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The Fat Agenda: An Analysis of Fatphobia, Race, Gender, Sexuality and Black Womanhood

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THE FAT AGENDA: AN ANALYSIS OF FATPHOBIA, RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY,
AND BLACK WOMANHOOD

by

KARA ASHLEIGH LAWRENCE

Under the Direction of Tiffany King, PhD

ABSTRACT

As a result of colonialism and hegemonic patriarchy, experiencing life with intersecting oppressions is extremely taxing. The added difficulty of being overweight can contribute additional stress in an appearance driven society. Yourdictionary.com reductively defines fatphobia as “the fear and dislike of obese people and or/ obesity” (yourdictionary.com). The term is not acknowledged in more credible dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster or Oxford. Through personal narrative I will reveal the ways in which fatphobia, along with the interlocking oppressions of racism and sexism, can negatively impact the expression of Black women’s sexuality and humanity.

INDEX WORDS: Fatphobia, Fatness, Black, Woman, Sexuality, Sex, Virginity

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AND BLACK WOMANHOOD

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KARA LAWRENCE

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by

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, this project is dedicated to my mother, the late Valerie Marie Crawford Lawrence, who told me no matter what happened, to make sure I finished this degree. I know I didn't do it the way we intended, but I hope that I have still honored you with my accomplishments. Even though you didn't get a chance to watch me cross this stage, I know that you are always watching over me and guiding me with your light. You taught me so much and I thank you for everything

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TABLE OF CONTENTSACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Research Questions	12
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	12
2.1 Methodology	22
2.2 Method	27
3 THE STORY	29
3.1 Chapter 1: Virginity: A Big Deal to a Big Bitch.....	29
3.2 Chapter 2: A Fat Ass or a Fat Assss? Thick vs. Fat: Size Implications.....	55
3.3 Chapter Three: My First Love: It Wasn't Me, but it Should've Been	77
4 CONCLUSION	96
REFERENCES	97

1 INTRODUCTION

As a result of colonialism and patriarchy, experiencing life with intersecting oppressions such as being black and a woman is extremely taxing. The added difficulty of being overweight, puts you out of the scope of societal notions of attraction and can contribute to additional stress in an appearance driven society. According to yourdictionary.com, Fatphobia “is the fear and dislike of obese people and or/ obesity” (yourdictionary.com). Even the definition is reductive, in comparison to other explanations of discrimination such as homophobia or racism. The definition does not account for the discrimination experienced by fat people, nor is it even defined in more credible dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster or Oxford English Dictionary. Even urbandictionary.com defines it as “A made up condition espoused by certain members of the Fat Acceptance movement (FA), Health at Any Size (HAES), or Transfat Activists that purports to represent systematic and open oppression of heavier people but is really barely disguised body-shaming and sour grapes. This shameless attempt to capitalize on the growing awareness of actual oppression attempts to equate not finding clothing in their size with the denial of basic civil rights; fear for one's own life, and being forbidden to marry” (urbandictionary.com). The reference to fatphobia as a “made-up” oppression signifies the lack of understanding people have towards those situated outside the margins of societal privilege. Comparing it to other oppressions as an attempt to discredit the struggle fat people endure, completely disregards those who are experiencing fatphobia and other forms of oppression at the same time. Also, people who perpetuate fatphobia fail to understand the difficulties of being deemed unattractive in such an appearance driven society. The fact is, a person not being able to find their size in clothing, may seem like a small issue that is easily rectified, but it is in fact evidence of a larger system of oppression. Companies actively choosing not to create and

produce plus-size clothing, while over-zealously manufacturing straight sizes is a negation of humanity. The corporate negation of fat people perpetuates the notion that fat people should not exist or conform to something they were not meant to be. The lack of regard for plus sized bodies negates bodily autonomy and seeks to dehumanize the person in an attempt to make others more comfortable. Feeling negated is damaging to a person's psyche because it leaves people feeling unworthy and unattractive, which is dangerous especially for women. In our society, being desirable can be as valuable as being rich. Attractiveness gives people an advantage that can be used as a form of, or a way to acquire currency. Furthermore, fatphobia, just like other oppressions has material consequences that impact more than just negative reactions to their appearance.

According to Marilyn Wann: "In the workplace, 93 percent of human resources professionals said that they would hire a "normal weight" applicant over a fat applicant with the same qualifications. Fifteen percent would not promote a fat employee" (Wann, xix). Due to phobia, fat people's livelihood is affected despite their qualifications and work ethic. Wann goes on to discuss how fat people are discriminated against by the medical industry, which can impede their health outcomes negatively. Of this, Wann states: "The anti-fat bias of health-care providers leads to improper diagnoses. For example, physicians told a fat man in London for an entire decade that his abdominal pain was due to his "obesity". Finally, he received a scan and surgeons removed a fifty-five-pound malignant tumor" (Wann, xxi). This instance illustrates the way in which the medical industry vilifies fat bodies instead of treating them with respect. These disparities also exist within education. I have spent my entire life in school and I never realized the way in which education can reinforce fatphobic attitudes. In "Sitting Pretty: Fat Bodies, Classroom Desks, and Academic Excess" the authors assert the way in which something as

trivial as classroom desks convey messages about body size and acceptance. The authors assert that: “In the structure of classroom desks we read both an awareness and a neglect of fat student bodies, a simultaneous punishment and ignorance of fat existence in higher education’s crafting of the ideal student body. Both of these potential motivations underlying desk construction actively and simultaneously participate in the erasure of fat student bodies” (Attig and Hetrick, 198). The construction and size of class desks would have fat students to believe that there is something inherently wrong with their body. Improperly sized desks create an unwelcoming atmosphere for students who do not fit the bodily ideal, despite the fact that school is supposed to be a place where your mind is most prioritized. Instead, students are exposed to a classroom unfit for their body, which hinders their learning process. It also creates an environment that does not respect the fat body, further marginalizing it, putting fat students at risk.

It is my argument that fatphobia, along with the interlocking oppressions of racism and sexism can negatively impact the expression of Black women’s sexuality. I will be examining this phenomena through my own personal experiences with sex and sexuality through a Black fat feminist memoir project.

My Fat Life

I have literally been fat since I was a child. I barely remember the life I lived before I was fat, besides the fact that I was a lot more outgoing, and my body was a lot less discussed. When I was slimmer, I was just a kid unconcerned about my appearance and enjoying a carefree existence. After becoming fat, I was faced with the burden of falling outside of conventional beauty standards. I began to internalize the anti-fat attitudes of those in my social circle such as my family and schoolmates who would make commentary on my weight. These fatphobic attitudes had an impact on my development and self-esteem, truly tainting my childhood. I

started gaining weight right after my seventh birthday and was on an upward spiral until my senior year of high school. Every pivotal developmental stage I ever went through, I went through as a fat child, which distorted the majority of my memories. The funny thing is, I didn't even know I was fat until the fifth grade. I remember the exact time it happened. A girl I had been best friends with in 2nd grade (back when I was still marginally "skinny") was transferred into my class. Imagine my surprise when she began to bully me about my weight, calling me names such as "elephant" and even got her friends to join in. I was so confused because before her nobody really ever said anything. At first it didn't bother me because I didn't believe her, it wasn't until it went on for a while that I really began to notice that I was different. From then on, "my fat" ruled my life. Every decision I made, every interaction I had, every conscious thing I did, surrounded my weight. That's what happens when you become self-conscious. I barely ever had time to think about the other things that were going wrong (via puberty) because I was too worried about people thinking about how fat I was. I missed out on so many opportunities. Clubs I should have joined, clothes I should have worn, gatherings I should have been at, all because I was fat. I stopped doing things I loved because I was too embarrassed of my body. I used to spend every day at the pool when I was younger, then as I got older, I was too ashamed to be seen in a swimsuit and went years without even owning one. Thinking back on this period of my life, I realized that throughout my adolescence I was constantly giving an unconscious "apology" for my body that was unwarranted and unnecessary.

This realization occurred to me recently while reading Sonya Renee Taylor's book, *The Body is Not an Apology*, in which she states: "Living in a female body, a Black body, an aging body, a fat body, a body with mental illness is to awaken daily to a planet that expects a certain set of apologies to already live on our tongues. There is a level of "not enough" or "too much"

sewn not these strands of difference” (Taylor, 11). I was never living my life the way I wanted to because of the way I felt people were perceiving my body. I could feel how different I was. It was evident in everything that I did. Hanging with friends, wearing clothes, going to P.E., going to amusement parks, shopping, and even just walking around. After I became aware of my fatness, activities were no longer a carefree thing for me anymore because I was always living in this “apology” trying to straddle that line of “not enough” and “too much” that Taylor discussed. Sometimes I still do.

After I started getting teased about my weight in fifth grade, it didn’t really stop until later in high school, at least that’s when people stopped saying stuff to my face. It’s interesting though because even though I was teased a lot, I always made it look like being fat didn’t bother me. I remember during my senior year of high school, one of my “friends” told me that I was the most active “big girl” he ever knew. As if he was proud of me for being fat and still having the courage to live my life. What was I supposed to do, hide? Although, I truly feel like I did a lot of that in primary school, I can understand how people would think otherwise. In hindsight, this interaction was a direct reflection of the way fatness is dehumanized and othered. Because I am fat, I am not supposed to engage in or enjoy certain things and even as a child, I was supposed to steer clear of any real fun because fat people do not “deserve” to have fun. Of living in a world where you are granted limited humanity, Gay states:

“My body is wildly undisciplined, and yet I deny myself nearly everything I desire. I deny myself the right to space when I am in public, trying to fold in on myself to make my body invisible even though it is, in fact, grandly visible. I deny myself the right to a shared armrest because how dare I impose? I deny myself entry into certain spaces I have deemed inappropriate for a body like mine—most spaces inhabited by other people,

public transportation anywhere I could be seen or where I might be in the way really. I deny myself bright colors in my daily clothing choices sticking to a uniform of denim and dark shirts even though I have a far more diverse wardrobe. I deny myself certain trappings of femininity as if I do not have the right to such expression when my body does not follow society's dictates for what a woman's body should look like. I deny myself gentler kinds of affection—to touch or be kindly touched—as if that is a pleasure a body like mine does not deserve” (Gay, 146).

It is truly sad because when I think of the benefits people “deserve” out of life, it is astounding the way in which weight can be such a defining factor in how we live our lives. This is a true example of thin privilege and how straight sized people experience spatial privilege. Being restricted due to gender, race, and body type, veritably excludes Black fat women from participating in the full human experience.

I can say, looking back at my youth, I did a great job of making it look like being fat never bothered me. I was active in school, mainly as the class clown, so I was very likeable and I had a solid group of girlfriends. I used humor as a means of deflection because I figured if I wasn't physically attractive, I could at least have a dazzling personality. I have since learned that this is a common coping mechanism for fat children. Gabourey Sidibe's memoir *This is Just My Face* echoes this sentiment stating “Junior high is where I learned that if I couldn't stop the jokes about my weight, I could make them first... [This] way, at least I didn't cry, and my fellow junior high psychopaths laughed and wanted to be around me. Sure, they were partly laughing at me, but the joke was on my terms so they were also laughing with me. I think” (Sidibe, 123). I was naturally a goofy person, but I really think it became amplified as a way to protect myself. Despite this fact, I still shied away from anything that brought too much attention to me. I only

did non-athletic group extracurricular activities such as women's choir, DECA, and student council. I also chose these activities because they were female dominated and due to my appearance issues, I was very uncomfortable around boys. This is not to say that I was completely comfortable around girls, however, I valued male approval more. I attributed my worth to how much attention I got from boys because that is what I was conditioned to believe was important.

Although the teasing about my weight stopped in high school, that mindset lived on throughout college, all the way up until my junior year. Freshman year, I didn't participate in anything, barely went to parties or events, nor did I join any organizations. I was always overthinking about my weight, never wanting to really go anywhere because I feared people would judge me. Plus, my grades were subpar, so I had nothing to show for my lack of participation. Even though high school sucked for me, college was where I began to thrive. I ended up going to my dream school: Spelman College. I am so thankful I did because for some reason, I learned to love myself at Spelman. In the midst of so many beautiful Black women, I was able to find beauty in myself. What made this experience different from high school was the fact that I was being constantly affirmed simply for being who I am. We had classes, program, and assemblies just to reinforce our worth and brilliance as Black women. I learned so much finally I just decided I wanted to be free. I had wrestled with my body my entire life, not because I had a problem with it but because everyone else did. I knew there was nothing stopping me from losing weight, I had done it before. However, it was never something I was quite committed to. Fat really wasn't my issue. I enjoyed the softness of my body but the way the world responded to me, made me feel like my body needed to be changed.

Although the idea that fat people are just lazy and greedy because they don't choose to be skinny is the dominant narrative pushed by society about fat people, this is not the case. The fact is, many people are afflicted with medical issues that make them incapable of exercising or controlling their weight gain. For me, it was not a physical issue, but a mental one. I always felt so out of control with my own body. I never had the will power to really change it. I did diets and such, with some success along the way but I could never stick to anything. One day I came to the conclusion that I really don't mind being fat and there was no physical barrier preventing me from losing weight. I was completely capable of changing my body. But I didn't really want to. I actually liked my body I just didn't like the way society felt about my body but I also didn't care enough to change it. I am not sure if this was so much a conscious decision as it was a passive submission. Either way, as I got older, I really began to take more pride in my appearance which coincidentally happened at a time when plus-size women were gaining more representation. I found a lot of Youtube videos catering to plus-size fashion, I started reading more fiction with plus-size heroines (a real struggle, but worth it. I started following a lot of plus-size social media accounts, almost to the point of those accounts being the only people on my timeline, which really reinforced how important it was for me to see people who looked like me but were dynamic and fashionable.

While at Spelman, I took classes that forced me to become more aware of social constructs and it really shifted my mindset about who I thought I had to be. My social consciousness became further raised in grad school. For the first time in my life, people were actually talking about fat people in an academic space, in a non-pathologizing way. The knowledge I gained furthered my growth and self-image. And finally I started trying to create my personal style. Somewhere during that revelation I decided if I'm going to continue to live in this

body, I might as well live in this damn body. As a result, I started doing things outside of my comfort zone. I began wearing more of what I wanted and it was difficult at first. Like I said, I have been fat my entire life but for the majority of the time, I rarely wore shorts, or any other revealing clothing, which is a feat in itself because I was born and raised in the Deep South. I remember one summer when I was younger, I wore jeans and pants every single day. Imagine me, young AND fat, in the dead of summer with jeans on. The thought actually makes me itch now. Fast forward to now, I only really wear pants during the summer because I am at work or school and I get really sad when I have to do that. Now, I really only try to do things that make me feel good. I learned how to do my makeup, how to style my hair, and I stopped saying no to clothing that I thought fat women should not wear. I said yes to crop tops, short shorts, tight dresses, strapless tops, bandeau tops, two-piece swimsuits and all of the above. I strived to become those stylish women I envied on Instagram. I am still working on creating my style and I still struggle with insecurity but rarely do I look at revealing clothing and think it's too much for my fat body. I still struggle with my confidence because my weight actually kind of fluctuates for a number of reasons, I don't change clothing sizes or anything but I have smaller times and I have bigger times, and I always seem to feel more confident during my smaller times. As for my story, I think my intended purpose is to shed light on how it feels to reside in that space of just okay. Like Roxane Gay writes in *Hunger*, this is not a success story of how I became satisfied with my body, because I am not completely satisfied. However, I am okay with my body and I love and accept myself for who I am right now.

In *The Body is Not an Apology* Taylor states: "Hating your body is like finding a person you despise and then choosing to spend the rest of your life with them while loathing every moment of the partnership" (Taylor, 23). Instead of this, I chose to love myself. It was so

exhausting hating the body that I had to do everything in. I never had a moment of peace. It's a journey but I'm happy to finally be okay with my body. In this memoir, I intend to honor my fatness and how it created the person I am, as well as how I am finding the person that I want to be by strengthening my connection to my appearance, sexuality, and research.

Let's Talk About Sex

I have always had an interesting relationship with sex. I don't remember a time when I wasn't wondering about it, I kind of had an early introduction. Although sex was not discussed in my own household, I hung out with a lot of older kids when I was a child because my father works at a residential care facility for children who were in custody of the state. My house is located on the property of the facility and I also went to school with these kids, spent afterschool and my weekends hanging out on campus, so the majority of my time was spent with them. Because of the time spent with the older kids, I learned about sex from an early age. And for me it has always been a huge topic of interest. Coupling my interest with the fact that I'm dangerously curious, it has always been something that I have anticipated doing. Which is very interesting because I was always so eager, but never confident enough in myself to actually engage or interact with people in a sexual manner, which led to me not losing my virginity until I was a ripe 23 years old. Even before losing my virginity, I had very limited knowledge of any form of sexual activity. I didn't even have my first kiss until I was twenty. There are a multitude of reasons why I didn't have my sexual debut until later in life, but I credit them all to one source: my fatness. I know this because, very early on I started internalizing messages about my weight and how that factored into my attractiveness to people. Nobody had ever told me I was ugly but they had told me I was fat and they made sure I knew that my body made me undesirable.

I recall in the sixth grade one of my “friends” literally told me that “I had a cute face” and “I would be pretty if I just lost that stomach” while the other girls around us just laughed. I am pretty sure I laughed as well, but only as a way to subdue my hurt and embarrassment. The next year, while in seventh grade, I liked a boy named Michael and did my best to act like I didn’t because I was fairly sure he would not reciprocate my affections. He spent the entire first semester teasing me about my weight and the crush I had on him. It was safe to say that he did not like me because I was fat. This was the last time I was anything close to being proactive about my affection for someone. So, I never had any type of relationship or sexual encounter with anyone until college and I attributed this fact to my weight. I felt that I would never be desirable enough to lose my virginity despite the fact that it was pretty much the only thing I wanted out of life. Because of my weight, I really felt unworthy of anyone’s affection or attraction. Gabby Sidibe speaks on the politic of desirability and virginity stating “I didn’t see it as a treasure or a precious jewel. I had felt the burden of my virginity ever since my friend, a guy, told me when I was sixteen that if I was still a virgin at twenty-one he’d do me a favor and take it from me. He said it out of nowhere like he was so sure that I was so undesirable that he’d have to go ahead and lie on the cross and take my virginity from me as an act of charity” (Sidibe, 13). I did not realize until I was older that virginity was a social construct and not the tangible burden I thought it was. I also realized that my weight was not the primary reason I stayed inactive for so long. I had internalized those messages about fat women being undesirable and I was unintentionally avoiding sexual contact because I was afraid of what my partners would think about my body. Through this research I intend to explore my sexuality with the use of fat studies and Black feminist thought which will aid me in understanding my own socialization and

relationship with fatphobia and how it has impacted, or in my opinion, stunted and constructed my sexual exploration.

1.1 Research Questions

For this project, I have decided on three questions to guide my research process:

1. How has internalized fatphobia impacted the way I view my self-image and furthermore my sexuality?
2. What are the benefits of a Black Feminist approach in fat studies research?
3. What will my personal experience add to the discourse on fat studies research?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Western culture is built on a system of norms that primarily benefit the people that fit within them. Unfortunately, people who fall outside of them suffer varying degrees of harassment and abuse, this includes people who do not possess the physical attributes Western society prefers. In *The Invention of Women*, Oyeronke Oyewumi attributes this to our society being primarily sight driven. Oyewumi states “Consequently, since the body is the bedrock on which the social order is founded, the body is always *in view* and *on view*. As such it invites *gaze*, a gaze of difference, a gaze of differentiation—the most historically constant being the gendered gaze” (Oyewumi, 2). By this gaze the author speaks of being gendered, women have even more pressure to be seen as attractive as a way to possibly offset the other subjugations experienced. For Black women and other women of color, the stakes are even higher in a society that subscribes to Eurocentric beauty standards. In terms of social constructions, fatness creates an additional axis of oppression for women who experience sexism and racism. Being fat signifies an expression of deviancy that is unaccepted in Western culture. In Roxanne Gay’s book *Hunger* she details her personal relationship with fatphobia. Gay asserts “The obese body is

an expression of excess, decadence, and weakness. The obese body is the site of massive infection. It is a losing battleground in a war between willpower and food and metabolism in which you are the ultimate loser” (Gay, 122). As presented earlier in the definition for fatphobia, people feel like discriminatory practices against fat people are a made up thing, and to an extent they are, and just as with other constructs, the effects are very real. However, for fat people, and women especially, I would argue that there is an intentional punishment for this supposed deviancy that endures in all sectors because of the emphasis the West puts on resisting the norm. Oyewumi discusses the issue of difference stating “In the West, biological explanations appear to be especially privileged over other ways of explaining differences in gender, race, or class. Difference is expressed as degeneration” (Oyewumi, 1). There is no way to escape the consequences of not being considered attractive, especially if you are fat, Black, and a woman. Enduring these struggles can weigh heavily on a person, in particular, the way someone experiences their sexuality. For fat women, and I would argue Black fat women in particular, they are either hypersexualized or desexualized. This dehumanization can lead to unhealthy attitudes about their sexuality and negatively impact their sexual expression.

The hypersexualizing of Black women’s bodies is not a new concept. Black women’s bodies have been consistently put on display, mocked, poked, and prodded throughout history, like objects. Hortense Spillers theorizes the historical basis of the continued exploitation of the Black female body in her 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” in which she discusses how gender difference was lost during the Middle Passage. She explains the legacy of the captive body and how it affects Black people’s conception of gender identity. The distinction that Spillers makes between the body and the flesh is a good basis for understanding the construction of black female gender identity and sexuality. Spillers discusses the historical and present impact

of the stripping of black femininity during slavery, stating “But just as we duly regard similarities between life conditions of American women— captive and free – we must observe those undeniable contrast and differences so decisive that the African-American females historic claim to the territory of womanhood and “femininity” still tends to rest too solidly on the subtle and shifting calibrations of a liberal ideology” (Spillers, 77). According to Spillers, gender difference was lost during the enslavement of African peoples, thus resulting in black people not being able to be absorbed into the social construction of normative gender. For black fat women, this concept is especially true because while they can be recognized as a vessel for gendered assault, and violent forms of sexualization, their weight assigns them a certain masculinity that allows people to perceive them as unattractive in the hegemonic feminine narrative. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”, Spillers coins the term “pornotroping” of which she states: “...as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning” (Spillers, 67). This “powerlessness” is especially relevant to Black women because it constructs the way in which we perceive our entire meaning, complicating our existence, particularly our sexuality. Pornotroping is further discussed in an excerpt from *The Black Body in Ecstasy* by Jennifer Nash in which she discusses how visual culture’s representation of black women shapes feminist discourse on black female sexuality. Aligning with Spillers, Nash discusses the concept of “pornotroping”. Nash explains pornotroping as “...of course, a process of objectification (or being “reduced to a thing”), but it is also a process of being reduced to “sensuality”.

Pornotroping hinges on the ability of the captor to presume the “destructive” sexuality of black

female flesh and on the fundamental availability of black female sexuality—to meaning-making, to cooptation, to violence” (Nash, 41).

The representation of Black female sexuality has robbed black women of the opportunity to create their own sexual identities. Not only do fat Black women absorb the effects of pornotroping Black female sexuality, they also wrestle with the effects of fat women being dehumanized. A certain type of violence can ensue from society not recognizing one’s humanity. Ashleigh Shackelford discusses this in her blog post “Why I’m Nonbinary but Don’t Use They/Them” stating “As I was being denied gender from peers my age, and being denied gender by adults who are not sexually vested in me, I was also experiencing very specific gender violence from older men who were targeting my body as a representation of woman/fullness/sexual availability through a lens of misogynistic violence” (Shackelford, 2016). In the strange duality of a fat black woman embodying a certain invisibility to her peers, there is also an unwelcomed gaze on the body from predators. There is an aging that people attribute to the body when it is fat.

For fat women, I would argue that if we are acknowledged in the mainstream culture, we are often presented as a joke or with some type of comedic/sarcastic effect that symbolizes the dissonance of our existence, especially when it comes to our sexuality. Although, fatness has been historically represented more positively, at the turn of the 20th century, fat women became more of a spectacle. In “The White Man’s Burden” Amy Farrell, details the way in which something as trivial as imagery on postcards illustrates the “place” of fat women as objects instead of actual people. Farrell states: “These cards, however, also reveal the decreased figurative space available to any woman who did not toe the line of bodily control. The fat women in the postcards are all white, some middle-class consumers and tourists, some working

class or middle-class homemakers, some clearly “ethnic” and immigrant women; these images , however, mock all women for their fatness. In other words, they demonstrate the establishment of the symbolic place—or rather no place-of the fat woman in the 20th century” (Farrell, 236). Even on postcards, things kept as mementos from places one has visited or sent to friends and family to let them know you are safe and/or having a good time, is still used to degrade and disrespect fat women.

While this post-card example is focuses on white fat women, I argue the situation is even more extreme for Black fat women because of our race. Racism further impacts society’s view of Black women’s bodies. Nash uses the case of Sarah Baartman to further explain how the representation of black female sexuality came about in visual culture. Nash states that “According to Hobson, if Baartman was called on to stand for “the African race,” her body—particularly its imagined steatopygia—has come to stand in for black women, forever suturing the image of the black female body to the image of corporeal excess” (Nash,43). Nash and Hobson’s work help clarify why the Black and specifically the Black fat female body is seen as inherently accessible. As stated earlier by Shackelford, Black fat women are exposed to harassment often times without repercussion because it is seen as a privilege for someone to even find them attractive. So what signals do these actions send about Black women’s sexual autonomy? That it is irrelevant because Black fat women are not human enough to explore it for themselves.

Ashleigh Shackelford echoes this concept in her experiences on why she chooses to identify as nonbinary, while still using the pronouns she/her: “I’m not a Black woman, but I identify with Black womanhood and the experiences I had in creating my own girlhood/womanhood for myself when it was always denied to me. Not just the trauma of the

sexual violence, the anti-black misogyny and the dehumanization of my person to strip me of a childhood, but the cultural and social resilience and innovation of being a black girl is so much of my being” (Shackelford, 2016). Shackelford can clearly identify with experiences of Black womanhood but cannot identify herself as a woman because her initial development was snatched from her in a dehumanizing capacity. She then further discusses her experiences with masculinity due to her being considered overweight and how they shaped her feminine experience: “I am not a Black man or a masculine-identifying person, but I identify with the experiences I’ve had with being read as masculine because my Black fatness and my Black femininity has always been scripted as such. So much of Black femininity and the performance of Black femininity is that of being loud, demanding, truth-telling, Petty LaBelle, ratchetness, too strong, too big, too much, too powerful” (Shackelford, 2016). It almost seems as if being perceived as masculine due to her fatness helped her construction of femininity since she did not identify with the hegemonic notion of passive femininity. She goes on to reflect on the way white supremacy violates the black female experience: “The way whiteness and white supremacist ideology is set up, we’re not seen as feminine or woman or human. In many ways, the masculinizing of our bodies and performance has been the basis for our dehumanizing and denial of gender conformity. The antiblack transphobia experienced by all Black women, femmes and girls is because our beauty, humanity and gender identity is constantly viewed through a violent lens of whiteness” (Shackelford, 2016). Because of the violence committed by white supremacy, Shackelford consistently struggles with the reckoning of her corporeal body with her gender identity.

One of the topics that I want to emphasize in this thesis is the importance of the Black girlhood experience in the development of black female gender identity and sexuality. I would

argue that the experience of black girlhood as a fat black female, is not only racialized and sexualized, but erased if fatness figured into a Black girl's life during childhood. Ruth Nicole Brown theorizes the importance of black girlhood in her book *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* where she introduces the model Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths, which she describes as "...a space to envision Black girlhood critically among and with Black girls, who, it seems to me, are often the people least guaranteed to be centered as valuable in collective work and social movements that they could very well lead and organize" (Brown, 1). However, she does not limit the experiences of black girlhood to childhood, because in her research she utilizes the experiences of "...Black women and girls, who range in age between eleven and fifty-five" in order to significantly encompass the complex breadth of the black female experience (Brown, 5). Although she mentioned the diverse characteristics of the women participating in the program, such as race, identity, religion, and sexuality, does her practice include techniques for black girls whose childhood were also affected by fatphobia? Her definition seems to be very inclusive so I wonder if it would be an applicable practice for black fat girls as way to reclaim their childhood.

Ashleigh Shackelford recounts difficulties in her childhood as a result of fatphobia stating "Long before I came out as nonbinary, for most of my life, I struggled with gender and gender performance. I spent most of my childhood, adolescence and adulthood being violated for being a Black fat girl. I was often treated as if I was "one of the boys" or an "it" because I wasn't feminine or girl-enough to be seen as attractive, worthy of being treating like a human, or seen as innocent/controllable. My blackness and fatness and proximity to girlhood was always othered in a way that most others did not experience" (Shackelford, 2016). The expression of Shackelford's

experience of fat black girlhood, seems to encompass the need for the imagined vision Ruth Nicole Brown's has for Black girlhood being a source of freedom (Brown, 1).

The repercussions of having a fat, black, female assigned body are infinite, from being dehumanized to fetishized, and everything in between, so much so that the very act of existing is resistance. Social media, television programming, movies, the music industry, and even literature are active participants in the erasure of fat people, especially, Black fat women. Even if they happen to be featured in one of the modes of entertainment mentioned, they are generally portrayed as sad, angry or some other negative disposition. They are never portrayed as just people living their lives, doing regular day to day things. I personally gravitate towards romantic comedies and Harlequin romance novels, and the theme that seems to be ever present for fat female protagonists is the cheesy fat woman with low self-esteem that manages to catch the eye of handsome bachelor in spite of her weight. It rarely extends to the fat woman being positive about her weight and falling in love, or even just a storyline that does not focus on her weight in general. Her weight is always at the center of whatever plot, and rarely is there a fat female protagonist in a non-comedic/romantic program.

These portrayals lead me to wonder what messages they are sending to fat women. In my opinion, the message is that their existence is only privileged as a source of entertainment or as a romantic anomaly for men, which is also an extremely heteronormative viewpoint. Even further, Black women are often erased from these media depictions entirely. According to "Fat Heroines in Chick-Lit" there is an entire subgenre of Chick lit dedicated to fat women called "Bigger girl lit". This intervention seems progressive, and would technically be considered a win for fat women because subverts the narrative of fat women being undesirable. However, after my own experiences in the romance/chick lit sections (which are extensive) there is a shortage of Black

fat female heroines in these genres. Every example the author mentioned featured white protagonists, except for one. What does this mean? In my opinion it shows the lack of representation Black fat women get even in a category designed explicitly for fat women, reinforcing the racial exclusion of Black women in so called “progressive” movements and further marginalizing their desirability.

In movies, the fat heroine is even more of a rarity than it is in books. And hardly ever, especially in feature films, do you see a fat Black woman as a love interest. I can count on one hand the amount of feature films I have seen with fat Black women as the romantic lead. And I can count on no hands the ones that do not include Queen Latifah or Monique. There is not a space for fat Black women because society is still seeing Black women as inherently undesirable and are just now being open to seeing fat as desirable. Sesali Bowen states: “Fat Black women are only allowed space in Hollywood, and by extension the Oscars, as they often find themselves as the butt of the joke, the unsung hero, or the mule to more important white characters. They reinforce the narrative that fat women are less desirable, less important, and less worthy of our respect and admiration. Too often they exist in films to make us feel things like anger, disgust, or at best, hope for another character altogether” (Bowen, on the Oscars). Black women are often used as pawns in entertainment spaces because our humanity is not acknowledged in life or in entertainment.

There have been strides to be more inclusive of fat women in movies, most notably this year, the release of *Dumplin'* on Netflix, was an accurate depiction of life as a fat girl. In the film, the main character, Willowdean, who was given the nickname “Dumplin” by her mother, a former pageant queen, which she hates because it is an indicator of her weight. The entire premise of the movie surrounds Willowdean’s weight and its effects on her relationship with

others, primarily her mother. Because her mother is a former pageant queen and Willowdean is fat, they often have differing ideas on beauty standards. Rosie, Will's mother, wants her to be more feminine and put together in her dress, while Willowdean just wants to exist and be comfortable. This dilemma is one constantly faced by fat girls. Never being able to simply exist in the way we want because it is not up to par with other people's standards. Sesali Bowen wrote on this familiar dilemma stating: "Dumplin' perfectly captures the dissonance of living in a body that is understood to be shameful, less valuable, undesirable, and in constant need of fixing by everyone else. This is what fat girls are up against. As others try to define us by our bodies, we simply miss our departed loved ones and crave solo karaoke in the driver seats of our Grands Prix" (Bowen on Dumplin).

Because the media being is the primary means of socialization, it is one of the most pervasive instruments of fatphobia. It would also be the most impactful source of dismantling fatphobia, if the creators would show fat women as human. Ytasha Womack's "Afrofuturism" excerpt gives a quality analysis of how pushing existence in media, specifically black characters in sci-fi, serves as a form of resistance. Womack specifically discusses an idea that reflects my thoughts on the continued polarization of fat female bodies. In response to the objectification of a Black woman's dance performance Womack states: "The very presence of a woman in control of her body was unsettling and for some triggered instant objectification" (Womack, 102) which is also applicable to the lack of humane representation of fat women, and especially black ones. The idea that fat women, can exist without being comedic relief or being in romantic proximity to a man, has not been an existing theme. However, I feel it can be created through the same resistance exhibited through Afrofuturism. This will be especially difficult for black women, as being racially and sexually marginalized sets them up to be dehumanized, being fat will add an

extra layer of subjugation. Alternatively, the depiction of black fat women as just being human, will go a long way in changing the narrative, because as the author states, “images are powerful” (Womack, 133). More aggressive action can be taken but just the normalization of fat black women as human in media would be a powerful statement of resistance.

The impact of fatphobia’s dehumanizing effects is a prevalent issue despite the perceived notion that they do not exist. Not only can they affect a person’s psyche, they can affect the overall development of a person’s self-worth. As stated earlier, for black women, being pushed further outside the scope of societal attraction just contributes additional stress to their already overflowing burden. The internalization of the harmful stereotypes assumed by racism, sexism, and fatphobia can have dangerous effects which are reproduced through media and pop culture. As exhibited, black women have always endured discrimination over their bodies, however the added experience of fatphobia can result in added exposure to discrimination, which can negatively impact sexuality and sexual expression. Heightened discrimination will continue until the boundaries of societal attraction are banished and fat black women can be seen as human.

2.1 Methodology

Historically, Black women have held an enduring “other” status because they lay outside the hegemonic narrative of femininity; on top of racial othering, Black women are also disregarded among their own race because of their gender. This othering has translated to many different arenas, including Black and feminist movements as well as discourse. In addition, Black women also experience stressors that are not relevant to women of other races. Black women’s cultural backgrounds often influence the reactions to these stressors. Due to cultural traditions, Black women are seen as strong, independent, resilient, and often avoid asking help

from others. For this reason, Black women need spaces that appreciate their unique lived experience.

Kimberle Crenshaw discusses this in her essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” by stating: “I argue that Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the intersection of race and gender” (Crenshaw, 58). Because of their exclusion, Black women were forced to create their own spaces that met the needs of their intersectional experience. Incorporating Black feminist thought into fat studies research, allows the space to recognize Black women’s intersectional experience, instead of just centering race or gender. Kimberle Crenshaw provides an intersectional framework in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” that would provide a basis for improvement. In this text, Crenshaw was discussing the importance of acknowledging the Black women’s experiences in Black liberationist politics and feminist theory, however, this is still applicable to fat studies their lack of diversity within the discourse. Crenshaw states: Similarly, feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women. Neither Black liberationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents. In order to include Black women, both movements must distance themselves from earlier approaches in which experiences are relevant only when they are related to certain clearly identified causes...” (Crenshaw, 72-73). Much like feminist theory and Black liberation politics, fat studies research has also excluded Black women’s experiences from being centered or even acknowledged. Actively excluding and erasing Black women’s role is a consistent problem amongst less marginalized groups that actively reinforces their systemic subjugation, especially in spaces that are intended to liberate.

Because of their exclusion in mainstream movements, Black women were forced to create spaces for themselves, it was these unique spaces that birthed Black Feminist thought, an approach that explores and takes into consideration the experiences of Black women. In “Learning from the Outsider Within” Patricia Hill-Collins defines the concept of Black Feminist Thought and explains its three key themes. Collins defines Black feminist thought as: “...ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women.” (Hill-Collins, 157). The definition certainly recognizes the merit of a Black female perspective, however, it does not paint them as a monolith. The passage goes on to state “...while living life as Black women may produce certain commonalities of outlook, the diversity of class, region, age, and sexual orientation shaping individual Black women’s lives has resulted in different expressions of common themes” (Hill-Collins, 157). The Black feminist approach recognizes the humanity in Black women and the diversity within their experiences. In this project, I use an intersectional lens to integrate a racial analysis into Fat Studies research.

In order to supplement my intersectional approach, I have chosen to explore an approach that values personal experience. I have chosen to explore a narrative memoir method, because the nature of my research requires a non-traditional approach. Often telling stories from a personal vantage point makes the social phenomenon being discussed more relatable to other marginalized readers and people. By adding a Black feminist lens to feminist memoir, allows me to speak for myself in a way that might resonate with other Black fat women. Memoir allows the researcher to situate their own personal knowledge and experience in a larger context, which is important for Black women, because it allows them a chance to disconnect from stereotypes. In “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought” Patricia Hill-Collins frames the importance of Black feminist thought stating: “This different view encourages African-American

women to value their own subjective knowledge base. By taking elements and themes of Black women's culture and traditions and infusing them with new meaning, Black feminist thought rearticulates a consciousness that already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness gives African-American women another tool of resistance to all forms of subordination" (Hill-Collins, 750). This adds a new element to the traditional memoir and autoethnographic approaches that are privileged in academia. Another benefit of this method is that it eliminates the risk of research subjects being exploited by the researcher.

Black feminist memoir and narrative allow Black women a space to exist genuinely. No preconceived notions or expectations of them except honesty and authenticity. It would create both a space for healing and resistance. Black feminist thought already privileges the Black female experience and memoirs and first person narrative would only further it. In "I AM an Angry Black Woman", Rachel Griffin discusses the need for Black feminist autoethnography. She states: "In the field of communication, autoethnographic "Other stories" (Calafell & Moreman, 2009) that work against systemic forces such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism from the perspectives of women of color remain rare. As a methodology positioned to embrace subjectivity, engage critical self-reflexivity, speak rather than being spoken for, interrogate power, and resist oppression (Calafell & Moreman, 2009; Denzin, 1997; Jones, 2005; Warren, 2001), autoethnography can be productively coupled with Black feminist thought for Black female scholars to "look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal to the cultural" (Boylorn, 2008, p. 413)" (Griffin, 142). This approach is important because it positions Black women as the researchers, allowing them to control the type of content they create.

In any avenue, representation matters, this will be especially affective within fat studies research. Autoethnography creates a safer research space because it is less invasive, especially when discussing experiences with especially with fatness and sexuality, both topics which are not heavily discussed in the Black community. Instead of having to tell others about what you are going through, hoping they will understand, you can write it yourself and make sure the portrayal is accurate. Utilizing personal experience allows more freedom for the researcher to discuss day to day experiences with oppression faced, that they might not feel comfortable discussing with other researchers. Griffin also discusses this idea stating: “Black feminist autoethnography also offers a narrative means for Black women to highlight struggles common to Black womanhood without erasing the diversity among Black women coupled with strategically “talking back” (hooks, 1989) to systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism, classism)” (Griffin, 143). These experiences being reflected in research is essential because as stated previously, Black women are not a monolith but they do have commonalities across their experiences. While autoethnography informs my process of self-reflection and writing, I will not be conducting or writing an ethnography, but using creative prose like the ones found in the work of Roxane Gay and Gabourey Sidibe. Their work is creating a body of Black fat feminist literature which I hope to contribute.

I am also interested in pursuing a memoir-like method to further incorporate my experiences into my thesis. I am inspired by the style in Roxanne Gay’s book *Hunger*. I like the way she volleys back and forth between flashbacks and her present state, while making commentary on the past events and often times drawing them to her current actions. However, she does tend to give more of an overview in many events, choosing not to go in depth on many things, which I would attribute to self-preservation. She discusses some sensitive memories and I

believe that in an effort to mitigate her emotions so that she could actually finish the project, she chose not to divulge too much information. I understand this act, especially considering the legacy of how discouraging discussing weight can be. Gay reflects on this stating “I hesitate to write about fat bodies and my fat body especially. I know that to be frank about my body makes people uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable too. I have been accused of being full of self-loathing and being fat-phobic. There is truth to the former accusation and I reject the latter. I do, however, live in a world where the open hatred of fat people is vigorously tolerated and encouraged. I am a product of my environment” (Gay, 153). Before reading this, I was wrestling with how I wanted to portray myself and my life and I realized I cannot worry about that. If I come off as fat phobic, that might be my truth, and that is okay. Because as Gay stated I am who I was socialized to be, but I am reckoning with that, which will be evident in this project. Because I am being intentional with sharing my experiences, I intend to go more into depth because it feels necessary. Also, there is nothing that I plan to discuss in this thesis that I am uncomfortable fully revealing or discussing.

2.2 Method

For this project I have decided to:

- Use my personal experiences with sex/sexuality as a Black fat woman through personal narratives, in order to situate them within the larger discourse on fatness and sexuality while also examining the intersections of race and gender
- I have created personal narratives about my experiences with self-image, in order to show how my self-image contributed to my lack of romantic and personal relationships as well as how that impacted the timeline of my sex life

3 THE STORY

3.1 Chapter 1: Virginity: A Big Deal to a Big Bitch

Virginity. Such an unimpressive, unsexy word. You know how there are some words that just sound seductive when you say them, even if it doesn't have a provocative meaning? Virginity is not one of them. It doesn't even roll off the tongue for real. Which is confusing to me, considering it is literally the word we use to determine one's level of sexual activity. Interestingly enough, everybody knows the word but, there is often not a concrete understanding of what virginity actually is. In the Oxford English Dictionary, Virgin is defined as: 1. *Christian Church*. An unmarried or chaste maiden or woman, distinguished for piety or steadfastness in religion, and regarded as having a special place among the members of the Christian church on account of these merits. Virginity is defined as: 1. The condition of being or remaining in a state of chastity; abstinence from or avoidance of all sexual relations; bodily chastity, as a virtue of great commendation, or as conferring especial merit or sanctity; the mode of life characterized by this, esp. as adopted from religious motives. a. Of persons of either sex (or without special limitation of sex) (via <https://www.oed.com/>). By these definitions, only people who engage in intercourse can lose their virginity. Also, because of the religious implications, virginity has been upheld as a special honor or prize, which can impact people's (primarily women's) social capital and/or moral standing. The most trusted dictionary in the English language may have amongst the most reductive definitions of a word that defines the basis of our population's sex life. Splendid.

Either way, to me, what virginity actually is, is a social construction that was holding me the fuck back in life, or so I thought. Why does such a lack-luster word hold so much weight

(haha) in a fat, black, girl/woman's life? I'll tell you. Society says that if you are a woman, to be desired and wanted by men is your primary objective in life. Sure, it's great if you get a degree, have a career, be as successful as you want but never forget, your top priority is to be desired by, please, and ultimately picked, by men. Which for me, has been a bit of a problem from the beginning. You see, I have been fat all of my life and as you can imagine, gaining the attention of men has never been easy for me. So, by the time I was old enough to know and understand what sex was, I already felt like I was losing because nobody wanted to have sex with me. It wasn't that I was unattractive, nobody had ever called me ugly. But they did, however, call me fat. And they called me it often and in many different ways, which contrary to popular belief did not make me stronger or more equipped to deal with life.

I argue that bullying did the opposite. Research has found that effects from bullying can impact future sexual relationships, physical health, as well as cognitive functioning (Weinstock & Krehbiel, 121). So, instead of getting tougher, I just didn't know that I was attractive because fat has always been classified as undesirable, so if you are fat, it doesn't really matter what the rest of you looks like because nobody even took the time to check. And even if there was an off chance that someone found me attractive, they were too ashamed to let me know because of, you guessed it, my weight. All throughout middle school, I was bullied and taunted about my weight. By both boys and girls. Now the girls, I didn't care about too much, but the boys?! That really broke me down because it meant I never had a chance with them. In *The Body is Not an Apology* Sonya Renee Taylor says: "What of the child navigating puberty in a fat body or a body with chronic illness? Our experiences of body shame are layered upon and impacted by the intersections of our identities. The less normal our identity, the more fraught the waters of body shame" (Taylor, 30). Looking back, 12 year old me really felt that.

As a fat, Black, teen who was also gaining knowledge of her burgeoning queer identity, I was going through it! First off, I had just begun to really acknowledge personally that I was attracted to girls. I had felt it all of my life, but I always tried to ignore it. But in middle school, it became painfully obvious. I was often intimidated by or nervous around pretty girls, just as I was around boys. At the time, I just thought it was because I was so self-conscious about my looks. Which was also a part of it, but, looking back it was more than that. I wanted to impress them, I wanted their approval, and I wanted them to *like* me. I have more clarity about this now because I never felt that way about the girls I formed friendships with, only the ones who I found attractive in a non-platonic way.

I began to realize my attraction to girls around the same time I began to explore more with porn. I noticed that I was primarily drawn to lesbian porn, but differently from heterosexual women. A lot of women will talk about how much softer or intimate it was which is the primary reason it aroused them. However, through many conversations with my friend group which is startlingly hetero, I found out that the desire to actually have sex with women was not present. This was not my story at all. The majority of my friends expressed disgust at the idea of ever having sex with a woman. As a teenager trying to be accepted, I echoed their disgust, while internally knowing that I was in fact down for the gay shit. I often did this with taboo topics when I was younger and I sometimes feel shame when I think about it. However, I saw what kids did to their peers who expressed interest in something other than heterosexuality. They were ridiculed and often outcast. I was already fat, my self-esteem just couldn't take being further othered. But as I got older, I became more comfortable expressing myself. I could tell because my friends were becoming more aware of the fact that I was open because they started making

comments about how they “wouldn’t be surprised” if I had a sexual experience with a girl. And to their credit, they were not!

Even more troubling, was the fact amongst all this awakening came feelings of confusion considering my upbringing. Although, I come from a very nurturing, loving, and supportive family, they were also very...*conservative*. I come from a very southern, very Christian, very *traditional* type of family. My father is a Pastor for a church even further down south than Macon. In the fucking country. So, there were very strict expectations from my parents, mainly my father, on how I should behave and interact. What I will say is, I wasn’t a stereotypical “preacher’s kid”. Of course, as a teenager, my thoughts were nowhere near the cross, but I was too intimidated by my father to really do anything outside the norm. Like most kids, I found ways to sneak around and do things without my parents knowing but I was always too scared to be reckless.

The farthest I would go was working around my parent’s schedule. I would do small things like stay after school later, go to my friend’s house or to eat after school when I was supposed to be home. Nothing major. I was too scared to do anything else, my dad had too many eyes on me to feel free. On top of being a pastor, my father is the Vice President of Programs and Services, for a residential facility in Macon for troubled youth. The organization has facilities all over Georgia that my father oversees. Also, before he got his own church, he was assistant pastor of one of the most well-known Black churches in Macon. Needless to say, my dad is kind of well-known in the community. We also share the same face, literally everyone calls us twins, so I was not trying to get caught up out here. My father had influence over every single thing in my life. And somehow, we never talked about sex but I always knew how I was supposed to handle

it: Act like it didn't exist and abstain from it of course. I did a great job of not having it but I had infinite trouble trying to act like it didn't exist.

My parents never played explicit music, shows, movies, or "allowed" me to read any explicit books (I got around this but still) and to top it all off, we never even had "the talk". I knew that my parents knew what sex was, I mean clearly, me and my brother are the products but the only context it was ever discussed was in church when my dad was preaching about not having it. Or about Eve and that damn apple. Despite the strong Christian influence, or maybe because of this, my interest in sex has always been *very* present and accounted for. It was fun to talk about, sing about, read about and extremely fun to fantasize about. If there was anything on my mind majority of the time as an adolescent it was either sex, food, or my weight. Everything else was fleeting but those three were always present. The worst part was, I had no way to satisfy my curiosity. Everything I learned about sex I had to learn from friends and romance novels because I was too scared to talk to my parents about it. On top of this, I liked girls too and I really had nobody to talk to about that shit with. I figured if they never brought it up, it wasn't open for discussion.

I did take Sex Ed in middle school but only because my mom signed my permission slip. I was worried my father wouldn't approve. It was the highlight of seventh grade year. But I could never share that excitement at home because I didn't want my parents to know I was thinking about sex. It is weird because I never felt like my father was one of the overly righteous, "holier than thou" -type preachers, but I knew his stance on sex was very much in line with the bible, especially for girls. He and my brother have a different relationship. More honest and open about things such as sex and other "guy shit" but for me, it's a no go. At 24, I still will try to act like I don't know what sex is around my father. Like I said, my household was very...traditional.

As I got older, I would learn that the word to best describe my household was patriarchal. If nothing else, I knew I was supposed to be a virgin until I got married. I missed the mark just a bit on that one but to this day I wouldn't be surprised if my father thought I was still a virgin and I'm content to let the good preacher believe that as long as possible.

So yes, I was in constant internal turmoil because of puberty which was further complicated by my consistent search for validation from others. At first, I wasn't too discouraged because I figured, it's middle school, things have to get better right? WRONG. At that point, I still had hope that I would lose weight, become beautiful and finally gain the attention of men à la the plot of most teen movies about a fat person made before the middle 2000's OR I would finally find someone who wasn't shallow to accept me for me, and ignore what I looked like. If that didn't happen, I also had fantasies of having a really good guy friend who either: took pity on me and had sex with me on a drunken night or one that was secretly in love with me and would finally tell me after years of friendship. Then we would solidify our love by him tenderly taking my virginity and we would live happily ever after. In case it isn't obvious, I read a lot of romance novels and watched a lot of rom-coms in my teens. I was obviously lacking any type of action in my own life. But here I am, writing this in the present day, so obviously the first option never happened. Surprise, surprise, neither did the second one. Sorry to disappoint you but the third option *definitely* didn't happen.

No, I spent the rest of my adolescence as a virgin, hardly gaining any real attention from guys. Which I would say was an extremely different experience from my friends. If you couldn't guess, I was the only fat girl in my friend group. The quintessential DUFF- Designated Ugly Fat Friend. The majority of my friends were actually cheerleaders. I would always see boys around them. Talking, flirting, and creating relationships. It was impressive to me that they could even

have regular conversations with boys and not be awkward. On the other hand, boys just didn't interact with me. I was pretty invisible for the most part. Which to an extent I was okay with because I was stressed out about what I would do if anyone even approached my ass. While my friends were busy having their first, second, and for some, third "serious" relationships in our teen years, I was cuddling up with books, rom-coms, and food. I avoided co-ed social situations if possible and tried to stay out of the way when anybody other than my close group of friends were around. I did my best to end up in primarily female or non-interactive extracurricular's or electives in middle and high school, which meant avoiding gym and committing heavily to women's choir and art classes.

Avoiding non-interactive courses was also more of a feat at my high school than it seems because they were so committed to immersive activities in order to make us well-rounded students. I was serious though, I refused to be uncomfortable for 180 days out of the year. Of course, this impacted my interaction with boys by simultaneously helping me reach my goal of avoiding them, while also deterring me from my ultimate goal of copulation. It also hurt my self-esteem. Because despite my efforts, what I really wanted was a dude to randomly pick me so I knew I was worth the energy, like they did my friends. If you can't guess, that absolutely did not happen. For a long time, I was the only single friend in the crew. And not by choice either. This was also before it was cool to be single.

However, there were a few instances where dudes I was cool with gave me the impression that they had feelings for me. Most memorably, in my ninth grade year, one guy actually expressed interest in me. Or at least he made it clear that he wanted to fuck me and at that time, I thought it meant the same thing. It didn't matter to me that he was mean to me in 50% of our interactions, especially the public ones of course. Or that he had a girlfriend. Or that I

didn't find him attractive. And the real kicker is, he could never get my name right, which is a huge pet peeve of mine. I was desperate at 14 or 15 years old to experience some type of affection and/or sexual activity. Despite this fact, I still could not bring myself to rush into having sex with him. And once he realized I wasn't going to give it up immediately, he told me he was going back to his girlfriend. I respected that, which in a strange twist, only encouraged him to pursue me more. Looking back, I think he truly took it as a challenge to try and fuck me after I left him alone. He wasn't gonna let a fat bitch turn him down. However, in true fire-sign fashion, I had grown bored with him. So I politely ignored him and tried my best to have platonic interactions with him until he was no longer in my social circle. However, this really didn't work for him because he ended up sexually assaulting me at a Walmart one evening after a bonfire.

Now at the time, I didn't view it this way. I was only like 15 then, and was completely ignorant about these situations. So when he put his arm around me and took me away from the group, I thought nothing of it. When he took me down an empty aisle and pushed me up against the shelves, rubbed his dick on me, and tried to kiss me, I quickly realized that this was a situation I was no longer equipped to handle. As I got older, I would learn that sexual assault was not an uncommon thing by any means. From that point forward, I would have many discussions and witness many instances with female friends, family members, and even random women, in which men would often attempt or succeed in overpowering them. Some instances we didn't perceive as such, others were so explicitly violent, that we couldn't mistake it for anything other than what it was.

Truthfully, I started off wanting him to kiss me that night, but my breath smelled terrible, and I was not about to be known as the girl with stank breath, so I resisted. He really didn't care about me resisting of course, because he kept trying to kiss me, but I tried my best anyways. He

really was strong to be so small. Thankfully, one of the chaperones who had brought us walked past, and we quickly dispersed. To this day, I'm not sure if the chaperone really saw us, because nobody ever said anything about it, but I have never been so thankful to almost be caught in a sketchy situation in my life. Who knows what would've happened to me. And even though I only resisted because I forgot to put some gum in my mouth before he approached me, I'm grateful for that simple oversight. I'm not sure what kind of tone having my first kiss in a random Walmart aisle, with a boy who couldn't even remember my name, would have set for my life. But honestly, what hurts me most about thinking back to that time is I was actually disappointed in myself for not letting him kiss me that night. I was so desperate for validation from a boy, that I was willing to let it be at the hands of a guy who didn't give a fuck about me. In *Hunger* Roxane Gay wrote, "In truth, he treated me terribly and I thought that I should be grateful that he bothered to treat me terrible, that he bothered with a girl like me at all" (Gay, 41). I have never related to anything more. I was willing to take what I could get from that guy. I really thought that might be the last time a guy looked my way and I regretted not letting him have his way with me. Obviously, it wasn't the last time I received male attention and for that I'm thankful. Not because male attention is something to be grateful for, I'm grateful to be able to look back and find actual purpose for me being so miserable all those years. I'm glad that I had the chance to understand that centering my life on male approval is literally the *worst* thing I could ever do. I would actually credit my success to adopting the "fuck these niggas" mantra that I hold so near and dear to my heart.

Now as far as sex goes, that was definitely not my last encounter, as my naïve adolescent heart felt it was. This seems dramatic to believe, but as a fat girl, it was not an uncommon thought. Even Gabourey Sidibe discusses the way in which her own mother believed she was

still a virgin at 27. Although she didn't state anything about the belief being connected to her weight, I find it hard to believe that wasn't the case. Most people assumed that fat people weren't fucking because they were undesirable. That was how I felt. The pattern my sex life had taken supported my belief. My next encounters wouldn't happen until much later, and the main event really wouldn't happen until well into adulthood. My sex life, IF you could call it that, didn't start getting popping until my twenties. And honestly, before I had sex, I thought my worst nightmare was coming true. At the ripe old age of 23, I, the girl who talked about, read about, and immersed herself into everything sex/sexuality based, was still a fucking virgin. I had been reading erotica for who knows how long and had been fantasizing about losing my virginity since at least middle school. Don't get me wrong, I was very active with myself. I had been masturbating since I was a freshman in high school, so I had gotten pretty acquainted with myself, but with a partner? Only in my fantasies. And at that time, that is what counted to me. I can admit that when I initially set out on my quest to be initiated into the realm of sexual activity, I had a very narrow view of what it could be, which is not entirely my fault honestly.

Via the Oxford English Dictionary, Sex is defined as: "2. *colloquial* (orig. and chiefly U.S.). a. *intransitive and transitive*. To have sexual intercourse (with)." This is basically the definition that I grew up adhering to. So naturally when I thought about losing my virginity, I thought about intercourse as the gun that would officially start the race to my sexual awakening. Getting deeper into my Women's Studies education helped me to understand that sex can be way more than what we are socialized to believe. It can include, but doesn't only have to be intercourse. Bruce Burgett defines sex as "...the real and imagined acts that ground various sexual identities" which truly encompasses the way that I have come to view sex. It also means that my sex life had begun way before I actually involved another person (Burgett, 2014). I wish

I would've known this beforehand because I wouldn't have been so eager at the idea of having intercourse nor would I have felt so defeated every time it didn't happen.

There had been fleeting moments when I could have let it happen. Like, that one time when I was twenty-one and was so close, like at the point of entry close, and it still didn't happen. To this day I am still confused. I had done everything I thought necessary at this point. I went to the club with my friend, got drunk, and even brought him back to my parents' house. He couldn't come inside of course, but my car was conveniently parked in the drive way and I had an SUV, so we were definitely making things happen in there. I had even gone as far as sucking his dick in the back of my car. How could we not have gone all the way?! Well there were a few things. For one, I had not shaved. Why you ask? Well for starters, I rarely shaved. Being fat all my life had taught me that nobody was checking for me, so I never needed to be prepared. I didn't even have my first kiss until I was twenty years old, and even then, not much happened after that. So I never felt the need to "stay ready" as they say. I always felt I would have time to prepare if anything (or anyone) was to actually *go down*. And for the most part, my theory was correct. Nine times out of ten, there was no action in my life.

However, this particular evening, the stars really began to align, until I cock-blocked myself, essentially. As stated, previously I had gone so far as to suck this random man's dick, but when he tried to go down on me I had to pump the breaks IMMEDIATELY. Strike one. I am definitely very pro-body hair for women, however, at that time in my life I was still not comfortable enough with myself to even allow him to see me that way. Most people, especially men did not appreciate body hair, especially pubic hair, on women. Even my friends had consistently talked to me about the importance of keeping things groomed but I ignored them because it seemed like a lot of effort for zero reward. Still, he had no problem with it but it made

me uncomfortable. Plus, while I was exploring his nether regions, I realized that he was well groomed and that made me even more self-conscious. That probably made me even more obstinate. I could tell he was confused by my opposition to him giving me head, but we still moved forward. We continued to fool around and at some point, he conveniently ended up on top of me. I was bare on my bottom half but he still had his pants on, so we kind of just dry humped for a bit, which I was cool with. That went on, until I randomly felt a searing pain at the opening of my vagina. Yes, it is exactly what you think it is. That nigga tried to discreetly slide his dick in without even a whisper of a condom. However, my body was not having that at all. Again, the brakes were pumped IMMEDIATELY. Strike two, bitch. Why would he think this was okay?!

I had to tell him I was a virgin but the main question in my mind is: Sir, why would you NOT ask before trying to enter another person's body? Especially without protection? And on top of that, the more familiar thoughts started swirling in my head: Is it because I am fat and he thinks I'm desperate and will accept anything? Because the whole, night I had been anxious about this situation anyway, but the alcohol really did its best to extinguish those thoughts. Even the way that we met, seemed more of a happen stance rather than genuine desire. It was the classic scenario: his homeboy came over to talk to my friend, so he got stuck with me. Or at least that's how I viewed it. Despite these thoughts, he had been fairly nice and attentive to me throughout the night and it wasn't until that very degrading moment of him trying to shove his penis inside of me without my knowledge that my doubts returned. You see, as a fat woman, doubts are never too far from your mind. They often times feel like a protective measure, a security blanket, if you will. One that will wrap so tight around you and suffocate you with its warmth if you let it. But even then, I chose to ignore my doubts and we continued on.

We fooled around for a little while longer, before I realized these people had to leave my driveway. It was past four in the morning, and I was scared to death my dad would randomly open the garage and see me out there hoeing. The icing on the cake was, we did all of these things, and this man still left without asking me for my number, my social media, or anything. In his defense, he did suggest we be friends with benefits and I said no, but still, he didn't even want to keep in contact? Strike three! You're out of here.

I really had to wonder: had I of not been fat, would he have tried to stay in contact? Would he have worked harder to please me? Would he have cared more about my safety? I also wondered how he viewed me. Did I come off as desperate? The pathetic fat chick, who would do anything for a guy who showed her some attention? All of my internalized misogyny began to show. I was so far in my head, and I didn't know how to get out. On the other hand, I did turn down his offer to be friends with benefits, so maybe he felt rejected and was reacting to that. Maybe he was actually respecting my decision, which is something I didn't necessarily expect from him. Either way, I was disappointed and a bit regretful that the connection would be closed. Although, later on down the road, I would realize it was for the best.

After that experience, I thought I would be on an upward spiral of sexual exploration. It seemed like the universe was finally aligning so that I could attain my life long goal of getting some dick. Again, my life is a joke because the exact opposite happened. I had no more rendezvous for a solid two years. Nobody even looked at me for a solid year. So, during my senior year of college, I decided to take some action. I did what almost every millennial feels is the solution to their sex drought: I got on dating apps. Very unsuccessfully I might add. And after I did that off and on for a while, I got back off. It was so trash that I couldn't even bring myself to really commit. I even met two guys in person, and both were a mistake.

The worst of the two was the second time I decided to meet a guy off of Tinder (I know). Picture it: It's my senior year of college and I have committed to taking more chances because I have nothing to lose. We were only a month out from graduation and I started the year having all the credits needed to graduate, so the classes I was taking were of no consequence. I had a job and two internships so I was padding my resume and making money. I was still a dependent so my free time and money were still mine. A wonderful time in life. Anyways, it was 4/20, a national holiday (if you know you know) and because I had no real responsibilities, I was taking full advantage of the day. I had been on tinder for a few months and had been talking to a guy on and off for the majority of the time. He went by the name "Allure" because he was a music producer (surprise, surprise) which if you know anything about Atlanta, and the music scene, this was a red fucking flag. Every other nigga you meet in Atlanta is either trying to break into the music scene (via soundcloud rapper) or works as a promoter. Either way, they usually aren't about shit for real. At the time though, I was still fairly naïve, so I thought him being a producer was a step up. I was wrong. I'm actually not sure what made me feel like it would be a good idea to meet up with this guy. Our conversations weren't stimulating or consistent but here I was, believing we would connect in person. I think I was putting a lot of pressure on myself to jump into the dating scene because I needed the experience. Considering how impatient I was about losing my virginity, I think I was trying to push myself to make things happen in a timely manner. I remember feeling like I would be a failure if I graduated college before having sex. After this experience, I didn't feel like it was worth it anymore.

Alright, let's get back to it. To celebrate the momentous occasion that is 4/20, one of my best friends, let's call her Li, decided to host a session at her apartment that evening. Randomly, Allure who said I could call him "Al", and I had started conversing again that week and per

usual, he wanted to meet up. I immediately started stressing over when would be the best time. To alleviate my worries, Li thought it would be a good idea to invite him to the session. It would be low stakes and low stress because I would be amongst friends, making it a comfortable and safe environment. This was all true, however, I overthink everything so nothing is low stress for real. I'm always concerned about what I look like, am I gonna be able to relax, will people find me interesting and fun, etc. This night, I tried to put all that aside and decided to go through with letting him come to the session. Even before it started though I had this nagging feeling that it wasn't gonna go the way I wanted. I tried to ignore the feeling, chalking it up to nerves (which I often do with my intuition), but the feeling wouldn't go away. For good reason too. Before Al even arrived, me and my friends had started the night off smoking, so my nerves had gone down a bit but they were still there. Before we even got deep into it, I got a call from Al, saying that he was trying to find exactly how to pull into the complex. I did my best to direct him and I even went downstairs so that he would see me when he pulled in and show him where to park. When the car pulled up, Al jumped out before the car even came to a full stop. That didn't sit right with me because you're so eager to see a person you've never met that you have a lack of regard for your safety? That does NOT turn me on. I need to see some better self-control. Even still, I ignored all of this and took Al and his artist, whose name I don't remember, into Li's place.

When I got in, I realized that more of my friends had shown up which was both great and terrible. Everybody would either witness the inception of my first relationship or watch me crash and burn with this man. Guess which one actually happened? Don't work too hard guessing, I'm gonna tell you regardless. As soon as we got in, I introduced them to everyone, then I told Al, he and his friend could sit on the couch and get comfortable. Being the anxious person that I am, I chose to avoid Al by standing in the kitchen and chatting with my friends because I knew if I

went over there I would have to 1. talk to him alone and 2. face the inevitable fact that this nigga was kind of a weirdo. Like, I just felt it in my spirit. Finally, my friends forced me to go sit with him, which I suppose was fair because he was my guest. I went and sat next to him in the last seat on the couch and I immediately regretted it. This man started talking to me about some nonsense that I did not care about nor do I recall because hello, I was high out of my mind. In my defense, I didn't even realize this man was talking to me until I looked over at Li's sister and her roommate who were damn near in tears over our interaction. They of course offered ZERO support to my struggling ass. Then, as we were passing around the various apparatus', Al wanted to work on his "beats" which I thought was inappropriate because we are in the middle of a rotation! There is an etiquette to maintain. On top of that, he then tried to interrupt my flow during the session by asking me to hold his computer steady so he could solidify a beat. I politely declined of course. And I will say that I might be nitpicky about my smoking environment because one of the things that I enjoy the least is someone not honoring the vibe and talking throughout and BOY was this man a talker. At some point, he even started talking to the television, and I don't mean just responding, no, really talking. To this day I am still not sure what the context was for him talking to the TV because I had zoned out. At that point, I was embarrassed and just trying to act like the situation wasn't happening. Now we were in the red flag territory.

The absolute last thing that pushed the entire evening over the edge was Al trying to commandeer the speaker so he could play his own music and really got upset when my friend refused. All evening, everyone else was talking, laughing, vibing to the music but me? I was stuck wondering how I had even gotten myself into this mess. Now he wanted to subject us to his music and then had the nerve to be upset when we were obstinate? We didn't even know him or

his subpar ass beats. This was the final red flag. I knew we weren't tripping cause even his artist stepped in after a few minutes and said "Bruh, let's just go" which kudos to the artist because I remember him chilling and being laid back as fuck, which is what you're supposed to do when you enter someone else's space. So, after this, there was only one option for the passive person I was at this time: I acted like I was leaving so that he would follow suit. I walked him back to his car and that was the last I ever saw of Allure the Producer.

We would text occasionally and he would still try to get me to hang out which was wild to me. He said he enjoyed himself though and I was glad that somebody did. So imagine my surprise when he texted me a few weeks later to tell me how "bougie" my friends were because he had tried to slide in one of their DM's and she responded negatively. He didn't understand because he said he "wasn't trying to marry the girl or anything" and that I "looked way better than her anyway". I guess I was supposed to take that as a compliment? I wasn't surprised though. Being the fat friend, you tend to get used to the idea that people won't find you the most attractive when you're with your friends. Which made it hard for me because all of my friends are beautiful. The majority of my life, I had crushes on guys who ended up liking or dating my friends later on. So, I was not surprised, however it still fucked me up because, I really invited this man over only for him to turn around and try to holler at one of my friends. Needless to say, this was the last time I EVER met up with someone from Tinder. Matter of fact I think I deleted the app for a while after that because it just wasn't worth it.

After that experience, I realized, what I craved wasn't sex, not really. Yes, I was extremely curious about this activity that seemed to rule our society, but my curiosity wasn't enough to sway me. I wasn't just shallowly looking for sex as I had planned, otherwise, I would have had it already. No, I was looking for something more, something that I couldn't get from

other people. I was looking for validation in myself. I wanted to know that somebody was attracted to my body, and not just in a passive way. I realized how unhealthy what I was doing to myself was, so I began to disengage and reevaluate. It really wasn't as intentional as I am making it sound, as there were a lot of things going on in my life that prevented me from even focusing on my sex life.

For one, I was graduating in May so I was finishing classes and internships, while working a job and trying to keep up with my social life. Everything was actually going really well for the most part. I was booked and busy all spring semester. I had even gotten accepted into the Couple and Family Therapy program at Thomas Jefferson University, which was my top choice for graduate school. I had only applied to three programs because I was so set on TJU. It was the only school that offered CFT with a concentration in Sex Therapy, which I strongly wanted to get into. I had wanted to become a family therapist since I was in middle school and then I found out in college that specializing in issues pertaining to sexuality was only an additional certification. It felt like kismet. My entire world opened up.

Doing further research I found a program that not only provided a family therapy degree and helped students attain hours that would go toward their sex therapy certification? It was a match and I was immediately committed. Although the school was in Philadelphia which was kind of intimidating since I had never lived more than an hour away from my hometown, I was fully invested in moving across the country if I was accepted into this program. So, imagine my surprise when not only was I accepted, I was offered a scholarship! It didn't make much of a dent in the overall fees but it still felt like a positive sign to me. I officially committed to the school not too long after I was accepted. I paid my acceptance fee and began planning my move to Philly.

Unfortunately (and fortunately but we'll get to that later) that move never happened. I'm currently sitting my Black ass in Atlanta, where I have lived for the past six years, typing this thesis right now. This decision would be surprising for damn near anyone I had a semblance of a conversation with between the months of March and May 2017. I was excited to let everyone know I was getting the fuck up out of Georgia to start my new life in one of the "litest" cities in the country. Me, a little ole girl from Macon, GA. So what would make me derail my plans? A few weeks before I graduated, I received some news that turned my entire world upside down. Unfortunately, it wasn't surprising, it just confirmed my worst fears.

For a few months, my mother had been having some health issues that she couldn't find the root of. She was convinced that it was nothing serious, and I was inclined to believe her since she had several different doctors handling her medical care. She had even been hospitalized in January of that year and then released by the medical team with them stating that the issue she was experiencing would be alleviated with a routine procedure. If something was truly wrong, they would've told her, right? I guess not because there I was finding out months after her hospital visit that my mother had stage four stomach cancer. The cancer had metastasized so severely that they didn't even know the true origin of it, just that it was somewhere in the intestinal track. It didn't matter either way honestly. What mattered was that things had changed and I had some decisions to make. Me and my mother were very close.

We spoke on the phone almost every day when I was in undergrad. If I was in Macon, you could find me in her room, at her job, running errands with her. We even sat in the same pew together every time we went to church despite the fact that the younger adults had been sitting in the audience together for as long as I could remember but I never felt the need to leave her side. When I was young, we butted heads a lot but as an adult, she had become one of my closest

confidants. So of course, I spoke to my mother about everything and she was adamant that I should still move to Philly and live out my dreams. She understood how much it meant to me to go but she also knew my heart. She knew that since I had gotten that phone call I had already decided not to go. It was an easy decision. My mother was my heart, she had taken care of me my entire life so it was a no brainer that I would stay and help. Thankfully, the universe had provided me with a way to ensure a fairly smooth transition into my new plan.

Remember those other two programs I had gotten into? They came in handy here. Both of them were in Georgia but one was in Macon and the other in Atlanta. The only problem is that the programs were different. On one hand, there was the program in Macon which was also a Family therapy program that was good but still wasn't my top choice in programs. I tend to be an all or nothing person so that fact really bothered me. On top of that it was in Macon, a place that I was not keen on being. The price of attendance was comparable to the program I wanted to go to in Philly but they weren't talking money either. It didn't feel like the place I needed to be at that time in my life. The third program I had gotten into was really kind of random. During my sophomore year of college, I had taken Introduction to Women's Studies and I felt like I had really found my niche. We learned about concepts and systems that I had always experienced but never had the language to express. Since then, my interest had been piqued. I even considered minoring in Women's Studies but was too afraid to risk finishing late, so I decided against it. That turned out to be a bad decision that I've made peace with so we'll move on. However, while I was researching graduate programs, I came across a program at Georgia State University for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. I thought "Well this certainly looks like something I would be interested in" and I was right. I had about five programs on my list for grad school applications and only committed to three of them.

The WGSS program was the last one I applied to because they kept extending the deadline and I KNEW. This must be meant for me, the person with some of the worst time management skills I had ever seen. I perused the website to make sure it was right for me. Some of the faculty interests and courses offered aligned with my interests and that was that. I made sure to finish my application by the March deadline. Then the funniest thing happened: I was actually accepted. It was unexpected because one, I didn't have much Women's Studies education under my belt and two, my GPA was sketchy. I didn't feel like I was the most viable candidate for this program. Somedays I still don't but regardless I will tell anyone that the Institute for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Georgia State saved my fucking life but we will get more into that later. The point is, I had decided to commit to this program later than I was probably supposed to but in time to still be a part of the 2017 cohort.

But before I could get there, I still had a summer to get through. So, my post-graduation summer, I spent working two jobs, taking my mother back and forth to doctor's appointments a few times a week, searching for a place to live in Atlanta, traveling a bit and hanging out with my friends. It was one of the best summers I had ever had. I spent so much time with people who truly loved me and it was the last time I ever had without real responsibilities. I lived at home and I still had a decent looking savings account. The possibilities were endless.

And of course, once grad school started, I didn't even have time to focus on anything other than what I absolutely had to. This was a different world for me. I hadn't planned to be here, at this school, in this program, but it was exactly what I needed at the time. That first year of grad school really served as a tremendous growth period for me. For the first time in my life, I lived alone and paid bills, so I had to learn to be self-sufficient. I had to learn how to balance my time when there were no consistent assignments, in-class exams or quizzes, to keep me accountable.

We primarily had writing assignments that were due throughout the semester and the final papers at the end. That was new for me. This completely changed my mindset. I had to actually take time to get to know myself. I had never really delved into the Women's Studies discipline, yet here I was, doing it for the first time, at an advanced level. I doubted myself a lot, but just like with living alone, I had to become self-sufficient. It felt like such a struggle, a journey that would never end. But really, it was an awakening.

My entire mindset changed, the way I viewed the world, and ultimately how I viewed myself became much more, gentle. For the first time ever, I wasn't worried about what I looked like. I wasn't worried that people were always staring at my fat when I was giving presentations, I found an accepting home, that privileged my thoughts and feelings. The knowledge that I gained equipped me with so much power, that it even started to reach outside the classroom. Dare I say, I actually started loving myself? I felt more confident and that made me feel attractive. I wasn't as bogged down by these societal expectations because they had no material consequences for me. I will talk more about this in the following chapter, but I began dressing more freely, interacting more freely, and during the summer before my second year of grad school, IT happened. I actually "lost my virginity". I hate that language of "losing" your virginity. It's not lost, I know exactly where it is of course. I was there when it happened. In retrospect, that was an extremely interesting experience. One I don't regret, but I do frequently examine what type of mindset I was in to let it happen the way it did but, you live and you learn.

Let me set the scene though: It's a hot, Atlanta summer evening, the first of July to be exact. It was a Sunday but since it was the summer we really had nothing better to do than go out because we weren't working for real. Me and a couple of my friends decided to go have a Sunday funday which started with an evening happy hour. Then we continued on to a bar near

my house. When we arrived, they were doing spoken word, which we weren't really feeling but they had five dollar Long Island's, which we were committed to so we stayed. I ended up having between three and five of the Long Islands, which is how the night ended up where it did. I was also wearing what I refer to as my "Lucky Hoefit" so I needed to stay and be seen. It consisted of a cute white skirt with beige stripes, a black strappy crop top, and platform sandals.

Of course, my face was beat to the Gods and my hair was bouncing and behaving despite the midsummer humidity. I could feel the favor over my life that evening. After a few minutes, the spoken word portion of the evening concluded and the DJ made their presence known. I'm pretty sure they were playing popular hip hop and R&B hits but I was there for the alcohol so my memory's kind of fuzzy on the musical stylings. The atmosphere was pretty lively for a Sunday night so we really started enjoying ourselves as time went on. Halfway through the night we're standing at the bar, taking shots I presume but I can't be sure because drunk, and this nigga beside me kept bumping against me. I didn't think much of it because it was kind of crowded but finally he made some type of remark about my skin being soft. I said thank you, and then he rubbed my arm to emphasize his point. Now usually, I would get offended by some random touching me but I was drunk and horny by this time so instead I sparked a conversation with the man.

There are several things that stand out about this conversation in my hazy memory: One, he was drinking some type of beverage that he claimed would enable him to stay hard all night. At the time I didn't believe him but after our experience together, I would be inclined to say that the claims were not false. Two, I never learned this man's name in that conversation. I told him mine and I thought I knew his but I wouldn't find out until the second time we had sex that his name was not what I thought it was. So, I lost my virginity to someone whose name I didn't

know at all. Which turned out not to matter because he was not putting in the type of work that made me want to call it out or anything. The last thing I remember from our encounter that night is the fact that he never bought me a drink. I could be wrong about that but I'm pretty sure he didn't.

I don't know what made me so comfortable with him. I guess I really wasn't to be honest, I was just ready to have sex and this seemed like the best way to do it. What makes it so interesting is; we didn't even hang out consistently that night at the bar. He would randomly disappear for long periods of time and then show back up throughout the night. Somehow, during our meetups in the bar, we had come to the decision that he was gonna come home with me that night. I don't even remember us exchanging numbers at the time. However, as we were leaving, this man disappeared again! Since I had no way to contact him, I decided it wasn't meant to be and that I wasn't gonna stress over someone I didn't even know. Instead, me and my friends went next door to get something to eat before we made our way back to my place. As luck would have it, he strolled into the restaurant not too long after we got our food. He and I made the final decision there, over my curry goat and mac and cheese, that I would be getting my hymen broken that night.

Now for context, all night long my friend had been telling this man my business: that I was a virgin and I was ready to lose it. This sounds weird but this was very on brand for my friend. Let's call her, Nikki. Nikki was a few years older than me and we knew each other through a mutual friend from home. We had hung around each other for a couple years in groups during my visits to Macon, until our friend moved out of the city and we began hanging alone. She had recently moved to Atlanta to start a new job so we got together much more during the summer of 2018. I had consistently expressed interest in losing my virginity and she made it her

mission to be my wing woman in this process. Now what I didn't know about Nikki was, when she assists, goals are actually met. I have been a witness to her power numerous times. She even helped me bag two people in one night but that's a story for a different chapter.

The point is, she was determined. So, on the night that I met Rudy (my deflowerer) she was on ten. She was selling me to him the entire night. She made sure to tell him that I was out to lose my virginity and he could be the lucky nigga to find it if he was interested. He was interested in fucking but he didn't heed her words about it being my first time. He *did not* take it slow with me. I will spare the gory details but there was a lot of screaming (not from pleasure) and a lot of blood. Whenever, I describe losing my virginity in person, I often recount that it was one of the most painful experiences I have ever had. Almost traumatic. In later conversations with this man I would learn that he thought my friend was lying because he didn't know "that there were still virgins at this age" (I was 23) and that "I didn't look like a virgin" which makes a lot of sense. I've always been read as more sexual than I am because of my body. We will get further into that topic in the next chapter.

Even though that night was a blur, I still remember how I felt during the encounter. Like he wasn't listening when I said "slow down" "ouch, that hurts" "gently, please" and other pleadings for compassion. I really felt fearful at times that if I asked him to stop that he might not. I remember checking out during because I got so caught up in my mind as I often tend to do with things like: "I can't believe this is happening" "Why am I doing this?" "This is what I was so eager to do? This shit hurts" I swear at one point it actually got more painful when I thought it should be getting better and that was when I knew I needed to stop. So that's what I did, I asked him to stop, he kept going as if he didn't hear me. My heart nearly stopped. So louder I said, "STOP". I could tell that I had startled him but he said okay and stopped. I was so relieved I

almost cried. But I realize that moment could have turned out much differently for me. Here I was, with a strange man in my house, alone, without any weapons or real way to protect myself, for some dick that wasn't worth it. But I don't regret it because it kicked off the reckless life I claimed I always wanted to live and I made it out unscathed. When I reflect on this, especially with other people, I realize that the way in which this happened was kind of brutal. I do not view this as assault necessarily, but I also don't think my body was properly respected during this encounter. It's been a little over a year since this happened and I am just now beginning to really explore what this means for me and how it impacted my sexual experiences moving forward.

3.2 Chapter 2: A Fat Ass or a Fat Asssss? Thick vs. Fat: Size Implications

“I’m a thick bitch, I need tempo. Fuck it up to the tempo”- Lizzo

Am I fat or am I thick? Who cares because I still wasn’t getting fucked.

If you would’ve told me a few years ago, that I had size privilege, I would have laughed in your fucking face. Nothing about my experiences in my body has ever felt beneficial. Until around 2015, I couldn’t buy cute clothes in store, it felt like nobody was attracted to me, and I hated being in extremely public spaces. It even felt hard for me to be around my friends. I have always felt so fucking big. I had always been tall and I have always been wide. At my heaviest, which is currently, I am 5’8, about 270 pounds give or take a few (the stress of life has me fluctuating) and I have no ass, not much hip width, and a whole lot of stomach. I hold more of my weight in my upper body which has really derailed my dreams of being a video vixen but I digress.

At best, I could be called proportional and that’s on a good day. I felt like my clothes never fit right because my stomach was always the most visible in everything. Go figure, right. In my opinion, my life was no better off than any other fat person’s. Even though I had been deemed “medium fat” by the boy I liked in 7th grade that seemed to have no positive effect on my life. The boy who deemed me “medium fat” was Michael Lamar Thomas, III I believe. He was so fine to me that it made no sense. I thought I hid my interest well but, apparently, I did a really terrible job. Either way, my affections did not matter because he made it very clear that he was not into fat girls when he spent the entire first semester of our time together bullying me in

class. Regardless, I still had hope for us because I felt that my sparkling personality would win him over. In a strange turn of events, I was kind of right.

When second semester came around, this nigga actually started feeling me. Nothing had changed as far as my appearance. I was still fat. He and I had started to build a friendship and I was very much a class clown so I kept everyone entertained. Still though, he would not come full force with his affection for me. I would just so happen to catch him staring at me every now and then. Soon, he stopped bullying me completely and he kind of even accepted my weight at some point. We had countless conversations with each other that year but the one that is most vivid is the one where he said I wasn't "that big". We were sitting in our first period math class, and I can't be sure what prompted the conversation. I assume I made a joke about my own weight (that was very much my thing) and then Michael said, "You know, Kara you're not even that big, you're more like medium". I don't remember what I said after that but I remember being elated because finally, I thought people began to see me the way that I had always seen myself. Only now am I coming to terms with the way that I and others hierarchize fatness. The comment of only being "medium" gave me so much validation that I really held on. I stopped associating myself with fat for a while. I was "thick" or "PHAT" which stands for Pretty Hot and Tempting but I did not want to be associated with actually being fat. However, this was impossible because I am indeed, and always have been fat. But I began to understand that the association between being fat and being thick was that one was the good type of fat, and the other was the bad. Being "thick" means, you're fat but it's all in the "right" places as they say.

Despite Michael's revelation, I didn't believe that he had suddenly began to have an appreciation for fat girls or fatness at all. I think it was just me. Not to brag but my personality is pretty fucking awesome and it's rare for people not to like me once they get to know me. Over

the course of the year, Michael and I had gotten to know each other quite well. Even still, him liking me took me off guard. It obviously took him off guard too because after ridiculing me for how fat I was the majority of the school year, he had to rationalize his attraction to me by reframing my body as only “medium fat” instead of just fat fat. Obviously, being attracted to a fat girl was unacceptable to him. This wasn’t surprising though because when I looked around at the heavier girls who were getting chosen, they were what would be considered thick. They might’ve had a stomach but they also had the hips and ass to match and nobody ever called them fat. I understood this because culturally, that was the ideal. Black men loved wide hips and a fat ass as long as a slim waist was included. So, to be considered attractive, Michael had to force me into that category. Thus, I became medium fat.

There was also the issue of me being larger than most boy’s my age, including Michael. Most adolescent boys don’t want to be with a girl that’s bigger than them. This is the time when they are coming to terms with their masculinity and they still tend to have superficial views. This speaks to the overarching theme of fatness being intimidating or aggressive. Being a girl or woman with more weight on you (not in the right places) is often read as masculine. As stated by Cecilia Hartley in *Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship* “fat women are viewed as unfeminine, unattractive, masculine, out of the running” (69). And at our young age, boys were not willing to challenge the status-quo in regards to fat girls. They wanted girls who looked like they could become the women in music videos, which were very popular at the time. Pretty face, light skin- flowing hair and stacked bodies. It didn’t get much better as we got older either.

With the rise in social media, the hierarchy only became reinforced. With the system of visible likes on pictures, it’s easy to see who is viewed as more attractive. It became much easier

to view a bodily ideal that couldn't be attained. Even if you didn't encounter these people in real life, an interaction only became a click away. As an active member of the social media generation, I can tell you that seeing these images so much, was very impactful in a negative way. Studies show that being able to so easily view images of peers that fit the bodily ideal produced increased bodily dissatisfaction amongst women (Fardouly, Deidreichs, Vartanian, et. al, 2015). Of course, this makes sense because it's one thing to view a celebrity all dolled up on T.V. or in a magazine and understand their image as an unrealistic standard of beauty. However, it's another thing to log into Instagram and see one of your classmates pictures do numbers because of how attractive they are. It can really fuck you up in the head because seeing people you interact with on a daily basis being praised for their looks while you can barely break 37 likes on your best day, tends to affect your self-esteem. Especially with the rise in Instagram models. Women literally get paid just for posting pictures. I'm not hating, I support the hustle, but I can't lie and say it hasn't made me consider taking a trip to the Dominican Republic to get my body done, so I can get on the grind too.

My shape is very specific and damn near non-existent. I can almost get away with being proportional but I have no hips or ass. Just thighs, stomach, boobs and a whole lot of back fat. But how did I even as a young girl even know that such distinctions existed, and so starkly at that. It had been engrained in me. As Da'Shaun Harrison states, "Mainstream—whereby I mean hegemonic—powers have created a dichotomy between 'thicc/k' and 'fat'. Anti-fat domination determines who gets to be the former and who is always understood as the latter. This is how desirability/beauty politics show up in our language. The reality is that these two terms are the same; thicc/k is fat, fat is thicc/k. how one defines and understands beauty is what informs their language around other people's weight and appearance" (Harrison, 2018). This is familiar

because defining beauty through body size is prevalent in the Black community. We have a lot of nicknames for Black women surrounding body size. “Brick House” “Stacked” “Stallion” “Coke Bottle”, all referring to the curvature of a woman’s body. That is how “thick women” are categorized.

As I got older, that proved false. The commentary on my body from others about my size continued to be a theme. Whenever I would discuss weight, sizing, or shopping amongst friends or acquaintances they would generally respond with a resounding “You are not that big” or “You can’t weigh that much!” which was always confusing to me because why would I lie? It’s not like being over 200 pounds and wearing sizes in the double digits is desirable. As confusing as these claims were, they did serve to complicate my understanding of weight distribution and fatness. Weight distribution is a funny thing. I thought this may have just been strictly a skinny person perspective at first, but even fat people often can’t reckon their standards for what a fat body actually is versus what they think it should be.

In *The Fat Studies Reader*, Lara Frater discusses her issues with the depiction of fat characters in romance novels. She states “In the 2004 fat-to-thin fantasy *Night Swimming* by Robin Schwarz, main character Charlotte weighs 253 pounds but happens to be a size 18, which is proportionally ridiculous, but it keeps the character below size 20” (Frater, 236). Her critique is valid as far as only using sizes below a 20 as a means of regulating desirability, but she was wrong about the proportion issue. Height wasn’t mentioned but it is completely plausible for this woman to be 253 pounds while being a size 18. I am indeed a solid 270 pounds at least, but I have been a consistent size 18 since I was in high school. At that time, having such a large clothing size seemed like the end of the world to me. In truth, it just wasn’t my time yet. My weight has increased by at least 20 pounds in the past six years but my sizing has remained fairly

steady. I can alternate depending on what the range of clothing is (misses, women's, juniors etc.) but they all translate to being a size 18.

In the current state of plus-size fashion, most companies cater to sizes twelve to twenty. They rarely go above a 22 or the equivalent 3x. In the past few years, companies have begun to do more inclusive sizing, but initially, fat women were lucky to find a size above a large in straight sized stores, especially, junior ones. So, when people would look at me and get surprised as to why I couldn't shop in regular stores, I would be confused. I thought my fatness was visible, overbearing even. However, when the new wave of plus-sized fashion came about, my privilege was hard to ignore. When I look at models on websites, I don't have to work too hard to imagine what the clothes would look like on me. Now, I can walk into most major retailers who have a plus-sized range and be fine. Being a size eighteen, is still considered a desirable size amongst the fat community. When I was younger though, this meant nothing to me. In middle and high school, I could probably count on two hands the number of fat girls in our school. It just seemed to be the most uncommon thing. I was always the biggest in the class.

When I was really young, Cheryl, an adult in my life started calling me "chunky monkey" but she was really the only person who said anything. Plus, she was fat, and she seemed to say it with affection so I wasn't sure how to take it. She also seemed to be very positive about her body and she was married, which meant that men found her attractive. In my young mind, that was all that mattered. I began feeling a little self-conscious but it wasn't full blown. Then BOOM one person nicknamed me "elephant" in the fifth grade and teased me the whole year. It was all downhill from there of course. I went to middle school the following year and my insecurities just continued to grow. I went to an all new school zone because they opened a new school that just happened to include the street I lived on. Only a select few people from

elementary school ended up coming to the same middle school as me and only a couple were in any of my classes. I had gone to school with the same people basically all of my life, so to be alone, in a new situation was basically psychological torture for me.

Starting sixth grade was the first time I learned that I do not handle change well. I cried a lot during the first few months and I hated going to school. We also had to wear uniforms which worked for me in elementary, but I had started to grow out of my clothing and had to start shopping for bigger sizes. This is before cute plus size clothes were more accessible and since I had just discovered I was fat, I didn't know where to shop for cute clothes. So instead of finding out, my dad took me to Academy Sports, where we purchased some ugly ass, baggy khakis and non-descript collared shirts which only served to further plummet my fragile self-esteem. Every moment that I was in the school I was self-conscious. All I did was mind my business, do my work and try not to bother anybody so I could be saved some embarrassment. My anxiety was so bad that in my sixth grade year, I burst into tears because some boy made a comment about my subway sandwich that I had brought for lunch. The comment had nothing to do with me but I thought he was making fun of me because that's what I had prepared for. I was absolutely miserable.

Little did I know that at that time, the reason for me being so miserable, actually had more to do with me transitioning to middle school than being fat. Being forced out of my comfort zone, amplified my insecurities, and sent my sheltered sensibilities into a tailspin. Don't get me wrong, I was still bullied but I got bullied in elementary school too, the difference though, was at least I had a social circle to buffer some of the tension. In the beginning of sixth grade, I had no one. In seventh grade, things improved remarkably though. I made some friends and finally found my niche. I started taking pre-AP classes which was better than the gifted program

because majority of my class was Black. I started getting more involved socially and became more comfortable with myself. This was also a big year because I met my best friend and my first love (unrequited, of course) all in the same class.

Gaining Knowledge and Inspo through Social Media Representation

I started to really hate the way I looked and fantasized about how much better my life would get when I became skinny. Obviously, that never happened. I was fat all through high school and college. Hell, I'm still fat as hell. The only difference is, I actually appreciate my body. There is still a daily struggle to fully love and accept my body but I no longer feel unattractive, restricted, or ashamed. This didn't randomly happen though. I had a lot of help. At the end of my high school career, a social media website called "Instagram" became very popular amongst my age group. Being that we had lived through the invention and subsequent death of popular websites like Myspace and Facebook, my peers lived for any medium that would allow them to share memories and moments at the click of a button. I, on the other hand, was not particularly excited about this new phenomena because I wasn't keen on sharing pictures of myself for the consumption and approval of others. Yeah, I had a Facebook but that wasn't the primary function. I barely took pictures for that. So when Instagram started circulating, I intended to wait it out.

Nothing had caught on as heavily since Facebook so I wasn't too worried about it. I also had an old Android phone that barely even took pictures or connected to the internet so I really wasn't pressed. This was my excuse for anyone who asked why I had not yet signed up for Instagram. I figured I would bide my time until this Instagram faded into the background like the other sites. If you're reading this in the year of our Lord 2019, then you know how absolutely

wrong I was. The shit did not fade whatsoever, it only got stronger as time progressed. I decided to make my peace with the website as intended, and when I got my first iPhone for Christmas in 2012, I did just that. I went back and checked because of course, the first pic I ever posted is still up and its time stamped, December 30th, 2012. This was the beginning of my tumultuous relationship with social media as we now know it. My past interactions on Myspace and Facebook had been of low consequence for the most part but I felt with Instagram, things might be different. I'm pretty sure I expected a negative result but it actually changed my life for the better.

As I got more into Instagram, I started coming across plus-size beauty bloggers. This discovery literally opened up my world. I wish I could remember, the very first account I followed because that was the beginning of the rest of my life. It could've possibly been either Gabi Fresh, two well-known OG plus-size fashion bloggers. Regardless of who it was exactly, after I found the first account, they started to lead me to others. It became a chain reaction so much so that at this point and before I knew it, I was a part of the community. I gained so much from them. My mission started off simply as a way to find clothing inspiration, which I got but as a bonus, I gained insight and comfort. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I didn't have any fat friends growing up. I had nobody who understood what I was going through, no one to share clothes with, and nobody to look up to. I didn't even see my adult life as being fat. When I envisioned my future, I was slim. I didn't find any happiness in my continuing to live a fat life because that's not something I had ever witnessed but following these accounts showed me something else. I began to see adult women who were fat, happy, AND stylish. Although, these accounts were helpful, they really were just the tip of the iceberg. I began to appreciate my body more but I hadn't come to terms with why I really hated it in the first place. Then I made it into

the more revolutionary fat sector of Instagram and I can say that things took off from there and I have not looked back since. I met one of my biggest influencers in this glorious arena of fat goddesses: Ashleigh Shackelford.

Ashleigh Shackelford, known on social media as @ashleighthelion, is a very vocal voice on body positivity and inclusion and is very well known on social platforms. Her Instagram bio states that she is a Black Fat Femme, a writer, cultural educator, and a visual artist. I was intrigued by not only her colorful fashion sense but also her commentary on all things liberatory for Black, fat, queer, and femme people. She was so groundbreaking for me because unlike the other accounts, I followed whose bodies were fat but still along the lines of conventional, Ashleigh has a starkly non-normative body. She is visibly fat and that appealed to me because I could relate. I remember one of the first ever images that shook my world. She posed in a fitted dress showing off her chest and visible belly line and she captions the picture “I love my belly. I’m not in the business of internalizing that bigger bellies and guts are ugly/ hypo-feminine/ unworthy. I’m not in the business of acting like my body doesn’t change shape/ size depending on my positioning. I’m fat standing up and fat sitting down. And I’m literally cute as fuck either way. 📍 #BellyGameTooStrong” (Shackelford, 2016).

This disrupts the overall image portrayed by many plus-size women in media. There is a big trend of fat women, still trying to appear slimmer and smoother to appear more palatable. Most bloggers often preach the importance of shapewear in order to look the best in tighter fitting outfits. They will also discuss posture and discuss the best way to appear in pictures, which generally includes sitting up straight or standing so the pudge is hidden. Instead Ashleigh challenges that by sitting down, embracing her full figure and not conforming by picking positions deemed most flattering. Even though, I still love me some Spanx, I have gotten much

more comfortable with the way that my body looks with and without them. Even with them, they aren't miracle workers, everybody can still see that I am fat and I'm perfectly content with that. Plus-sized women are ridiculed for their weight, deemed unattractive, and have been excluded from the mainstream media. The body positivity movement has encouraged plus-sized women to embrace themselves, and social media has given many fat women a platform to challenge societal norms. People have begun to take notice as seen in the increase in and attention to plus-size fashion lines as well as the rise of plus-sized models.

Dating fat women has even gained more attention in media, with the artist Drake coining the line "Yeah, that's right I like my girls BBW, type that like to suck you dry then eat some lunch with you. Yeah, so thick that everybody in the room feels so uncomfortable" (Drake, 2014). Even artist 21 Savage acknowledged his attraction to bigger women in the song "Red Opps" saying "...You can keep the skinny bitch, cuz I like a fat ass and thighs" (21 Savage, 2016). Despite what seems to be an uptick in the appreciation of fat women, there is still a clear divide on what type of fat women are being accepted. Both of the rappers mentioned previously have never even been seen with an actual fat woman. 21 dated Amber Rose, who of course has a coke-bottle shape but I would be surprised if she wore above a size six. And Drake has dated a laundry list of women with varying shapes, many who are also conventionally curvy, who again, probably do not wear above a size eight and that's generous. The hierarchy of size is still being reinforced in pop culture even if it does appear to follow the positive trend of bodily acceptance. Women with less conventionally attractive shapes are still being marginalized, however.

Does Size Matter? Weight loss and Coming to Terms with Size Privilege

In high school, I tried to convince myself to lose weight in order to avoid ridicule and win favor (internally gagging) with the boys. So much so, that I tried twice, quite unsuccessfully, to lose weight. The first time I attempted weight loss, I was in the ninth grade. Another difficult transition for me because I ended up transferring back to the first school district I was in. I had spent three years at Howard Middle School with the thought that I would transition to the feeder school, Howard High. Instead, I had to go to Central. This was devastating considering I had spent all those years getting used to the other district. Puberty is a very fragile time and I had just begun to get a handle on things. I started coming into myself a little, found my niche in choir classes and even met some of my very best friends in middle school, most of whom I am still friends with today. Imagine my disdain when I found out my street had gotten rezoned back into the other district! It was too much for my adolescent heart to take and I was truly distraught. It was so bad that my father even started working on a way for me to transfer to my feeder school but I still had to start at Central. It was a hard time.

Central High School is one of the best schools in Macon, Georgia but only for one reason: The International Baccalaureate Program. Basically, the gifted program on steroids. I was familiar with it because Central was my brother William's alma mater and he had completed the program. That was a dark four years. It really wasn't even something that you could just do, you had to apply and be accepted. I had actually applied to the program when I found out I had to go to Central but I hadn't been accepted. This made things even worse. Central is in what people might refer to the rougher part of town. At the time, this felt like a problem because I had never been to a majority Black school and I was nervous. All my life I had been ridiculed for "talking white" so I was primarily concerned about not being able to relate. People assumed I

was bougie and on top of being fat, I just did not need the extra attention. I had just gotten past that at my other school, now I was going to have to start this process all over again.

So I started at Central High School and just as I expected, I hated it. I had found a few people that I knew from middle school to cling onto but for the most part, I was alone. For the first time, I had to be around people who didn't know me, in classes filled to capacity, without anyone to talk to. It was my worst nightmare. I spoke to nobody but everyday my anxiety was on one-hundred because I was just waiting on somebody to tease me. There were a few times when people did but for the most part, people left me alone. Now, I hated feeling so out of place at Central but one of the highlights of being at this school was how attractive the students were. The boys were FINE and the girls were so damn beautiful. It was distracting in the best way. This fact also emphasized how unattractive I felt though. So halfway through the year, I made up my mind that I was going to change things.

My mom had a friend who had been doing Weight Watchers for years so I decided I wanted to commit. My parents (mainly my father) had always tried to find ways to help me lose weight so they were on board as long as I was serious, thus began my journey with Weight Watchers. Personally, I don't think children should ever be subjected to this kind of situation but, everyone thought it was a good idea so here I was. If you've ever been to WW, then you know how humiliating this experience can be. The premise of the program is to provide a space for people all suffering from the same burden, chronic fatness, to come in and support each other through a lifestyle change. WW would never refer to their program as a diet, because it's based on "counting points" not calories in an effort to teach portion control and discipline. It was so revolutionary because you could eat whatever you wanted as long as you stay within your point limit for the day.

The first time I went, there was a consultation in which I was weighed, discussed my long term weight goals which were then converted into manageable weekly goals. I was allotted a certain number of points to eat throughout the week and to keep myself on track, I was only supposed to eat a certain amount per day. The program included materials that taught you how to determine the number of points in a food, a list of foods that were WW approved to make it easier, as well as recipes and workout plans that could help you best maximize your points. What never made sense to me is the marketing. They made it out to be this new way to lose weight that wasn't a diet. You didn't count calories but instead you counted points. In order to stay within your point limit and actually sustain yourself throughout the day, you had to restrict yourself to lower calorie, lower fat foods. If it looks like a diet, tastes like a diet, works like a diet, wouldn't we just call that a...diet? No, because that wouldn't make us feel as good, would it?

Either way, I set forth with my...lifestyle change. It was difficult of course because I was the only one in the house doing the program. My parents did their best to help but there is only so much one could do. I was expected to eat shit like salads and fruit while everybody else was somewhere in the house eating chicken wings. It just felt like torture. To combat this feeling, WW provided a support group environment during weekly meetings. They gathered during various days throughout the week for about an hour to check-in and offer support, as a way to reinvigorate those on the wagon. I usually went on Saturday mornings.

For my first meeting, I think I actually ended up going on a weekday. The primary demographic were middle-aged white women, which made sense because we were on the Northside of town. Because of the divide in Macon, most of the more affluent members lived in the northern part of the city. There was a decent amount of people there which made me nervous because I was not ready to be on display like that. Thankfully, there weren't many men who

attended the meetings, if any because that really would have spiked my anxiety. I didn't interact much with the members outside of the person I came with because I was usually the only teenager there. I was also one of the few people of color for the most part. I think I even felt a little self-conscious in the beginning because most of the attendees had either reached their goal and were working on maintaining, or very close to reaching it. I was confused because I thought I signed up for Weight Watchers and I felt like we were sorely lacking on the weight portion of the equation.

I will say that I know the people were well-intentioned however, just by virtue of the program set up, meetings could give off an "us against them" vibe. The leader of the group was always a success story who had been able to maintain their goal weight. I never saw a leader that was above a size 10 and that's generous. I also don't remember many, if any, leaders of color. This created a hierarchy of sorts because the leader is supposed to be the prototype that we should aspire to but safe to say that I could never be a size 8, middle aged white woman. I never found anyone that I could really relate to besides the woman I actually came with. I encountered someone my age exactly one time throughout my tenure in the program. Structured weight loss is not necessarily kid friendly though, so I get it. I just never really understood where I fit in. I never made it below 200 pounds and I rarely met my weekly goals. I really wasn't a very interactive member. There seemed to be a kinship within the meetings that I just couldn't get with. I spoke occasionally but for the most part, I could've been invisible.

Every meeting started off the same: you come in, go the counters and get in line to get weighed. There are staff, usually people who have been through the program, who operate the scales. You hand over your handy dandy booklet that tracks your weekly progress and after you finish, the staff records your new weight and either gives you a star to place to place in your

booklet that signifies that you lost weight or, they leave a blank space to remind you of your failure for the week. I understand that this was supposed to be some sort of motivation but really? I couldn't even get some type of "You'll get them next week, fatty!" sticker? Something? I guess not. As a way to further boost morale, attendees were encouraged to share their weight loss wins for the week as a way to not only gain recognition, but motivate those who are struggling. This usually happened in the beginning of the meetings as a way to warm everybody up and break the ice. This was fine, except it reinforced the idea that they were seemingly trying to get away from: all weight loss is good weight loss. The "lifestyle change" rhetoric seemed to go out the window when it came to the actual weight loss strategy.

I remember one particularly off putting instance that I had during a meeting that hasn't left my memory to this day. Spring break of my freshman year of high school, in the middle of my weight loss journey, I began to feel kind of icky. I went to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina like I did every year and had a pretty decent time. However, toward the end of the trip I started feeling super lethargic and had some cold like symptoms. At first, I thought I had just gotten a cold and expected to get better within the next day or so. After being home for a bit though, I noticed that I did NOT feel better at all. I actually got worse. I had a high ass fever and my body felt like it was perishing. I wasn't eating, couldn't do much but sleep, and my body ached even though I had done zero physical activity. Growing up I rarely got sick, so my parents knew that this was not a good sign. After a day or so, they took me to the med stop one evening so we could finally find out what was wrong. To my surprise and chagrin, I had somehow caught Infectious Mononucleosis, more commonly known as Mono. For any other teenager, catching what is referred to as the "kissing disease" might not be shocking because hello, teenagers kiss. I did not though. I had zero contact with anyone else's lips. I don't even remember sharing drinks

with people at that point because teens are so nasty and that kept me fearful. I'm pretty sure my parents were side-eyeing the fuck out of me because they thought I was out here being "fast" but no, I really had no idea as to how I would've contracted this. I couldn't even remember being around anybody sick.

Back to Weight Watchers though. Because I had mono, I ended up losing eight pounds in about a week because I had no appetite. After weighing in at the meeting immediately following my illness, I was congratulated and given that very sought after gold star for my "accomplishment". In order to motivate the group, of course I shared my amazing eight pound weight loss for the week. I was met with praise and applause from everyone which did of course made me feel good. When asked by the group leader how I accomplished it, I told them the truth that I had gotten sick so I basically wasn't able to eat for the week. I can't remember exactly what her reply was but I think it was something like "We'll take it". There was probably some type of further encouragement like "keep up the good work" but that could just be the bitterness speaking. Still, the positive response to my illness induced weight loss is pretty fucked up. At that point they truly didn't care about my health because at least I was closer to being thin. Damn a lifestyle change, this was clearly a by any means necessary situation and as an impressionable 14 year old, this is not the type of messaging I needed to be hearing. For all intents and purposes, I was fairly healthy. My blood pressure was good, cholesterol was fine, no major health problems and still people were rejoicing in the fact that I was a few pounds lighter, even though I could've lost my life? What a wild experience. Thankfully, that was the highlight of my tenure in Weight Watchers. After that, I fell off and left the program about a year later. I have no regrets. I only wish my parents would have been able to convey the message that my body was fine and

didn't need to be changed. I know they were only doing what they thought was best though so I don't fault them.

Fortunately, this was not my last encounter with a weight loss program. The second however, had a much healthier outcome though. After I graduated high school, my father decided I would go on a diet. To this day, I am unsure of my father's motivations behind wanting me to lose weight. He and my mother always did their job of instilling how beautiful I was while also telling me my weight was an issue. This was confusing especially because my father is a large man and I never saw him make any effort to change his lifestyle. Also, a lot of my family on his side is fat, including his two sisters. It only made sense that I would be fat because it was in my genes. His mixed messaging created this weird dysmorphia in the way that I related to myself. I could never really decide if I thought I was attractive or not. I thought my face was okay, I had nice hair and a pretty smile. But my body must have been the problem because even my parents wanted me to fix it.

I know it wasn't a health thing because we didn't have any major health issues from his side. Even if we did, he took no measures to improve our health outcomes. He was the primary cook in the house, yet he never tried to change the food we ate. He was the head of the household and whatever he said to do, we did. Yet, he never made much of an attempt to get us on a fitness plan. To me, it seemed as if he had an issue with my weight (I never expressed mine) but he didn't find it important enough to change. I felt like he wanted me to care more. Since my brother had taken it upon himself to lose weight when he was young, I think he felt I should do the same. Joke was on him, that wasn't my ministry. Still isn't clearly.

That summer was different though. My brother was home for a few months after graduating law school in order to prepare to take the Bar exam. William being home really made

a difference in my approach to weight loss because unlike the experience I had with Weight Watchers, his plan was more straightforward. We worked out every day, ate a limited amount of carbs, and we drank only water. Not only was his plan more manageable, but because of our relationship, it became more of a bonding activity than anything else. Besides a few key differences, me and my brother are basically the same person and we didn't even know until that summer. We had grown up in the same house together but our paths rarely intersected. William and I are exactly seven years and two days apart. Because of our large age gap, we never really spent much time together because we were always at such different developmental stages, so we never really got a chance to get close.

The summer of 2013 changed everything though. I had just turned eighteen and was headed off to college in the Fall. As I stated, William had just finished law school and was on his way to becoming a full time attorney after he took the Bar. I was maturing into adulthood and at 25, he was still straddling the line between adolescence and adulthood so we had finally caught up to each other! Plus, since he graduated from Morehouse and I was headed to Spelman, we spent a lot of time discussing his experiences and what I could expect in the AUC. We talked about parties, classes, and of course homecoming! We even started planning for the year that he would come down. I was most excited because I knew that I had someone to get my liquor for me.

When he wasn't studying for his exam, we spent our time either, sleeping, eating, in the gym and on weekends, we would go on outings and stuff to celebrate our discipline throughout the week. Hanging out so much gave us time catch up on all the things we missed during the first eighteen years of my life. We learned a lot about each other and became best friends because of it. Because William was actually focused on fitness for himself he had no real investment in my weight loss for real. I just happened to be tacked on to his regimen because my dad wanted me to

be. Will was more concerned with gaining weight, primarily in his upper body and building muscle. He was very concerned about strengthening his baby ass calves. Even though he was focused on his own thing, he was nice enough to construct a plan for me that was geared toward weight loss. He was very serious too. Like me, William had also been a fat child. Unlike me, William has determination and discipline, so he actually shed his baby fat the summer before he went to high school and had maintained it ever since. I had always been envious because I felt like he was the better sibling because he had overcome his issues with his body.

Before he lost weight, he was extremely self-conscious but after, this nigga fell in love with himself. He is also very smart, talented and extremely hard working. He had always been that way but after he became slim, this nigga became unstoppable. It only got worse after he went to college. If you've ever met a Morehouse nigga, then you know exactly what I'm talking about. I was extremely proud of him but also jealous. Everyone paid a lot of attention to him because he was the more accomplished, attractive sibling. Even MY friends were constantly asking about my "fine" older brother. Gross. Either way, maintaining his body and this image he created for himself was very important. That definitely translated into our fitness routine. Every single day Will and I went to the gym and ate together. There was no counting points and support groups yet this was the most successful I had ever been at actually sticking to a weight loss effort. I never had to really put any thought into anything because he cooked majority of the meals and orchestrated the workouts.

The most startling discovery of that summer was that I actually enjoyed working out. That summer I could actually be categorized as a gym rat. Sometimes, we were in the gym for hours, and we even did two-a-days sometimes. I hadn't set any goals because this whole workout diet plan situation wasn't my choice but, I was going to college in the Fall so my main aim was

to be in shape and feel better about myself before I went. Not having a rigid goal to meet really freed me of any harsh expectation for myself. When I focused solely on bettering myself and spending time with my brother instead of trying to reach some unrealistic standard tied to conventional notions of beauty, I actually enjoyed fitness related activities. Wild, right? It also helped that William never pressed me about committing to losing weight. He pushed me but he never made me go past my limits.

I am ashamed to say that, that summer, was the last time I worked out consistently. After starting college, I fell all out of routine and I never picked it back up and since then, my brother and I have never been in the same state for longer than a week. I wish I could've kept it up but I appreciate the experience for what it was. Before that, I was intimidated by the gym for sure. Now I have a more positive association and I really want to get back into it as a means of self-care rather than weight loss. Now that I have seen what my body can do, I am much more appreciative of it. I always correlated fitness with being thin but that's no longer the case. More than anything, I enjoyed the discipline it provided and I loved being in shape. It's quite refreshing to be able to walk up more than five stairs without getting winded. After I find some stability in my life, I intend to be more consistent with my gym routine but until then typing this paper is my main form of exercise.

At twenty-four, my relationship to my body is vastly different then when I was in middle school, lusting after Michael Thomas. Don't get me wrong, I let my dreams of being a video vixen fall to the wayside, but I would still love a fat ass and wide hips. I love my fat body but I still tend to uphold that ideal of "thickness" as my standard of beauty. I often look at myself in the mirror when I'm feeling unattractive and think of how much better off I would be if God had distributed like two of the pounds from my stomach into my ass. I don't need to be Buffy the

Body but damn, I just want a little something to match my thighs. The difference for me now though is that majority of the time, I really enjoy my body. I still have a ways to go but I would say I am at a good eighty percent with loving myself. I also don't think that anyone's quality of life should be reduced simply because they have a lower waist to hip ratio than someone else. I am sad to say that at one time I did believe I deserved less because of my body shape but I am definitely not in that space anymore. Instead, I am very adamant about the fact that fat women of any shape or size, deserve all the good things in life because we are human so we should have the full experience, not just the shitty parts.

3.3 Chapter Three: My First Love: It Wasn't Me, but it Should've Been

“So many men in my mentions acting like this fat bitch can't pull dick. There's nothing easier but I love myself so I date women”- Roxane Gay via Twitter.com

When I was young and fat, I had only ever imagined myself in a relationship through the lens of pity, honestly. I didn't expect to find someone who was immediately attracted to me because of my body. So when it came to approaching any sort of romantic interaction I automatically came with an apology in place for my body. I was certain that my “...too fat, too dark, too muchness, was the offense” (Taylor, 13) whether anyone had expressed it or not. I wasn't the standard so I accepted that I would have to make up for the lack in my appearance in other ways. I had to be funny, generous, smart, and easy going. I never wanted to be annoying so I always put others first. I identify heavily with the way Roxane Gay reflects on her difficulty with believing she deserves to have standards. She states, “It is hard to say, “I deserve something good, I deserve someone I actually like,” and believe it because I am so used to believing, “I deserve whatever mediocrity comes my way.” In our culture, we talk a lot about change and growing up, but man, we don't talk nearly enough about how difficult it is. It is difficult. For me, it is difficult to believe I matter and I deserve nice things, and I deserve to be around nice people” (Gay, 244).

I never believed that I deserved much in intimate relationships whether it be platonic or romantic. This fact wasn't glaringly obvious, until I took on the task of pursuing a romantic relationship. As I got older and my self-image improved, I began to believe that I had left those thoughts of worthlessness in my early adolescence. I had become this educated, empowered,

dynamic woman who knew what she deserved in life. I deserved a partner who was complete in themselves and would complement all of my attributes. At 23 though, I was confident that I might never find this person. I had lost faith in humanity and decided that I would live the remainder of my life being unattached and having hot, sleazy sex. This feeling only increased after I started getting my feet wet in the world of dating and sex. I had entertained a few men and decided that the relationship life was not for me. Plus, the relationships that I had been a witness to throughout my life did little to improve my views. I really was too young and inexperienced to be so jaded. But this is the thing about life: it will always show you what the fuck you need to see, especially when you don't want to.

The Intro

We have officially come full circle in my journey of discovery. Now we get down to the juicy shit. I started this project talking about my virginity, how it impacted the way I viewed myself, my life, my desirability and of course my sexuality. I talked about the actual loss of my virginity which I regard as my entry into the world of intercourse. I didn't cover it extensively because it doesn't rank highly for me anymore in my list of important sexual experiences. I would rather discuss my first pleasurable escapade. Losing my virginity was consensual, but I would frame that experience as me getting fucked. Only one person actually received any pleasure that night and obviously it wasn't me. But as far as my actual first time having sex, authentic, reciprocal, mutually satisfying *sex*, that honor goes to someone else entirely. It definitely did not happen the way I expected it too nor did it happen with who I expected it to happen with. I had always had a very heteronormative view of sex so I always expected to fuck niggas. So, when I first set out on my pussy poppin' quest, I was primarily concerned with dick. I

wanted to try it and it seemed like the first tier I needed to conquer before I moved on to more complicated matters.

I had gotten to the point in life where I wasn't looking for anything serious. I was bogged down with school, my social life, home life and work. I didn't take men seriously, and even when I tried, they showed my why I fucking shouldn't. After I started fucking them, I realized that it was definitely something I could do without much effort. I had several sexual encounters and each one was pretty much the same. I brought them to my place, we had sex, I sucked their dick, quite impressively if I do say so myself.

When it came time them to reciprocate, they either gave me head half-heartedly or not at all, then we proceeded with intercourse. Someone would cum and it was *never* me. But I was a pleaser by nature, so I enjoyed giving head, it still would have been nice to receive it in the same spirit it was given though. At the time, I noticed the disparity but I didn't take it too seriously because that was what I expected from these encounters. We had zero emotional connection, and I wanted it to stay that way. It was summer time and I wanted to keep up the momentum I had started so I figured, I would find someone to actually make me cum. I was right, I just got a bit more than I bargained for in the process.

Earlier chapter, I mentioned that my friend Nikki, wing-woman extraordinaire, had helped me successfully bag two people in one night. One of those people I had sex with once and never spoke to again, the other I fucked around and got into a serious relationship with. The person I went home with that night, was NOT the one I ended up committed to.

It was August 11, 2018 when I met the first love of my life. It started off as regular as any night out. Nikki had just finished her first official week of work, so to commemorate the occasion, we decided to go to a nice dinner and then hit some bars. We pre-gamed, had several

drinks at dinner and then proceeded to hit Edgewood where we also had several drinks and I think there were shots involved as well. Point is, by the end of the night, I was about three sheets to the wind. Perfectly primed to be on my bullshit.

While we were out initially, I was chilling, ready to engage with someone if they caught my eye but it never happened. I had prepared to end the night alone, which was fine. It was around 1 a.m. when we decided to leave the bar. Since I live down the street from Edgewood we decided to walk back to my place. One of Nikki's friends had decided to join us during dinner and went with us to the bars so there was enough of us that we felt pretty safe walking home. As we were walking, we passed this restaurant called the Hungry Ghost that appeared to still be serving food. Being that we were all pretty drunk, we felt it would be a good idea to stop in and grab something to soak up the alcohol.

As soon as we entered the restaurant, I noticed that the guy cooking the food was pretty cute. While I was ordering my food with the woman who worked there, I tried, quite unsuccessfully, to shoot my shot with the cook. When I am sober, I would never be confident enough to make an advance on someone and I definitely wouldn't be able to recover from the sting of rejection if I got shot down. Thankfully, I was drunk as hell, so I barely felt it. I paid for my food and sat down. I kept eyeing the cook but I left him alone. Shortly after me and my friends sat down. A guy walked in and ordered. I saw him but I didn't pay much attention. Me and my friends kept talking. Next thing I know, the guy sits down at the table directly next to mine. I don't even remember how we started talking but we did.

I learned his name was Max and that he was born and raised in Atlanta. He had just graduated law school and was waiting to take the Bar exam. I was intrigued. While we were chatting him up, a group of masculine women came in. One was tall with locs, another medium

height with braids, and a third who was quite small, also with locs. I saw them come in but in my drunken haze, I paid little attention to what they did after. Plus, I was talking to the guy so I wasn't really concerned.

As we got deeper into the conversation, we somehow got on the topic of being cheap. He made the claim that most men were cheap, he just wasn't afraid to proclaim it out loud. I was no longer intrigued. I told him that that was a false generalization, because I didn't grow up around any cheap ass niggas. It's fine if that's what he wants to be but he couldn't say all men were cheap. He maintained the claim so I decided to survey the room. In hindsight, this was kind of a shitty thing to do but I am a bit overly interactive when I'm drunk. Either way, I asked the room, which mainly consisted of the three women, Max, my friends some other people who I can't remember, and me. Not the greatest sample size but that's what I was working with. I asked "Do y'all think all men are cheap?" I was met with a resounding "No" so I was satisfied. I returned to conversation with Max. What I didn't realize was that while I was parlaying with Max, the three women had moved closer to sit near my friends. We all end up chatting for a bit but I really don't pay attention to everyone else because I was still chatting with Max. Somehow, the conversation had become flirtatious. Then it became explicitly sexual. I was being very direct. We started discussing him coming home with me. I had some questions though. One: did he eat pussy? The first guy I had started fucking with did not and I refused to end up in that situation again. Second: how big was his dick? This is crass but, BUT I am a large woman so I need a dick to match. He said it was a nice size but I needed details. I wanted to see it. During this conversation Nikki interjected and said we should just go to the bathroom so I could see it. There was only one thing left to do: we went to the bathroom. I took Max into the ladies room and we

went to the largest stall. To his credit, the man was not shy. He whipped it out and what he said was true. It was a nice size.

Now this is when things got interesting. In true drunk Kara fashion, I went ahead and did what I do. I started sucking his dick. It really speaks to how drunk I was because I had to squat instead of kneel because we were in a public bathroom and ew. I haven't hit the gym in a while so the fact that I could hold a squat for more than a minute is quite impressive. While I was showcasing my talents, I heard the door open. For a split second I forgot we were in public. Max and I froze. Next thing, I know I hear a soft voice say, "Kara" I was shook. So shook, that I actually replied "Yes?" The voice continued "Hey, it's Tee, Nikki sent me to check on you". I assured Tee, that I was okay and she went on her way. In my head, I could only think of two things: Who the fuck is Tee? And second, did she know what was going on in here? I was still too drunk to be embarrassed but the thought did cross my mind. Me and Max ended our interlude and went back to join the crowd. Obviously, Max was going home with me, so we gathered our stuff to head out. Before I left though, Nikki formally introduced me to Tee.

In the months prior, I had been talking to Nikki about how I really wanted to give it a shot with women. I had always been attracted to them but I was too intimidated to really do anything about it. Thankfully, the universe aligned because God truly loves me and knew what I needed. Nikki had told Tee my situation (yes, here we go again) but Tee was very understanding. I don't remember much from that initial meeting. I couldn't tell you what she looked like, what she was wearing, how she smelled. The only thing I really remembered was that her name was Tee and that she had said the magic words: "Hit me up if you ever want some good head". Music to my ears. Of course, I said "Oh, I definitely will". That was drunk Kara talking because I got zero contact information. My subconscious knew I was too anxious to actually do anything.

Instead, I went back to my place, with Max and had the same type of sex I usually did. He gave me head but it was extremely subpar. He came, I didn't, very mundane. I was disappointed but not surprised. Little did I know, something better was coming around. Even though I hadn't gotten Tee's number, all was not lost because Nikki had my number.

The Interlude

A couple weeks later, Nikki put me in contact with Tee and we started planning to meet up. I had a prior engagement the weekend directly after we started talking so we had about a week in between from when we started talking to when we planned to meet up. First of all, this was an issue because we were only supposed to be getting together for sex. I was still sticking to my plan of not getting into anything serious. We had discussed it and we were both on the same page. She had recently gotten out of a relationship and wanted time to heal from that. For some reason, this didn't translate into our interactions. We were chatting the whole time up until we were supposed to hang out. We didn't text everyday but we talked enough for me to become intrigued and intimidated.

I began to look forward to our conversations and that's when I knew I was in trouble. I liked her personality already. She was interesting and we had similar ideals. This was strike one. My anxiety started to flare up. Those familiar thoughts started surfacing. I had already begun to feel like there was an expectation for our meet up that I wouldn't be able to achieve. I know we had met in person before but I was concerned because if she was drunk like I was, she probably wouldn't remember what I looked like. This left the potential for her to be dissatisfied with my appearance. Nikki told me that Tee preferred plus-size women so that kind of soothed me. This would actually be my first time being with someone who I knew for a fact had experience

navigating a body of mine. This both excited and worried me. On top of this, I had no idea how to be with a woman for real.

I wanted to create the same type of experience I would want for myself, but I was out of my element for real. With men, I didn't have to do much. Basically, suck a little dick and lay there. No problem. But a woman?! I was pretty sure it was going to be a bit more intricate than that and what if I couldn't live up to her past experiences. She was 28 and had been fucking since she was in her teens. I was only fresh out the gate in this world of sex. My nerves got so bad that there were several moments leading up to our meeting where I considered flaking which is quite out of character for me. Instead, I persevered.

Finally, the day came. We had planned for a Friday night and I was a bundle of nerves all day. I cleaned my apartment from top to bottom so everything was in order. The last thing I needed to worry about was whether she was judging me by how clean my apartment. I got all the necessities: weed, alcohol, and a good playlist. We were staying in so I had to prepare the perfect outfit and I even put on a little makeup to boost my confidence. I hadn't gotten around to washing my hair which sucked because wearing my hair out is a big comfort for me. I knew I was at my best when she met me so I was really hoping she wasn't disappointed with my appearance this time. I didn't have too much time to worry about it though because before I knew it, she was pulling up to my place. I went out to meet her and was worried because I really had no idea what she looked like. Thankfully, we were the only people out when I went to meet her.

As she walked up, my nerves were out of control. When she came into my line of sight, she wasn't what I expected, she was even better. She was a petite woman, only 5'1, with a small frame but she was solid. She had skin about a shade darker than peanut butter, dark brown eyes

that were so rich, they almost looked black and a radiant smile. She had sister locs that were about medium length and perfectly complimented her pretty face. I was immediately intimidated. She was beautiful. Fuck. All of my anxiety returned full force, what if she didn't find me up to par? I guess it really didn't matter at this point, I had no choice but to go through with the evening. I invited her into my apartment and things escalated from there.

Despite the fact that we were only there to have sex, we immediately began with the 'getting to know you' portion of a first encounter. She had also brought weed so while she rolled up, I fixed some drinks and we chatted about our backgrounds and work/school life. This was expected and appreciated. It made me more comfortable. The problem came in when the talking didn't stop. She probably arrived at my house around 10 p.m. We had to have talked until at least 1 a.m. We talked about everything and it was very refreshing to talk to someone who not only listened to me, but was interested and could offer equally insightful commentary. I am generally a person who does the majority of the listening because that's what I enjoy. I love to talk as well, but I rarely find someone who cares to listen so I default to listening. I was immediately infatuated. I would have been content if we didn't have sex that night honestly. Considering what did happen when we had sex, I should've kept with my first mind not to do it.

After talking for so long though, Tee decided that it was probably best if we got to it. We were both nervous, for different reasons and the tension was palpable. We had already talked about our anxieties throughout the evening. The ease with which the conversation flowed had calmed my nerves but the moment Tee leaned over and asked to kiss me, every single one of them returned. I knew by the simple fact that she actually asked my permission, things would be different. Nobody had ever asked to kiss me, they usually just went for it. This let me know she respected my body and my choice in this interaction. It both scared me and turned me on. In a

moment of weakness, I asked if she could give me a moment while I applied some lip balm. She agreed of course but that dampened the mood for sure. Strike two. After returning from the bathroom, we proceeded with what we were there for. She initiated the kiss again and it was on from there. Immediately, I noticed a difference in the way she kissed me versus the way I had been kissed in the past. There was undeniable passion here. She was gentle with me but I could feel her desire. She took her time too. There was no urgency and I didn't feel like she was ready to fuck me for her own pleasure then go. I could tell she wanted me to be an active participant.

This was a new situation for me that I was completely unequipped for. I didn't know what to do with my hands and I was too distracted by what she was doing with hers. The way she was handling my body as if she knew me had my head in a tizzy. It was kind of like an out of body experience, I was there but I wasn't really there. I can admit that her frame had me a little concerned at first but this small woman had zero issue navigating my body. I was entranced. So much so that I wasn't even doing my part in engaging her body. I didn't know what to do. She went about undressing me and all I could do was help her. It wasn't until the end of the evening that I realized that Tee never got undressed because I forgot to do it. I was ashamed! Somehow though, I ended up fully naked and Tee commenced with pleasing me. She had made her way down my body and by the time she had gotten to my pussy, I just knew shit was about to go down.

I had started to get into my head though because I felt she had high expectations. Her primary aim of the evening was to please me. That was a problem for me because I had always been the pleaser, I didn't even know how to interact when somebody was serious about pleasuring me. I knew my body was capable of orgasming because I had done it by myself but nobody else had ever been able to accomplish it. Despite her efforts, Tee was no different. She

was the most impressive out of my partners because she actually tried. There was no half-hearted efforts on her part, I could tell that she loved and appreciated my body. However, because no one had ever taken the time to actually try to make me cum, I had no idea how to assist in the process. I didn't know how to direct someone else to my pleasure points, I was too nervous to speak up about what I disliked, which in the past hadn't been a problem. But here I was with someone who only wanted to please me, and I was unable to participate because I had never had to. I was lost in the situation. Tee really tried her hardest and I wanted to be able to honor her efforts with an orgasm but my body just wasn't having it. It got to the point of Tee actually stopping to ask me what I felt the problem was. I wish I had been able to see the shock on my face because I know it was visible! She was asking me what I thought?! I was just hoping we could move on and act like nothing was happening. But no, this woman wanted to talk. She wanted to know what she was doing wrong because she had never encountered this situation before. Immediately, I knew the problem was with me and I told her as much. That didn't help the situation. The evening ended on that disappointing and awkward note.

The Process

After that night, I thought I would never see Tee again. But the next day, she texted me saying if I was willing to try again, she would be open to it. I was elated. I thought I had blew it and so did she. We talked about what could have possibly gone wrong considering how well the evening had started out and we concluded that there was too much expectation placed on the evening. We decided to give it another shot the following week. Again, we talked up until our next encounter and I only became more infatuated with her. This did not help me in reducing my expectations for the evening. I wanted even more to cum just so I could make her happy. I had begun centering her in my quest for pleasure and this did not translate into me reaching my goal.

I had put too much pressure on myself. I will say the evening was better because I was intent on being more interactive. I was insistent upon the fact that I was going to engage with her body just as much as she had engaged with mine.

Tee being a masculine lesbian, tended to take on the role of being more dominant and preferred to give pleasure rather than receive it. She was definitely not what they call a “Touch me Not” lesbian, but she derived more of her enjoyment from pleasing her partner. To the point where she rarely received head from her previous partners. We had discussed this fact and I let her know that I respected her boundaries but I also preferred to give. Thankfully, she felt comfortable enough to allow me to engage with her body like that because otherwise, we both would’ve been out of luck. Although our second experience improved remarkably, I still didn’t have an orgasm. Another conversation was had about what I felt the issue was. I straight up told Tee that I just didn’t know if I was meant to have orgasms with a partner. She disagreed with me.

This was only our second time having sex and she let me know that she would keep trying until we made it happen. This warmed my heart but again, put a lot of pressure on me. It also didn’t make it better that it literally took her about two months to make me cum. I even journaled about the experience and I specifically wrote about my fear of her getting tired of me not being able to cum. To her credit, she didn’t get tired of me BUT it got kind of rocky at times because she started to feel like there was an issue with her. It became complicated because this was supposed to be a fun, stress free experience where I explored my sexuality but my body wouldn’t even let me do that in peace. The initial experience truly set the tone for the remainder of our relationship.

As we continued to date, I learned a lot about myself. I began to realize that the way I viewed my sexuality was completely based off the needs of another person. I was only happy if I

was making someone else happy. I was my worst nightmare: a people pleaser. This was really an epiphany because I had never thought of myself as a passive person and nobody I knew would describe me as such. After reflecting on it, I would describe myself as easy going, nonchalant, generous and loyal. In truth, this was code for the fact that I lacked boundaries and didn't know how to assert myself. Roxane Gay, stated it best in her memoir *Hunger* writing: "Even when I am in a good relationship it is hard to stand up for myself. It is hard to express dissatisfaction or have the arguments I want to have because I feel like I am already on thin ice by virtue of being fat. It is hard to ask for what I want and need and deserve and so I don't. I act like everything is always fine, and it's not fair to me or anyone else (Gay, 244). I was still defaulting to that mentality of being thankful that I was getting any type of consideration at all. It didn't matter that I wasn't getting what I wanted, shit, what I *needed*. That seemed to be better than the alternative which was nothing at all. Accepting the minimum was a theme that translated to every area of my life but it took me 23 years and a toxic relationship to ever figure it out.

A Lesson Learned

Tee and I were together for a total of six months before we finally had to part ways over some bullshit that never had to happen. We never even passed the honeymoon phase. Considering how our relationship started, we fought right through it. To be honest, it went on longer than it should have because I was too passive to end it. I had fallen in love and I was convinced that I should do whatever it took to salvage that, even if the other person wasn't offering the same courtesy. My understanding of "love" was tied to dominant notions of femininity which was only further obfuscated by my fatness. I didn't understand how to value myself because I hadn't been socialized to view myself as valuable. Instead, I looked to other people to determine my value and that became obvious while I was with Tee. I had never taken

the time to deeply reflect on what I wanted out of a relationship because I had only focused on what I could give. I had no idea who I even was for real.

Feeling lost in my self-identity was only amplified by the fact that I was coming to terms with my queer identity. I had never labeled myself before my relationship, I had never had to. People mainly assumed that I was heterosexual but there have also been those who have questioned whether I was something else. I never had to clarify because I was never dating anyone. I had expected that I would date men, but I was very much attracted to women as well so I did not really understand where I fell on the spectrum. In truth, I had given up hope that I would date anyone so the shock of it hadn't even worn off enough for me to consider slapping a label on what I was.

After entering into my same-sex relationship, people really started to press me about how I identified. Lots of "So are you a lesbian?" or "You're bisexual" conversations ensued when I would reveal that I was dating a woman. I never quite knew how to answer because it had never been of consequence to me. In my eyes, this was my first relationship and it just happened to be with a woman. Just to keep it simple, I agreed that I most closely identified with bisexual when I had to give an answer. It still wasn't that deep to me. It was deep to Tee though. My uncertainty about who I wanted constantly kept her insecurities raging. I didn't understand what the issue was, what did me liking both men and women have to do with our relationship? I was only here for one person right now. If I wanted to be disloyal, I could have continued with the shenanigans I was engaged in when she met me. I knew her views weren't uncommon though. There is a heavy stigma painting bisexual people as being more prone to disloyalty than those that are monosexual, which often leads to issues when trying to form a monogamous relationship (Kless, 2011). I get it, well not really but I tried to honor her concerns but I couldn't change my past or

the fact that I was attracted to both sexes. Also, if we're keeping it a buck, I had more cause to be concerned about her than she did me. She actually had a history of cheating but I tried not to worry about it. I couldn't really get around it though. I realized very early on that Tee had a lot of insecurities, none of which I could do anything about.

Initially, Tee seemed like the perfect match for me. She was everything that I ever thought I wanted in a partner. She was smart, beautiful, socially conscious and even more than that, she worshipped the ground I walked on. Being with her made me realize that I still seek excessive validation from people. It's normal to want to know that your partner is attracted to you but it can become problematic when your self-image becomes tied to their notions of you. I loved how much she loved me. I fed off the fact that she thought I was everything. She constantly reminded me how beautiful I was, how intelligent she believed me to be, as well as how amazing my personality was. My confidence really thrived during the time we were together. I never had to wonder if she was attracted to me, it was a given because she wouldn't let me forget it. Unfortunately though, my view of myself started to become shaped by what she wanted from me.

I always wanted to make sure that I was doing everything I could to keep her interested. I began to cater to an ideal that was not at all who I actually was. I knew that with her, my appearance wasn't the problem but I wanted to ensure that I was attractive to her in other ways. As I stated before, Tee had a lot of insecurities. She had been through a lot in her life and she explained to me that her last relationship had been quite toxic, which is why we really weren't supposed to start dating in the first place. We proceeded with dating though because we liked each other so much and I believed that we could overcome whatever obstacles we were dealing with. I thought we could heal together. This was a horrible plan though because I hadn't even

begun to realize the depth of my own insecurities so I definitely should not have been trying to handle hers. Either way, it happened. Almost immediately, things started going south. It was subtle to me but there were a lot of red flags that I ignored. Primarily the fact that every issue we had ended with me taking the blame onto myself for what had happened. I wouldn't say that this was her fault really. She projected a lot of shit on to me, I was just too naïve to understand what was happening. I felt that if she was experiencing something negative pertaining to our relationship, the problem had to be with me. I never stopped to consider any other explanations. Of course, this pattern bled into our sex life.

At only 24 years old, I am ashamed to say that I do not enjoy sex that much. I like it but it's just not high on my priority list. My sex drive is pretty low. This discovery might have been fine had I not have made it in the midst of my first relationship, whose inception was based purely off of me wanting to have sex. In the beginning, I thought it was primarily my anxiety about Tee not being able to make me cum. I'm sure that did have a lot to do with it but about a month in, she started making me cum and she really never stopped. There were still some occasions where I couldn't reach my peak but damn near every time we had sex, I was orgasming which made sense. She had really taken the time to get to know my body, plus we were emotionally tied so that took it to the next level. That's why even after we had been together for a while it became confusing as to why my body was still not interested in sex.

Granted, sex still wasn't "easy" because even though she could make me cum, it usually took forever so my anxiety around not coming at all was traded for wondering how long it was gonna take. And even though she had started enjoying me pleasuring her, she still wasn't satisfied unless I got mine too. Safe to say that I was not mad about that at all, it just really put the pressure on me. It really began to make sex feel like a test almost. One that I had no way of

studying for so I could never be sure if I would pass or not. This was uncomfortable because we had sex A LOT. We were together every single day possible and we would have sex ninety-five percent of those days.

Remember when I said I had a low-sex drive? Yeah, I still did. Granted, this was a time in life when I was emotionally, physically and mentally overwhelmed so I also consider that I just was not in a place to be focused on sex. Furthermore, the addition of feeling pressured to be so sexually expressive, even within the comfort of my relationship only added to my anxiety. Either way, I knew that it wasn't happening for me sexually. Tee however, did not have a low sex drive, quite the opposite actually. As I said, we had sex basically every day often more than once. Had I wanted to, Tee would've been content doing it more than twice. I started to feel like that stereotype of lesbian sex being never ending was true. I wish I could have taken full advantage of it. Instead, I often found myself having sex to avoid any type of conflict about it. I felt like that was just part of being in a relationship. You're supposed to give your partner what they want, right? The concept I hadn't grasped was giving my partner what she wanted, just not at the detriment of myself. I mean, I enjoyed it when we had it but I often would have appreciated continuing to do whatever it was we were doing prior to having sex just as much, if not more.

Nevertheless, I had to please her. However, I rarely initiated which to Tee meant that I wasn't attracted to her. I understand why she would feel that way but that was not the case at all. I wanted to have sex with her, my body just wouldn't get on board. It really had nothing to do with her because even before I started having sex, I wasn't a chronic masturbator either. When I was younger and my hormones were raging, I did all the time but in adulthood, I hadn't felt much of a need. I could go weeks in between before I would actually feel like doing it. It was

kind of a lot of work because it took me forever to cum anyway, so I felt like I might as well not even bother. I knew the problem wasn't her, it was me but that didn't stop her feelings about it. This put a strain on our relationship because it only fed her other insecurities. I tried my best to counteract by initiating more, trying to be more involved during sex, taking supplements and I even got off of birth control in an effort to boost my sex drive. None of it really helped. I could only do so much and I didn't know how to change what had become my body's baseline.

I started to feel like a failure. For the most part, sex had stopped being about pleasure for me. I couldn't separate her expectations of me from what I actually wanted from the experience. Here I was, in a committed relationship, also what could be a fulfilling sexual relationship and I still had no real idea of what I wanted out of sex. All I know is that I liked to please others but I wasn't exactly sure of how to reckon that with how to derive pleasure in my own body. It wasn't enough that I was orgasming every time we had sex because before I hit that peak, it was just alright. I wanted a fully immersive experience and I had no idea how to create that. Although me and Tee broke up over something unrelated to sex, I still can't help to feel a relief over the fact that it happened because I had no idea how we would've been able to sustain our relationship anyways considering how disconnected we were sexually.

Exploring Celibacy and Reconfiguring my Relationship with Pleasure

Since the official end of my sexual relationship with Tee, which was admittedly different from the ending of our romantic relationship (can we say backslide?) I have begun exploring the idea of committing to celibacy. It really began as a joke amongst me and my friends before I really started to reflect on how fucked up my engagement with sex really is. I had never really done it for the right reasons. I started having sex because I was curious about what the hype was

about, and because I wanted to feel attractive. I love learning about sex, reading about it, talking about it and everything in between. I enjoyed the intimacy of being with someone I loved but as far as the actual physical act of sex, I can't say that I have found that to be as fun or fulfilling as it is intended to be. It's really interesting because I really want to be a sex goddess. All I want to be is a sensual being. I want to do more than just think about sex, I want to crave it. I want to love it. I want sexual energy to radiate from my pores. I'm not sure if this is something I will ever achieve considering the way my body appears to be quite ambivalent towards the act of sex. I don't really understand my body or my relationship with sex and I really feel like I need time to explore that before I engage with someone else. My issues with people pleasing and putting others needs before mine have seriously warped my sense of sexuality. I have never taken time to understand it for myself, instead I took my cues from others. Everyone else seems to be having sex and loving it. My friends really rave about it. I am okay with it. Tee and I had some great times but I still can't say that I love sex. Some days I'm not sure if my body even likes it for real.

I have never in my life considered celibacy because of all the religious stigma surrounding it. I don't like anything that involves self-denial or restraint, especially if it's not self-serving. I have issues with discipline (my therapist and I are working on it) but not having sex has proved to be quite empowering whereas before it felt like punishment. I don't have any real parameters around it. There's no specific time period I want to adhere to but I know that I will be committed until I am able to engage with sex in a healthy and enjoyable way. Until I can figure out what that looks like, me, my therapist and my vibrator (not all at the same time) will be in constant conversation!

4 CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this project was for me to explore my relationship to sexuality through the lens of fatphobia, gender, and race, all things that had warped my sense of self-understanding and worth. I wrote this project for twelve year old me, who had nowhere to turn when it came to questions about my body and sex. I wanted a relatable body of writing that could reach the masses. I chose narrative style because I see myself most heavily reflected in personal experience rather than theory. This project was intended to be a reflection of me and others who are often excluded from the discourse.

As a child, I had no role models, no friends, and no family members who looked like me, that could tell me that my life would get better. I had no one who could affirm me in my experiences and let me know that yes, the world was treating me differently because I was fat and no, it was not my fault. I thought it was important to take on memoir style project because I wanted to see my experiences mirrored. I wanted to interject my experiences into the discourse in order to create a space for explicit, uninhibited, Black fat female sexuality. I wanted to write about what it felt like to reside in a body that I am not fully comfortable with and how that impacted my experience of sharing it with others. Because of the way I was socialized, I had always felt unattractive. My insecurities are valid because in the overarching narrative of what is desirable, I am not. Representation is important. I was not given much material I could relate to growing up, but I hope to provide a different experience for fat people coming after me.

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