

Navigating Intersections Between Fat Identity and Misogyny

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Background

- Research around weight and fatness usually leaves out the lived experiences of people who identify with “fat” as a neutral or even celebrated label and are directly impacted by anti-fat bias
- Anti-fatness is deeply rooted in anti-blackness and ableism
- The average woman in America is considered plus sized, yet there is an expectation that they will feel guilty about their size and actively work to change it
 - Weight is largely out of individual control
- American culture highly values self-discipline, motivation, and aesthetic presentation
 - Fatness is seen as a failure to perform all of these things

Approach

- My goal is to examine where current research about fatness and femininity is standing today and areas which call for more research
- I am interested in approaching this issue through an intersectional lens and with empathy towards all parties involved
- Much of the research around fatness is focused on curing the “obesity epidemic” rather than asking what real people need and how their lives have been negatively impacted by moral panics about obesity
 - This “epidemic” is both misogynistic and highly racialized
- We are lacking in research about fat women which treats them with respect and human dignity

Findings

- Men may “have” fat without “being” fat, while women are not afforded that option
- Sexual assault of fat women is excused or written off as impossible
 - These women also experience a great deal of sexualization and fetishization
- Fat women are expected to perform pride
 - Marginalized people often distill their experiences down in a way that is palatable for those around them and will not be viewed as an attack towards their oppressors
- “Economy of trauma”
 - Many report feeling that they need to draw on their most painful experiences in order to convince others that the anti-fat bias they experience is real
- Many fat activists prefer the terms anti-fatness or anti-fat bias to the term fatphobia
 - “Fatphobia” can medicalize this bias and takes away responsibility from the person holding the bias
 - “Obesity” is another disliked term due to the way it medicalizes fatness and makes the audience think of it as a medical problem which needs solving

Social Implications

- The way we view fat women, even when attempting to help and support them, is often lacking in empathy towards the very people we are talking about
 - Instead, the conversation is often centered around what we should “do” with them as if they are a social problem which needs to be fixed
- Treatment of fatness as a choice allows thin people to view it as a moral failing
 - Conceptualizing fatness as a moral failing is used to justify bigotry and systemic injustices against fat people
- Defeminization of fat women acts as a step towards their dehumanization
- People who don’t experience anti-fat bias view feeling insecure as the worst possible thing they could experience, so they reduce the experiences of fat women down to simply feeling insecure
 - Instead, fat activists are working to dismantle institutional biases against them
 - This, in turn, would benefit people of all body types

Conclusions

- The very core of what it means to be feminine is often centered around beauty and aesthetics as social capital
- Fat feminine bodies are depicted as objects, rather than subjects, which are devoid of femininity and ultimately their humanity
- Fat women who are not actively trying to shrink themselves are viewed as deviant and even threatening to the status quo
- Fat identities intersect meaningfully with other marginalized identities such as race, gender, sexuality, and class
- Because it is viewed as a choice, many people still feel no responsibility to be respectful of fat women

Future Research

The lived experiences of self-identified fat women are under-studied in academia. Moving forward, I am interested in exploring the ways that some religious traditions influence misogyny, anti-fat bias, and the way that people attach morality to fatness. I also hope to further investigate how fat women are depicted in the media and how it may impact their lives.

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It is important to note that the original sin, what is canonically the source of evil and human suffering, is a woman eating. When women eat, this action is often depicted as failure and giving in to temptation.

Weigh Down Workshops are one example of many religious programs which equate weight loss to moral righteousness and closeness to God. Many of these programs are focused on women's ability to restrict and control their food intake.



Even in this advertisement from the early 20th century, you can see that the fat woman is drawn with a mustache, further separating her from her own femininity.