know what they have chosen to share with the wider world via their personal essays and make no claims to be speaking for them.

My research aims to begin to answer the question: how do fat queer people think about their gender expression as it relates to their fatness and queerness? In order to be included, a

narrative needed to fit the following: they needed to be written by someone who identified as both queer and fat, they needed to discuss their personal feelings about their gender, and they needed to be publicly accessible online. I included pieces from people who self-identify as fat (or any of its many euphemisms) and who also self-identify as having a queer gender identity or sexual orientation. Self-identification is my preferred method because it removes the question of determining who is “fat enough”, as other fat studies scholars also do (Taylor 2018). While each individual disclosed their fatness and their queerness, only some people mentioned their gender identity or race. However, of those who did, 8 stated they were women (either cis, trans, or not specified), one explicitly identified as cisgender, 6 explicitly identified as having a non-binary gender identity, 3 explicitly identified as transgender, 6 stated that they were Black, one identified as a person of color, 2 identified as Latina, and only one stated that they were white. Discussions of class, disability, employment, and education were mostly absent from the pieces.

I used multi-level approach when analyzing these narratives. First, I identified relevant themes within these texts, through a manual close reading. I let themes emerge that were salient for each author, keeping track of themes per text and for the set of texts as a whole. My second level of analysis relied on discourse analysis, connecting some themes that emerged to common discourses and counterdiscourses about fat and queer people. Following fat studies researcher Allison Taylor (2018) and queer studies scholar Joshua M. Ferguson (2013), I focused on what themes said rather than how common they were, in order to avoid silencing less common perspectives. As such, themes did not need to appear in the majority of the narratives in order to be considered important. Rather, all themes that said something about the intersections of fatness, gender expression, and queerness were considered relevant. I utilized a Foucauldian discourse analysis in order to explore the discourses that appear within our larger U.S. society, as

well as the counterdiscourses that appear in fat activist spaces, and how these discourses impact fat queer individuals. Utilizing a discourse analysis is a way of uncovering how constructed ideas become naturalized and thus questioning them as sources of knowledge (Diaz-Bone et al.).

Personal narratives provide a firsthand account of how the person writing it views their identity. Additionally, the internet is a space of knowledge production – within this sphere, people become active agents in creating counterdiscourses that challenge dominant narratives. In this instance, personal narratives provide us with firsthand accounts of how fat queer people consider their gender expression as it relates to their queerness and fatness, and how that is impacted or challenged by dominant or counter discourses around fatness and queerness. I analyzed these personal narrative essays looking for themes and counterdiscourses around fat queer identity as it relates to gender.

While conducting this research, I was attentive to certain methodological challenges and ethical concerns, which I approached from a feminist lens. The internet is a semi-public space – everything we put out there can be found or seen by someone else, but the audience can be limited, and it feels at times like a private area. Throughout this research, I kept in mind the ethical and privacy boundaries of this research. I chose primarily to use articles published for public consumption, with the exception of the post on LiveJournal. In that instance, I only reference the name of the LiveJournal and do not include the usernames of people posting on the forum, in order to maintain some anonymity. Throughout this work, I have gathered and analyzed discussions of gender expression from fat queer people, drawing out key concepts and themes regarding gender performance and identity formation. While doing this work, I have kept in mind my own biases and positionality as a white queer cisgender woman who, while fat, would be considered mid-fat and thus does not experience discrimination in the same ways that

some of my infini-fat and fat people of color community members do. I have tried to keep in mind what Borland (1991) brings up in her piece “‘That’s Not What I Said:’ Interpretive conflict in oral narrative research,” namely that researchers must be aware of how we are framing and interpreting narratives and must acknowledge that the subject’s own interpretation of events might be different from ours. Borland also asks the researcher to consider and question the relationship between researcher and subject especially in terms of knowledge production and analysis. As a fat queer person, I have considered myself to be part of my research as a subject, as well as a researcher. My own experiences influence my research interests and perspectives, as well as inform the way I view gender as a fat queer person.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

Three overarching themes appeared in the personal narratives that I examined: *Gendering the Physical Fat Body*, *Community Ties*, and *Rejecting Assimilation*. Within these personal narratives, fat queer people grapple with how their bodies are impacted by dominant cultural discourses related to their fatness, gender, sexuality, and race. These discourses are normalized and can produce stigma, stereotypes, or feelings of shame related to their bodies. Examining these personal narratives showed the reciprocal and mutually constitutive relationship between how one claims one’s own identity and the way in which one is received by others. Part of how we claim and construct our identities is based in how we believe we are being seen or read by others. At times, this is related to real feedback we received from people in our lives. However, this can also be based solely on cultural beliefs that permeate our society and are thus internalized, rather than actual responses from those around us. We see this mutually constitutive movement as people are claiming and reclaiming their own identity within a broader framework of seeing themselves through the perception of others. This relationship can be both affirming

and distressing – if you are correctly reading my identity, then I feel affirmed in my identity. If you incorrectly read me, then I may feel distressed in my identity. My identity is partially constituted through how you see, or read, me. This is seen both in the existing literature and in the narratives within this research (White 2019; Murray 2005).

While these texts are personal narratives about the lived experiences of those writing them, some do rely on counterdiscourses and dominant discourses around fatness and queerness. Through these narratives, we can see how dominant cultural discourses about fatness impact how fat queer people think about themselves. We can also see which counterdiscourses they use to combat dominant discourses that cause them anxiety. The fat queer body thus becomes a site of analysis, knowledge production, and resistance. Through these narratives we can also see that fat liberation is a form of imagining queer futures. It becomes a way of producing generative queer potentialities that see fatness not as something to be avoided but celebrated. Within some of these narratives, fat queer people reimagine their bodies in the context of coming into a new consciousness or rejecting normative constructs – through this, they create new queer futures for themselves and their bodies. This then also becomes a form of feminist storying – it is a way of re-writing what has been taught to you about your body, a reshaping of history based on new knowledge.

### *Gendering Fatness*

Previous literature has established that the fat body is gendered (White 2019; Bergman 2009; Braziel and LeBesco 2001; Hartley 2001). Where fatness appears on the body creates certain readings of gender, partially based on individual perceptions of fat bodies – meaning, the same body can be read as both masculine or feminine depending on who is reading gender onto the body. Within these narratives, fat queer people discussed this experience quite often, noting

the different ways in which their fat bodies were gendered. Fatness marks itself specifically upon the body and has gendered connotations within the larger cultural discourse, thus becoming a specific site of analysis. Queerness is also concerned with gender as an experience - for some queer people, their gender expression can play a large role in their personal comfort and identity. If gender is thus marked both by fatness and by queerness, it stands to reason that the way queer fat people relate to gender must be different than how straight and/or thin people experience gender. Thus, this theme explores the intersection of fatness and gender and how they implicate each other. We see these identities interact primarily via feelings of legitimacy or illegitimacy, the notion that fatness is inherently gendered, and pressures to conform to a certain gender expression. Within these narratives, we also see clothing used as a cultural signifier and, at times, used to perform gender in a variety of ways.

One theme that arose for some fat queer people relates to how others perceive their gender identity or sexuality based on their gender expression and its interaction with their fatness. Particularly for trans and nonbinary fat people, they discussed the fear of legitimacy. They discussed being afraid that they would not be seen as their gender or as trans “enough” because of how fatness affects their body. We have cultural constructions of which bodies are easier to read as nonbinary, ideas which are based around white, thin bodies that can achieve a culturally predetermined notion of androgyny (White 2019). Similarly, hyperfemininity is often expected of trans women, especially fat trans women. In one instance, a trans reader (they/them) of the website Autostraddle wrote into a fashion advice column asking for help. They note that, as a fat trans person, they have trouble finding clothing that fits their queer identity because fat clothing is generally pretty feminine. They say “I want to look cute and feel in my gender” indicating that clothing plays a significant role in their internal notion of their gender and their

comfort. They also state that they feel anxiety about what they wear, “hoping that it will be read as 'trans enough' even on days that I feel femme” (Mika 2018). With this we can see two things - that their anxiety is connected to how their gender is being read as fat and trans person, and that they feel there is a connection between the type of gender expression (in this case femme) and being seen as legitimately trans. Another white nonbinary fat queer person (they/them) notes that their body seems to “go against everything I used to believe about androgyny” – they never feel “trans enough or cis enough for people, cis or trans” because of how their fat lays on their body (Thompson 2019). For Thompson, fatness creates the appearance of curves on their body, a signifier in our culture that can be read as feminine according to dominant gender discourses. This acts in conjunction with their experience of seeing only thin, masc or stereotypically androgynous people identifying as nonbinary – in short, people who do not look like them. In this instance, both internal perception of their gender and fatness, along with a fear of how others will gender their fat body impacts their comfort with their gender identity and presentation. They note that they feel a need to present in a more masculine way, especially because they are fat, and wonder if that impulse is because of their own gender identity desires or because of public pressure to be masculine if you are nonbinary.

Shackleford (2016) (they/she) also experiences this anxiety around legitimacy, noting that whenever they name themselves as nonbinary, there is always discomfort because of a “strange voice in the back of [her] head screaming, “no one believes you!” because [she’s] often in between not-trans-enough and too-cis-passing-to-incite-discomfort-in-cisgender-people.” (Shackleford 2016). They specifically relate this to their fat femme-ness, noting that femininity is seen as something that can only exist in relationship to masculinity, as something that is for the benefit of others and is always related to being cisgender and heterosexual. This idea that

femininity is always paired with masculinity and inherently heteronormative is a discourse that causes much discomfort for fat queer people who have a femme gender expression and relates to the larger phenomenon of femme invisibility. They note that being misread as straight or as a cisgender woman means they are being erased and “requires [her] to authenticate [herself] to everyone by over-explaining [her] gender” and because they are femme, “this particular erasure requires [them] to prove [their] trans-ness while also never producing enough evidence of [their] trans-ness to do so” (Shackleford 2016). In this instance, fatness helps to create the appearance of a femme gender presentation, but which is then read as female, instead of trans or nonbinary. Thus, fatness in conjunction with dominant cultural discourses around gender both affirms and creates anxiety around gender presentation.

Brighe (2015) (she/her) struggles with feelings of legitimacy in a different way. As a trans woman who was worried about the way fatness might masculinize her body, she notes that she “wore Spanx and obnoxiously padded bras pretty much constantly to shove [her] body into some semblance of an acceptable shape” (Brighe 2015). Here, she is drawing on a dominant discourse about women’s bodies that tells us that there is a proper way for women to look – that is, curvy. Her desire here also stems from a fear of experiencing transphobia, worrying that her “bare broad shoulders would be an instant tell that [she] was a trans woman and would cause a scene” (Brighe 2015). She is molding her body, wanting to create a visual appearance that is legible as female to anyone who views her – and this desire is also motivated by fears of not “passing” and not being read properly as a trans woman.

Some nonbinary fat queer people note that they feel a pressure to present in a more feminine manner because of their fatness and experience a similar form of misgendering. Vankoot (2017) (she/her) notes that for fat women, “when we don’t put forth the effort to

conform to that femme standard, we are much more likely to be desexualized and called lazy, or manly, or otherwise trotted out as examples of why fatness is terrible and disgusting” (Vankoot 2017). She describes performing femme-ness as something that is difficult, that demands labor, as something she only wants to do when it is profitable to her, and that she feels pressured to do it. Vankoot’s experience with femininity is complicated by societal expectations and her own internal sense of her gender identity. She identifies as nonbinary and for her, being “femme” is a costume, useful “when it’s expected of [her], or a tool [she] might use to feel safe” (Vankoot 2017). Here, femme becomes something that needs to be performed, instead of something that she wants to perform. She connects this intimately to her fatness, noting that

“the body I have means I’m read and treated as a woman or femme all the time, in whatever I wear, which means I get to experience misogyny and misgendering all at once. Boobs, belly, and butt. They give me away, expose me, and they are too large these days to hide in skater jeans and hoodies, even if I wanted to stop being so unapologetically, unabashedly fat” (Vankoot 2017)

The way fatness lays on Vankoot’s body results in her queer gender identity being constantly misread, causing discomfort and distress. For Vankoot, femme-ness is not something she feels comfortable with or desires but is nonetheless always read upon her body because of the way we treat the appearance of curves as inherently feminine and therefore belonging to a woman.

Schneider (2018) (she/her) also notes feeling pressured to be feminine because of her fatness. She views masculinity as inaccessible to her because of her fat body. She notes that she wanted to dress in “a masculine way and feel confident about it ... yet men’s dress shirts never button past [her] stomach and [her] hips wouldn’t fit into anything that wasn’t made for ‘curvy women’” (Schneider 2018). Fat that lies on the body in the chest and hips often creates a visual appearance of curves, which is then associated with femininity and thus womanhood through normative ideals of beauty and bodies. In this way, Schneider is indicating that the way clothing is gendered causes experiences of gender envy and dysphoria for her. This also relates to a

common problem fat people have, which is a lack of access to clothing variety – she is not the first to critique the fashion industry for providing only feminine clothing, which is meant to accentuate curves, for fat women. This constriction of clothing choices implies that fat women must be feminine, thus excluding fat people who do not identify with femininity.

Fat, trans, and Latina woman, Rude (2013) (she/her), feels the impacts of both gender dysphoria and fatphobia on her body, noting that she feels “crippling dysphoria that comes from having a body that I often don’t even recognize as my own” and also deals with “the cultural misogyny that tells me that a woman can’t be as big and fat as I am and still be desirable” (Rude 2013). This illustrates the ways in which proper femininity is tied to body size, both of which are also tied to desirability, and then further impacted by the experience of being a trans woman in a transphobic culture. The specific intersection of transphobia and fatphobia here creates a particular anxiety around not being seen as a “proper” woman. Our culture’s strict notions of proper womanhood are seen via fatphobia and transphobia – here, it is not just Rude’s personal feelings about her gender and fatness that are at play, but also how she is impacted by our culture. Brighe (2015) also notes an interaction between gender dysphoria and fatness. She notes that trans people are rarely celebrated and when they are, “it universally seems to be those who fit within standard cisnormative beauty standards, which include the preference for thinness” meaning fat trans women, like her and Rude, are unable to see themselves represented in our cultural recognition of trans people (Brighe 2015). She is also illuminating here a dominant discourse in our society which associates beauty with thinness. Brighe, like Rude, notes that experiencing gender dysphoria deeply affected how she saw her body and her feelings towards herself – she notes that it is only upon beginning the process of transitioning that “some of that self-hate finally started to fade” because what she expects to see begins to line up with what she

does see (Brighe 2015). Here, her relationship to her fat body is inextricably linked to her experience of being transgender, and the feelings about one affect her feelings about the other.

Schneider (2018), who is cisgender, also connects discomfort with her gender expression to discomfort with her fatness stating “I was often so ashamed of my breasts and belly; of my thighs coated in stretch marks that make me look like I’ve been clawed by tigers. I didn’t know how to present as a masculine queer woman when everything about my body was not just deemed feminine, but unacceptably fat” (Schneider 2018). In a related vein, Aprileo (2018) (they/them) asserts that “when you live in a fatphobic world that forces you to distance yourself from your body all of your life, you may not be super in touch with or think about gender” (Aprileo 2018). Fatphobia alienated them from their body – because they were unable to connect with their body, they did not think about or relate to their feelings of gender dysphoria.

It is only after Aprileo (2018) finds body positivity and begins to heal the trauma caused by fatphobia that they are able to finally begin to address their gender dysphoria. They note, “my experience with my fat body and learning how to navigate the world with it led me to discover my gender” (Aprileo 2018). Shifting how they viewed their fatness opened up the space for them to then explore their feelings about their gender. Similarly, Brighe (2015) notes that “... somewhere along the road of transition, I had stopped hating my body. It had finally become *my* body in a way that it really hadn't ever felt before, and I loved every bit of its imperfect, fat-in-a-not-socially-acceptable way skin” (Brighe 2015). Through being able to reclaim her body and having autonomy over it, Brighe’s relationship to her body shifts. Fatness and queer gender are intertwined – by coming into a fat consciousness, these fat queer people begin to feel more comfortable in their bodies and thus come into their queer gender identities.

Counterdiscourses of fatness discussed in the body positivity movement, such as “love your body”, promote body acceptance which can then be translated into other areas of discomfort caused by societal oppression. Fat people are taught to distance ourselves from our bodies, told that we should feel uncomfortable in our bodies, which then impacts when and how we think about gender and queerness. If you spend so much time focusing on shrinking or changing yourself, you are not thinking about other things that cause joy or discomfort. Still for others, being able to identify with a specific queer gender identity helps them feel more comfortable with their body. Jerome (they/them) notes that identifying as butch helped “with coming to terms with being nonbinary and strangely enough (but not really) my blackness but also how my body is supposed to look” (Vanessa 2018). Here, the ability to find a gender expression that fits with how their body looks creates a sense of acceptance with their fat, Black, nonbinary body.

On a different note, Fatshion, a portmanteau of “fat” and “fashion”, stands out as a mode of expression for several writers, and helps elucidate the ways in which clothing can be utilized by fat queer people to create comfortable gender expressions, and also the ways in which clothing can cause gender discomfort because of the lack of variety in plus-sizes. The internet is filled with digital communities that utilize fashion as a type of self-expression – the fat-o-sphere is no different. Fatshion blogs have been popular since the early 2000s. Take, for example, the LiveJournal community entitled “Fatshionista”. Here, users could post questions, share outfits, ask for advice, give recommendations, and create a community for fat people who love fashion. This community was explicitly inclusive of all identities, which resulted in quite a few posts from fat queer people who discussed how fatshion impacted their lives. One poster asked for aid finding appropriate wedding clothing for their partner, a butch queer fat person, who struggled to find something that felt appropriate to them. Finding something that affirms the seeker's queer

gender identity while fitting their fat body is a struggle, especially as they are not femme. For fat queer people, there is much attention to more feminine styles, and indeed a queer femme gender presentation seems to be more acceptable. This leads queer butch fat people with a dearth of clothing options that affirm their queerness, gender, or sense of style. Clothing, in general, can be a site of anxiety and contestation within the fat community. The ability to find clothing that fits, is affordable, and feels good has often been an issue for fat people – historically, some fat people create their own clothes as a way to get around this. Additionally, the larger the size needed is, the harder it is to find clothing that fits, looks good, and is affordable. There is a debate around this issue - by focusing so much on clothing and advocating for plus-size clothing, fat people become part of a system that seeks to normalize something through making it consumable, in a similar way that white gay capital becomes produced as white gay people are seen as consumers (Alexander 2006). As fashion brands recognize the market for plus-size clothing, fat people become consumers and some smaller fats become somewhat normalized. Advocating for more clothing options for fat people, especially large fats and infini-fats, is in some ways, an issue of basic human needs - we all need clothing, and it needs to be affordable to the masses. However, as fat people become consumers, campaigns for better and more accessible fashion can become a tool of capitalism instead of a political act. This push for more accessible fatshion is sometimes presented as the nexus of fat activism, which is it not - making fat people into consumers who can fit into the capitalist structure does not change structural oppression.

On a different note, the clothing that one wears can impact how their gender and sexuality is read, thus affecting how they are treated. In an exploration of wearing leggings in public for the first time, Rivera (2103) (she/her) notes just how strongly clothing, and by extension gender presentation, can affect how her queerness is read, when in conjunction with

her fatness. By wearing leggings and thus creating a curvier bodily presentation, Rivera is creating a more femme gender presentation. This fat body femininity prevents her from being read as queer, indicating that we read femininity as inherently straight, and begging the question – is there a femme gender presentation that is always read as queer? Generally, Rivera dresses more masculine, noting that “most days when I step out of my house I make sure that the contours of my silhouette are grid-like, smooth, confined to lines like the streets of my city” (Rivera 2013). She uses her clothing to create a specific silhouette – straight lines as opposed to curves, molding her fat body to create a more stereotypically butch presentation, which signifies her queerness to those around her. Rivera notes that she is not particularly attached to any one gender identity but rather “for me and only me, they signify protection and deflection. In these clothes I am able to control who sees what of me and when” (Rivera 2013). Here, clothing becomes a way to create a gender expression, but it also helps mold gender identity in conjunction with her fatness. In particular, clothing can affect how others perceive your gender, which can then also affect your own feelings about your body or gender based on if you are being correctly read.

We also see that one’s fashion choices shift as their self-image shift. There is a reoccurring theme within discussions of fatshion – namely that fat queer people attempt to hide or diminish their body before they come into a fat or queer consciousness. One writer (she/her) notes that her style changed drastically once she came out as queer. Prior to that she wore dark clothes in straight cuts, in an attempt to hide her queerness and her fatness via her fashion. Once she came out, her style shifted to bold colors, bright patterns, and more interesting cuts – she states that her clothing became more camp, noting that “clothes are a declaration of the self” (Ashley 2020). Here we see how an internal shift in self-perception affects the way you present

yourself to the world – which then, in turn, affects how the world perceives you. Within these narratives, we see that dominant cultural discourses around fatness and gender impact how fat queer people view their gender identity. Clothing becomes a way to express gender, to mold the body, but can also cause anxiety.

Some of the nonbinary people within this sample found discomfort with how their fatness rests on their body because others then read them as more feminine than they would like, and additionally because they do not see nonbinary representations of people who are also fat. We also know that race affects how your body is read – Luna (they/them) talks about how the lack of body hair on their body is read as something femininizing, noting that if they had more hair, they would be read as a bear and thus more masculine – and that lack of body hair is related to their indigeneity. Others talk about how their Blackness, combined with their femme identities and fatness, makes them more undesirable as citizens under normative constructs which take whiteness as the default – that even if they are happy with their gender and presentation, the way they are treated by others is discriminatory. All of this does rely on the notion that gender can be “read” on the body, and that our cultural constructs of a proper gendered body are affected by race, class, and body size, and that there is a preference for certain racial, class, gender, and sexuality markings. Even while we assert that gender is created by you as an individual, there are still cultural and societal ideas of what gender is and how it presents - because even as we try to break down ideas of the gender binary, people will still be utilizing these categories. Thus, some of the fat queer people in this research set expressed anxiety around how they will be read by the world, fears that their queer sexuality or gender will not be properly read by those around them because of how their fatness and gender expression interact. One thing that can help mitigate some of these anxieties is the creation of community ties.

*Community ties*

The theme of community comes up in two main ways across these narratives. We first see a theme of inclusion and exclusion regarding community in two ways – first, via being read as queer or misread as straight and secondly, via attempting to navigate the multiplicity of identities in community spaces. Community also appears as a place for some fat queer people to learn about either fatness or queerness. Community ties become a way for fat queer people to reshape their feelings and experiences with their fat queer bodies, but they can also be sources of anxiety and feelings of exclusion, based on whether or not they feel they have access to a community. Here, we must also consider who sets the boundaries for a community, which bodies are read as being readily part of the community, and how even queer desire, which purports to reject normative constructs, can still reinforce a preference for whiteness and a misrecognition of femininity.

We see this theme of community access come up in a few different ways. Rivera (2013) notes her access to the queer community feels based, at times, on her gender presentation. In her essay on wearing leggings, she notes that this not only exposes her to the objectification of men, but it also cuts her off from “the soft and beautiful underworld inhabited by everyone else - decent, open, non-aggressive people, often queer, often femme-identified” (Rivera 2013). In short, presenting as slightly more femme cuts her off from this community, a community to which her “butch/hood-esque presentation provides an almost all access pass” (Rivera 2013). In contrast, when she is able to be successfully read as queer, via her butch presentation, which is always racialized and classed, she delights in it and acknowledges the importance of being correctly read as queer, stating: “the speakeasy undertones of my queer existence are so badass, I love the code-switching and the acknowledgment of my existence from others like me” (Rivera

2013). Additionally, for Rivera, this ability to be read as queer is incredibly important. She states that “public speakeasy-like code switching acknowledgment is one very important aspect of feeling connected to community” (Rivera 2013). Yet when wearing leggings, the difference is stark – “not one person from any of my worlds reached out to claim me” (Rivera 2013). Rivera reflects on this, drawing attention to how connected our identities are to others – how they are connected to our communities, who can affirm us and make our identities feel legible and legitimate.

Rivera (2013) here exemplifies both inclusion and exclusion, based on how her fat queer body is being read – as a fat woman dressing in a masculine manner thereby presenting as butch, or as a fat woman dressing in a slightly more feminine manner, thereby presenting as lightly femme and being shoved out of the queer realm and into heterosexuality. This experience is connected to larger discourses around what a normative queer body looks like, where queer people who transgress heteronormative gender roles are more easily read as queer than queer people who appear to be “conforming” to heteronormative gender roles. We see this also in the experience of femme-invisibility – or the phenomenon in queer communities in which queer people, typically cisgender women, intersex people, and transgender and nonbinary people, who have a femme gender presentation and bodily characteristics that could be read as female, are misread as straight. Femme-invisibility is based on the inability to read femininity as anything but straight, a product of a heteronormative and misogynistic society which marks femininity as always needing to relate to masculinity – but it also marks an interesting point of tension with the long history of femme-ness as a gender identity within lesbian subcultures. Rivera too, notices that a feminine gender presentation is often looked down on for queer people, stating “What is it

about femininity that makes people hate on a queer?” and later noting that femme-invisibility can cut queer femmes off from the community (Rivera 2013).

Community access also comes up with regards to navigating multiple identities. Some queer, fat, Black, femme activists note that they are asked to do the bulk of the labor in fat activist and body positivity spaces but are often left out of the community. Thomas (2016) (she/her) experiences this within the mainstream queer, Black, and fat positive communities, noting that they all depend on “the unpaid labor of fat and queer Black women and femmes” (Thomas 2016). Thomas notes that fat and queer Black women and femmes are also the most marginalized and viewed as invisible within the community, particularly when it comes to the labor they do. A queer of color analysis of this connects this phenomenon to the treatment of people of color as surplus labor under capitalism and the subsequent control and otherizing of their gender and sexuality (Ferguson 2013).

Shackelford (2016) notes that femme invisibility is everywhere because femininity is seen as “a byproduct of masculinity”. They note that “femininity is denied queerness, nuance, gender deviance/complexity, sexual agency and visibility, because in the context of white supremacist patriarchy, femininity only exists for consumption” (Shackelford 2016). Thus, the way femininity is received bars Shackelford from full access to the community they want. Shackelford also notes their fatness as a barrier to feeling completely welcomed – they “wanted to be openly queer; to walk into a room and be welcomed with applause” but instead “feared sneers of disgust” because of their fat, Black body (Shackelford 2016). Here, the combination of their fatness, Blackness, and queerness come together to create both a sense of hypervisibility and invisibility, while also leaving them feeling on the outskirts of the queer community. This also speaks to the question of what bodies are desired under a queer gaze which is steeped in

whiteness. Even if it breaks the bounds of heteronormativity, the queer gaze as it is often conceived of centers white queer people as the default. This then marks queer of color as "other" and impacts how fat queer people of color are desired or not desired.

For others, their relationship with their queerness changes their relationship with their fatness, and vice versa. Several writers on the Autostraddle roundtable noted that their experience either with the queer or fat community played a role in their acceptance of the other identity. Thus, feeling part of a larger fat feminist or fat and queer community can bring people into body positivity or fat liberation and thus change how they interact with their own bodies and gender. Jerome notes that community has impacted their relationship with their body. Being part of a literary community that utilizes body positivity discourse and seeing “posts about how to unlearn toxic body shaming, or how to treat your body softer, or fat forgiveness (and realizing there's nothing that needs to be forgiven!)” helped them shift their views of their body (Vanessa 2018). Reneice (she/her), meanwhile, notes that she came to love her queer sexuality through body positivity – the movement helped her to gain “confidence in her joyously fat self and [realize] just how sexy [she was] and had always been” (Vanessa 2018). Vanessa (she/her) asserts that “coming out as queer and learning to love my body are absolutely linked, no doubt about it” (Vanessa 2018). Queerness gave her a “framework” for loving her body – it provided a space where she “finally felt desirable, and [she] liked that others saw [her] as desirable” (Vanessa 2018). For her, the queer community provides a space to be outside of the heteronormative gaze and thus helps to disrupt normative discourses around who is considered beautiful or acceptable. Here, experiencing queer desire and the queer gaze helped these queer fat people to shift their relationships with their bodies, by questioning what desire is and should be.

Community ties can thus impact feelings about fat queer bodies in a multitude of ways. They can prompt feelings of exclusion from the community, when the community does not acknowledge the ways in which fatness, gender, sexuality, and race come together on a body. Fat queer people can also feel left out of communities because of being incorrectly read as straight due to a femme gender presentation. However, community ties can also be a way of re-writing one's experience with their gender and fatness, creating a new relationship to their body via counterdiscourses around fatness and gender which promote body acceptance and celebration. For some, however, counterdiscourses around fatness and gender which simply promote body acceptance are inadequate.

### *Rejecting Assimilation and Embracing Liberation*

Within the larger realm of fat activism, there is often a split between body positivity and fat liberation. Body positivity is often marked by counterdiscourses which promote changing your perception of yourself – it is often focused more on internal feelings about fatness. Fat liberation, on the other hand, is more concerned with changing the cultural stigma around fatness and systemic fatphobia. Many fat activists who are more in line with fat liberation discuss doing away with the concept of beauty all together, viewing it as something that simply reinforces categorization of people based on white Western notions of worth and desirability. Some instead work to reclaim the term “ugly”, divesting from beauty and desirability politics, because they connect that with white, colonialist beauty standards that consistently devalue Black, fat, and queer folks. A queer of color critique is useful here for it calls attention to the ways in which culture “compels identifications with and antagonisms to the normative ideals promoted by the state and capital” (Ferguson 121, 2013) - these antagonisms can be seen in the way that fat queer people of color divest from dominant notions of beauty. Being marginalized as “undesirable”

means you do not receive the same societal benefits that conventionally attractive or accepted people do, and thus experience a sort of precarity. Some fat activists critique body positivity as being too assimilationist – they argue that it reinscribes beauty norms and seeks to expand the categories of beauty instead of destroying them all together. By widening these categories, we still create and categorize the “other”.

Luna (2018) (they/them) specifically chooses to divest from an attachment to gender because of how their gender and sexuality is perceived by others, which thus affects how they are treated. They call this “gender apathy ... where gender becomes an experience much larger than me that I have little to no control over, and have forsaken any attempts” (Luna 2018). They note that each time they go into public, they are opening themselves up to public interpretations of their nonbinary gender, which inevitably end in confusion for the stranger who is unable to properly read their gender. Luna also notes that how someone interprets their gender affects how they interact with them. As an example: when they are read as more femme, they are more likely to receive sexualized comments. They point to their “big, soft belly and what might be called breasts on a different body” along with their lack of body hair as markers that cause their body to “fail” to produce any sort of normative gender (Luna 2018). Additionally, they note that they feel like “fatness arrests my gender. Regardless of how I *feel* and how I *view* my gender, there are material limits to what my body is allowed or – more appropriately – disallowed to access” (Luna 2018). Here, Luna is pointing to our larger culture’s interactions with fatness and gender – because we have very specific ideas of what constitutes proper gender expression, anything that falls outside of those realms is not afforded the same access to these categories and becomes culturally illegible. It does not matter how Luna feels about their gender or their fatness and the

interactions between them – our U.S. society has decided for them. Thus, they have decided to opt out altogether, a liberationist approach that other fat queer folks also ascribe to.

Others also notice this theme of connecting worth to identity categories, some through discussions of desirability politics. They deconstruct or challenge notions that posit ugliness as worse than beauty, in some cases embracing the term and doing away with the cultural standard of beauty. Overall, this theme is most salient for the fat queer people of color within this small sample. Thomas (2016) notes that living at the intersection of fatness, Blackness, and womanhood makes her “undesirable” to most people. Yet she also notes an incongruity here, stating that while fat Black women are considered undesirable in public, “behind closed doors we are desired, fetishized and given all different types of attention” (Thomas 2016). Epps (2014) (she/her) notes that because she is a queer, fat, Black cis woman, she is “not society’s ideal role model for anything feminine.” She also asserts that “many times I’ve had my identity, my femininity, my worth challenged because of the way I look” and “I want fat black women – queer or otherwise – to have the option of being feminine, masculine or whatever the hell they want” (Epps 2014). Here, she is challenging the common discourse which promotes thin, white, women as the goal for beauty, while also challenging the idea that our worth is connected to our looks, and challenging the norms that posit thin, whiteness as the norm for queerness. Carmen also notices this beauty discourse, noting that she does not “want to subscribe to systems of beauty that weren't designed for [her] queer, black body anyway” (Vanessa 2018). She points out that these systems of beauty, and the cultural discourses that follow, were created with white women in mind, not queer Black fat women – thus, disengaging with them allows her to create a better relationship to her body. Through rejecting counterdiscourses they view as assimilationist, which were made without their bodies in mind and rely on the othering of bodies of color and

their gender and sexuality, these fat queer people are instead creating counterdiscourses of their own – liberationist discourses that reject dominant categorization of beauty and desirability, in favor of building new paths of love and liberation.

Through all these personal narratives, we can see how the experience of coming into a fat consciousness is buoyed along by counterdiscourses from body positivity and fat liberation. These counterdiscourses posit the fat queer body as something to be celebrated, as beautiful, or as something that is worthy of rights and dignity simply by virtue of being human. While these counterdiscourses are not always explicitly named, they are implicated in finding comfort with one's fat body, the discussions of community building, in the rejections of assimilation. Using these counterdiscourses in this way acts as a form of feminist storytelling – through their narratives, these fat queer people are reclaiming the narrative of their bodies and rewriting the histories of their bodies. Morales (2019) notes that “recovery from trauma requires creating and telling another story about the experience of violence and the nature of the participants, a story powerful enough to restore a sense of our own humanity to the abused” (15). This can be a form of healing, of reconnecting to the self and recovering from the trauma fat queer people often endure as a result of anti-fatness and anti-queerness. Here we can see an acceptance of a fat politics for some, and a consciousness shift for all, which then allows for greater self-exploration and identification. In a few instances, fat queer people come into a queer consciousness first, which allows them to separate from a cis-heteronormative model of desire into a queer model of desire that they find more liberating, thus opening up the possibility of body acceptance and love. Additionally, within these narratives we also see some fluidity between whether something is seen as oppressive or as reclamatory. Femininity can be seen as both oppressive and as something to be reclaimed, depending on the person writing about it. Discussions of body

positivity can also be seen as both oppressive and as something to be reclaimed. For some, reiterating this discussion of “my body is beautiful” feels liberating, and freeing – a way to reframe how you see your body. For others, the counterdiscourse of “my body is beautiful” simply reinscribes a category of beauty – it does not break down the category itself, only widens it to allow more people access.

## **Conclusion**

From a young age most fat people in the United States learn that our bodies are wrong. We receive an influx of messages about how fatness is morally repugnant. Dominant cultural discourses around fatness present it as something to be feared or hated which create feelings of disgust or fear of fat. It thus becomes illegitimate as a bodily representation, which means we do not see fat bodies represented because they are undesirable, according to modern white, middle-class, heteronormative ideals. This, in turn, means that when people are looking for gender or queer affirming role models in the mainstream all they see are thin white people - which makes them question their gender and how their gender is being represented to the world. Finding queer fat role models, especially fat queer role models of color, requires specifically seeking them out – online, in community spaces, through artwork. The fat liberation movement in the United States worked to begin to change some of these dominant discourses, through the creation of counterdiscourses and an alternative history of fatness. These counterdiscourses are still used today, within fat liberationist and body positive spaces.

Within these narratives, we see discussion of discourses around fatness and gender, and where they intersect on a fat queer body. Many of the fat queer people in this sample noted that their feelings about their gender expression were impacted based on how others perceive their gender, which was affected by how fatness lays on their body. Fat queer people used a variety of

measures to control how people read their gender or queerness, generally via clothing. However, some fat queer people felt like a specific gender presentation was still inaccessible to them.

While within this study, cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary people all experienced feelings of anxiety because of their fatness and gender expression, it was not the same. Transgender and nonbinary people note that they were worried about being seen as “legitimately” their gender, due to the intersection of transphobia and fatphobia that they experience. Additionally, for some fat queer people, accepting either their fatness or their queerness helped them to then accept the other identity.

Within these narratives we also see the theme of community ties. Some fat queer people noted that having access to a community was based on how you were perceived – as queer or straight. Fat queer people of color noted that they often felt excluded from community and taken advantage of at the same time. Still for others, finding a community became a way of rewriting their experiences with their bodies or their sexuality. Through community ties they came to love their fat queer body because of the counterdiscourses that were circulating in their communities. Lastly, many of the queer fat people of color in this sample rejected trying to fit into dominant standards of beauty, bringing up the last theme, rejecting assimilation. For them, dominant cultural discourses around beauty were always going to be inaccessible to them – thus, they use counterdiscourses around fatness, gender, and queerness that reject desirability politics and instead campaign for liberation from white colonialist beauty standards and measures of worth.

Within this study, we see how mainstream discourses of fatness, along with counterdiscourses from the fat liberation and body positivity movements, appear in fat queer people’s discussions of their bodies. Discourses of fatness embraced by the mainstream usually rely on moralizing fatness as bad, as something to be ashamed of – they rely on negative views

of fat people and stereotype us as lazy, greedy, and mean. Counterdiscourse of fatness used by fat liberationists and the body positivity movement oppose these dominant discourses. Instead, they promote discourses that frame fatness as positive, beautiful, or morally neutral. Some focus on creating positive feelings about yourself and your body (all bodies are good bodies) and other focus more on rights discourse (you deserve to be treated with respect no matter your size) – some are based in assimilation; others are more liberationist and focus on dismantling oppressive systems. This thesis explores how fat queer people experience their gender expression as mediated through their experiences of being fat and queer. This experience is heavily influenced by cultural discourses around fatness and gendering fatness, which impact both how fat queer people are seen and how they feel about their gender. We also see that counterdiscourses, which arise from queer and fat communities, can aid in reframing one's experience with their fatness and gender. For some, it is through rejecting cultural discourses around desirability, fatness, and gender that they find a path towards liberation.

The experience of fatness and the experience of queerness are intertwined, but the ways in which they affect each other are not the same for each fat queer person – nor is the way gender affects fatness the same for each fat queer person. While we are all affected by the larger structure of fatphobia, and while we all feel that on a personal and cultural level, these experiences are impacted by our other identities. Additionally, some people will experience their fatness as affirming of their gender, while others will view their fatness as making their gender harder to read – or experiences of how their fatness impacts their gender will shift by the day or as their perception of themselves shifts. This is then complicated by discourses around what a queer body looks like, especially when it is promoted as white, thin, and without curves. Many of the people here talk about queer gender identities – for some, their fatness makes their body

more legible as the gender they want to be read as – for others, their fatness precludes their gender being read correctly because of social norms. Thus, dominant cultural discourses around fatness and gender impact how fat queer people view their gender identity.

This research shows that we cannot easily separate out the experience of being fat from the experiences of our gender, sexuality, and other identities. Intersectional approaches are needed in our discussions of fatness, particularly in our discussions of fat liberation and body positivity. We need more exploration of the very specific ways in which fatness is impacted by race and class, particularly from a transnational feminist lens and with an exploration of how colonization and imperialism impact attitudes towards fatness. Colonization and imperialism often brought fatphobic discourses to indigenous cultures who might not have had negative associations with fatness. Future research could explore the ways in which colonial legacies impact experiences of fatness, gender, and queerness. Additionally, further research that explore how fatness unsettles gender norms, specifically queer gender norms, would help to broaden our understanding of what it means to be queer. Future research should further interrogate queer forms of desire and the impact the queer gaze has on how fat queer people think about themselves and their gender constructions. Both areas of research are, of course, implicated by your race, your class, and your location within the world. This is also an area of research that also has much overlap with disability studies, which could be a path for generative analysis of gender, sexuality, and fatness.

Expanding the ways in which we think about fatness, gender, and sexuality, has implications for creating radical futures for fat queer people. We need to widen, to *fatten*, our ideas of what a queer body looks like – of what a trans or nonbinary body looks like. In our culture, we often read gender and queerness onto the body, using cues to make things legible to

us, but this relies on an idea that we can know someone else's gender identity or queerness based on their gender expression or presentation, which means we have stereotypes of what this looks like in order to make identifying them easier. Yet reading queerness is not easy and nor should it be. We do not need homogenization; we do not need to collapse experiences into one singular thing. We need to revel in the complexity, the messiness – to embrace being unsure of someone's gender or sexuality until they tell you and to accept that we can sit with this discomfort. In order to do so, however, the fat liberation movement and the body positivity movement must center diverse voices and experiences of fat queer people. Too often, our movements focus on white queer fat people who live in the United States – our movements should instead center fat queer people of color, fat queer people with disabilities, and fat queer people who live outside of the United States. Additionally, while parts of the body positivity movement can be useful - for example, confronting internalized body shame can be extremely freeing – it is a movement that, as whole, does not seek to address structural issues nor does it center the voices of fat people. All the self-love in the world will not fix structural oppression or cultural hatred towards fatness. Liberation does not look like one single solution for every person. It is multifaceted and heterogenous. It is not widening the categories of beauty, of personhood, of worth – it is eradicating the binaries all together.

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