

**FATTENING QUEER FEMININITIES: THE PITFALLS, POLITICS, AND PROMISES
OF QUEER FAT FEMME EMBODIMENTS**

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Abstract

This dissertation identifies and documents how women and non-binary people in Canada negotiate and resist fatphobia, heteronormativity, and femmephobia, alongside other oppressions. More precisely, using qualitative research methods— a combination of narrative inquiry, photo elicitation, and autoethnography— this dissertation explores how women and non-binary people in Canada who identify as queer, fat, and femme experience and challenge these intersecting forms of oppression. I argue that queer fat fem(me)inities are sites of intense regulation and policing and, at the same time, sources of collective resistance, resilience, and healing. I focus specifically on the ways in which queer fat femmes’ strategies of resistance, resilience, and healing contain glimmers of more livable worlds for queer fat femmes, where they are valued and desired. Ultimately, by bringing together the fields of fat studies, critical femininities, and queer theory, and through the use of interview, photographic, and autoethnographic data, this dissertation offers thickened understandings of the significance of queer fat femme embodiments, first, for queer, fat, and fem(me)inine people themselves and, second, for (re)conceptualizing normative notions of fatness, fem(me)ininity, and queerness more broadly.

Dedication

For all the queer fat femmes—especially the participants in this research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Queer, fat, and femme feel inherently, inextricably intertwined for me. Coming out as queer led me to femme, which helped me embrace my fat body as fem(me)inine.¹

To me, queer means that my sexuality can remain undefined, unrestrained, fluid, and shifting. It means not being tied down to a specific label or orientation. It means that I side eye the gender binary. It is capacious of my desires for queer masculinities. Queer to me is also politicized: it is not only a descriptor of my romantic and sexual feelings. It also makes clear that I desire a better world.

Fat means that I am committed to living in the (fat) body I currently have, not a past or future thin(ner) body. It means refusing to accept 'fat' as a derogatory term and, instead, allowing myself to use fat to describe what my body looks like. It also means taking a political approach to my body, as I use 'fat' to send the message that I am unapologetically taking up space. It is a way to describe my body and a term that connotes my body politic(s).

*Femme's meanings for me have shifted over time. When I first came out, a friend suggested that I read *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme* by Ivan Coyote and Zena Sharman (2011), Canadian writers and butch/femme (at the time) couple. In those pages I found myself. Reading about butch/femme relationships gave me a language and history for my desires. Reading about people who were feminine, and queer spoke to my worries that I could not be queer because of my attachments to femininity. Reading the words of queer femmes felt like home.*

¹ I use the terms fem(me)inine/fem(me)ininity to encompass both femininity and femme (A. Taylor 2018). Femininity and femme are overlapping, interrelated, and yet distinct phenomena. My collapse of these two words into one is not meant to conflate them. Instead, my use of these terms is intended to respect individuals' self-identifications as femme, while also referring to femininity more broadly. This theme is explored throughout the dissertation.

Those writings by queer femmes helped me to make sense of my relationship to femininity, queerness, and my fat body. I embraced a high femme identity, reveling in the pleasures of dramatic lipstick and eyeliner, fake eyelashes, and skirts and dresses. I always made sure to include signals of my queerness, like a nose ring or a single dangling earring, in pursuit of femme visibility. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was getting femininity ‘right’ because femme writers gave me permission to inhabit femininity in ways that I had previously been told were wrong. Femme meant that femininity became a site of possibility and pleasure for me.

*As I started reading more femme writings—anthologies like *Brazen femme: Queering femininity* (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri 2002) and Tumblr posts were especially influential—my fem(me)ininity become a politicized topic. I found a circle of femme friends. We would put on our makeup, which we called our ‘war paint’, together. We thought we were using femininity in radical and queer ways. We complained about the ways femmes were treated in our community. We discussed how hard it was to get a date as a femme, the way femmes became the ‘property’ of the butches they dated, and how we were not seen as ‘truly’ queer. I started to connect our struggles to misogyny and femmephobia—the cultural devaluation of fem(me)ininity.*

Consistent throughout my femme journey has been a feeling that femme is something inherent. I tattooed the word on my forearm to mark my enduring attachments to femininity (Figure 1), and to remind myself that femme gives me permission to fully embrace those attachments as a fat and queer person.

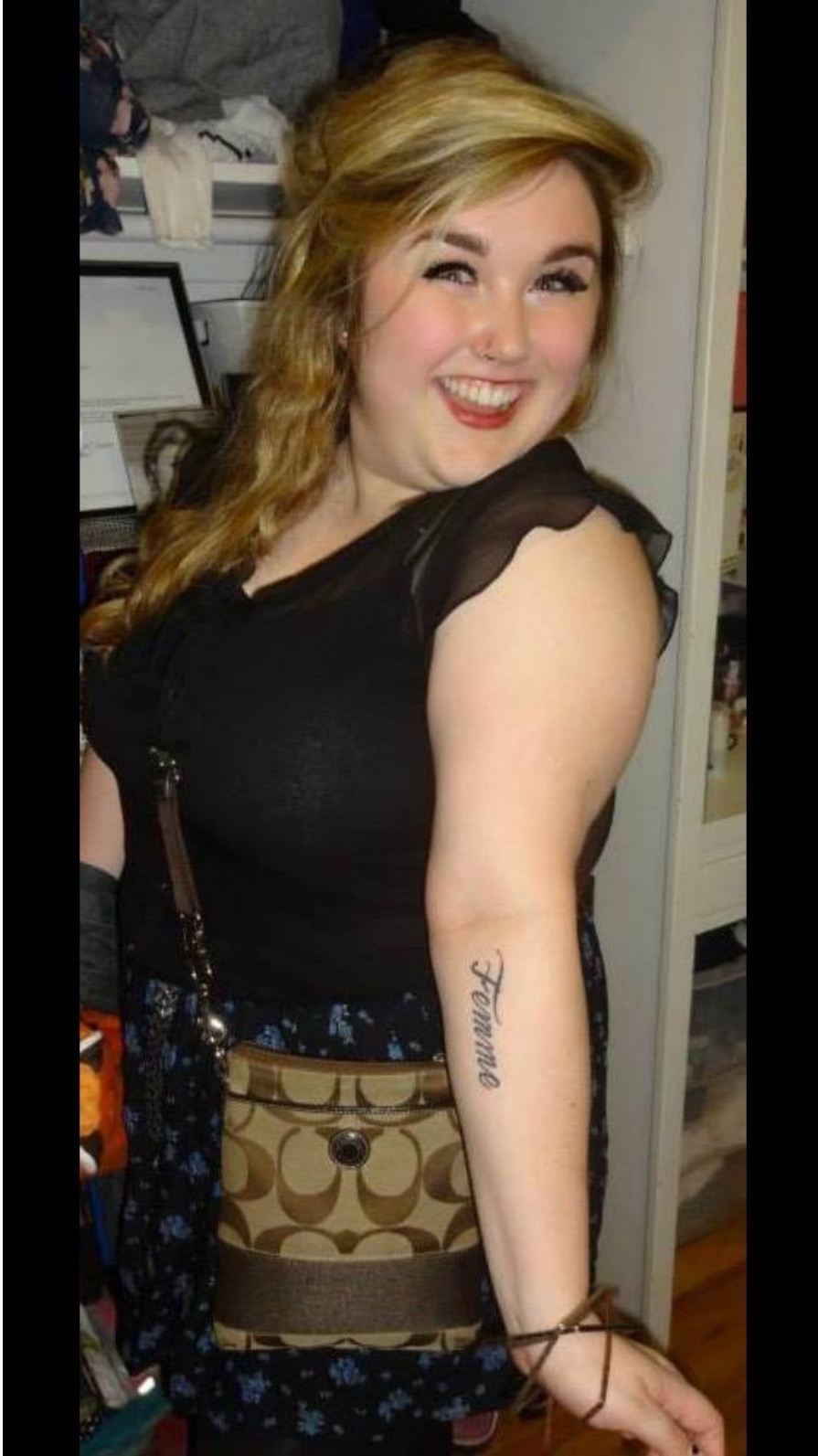


Figure 1. © Allison Taylor

Queer fat femme means that my fem(me)ininity is informed and shaped by my fatness and queerness. It means acknowledging that there is more than one right way to be fem(me)inine, and that my queer and fat body can be fem(me)inine, when the rest of the world tells me I cannot. It means that I see and desire fat bodies, queer bodies, fem(me)inine bodies. It means recognizing that my queerness encompasses all the ways that I do not fit in with mainstream norms and society. It means embracing all the ways that my queerness, fatness, and femininity are 'wrong' and valuing them for those exact reasons.

This dissertation opens with excerpts from the first autoethnographic journal entry I made for my doctoral research on March 11, 2019, prior to the interview portion of my project. In this journal entry, I answered questions from my interview protocol (Appendix A), including: what does queer mean to you? What does fat mean to you? What does femme mean to you? What does queer fat femme all together mean for you? My responses to these questions reflect my positionality at the time as a young, able-bodied, white, queer fat femme settler, and my investments in the liberatory possibilities and promises of queer fat femme. The photograph (Figure 1) featured in this personal narrative is from 2014, when I was newly discovering femme, and exemplifies the excitement and pleasure femme engendered for me. The freshly healed femme tattoo, the painstakingly applied false eyelashes, and the joy in my expression convey these feelings. This image from early in my femme journey, accompanied by my reflections on queer fat femme from the early stages of my doctoral work, contextualize my starting place for this dissertation. I open the dissertation with these initial reflections and this photograph because they offer insights as to why my dissertation research matters, not on a

scholarly level—which I elaborate on in the following sections—but in everyday life. This dissertation is, therefore, a deeply personal endeavour.

I was drawn to this research project because it offered a way to make sense of my own experiences of (un)belonging. I did not see those experiences included in existing academic literature, and I wanted to carve out spaces in both the academy and society for queer fat femmes. Thus, this dissertation first and foremost seeks to center the voices of queer fat femmes and to serve as a record of queer and fat fem(me)inine experiences, ranging from those that are painful and oppressive to those that are pleasurable and liberatory. The “archive of feelings” (Cvetkovich 2003) contained in the pages of this dissertation demonstrates the resilient and creative ways that queer fat femmes have and continue to survive in a world not built for them.

Research Terms, Questions, & Objectives

This dissertation identifies and documents how women and non-binary² people³ in Canada negotiate and resist fatphobia, heteronormativity, and femmephobia, alongside other oppressions. More precisely, using qualitative research methods— a combination of narrative inquiry, photo

² Non-binary refers to “people who are not male or female... In general, non-binary... refers to people’s identity, rather than physicality at birth; but it does not exclude people who are intersex or who have a diversity... of sexual development who also identify this way. There are non-binary people who identify as a single fixed gender position other than male or female. There are those who have a fluid gender. There are those who have no gender. And there are those who disagree with the very idea of gender” (Richards, Bouman, & Barker 2017, p. 5). I use non-binary as an umbrella term for this variety of gendered embodiments (Motmans, Nieder, & Bouman 2020). My understanding of non-binary includes people who may also or instead identify as gender non-conforming, gender fluid, genderqueer, polygender, or non-binary transgender, for example (Losty & O’Connor 2018).

³ Blair and Hoskin (2016) argue that, today, “there is a great deal of diversity among those identifying as femme” and urge future researchers “to be more inclusive when conducting research on femme experiences” (p. 110). In particular, Blair and Hoskin (2016) find that femme is, increasingly, taken up by non-binary people, in addition to women. Therefore, my focus on femme women and non-binary people in this research is not meant to subsume non-binary people under the umbrella of ‘woman’ or conflate women’s and non-binary people’s experiences of femme. At the same time, as one participant who identifies as a genderqueer woman demonstrates, there can be overlap in the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘non-binary’. My focus on women and non-binary people, therefore, is meant to encompass the growing diversity and complexity of femme embodiments and include under-represented femme voices in the academic literature. However, because of differences in histories and meanings of femme between gay men’s and lesbian communities, and this project’s foothold in lesbian femme histories, I do not consider the experiences of femme gay men in this dissertation.

elicitation, and autoethnography— this dissertation explores how women and non-binary people in Canada who identify as queer, fat, and femme experience and challenge these intersecting forms of oppression. Bringing together the fields of fat studies, critical femininities, and queer theory, this dissertation addresses gaps in research in these fields and contributes to the production of an interdisciplinary branch of knowledge that is currently under-explored and under-theorized.

In the context of this dissertation, queer serves as an umbrella term, encompassing people who resist or articulate alternatives to normative notions of sex, gender, and sexuality (Wilchins 2004). Femme has historically been drawn on by women to situate their femininity in relation to their lesbianism (Kennedy 1997). Contemporary femme research demonstrates that non-binary people, alongside queer women, increasingly identify with femme (Blair & Hoskin 2015). This femininities research defines femme as “an identity that encapsulates femininity that is dislocated from, and not necessitating, a female body/identity, as well as a femininity that is embodied by those whose femininity is deemed culturally unsanctioned” (Blair & Hoskin 2015, p. 232). Uniting these conceptions and embodiments of femme is an insistence on the value of femininity and a reclaiming of feminine ways of being and knowing (Hoskin 2017b; Serano 2013). Therefore, in this dissertation I understand femme as an embodiment centered on the embrace of feminized aesthetics, qualities, and values by “those that do not embody norms of feminine beauty or acceptability that are structured by neoliberalism, racism, cissexism, and heteropatriarchy” (Schwartz 2020c). Finally, as in the field of fat studies, fat is employed in this dissertation as both “the preferred neutral adjective” to describe fat bodies and a “political identity” to resist fatphobia (Rothblum & Solovay 2009, xxi). This dissertation explores the embodiments and lived experiences of women and non-binary people who self- identify as all three of these terms: queer, fat, and femme.

The dissertation is guided by four principal research questions. First, how do women and non-binary people in Canada negotiate and resist the intersecting oppressions of fatphobia, heteronormativity, and femmophobia? Second, in what ways might identifying as femme be an (in)significant site of resistance for queer and fat women and non-binary people in negotiating intersecting oppressions? Third, how might queer fat femme embodiments disrupt and/or reinforce the racism, classism, ableism, cissexism, and fatphobia central to normative conceptions of feminine embodiment? Fourth, what insights might theorizing fatness, queerness, and fem(me)ininity together generate for the fields of fat studies, critical femininities, and queer theory?

My overarching goal in this dissertation is two-fold. Through interviews, photographs, and autoethnography, I seek to better understand the significance of queer fat femme embodiments, first, for queer, fat, and fem(me)inine people themselves and, second, for (re)conceptualizing normative notions of fatness, fem(me)ininity, and queerness more broadly. In other words, my overarching research goals are to 1) explore if, why, and how queer fat femme embodiments matter to people in their experiences of gender, sexuality, embodiment, and oppression and 2) analyze the intersections of fatness, fem(me)ininity, and queerness for the theoretical insights they may yield for fat studies, critical femininity studies, and queer theory. Overall, this dissertation aims to generate novel insights about under-studied queer fat femme subcultures by considering larger questions of sexuality, embodiment, gender, and identity politics.

Context

*Why is Research on Queer Fat Femmes Important?*⁴

⁴ This section is derived in part from an article published in *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 2018, copyright Taylor & Francis, LLC, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2018.1449503>

Queer fat femme embodiments and communities warrant scholarly attention because they are emerging on a noticeable scale in Canada and other Western nations, largely within the context of growing and overlapping queer, fat, and feminist movements (Chalklin 2016a). Moreover, fat and femme subjectivities are marginalized in both heteronormative and queer feminist Western cultures (Chalklin 2016a). While feminist research has begun to explore fat fem(me)inities in gay men's subcultures, particularly as they intersect with race and racism (Han 2008), fat fem(me)inities are relatively under-theorized in other contexts. Indeed, there is little feminist research that focuses specifically on queer fat femme women and non-binary people even though the contemporary literature demonstrates that femininity and fatness are also devalued in these subcultures (Blair & Hoskin 2015; Luis 2012; Serano 2007; 2013). For example, some queer femmes find that others read their fem(me)inities as signifying heterosexuality, rendering them 'invisible' or 'inauthentic' as queer subjects (VanNewkirk 2006), and fat bodies are frequently invested with negative meanings, such as laziness and ugliness, in queer women's communities (Luis 2012).

The absence of queer fat femme women and non-binary people in academic literature can be attributed, in part, to assumptions that devalue femininity and cast femme subjectivities as unchallenging to normative femininity, thereby rendering femmes heteronormative and uninteresting to queer theorists (Brightwell 2018; Dahl 2012; Hoskin 2017b; Martin 1996). I also attribute the absence of queer fat femme women in the relevant literature to (misguided) theories suggesting that queer women exist in a 'protective bubble'. According to these theories, queer women tend to be shielded from fat hatred because of their heightened political consciousness or lack of interest in femininity and, thus, normative feminine beauty ideals (LeBesco 2004). Theories

such as these lead to the exclusion or under-theorization of queer women's relationships to femininity.

Queer fat femmes' marginalization as *feminine* fat people marks growing queer fat femme communities as an important site of scholarly investigation, too. Research shows that fat women are discriminated against in the areas of health care, employment, media, fashion, and dating, for example (Fikkan & Rothblum 2011). Heather Sykes (2009) contends that "men can have fat without being fat whereas women cannot" (p. 250), an argument—dependent upon race, class, disability, and size—that demonstrates the gendered nature of fat oppression. This research attends to the intersection of fatness and women's femininities arguing, for instance, that fat women deviate from the imperative for women's bodies to be slender and take up as little space as possible and, therefore, violate socially prescribed gender and sexual roles (Hartley 2001; Murray 2008). The focus in these analyses, however, is largely on the relationship between fatness and heterosexual, cisgender women's femininities.

My research addresses these gaps in the academic literature by exploring the intersection of queer fem(me)inities and fatness. In doing so, my dissertation offers a unique and novel contribution to research on fatness, fem(me)inities, and sexuality. Not only does my research incorporate new voices into existing scholarship; it also examines how these voices might transform existing critical knowledges. Therefore, in addressing the under-theorization of queer fat femmes' experiences of gender, sexuality, embodiment, and oppression, this dissertation provides the fields of gender studies, queer theory, fat studies, and critical femininities with new ways of thinking about the relationship between fatness, fem(me)inities, and queerness.

*What Has Already Been Said About Queer Fat Femmes?*⁵

⁵ This section is derived in part from an article published in *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, 2021, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/>

Despite the general absence of queer fat femmes from the academic literature, in recent years a relatively small amount of research has begun to consider the intersection of queerness, fem(me)inity, and fatness. Rhea Ashley Hoskin (2017b), for example, identifies fatphobia as one of many oppressions that intersect with femmephobia and, in particular, finds that fatphobia intersects with femmephobia to regulate slenderness as an imperative of patriarchal femininity. In my previously published masters research, I conducted a thematic analysis of fourteen self-identified queer fat femme women's personal essays (A. Taylor 2018). Essays were written between 2002 and 2016 by authors living mostly in the United States and Canada. Nine of the authors identified as white, four as Black, and one as Latina. One author identified as trans. I explored how queer fat femme women negotiate intersecting oppressions and suggested that queer fat femmes are excluded from both normative femininity and norms of queer femme, charting how queer femmes experience fatness as: masculinizing; feminizing in limited and limiting ways; intersecting with femmephobia to devalue and marginalize fat fem(me)inities in both mainstream and queer spaces; and limiting their access to resources, like clothing, used to fashion fem(me)inities (A. Taylor 2018). I concluded that, by facilitating fat queers' reclamations of fem(me)inity, queer fat femme embodiments expand "the terms by which subjects can identify with fem(me)inity" (A. Taylor 2018, p. 466). Mary Senyonga's (2020) work on Black queer fat femme embodiment deepens this analysis by exploring the ways in which fatphobia is "intimately tied to the project of white supremacy" (p. 223) and the consequent casting of "Black fat femme bodies in monstrous contrast to white femininity" (p. 225). This dissertation thickens the existing research by using qualitative data—interview transcripts, photographs, and autoethnographic journal entries— to explore the material and marginalizing effects of limited and limiting

conceptions of fat fem(me)ininity for queer fat femmes, and queer fat femmes' own (re)visionings of queer and fat fem(me)ininities.

Overview of the Dissertation

Including this introduction, my dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapters two and three offer necessary context for the dissertation. Chapter two sketches the theoretical framework for my dissertation. My theoretical framework is comprised of feminist theories of the body; queer theories of time, gendered embodiment, and femme; critical femininities; fat studies; and intersectionality. Because I draw on a variety of bodies of literature, rather than an in-depth literature review, chapter two discusses the main concepts and ideas from each branch of scholarship that inform my dissertation. Chapter three outlines and reflects on my methodology. In this chapter, I situate my methodology within feminist approaches to research, specifically “femme on femme” research (Dahl 2010), standpoint theory, and reflexivity. I also explicate my use of narrative inquiry, photo elicitation, and autoethnography. Additionally, chapter three summarizes my methods, from participant recruitment to data analysis, and reflects on the methodological and ethical concerns raised throughout my research process.

Chapters four, five, and six discuss my research findings, with each chapter focusing on a different aspect of my findings. Chapter four explores fem(me)ininity as a site of tension and marginalization for queer fat femmes, charting participants' fraught relationships with fem(me)ininity. In this chapter, I focus on the demands placed on queer fat femmes to embody a narrowly defined, culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, which is hyper-feminine and informed by fatphobic, white supremacist, heteronormative, cisnormative, and classist feminine ideals. I argue that culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity is exclusionary of fat trans and non-binary femmes, larger fat femmes, fat working-class femmes, and fat femmes of colour. I

conceptualize culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, more broadly, as an unattainable ideal by exploring participants' feelings of failure in relation to this fat fem(me)ininity. Finally, I chart the pressures placed on participants to approximate a culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, focusing on the violent policing of participants' fat fem(me)inine embodiments, especially where they deviate from culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity.

Chapter five shifts focus from participants' experiences of marginalization to their experiences of resilience and resistance, exploring how participants experience queer fat femme embodiment as pleasurable, powerful, and full of possibility. In this chapter, informed by Hannah McCann's (2018) call for analyses of fem(me)ininity that move away from exploring what fem(me)ininity *means* representationally to what fem(me)ininity *does* in terms of feelings and capacities, I ask: what does queer fat femme do for participants? I suggest that queer fat femme: enables a reclamation of marginalized identities, including queer, fat, and femme; offers scripts for queer fat femme embodiment; contains glimpses of utopian queer and fat fem(me)ininities; provides subcultural intelligibility; facilitates senses of safety and protection for people in a world that often makes them feel vulnerable and unsafe; and creates opportunities for coalitional resistance to overarching oppressive structures. I then chart how participants define queer fat femme in terms of openness, feeling(s), orientations, and collectivity. Putting participants' discussions of what queer fat femme does in conversation with how they define queer fat femme, I argue that queer fat femme might be (re)defined not as a singular aesthetic or politic, but instead as a site of orientation towards or feeling(s) of fem(me)ininity, where individuals experiencing oppression on the basis of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity can join together to identify, resist, and heal from common and overarching oppressions. Overall, in

chapter five, I frame queer fat femme as a space of liberation with an emphasis on collectivity, relationality, and possibility.

Chapter six builds on the theme of collectivity raised in chapter five to explore the emergent phenomenon of femmeships or, in other words, relationships between (queer fat) femmes. Framing my analysis of femmeships using Andi Schwartz's (2020a) doctoral research on femme internet culture, I first position my participants' descriptions of their femmeships within Schwartz's (2020a) framework of femmeships as political alliances and communities of care. Then, weaving together fat studies literature on fat sex, theorizations of femme sexuality, and queer theory, I expand on Schwartz's (2020a) analysis to explore the sexual nature of participants' fat femmeships. I argue that fat femmeships may be thought of as expressions of what Audre Lorde (1984) calls the erotic because of the glimpses they can offer of alternative and liberatory ways of relating to and desiring queer and fat fem(me)inities. Chapter six, thus, posits femmeships as enabling queer fat femmes to access a desire for themselves and each other, and pleasurable and liberatory ways of being in the world.

The final chapter of this dissertation, chapter seven, offers (in)conclusions from my research. Beginning with a personal narrative that brings the opening narrative in this chapter full circle, chapter seven then recounts the arguments made in each chapter. Chapter seven also reflects on the implications and limitations of my dissertation research, suggesting future directions for researchers in the area of queer fat fem(me)inities and considering how my dissertation can thicken existing and future fat studies, critical femininities, and queer scholarship.

Overall, this dissertation argues that queer fat femme embodiments illuminate the complex ways that gender, sexuality, embodiment, race, and class intersect in the (re)production

and regulation of queer and fat fem(me)ininitities. Queer fat femmes negotiate oppressive conditions of cultural intelligibility, facing severe and violent repercussions when they do or cannot conform to dominant norms. Embedded in queer fat femmes' negotiations of oppressions are resilience and creativity, as queer fat femmes use 'queer fat femme' to come together and identify, resist, and heal from those oppressions. If taken seriously and carefully examined, queer fat femmes' survival strategies contain shimmers of futures where queer and fat fem(me)ininitities are valued and desired.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

In this chapter, I sketch the theoretical framework of this dissertation. A project that explores multiple facets of identity, embodiment, privilege, and oppression requires a wide-ranging and comprehensive theoretical framework. Therefore, this dissertation weaves together several different, yet complementary and often interrelated, branches of literature. In particular, my dissertation is informed by feminist theories of the body; queer theories of time, gendered embodiment, and femme; critical femininity studies; fat studies; and intersectionality. In the following sections, I discuss the central tenets of these theories and elaborate on how they inform my dissertation.

Feminist Theories of the Body

Feminist theories of the body provide an overarching theoretical frame for my dissertation. With the rise of second wave feminism in the 1970s, feminists began to analyze the ways that women's bodies and women's relationships to their bodies were affected by sexism. These analyses, according to Carla Rice (2014), focused largely on "sexist body standards for girls and young women" (p. 20) and resulting body image and eating problems (e.g., Bordo 1993). In the 1990s, as social constructionist theories gained traction in the academy, feminist analyses of the body shifted to exploring how bodies are "shaped by the social contexts in which they are situated," and positing bodies as "mediated by culture and language" (Rice 2014, p. 21). However, in the late 1990s, some feminists began to challenge social constructionist theories of the body because, they argued, such theories focused exclusively on the discursive, neglecting considerations of the materiality of bodies (Rice 2014). Accordingly, theories such as body becoming (Battersby 1998; Coleman 2009; Weiss 1999) and new materialism (Hird 2004) emerged, arguing that bodies are

shaped “through relations with natural and cultural forces that surround them” and emphasizing “the roles of physicality, process, unpredictability, and creativity in understanding the human body and embodiment” (Rice 2014, p. 22). Informed by these “body becoming theories,” (Rice 2014) much feminist scholarship on the body today explores how a variety of forces—environmental, biological, and/or cultural— “expand or limit possibilities for what [bodies] become” (p. 22). For Rice (2014), the shift from social constructionist to body becoming theories enables a focus on “bodies as sources of possibility and pleasure” (p. 267) rather than solely as sites of oppression, allowing space for agency, or the ways that people “show varying degrees of conformity and inventiveness” (p. 268) in their negotiations of the world.

While a full engagement with the corpus of feminist scholarship on the body is beyond this dissertation’s scope, this short overview of the literature’s history offers necessary context for the four key concepts I draw on to frame this dissertation. The first key concept I draw on in my research is that of embodiment. Embodiment refers to “the inseparability of physicality from psyche; how selves are expressed and materialized through bodies and how meanings given to bodies shape selves” (Rice 2014, p. 17). Feminist theories of the body often insist on the embodied nature of subjectivity, criticizing the Cartesian mind/body dualism that posits bodies as separate from, and inferior to, the mind (Bordo 1993; Braidotti 1994; Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994; Weiss 1999). Feminists further problematize the Cartesian mind/body dualism by analyzing how women, especially Black women, are culturally associated with the body and, thus, considered inferior, lacking self-control, and animalistic (Bordo 1993). Instead, feminist body theorists tend to argue for the importance of analyzing the material body, conceptualizing the body as how individuals “perceive and interrelate” (Grosz 1994, p. 92) with the world. Recent research on fatness and femininities echoes this sentiment: fat and feminine subjectivities are grounded in the material

body and analyses of fatness and fem(me)inities require attention to the central role that bodies play in how individuals experience the world (Dahl 2012; 2017; Murray 2008; Rice 2014; Warin 2015). I therefore understand queerness, fatness, and fem(me)inity as embodied subjectivities, and queer fat femme as a form of embodiment, analyzing the role of the body in queer fat femmes' experiences of self, gender, fatness, oppression, and resistance.

The second concept that I draw on from feminist body theory is the argument that bodies are not pre-cultural entities but, rather, that culture mediates subjects' knowledges of and relationships to their bodies (Barad 2003; Bordo 1993; Butler 1993; Grosz 1994; Russo 1994; Segal 1999). According to this argument, the body is enmeshed in culture and, thus, significantly shaped by cultural ideas and beliefs. Indeed, bodies can be, quite literally, shaped by culture. For example, Iris Marion Young (2005) explores how restrictive norms of femininity produce "modalities of feminine spatiality" (p. 149), such that girls and women learn to maneuver their bodies in ways that take up less physical space than boys and men. The body, then, does not exist in a vacuum, rather, the body is "shaped by histories and practices of containment and control" (Bordo 1993). Such an approach to the body is useful for my research because I analyze the discourses that queer fat femme subjects draw on, and are regulated by, in the (re)production of their queer, fat, and fem(me)inine embodiments.

The third relevant concept feminist body theory offers for my research is the contention, informed by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1995/1975), that power and oppression operate on the (gendered) body (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993; de Beauvoir 2011/1949; Young 2005). For Foucault (1995/1975), bodies are produced in relation to power "as an effect of socially and historically specific practices" (Gatens 2003, p. 229). Feminists, building on this assertion, explore gender as a "way in which power takes hold of and constructs bodies in particular ways" (Gatens

2003, p. 230). For example, feminists have argued that femininity can operate as a form of bodily oppression: feminized practices such as makeup, fashion, and inhabiting a small amount of physical space constitute disciplinary measures that (re)produce women's marginalization (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993; Wolf 1990; Young 2005). This understanding of the relationship between bodies and oppression allows my research to consider the material, complex, and multiple ways in which queer fat femmes experience oppression.

The fourth concept from feminist body theory that informs my work is rooted in the contributions of feminist theorists of colour. Scholars such as bell hooks (1982), Patricia Hill Collins (2004), Sara Ahmed (2006), and Sherene Razack (2002) argue that power operates to (re)produce the body, and the spaces bodies occupy, as fundamentally racialized. For example, hooks (1982) and Hill Collins (2004) suggest that Black women's bodies are conceptualized in opposition to white women's bodies—which are passive and, thus, 'appropriately' feminine—as hyper-sexual and aggressive and, therefore, deviant. Specific parts of Black women's bodies—such as the buttocks—come to symbolize the deviance of Black women in the Western cultural imaginary, rooting the oppression of Black women, in part, in the body (Strings 2019). Similarly, Ahmed (2006) and Razack (2002) contend that spaces, and the ways that bodies are positioned within spaces, (re)produce racial oppression. More precisely, space and race are often co-constructed, with the effect that race shapes the ways in bodies can or cannot move through and take up space (Mohanram 1999). This approach to the body as a site of racialization enables my research to consider the ways in which race affects the (re)production of fat fem(me)inities, as well as the privileges and/or oppressions fat femme bodies may experience in negotiating spaces. Consequently, theories of the body by feminists of colour offer a theoretical framework that is attentive to the nuances of racial oppression and whiteness.

The four concepts from feminist body theory informing this dissertation are united in their understandings of bodies as central to the reproduction of gendered subjectivity and oppression. Together, they enable analyses of the ways in which queer fat fem(me)inities are materially experienced and (self-) regulated by norms of gender, race, and class, at the very least. Not only do these concepts attend to how power operates on the body, but they also facilitate my analysis of queer fat femmes' agency, in particular how queer fat femmes resist and re-work dominant understandings of gender, sexuality, and fatness through the body. Feminist theories of the body therefore allow me to center the queer fat femme material body as a site of analysis in this dissertation.

Queer Theories

Queer theory is a branch of critical theory that identifies, interrogates, and deconstructs social norms, especially norms of gender, sexuality, and desire (Jagose 1996). In this dissertation, I draw primarily from three branches of queer theory: queer temporalities; gendered embodiment; and femmes.

Queer Temporalities

In exploring the queerness of fat fem(me)inities—in other words, what is queer about or the queer potential of fat fem(me)inities-- my dissertation largely draws from queer theories of temporality. The “temporal turn” in queer theory explores “intersections between sex, gender, sexuality, history, power and time” (McCann & Monaghan 2020, p. 214). For example, some queer temporalities scholarship interrogates how dominant notions of a successful life are socially constructed and centered on heteronormative milestones like marriage and reproduction (e.g., Halberstam 2005). A main debate in the area of queer temporalities concerns futurity, with two

main perspectives emerging on the issue.⁶ Anti-social perspectives, first conceptualized in Leo Bersani's (1987) seminal essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" and expanded on by scholars like Lee Edelman (2004) and Jack Halberstam (2008a), generally advocate against a liberal politics of inclusion or tolerance in favor of an embrace of negativity, failure, unruliness, and the disruptive or disturbing potential of queerness. As Edelman (2004) famously writes, "fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized," (p. 29) rejecting future-oriented heteronormative structures of time and relationality and arguing for "no future."

Alternatively, and in response to the anti-social position, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) argues that "the future is queerness's domain" (p. 1). Muñoz (2009) works from the premise that, within the current and dominant heteronormative culture, queers can only imagine "barely surviving the present," (p. 112) and that this present is "impoverished and toxic" (p. 27). Queerness, then, becomes "a desire for another way of being both in the world and in time" (Muñoz 2009, p. 96). Muñoz (2009) conceptualizes queerness as "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (p. 1). Better worlds, "blueprints" of other ways of being, can be glimpsed, Muñoz (2009) argues, via the arts—in particular, visual and performance art. These glimpses of queerness are "always in the horizon," (Muñoz 2009, p. 11) creating space in queer theory and life for hope and potentiality. My dissertation, as a whole, seeks shimmers of more liveable queer fat femme worlds, insisting on the importance of a future for queer fat femmes.

Gendered Embodiment

⁶ Because my dissertation does not engage with this body of scholarship as a whole, my discussion of queer temporalities scholarship is not reflective of the breadth of work in the area and the variety of approaches queer scholars have taken to theorizing (hetero)normativity, sexuality, and time. Instead, I use this section to offer important context for the dissertation's Muñozian approach to queerness and queer(ing) fem(me)ininity and fatness.

My approach to gender is informed by the work of queer feminist Judith Butler (1990; 1993; 2004). To develop her theory of gender, called gender performativity, Butler (1990) draws on the work of feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir (2011/1949) and Gayle Rubin (1975) who advocate for a distinction between sex and gender, with sex being a biological fact and gender being a social construct. For Butler (1990), gender and the gendered subject are produced as intelligible through the repeated citation of gender norms: subjects are embedded within, preceded, produced, and constrained by regulatory gender norms. Rather than “an interior feature... [gender] is produced through the repetition of bodily acts” (McCann & Monaghan 2020, p. 127). Through repeating gender norms, potential exists for subjects to take up norms differently, perhaps in ways that are unexpected. This may disrupt or subvert the cited norm; however, it is difficult to know when or where subversion occurs and cannot be known beforehand. Accordingly, gender is constantly (re)produced and never fully determined: this is where potential for re-working gender and gender norms exists. However, Butler’s theory of gender performativity is not without criticisms, especially by scholars who argue that performativity does not account for lived experiences, in particular those of trans people (e.g., Namaste 2009; Prosser 1998).

Butler’s (1990; 1993; 2004) work informs my approach to gender in this dissertation in three principal ways. First, in conceptualizing gender not as essential to subjects but, rather, as performatively constituted through a repeated citation of gender norms, Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity enables me to theorize femininity as accessible across genders and sexualities. Moreover, for Butler (1990), gender operates to (re)produce sex as “‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (p. 10). Butler (1990) thus reveals the distinction between sex and gender, and notions of sex and gender as natural, to be fictions, albeit with very real material effects. Consequently, it becomes possible to conceptualize

diverse femininities in ways that are not pathologizing or marginalizing but, instead, that take them seriously as legitimate gender expressions, and to analyze the ways in which subjects (re)produce their fem(me)inine genders.

Second, theorizing gender as performative creates space to re-work femininity through the repetition of gender norms, offering a means of analyzing how subjects may challenge—or reinforce—oppressive feminine gender norms (Butler 1990). Femininity is not inherently oppressive or negative, as argued by some feminists (e.g., Brownmiller 1984) but, instead, is open to being (re)conceptualized in ways that make femininity livable for subjects. Butler (1990) thus offers a lens for theorizing how femininity can be oppressive that does not necessitate the eradication of femininity since femininity, in and of itself, is not oppressive. Consequently, it becomes possible to consider the potential for femininity to be (re)produced in multiple and less oppressive ways. Accordingly, Butler’s approach to gender allows me to analyze the ways in which my participants navigate, contest, and/or sustain dominant norms of femininity.

Third, Butler’s (2004) more recent writings on gendered embodiment inform my understanding of what Butler (1993) terms “cultural intelligibility” (p. x). By this, Butler (2004) means being recognizable “within a certain set of norms,” (p. 3) that “confer ‘humanness’ on some individuals” (p. 2). Analyzing norms of gender, sexuality, and race, Butler (2004) posits intelligibility as “a site of power by which the human is differentially produced... [creating] the problem of who qualifies as recognizably human and who does not” (p. 2). Those who are excluded from or fall outside of norms of cultural intelligibility “may feel that without some recognizability [they] cannot live” yet, at the same time, “also feel that the terms by which [they are] recognized make life unlivable” (Butler 2004, p. 4). In other words, cultural intelligibility can simultaneously “guarantee and threaten social survival” (Butler 2004, p. 217). The consequences for failing or

refusing to embody, and existing outside of culturally intelligible norms are violent and severe and pose a threat to survivability. Individuals, therefore, experience immense pressure to ‘correctly’ embody dominant norms of gender. My aim in using Butler’s (2004) approach to gender, then, is to explore “the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation” (p. 4). Put differently, my dissertation draws on Butler’s (2004) theorization of cultural intelligibility in relation to gendered embodiment to explore the ways in which dominant formations and alternative revisionings of queer fat fem(me)inities make queer fat femme life (un)livable.

*Femmes*⁷

Writings about femme constitute an important, yet often overlooked and undervalued, branch of queer theory. Femme emerged in 1940s and 1950s working-class, racialized lesbian bar culture, primarily in the United States and Canada, among women negotiating the intersection of femininity and non-heterosexuality or lesbianism (Fink 2006; Kennedy 1997). This history locates femme within a femme-butch dyad and as a gender expression, an erotic, an integral form of lesbian sociality, and an emotional style (Cvetkovich 2003; Eves 2004; Kennedy 1997). With the rise of lesbian feminism in the 1970s, butch and femme were marginalized by many feminists and lesbians for their assumed replication of heterosexual gender roles and femmes specifically were demonized for ‘colluding with the patriarchy’ because of their attachments to femininity (Galewski 2005; Musser 2016; Stafford 2010). In the 1990s, aided by the emergence of queer theories of gender performativity, femme scholars began to argue that

⁷ This section is derived in part from an article published in *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, 2021, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/21604851.2021.1985813>

femme should be recuperated as an important queer subjectivity (Galewski 2005; Walker 2012). These scholars argue that femme is distinctly queer in her gender and her desires, as she intentionally, actively, and visibly performs a chosen, loud, exaggerated, parodic, subversive, agentic femme-ininity (Duggan & McHugh 1996; Eves 2004; Fink 2006; Galewski 2005; Maltry & Tucker 2002; Mishali 2014; Walker 2012). This conception of femme is often referred to as “high” or “fierce” femme in femme scholarship (Galewski 2005; Walker 2012). Conceptualizing femme in this way challenges misogynistic assumptions— informed by 19th and 20th century sexology, lesbian feminism, and a widespread cultural devaluation of femininity—that femmes are ‘inauthentic’ and invisible as lesbians and/or queers, passive partners of butches, passing for straight, heteronormative, and assimilationist. Such assumptions marginalize femmes in both queer and mainstream spaces (Blair & Hoskin 2016; Dahl 2010; Eves 2004; Fink 2006; Harris & Crocker 1997; Stafford 2010; VanNewkirk 2006; Walker 2001). To this day, femme is often perceived as an undesirable and politically invalid or inferior identity within queer communities (Maltry & Tucker 2002).

While many femmes find a model of femme as “high” or “fierce” (Galewski 2005; Walker 2012) to be a valuable way to negotiate and articulate their fem(me)ininities, other femmes are critical of centering this conception of femme. For example, some scholars argue that this conception of femme is produced against “an imagined straight femininity” (Hemmings 1999 p. 455), which is necessarily homogenous, oppressed, and unknowing (Eves 2004; Galewski 2005; VanNewkirk 2006; Walker 2012), thereby (re)producing the very misogyny that femmes work to challenge and eliminating opportunities for coalitions between feminine subjects across sexualities (Galewski 2005; Walker 2012). Other scholars argue that this conception of femme (re)centers masculinity by considering and valuing only those subversive

possibilities that masculinities perform instead of those unique to femininities (Galewski 2005; Hemmings 1999). Still others suggest that this model of femme (re)creates exclusionary gender norms by privileging a specific type of femme as the “most properly feminist” (Galewski 2005, p. 184), thereby homogenizing femme identity and marginalizing femme subjectivities that do not or cannot conform to its standards (VanNewkirk 2006). This model of femme is also criticized for (re)producing a “liberal identity politics steeped in visual recognition, consumerism, and radical individualism” (Dahl 2011, p. 176; Walker 2012) that dovetails with contemporary neoliberal agendas, obscuring more complex, collective understandings of femme subjectivity, especially with regards to agency. Finally, some scholars argue that this model of femme (re)produces formations of identity, politics, and style typically associated with, and that often privilege, whiteness (Dahl 2011; Dahl 2014; Musser 2016).

Accordingly, some femme scholars seek alternative meanings of femme, often looking to femme life writing to identify and explore commonalities in iterations of femme across time and space (see Brightwell & Taylor 2021 for further discussion). Some conceptualizations of femme resist a firm definition stating, for example, that “femme identity can only be defined as indefinite,” (Lewis 2012, p. 106) and that “establishing a firm identity for the femme risks rendering her mundane” (Galewski 2005, p. 200). Other scholars emphasize femme as femininities (re)claimed by subjects who have been excluded from being recognized as feminine (Hoskin 2017b; Serano 2013). Beyond referring only to queer feminine women, femme encompasses all those who “refuse to and/or do not [or cannot] approximate the ideal norm of what patriarchal femininity constitutes” (Hoskin 2017b, p. 100). This notion of femme can be traced back to 1940s and 1950s iterations of femme, which was often articulated as including not only lesbians, but also sex workers and ‘promiscuous’, working-class, and racialized women

(Hollibaugh 2000; Nestle 1987). Femme anthologies from the late 1990s and early 2000s similarly articulate an expansive understanding of femme, one that is “informed by and also exceeds lesbian herstory... Many femmes are lesbians, but femmes are also drag queens, straight sex workers, nelly fags, all strong women and sassy men” (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri 2002, p. 13). These conceptualizations of femme bring together a variety of groups whose femininities have been marginalized, and who collectively re-write norms of femininity in ways that are more inclusive, intersectional, complex, and hopeful. It is this understanding of femme—as a (re)claiming of femininity—that I employ in this dissertation. I use this understanding of femme to explore how feminine people are marginalized based on their race, class, and body size, among other factors, and how feminine people come together to collectively challenge their marginalization.

While femme meanings, identifications, embodiments, and politics have changed according to time and place, it is important not to suggest a “progress narrative” (Hemmings 2011) of femme (Brightwell & Taylor 2021). Indeed, as Laura Brightwell and Allison Taylor (2021) argue via a close reading of historical femme life writing, femmes have a longstanding history of troubling and resisting “monolithic, reductive narratives of lesbian feminism, lesbian identities, femininity, and sexuality” (p. 22), with early femme icons like Amber Hollibaugh, Joan Nestle, and Minnie Bruce Pratt articulating their femme embodiments as rooted in anti-racism, anti-capitalism, sex positivity, and coalitional and collective politics. Therefore, in this dissertation, I do not suggest that queer fat femme embodiments are ‘new’ or ‘more progressive’ than previous or other iterations of femme. Instead, I emphasize connections between femmes, past and present, to highlight the enduring liberatory potential of femme.

Additionally, informed by femme scholar Hannah McCann (2018) and the previously outlined criticisms of some current manifestations of femme, in this dissertation I leave aside questions of whether fem(me)ininity is empowering or disempowering. Such questions almost always (re)invest in individual gender presentations and representations as the locus of political struggle. Instead, I want “to ask different kinds of questions about femininity than the ones that have been on offer to date” (McCann 2018, p. 18). Therefore, in this dissertation, I “shift focus from *meaning* to affective *doing* and queer *feeling*” (McCann 2018, p. 79). In other words, rather than making arguments about what queer fat fem(me)ininities ‘should’ look or act like to resist to normativity, I instead explore what fat “femme embodiment ‘does’ in terms of affects, pleasures, failure, and reimagining possibilities” (McCann 2018, p. 118). My focus on capacities, sensations, and feelings, via McCann (2018), is also consistent with femme scholarship that looks to the ways in which femme embodiments are shaped by orientations, attachments, and affects, such as vulnerability (Dahl 2017) and softness (Schwartz 2020c).

Critical Femininities⁸

The theoretical framework of my dissertation also incorporates critical femininity studies’ politics of femininity. Grounded in femme perspectives on fem(me)ininity and comprised of queer and feminist scholarship on femininities and femmes, critical femininity studies investigates the complexities of femininities, works towards intersectional conceptions of femininities, and analyzes relationships among femininities (Dahl 2012). Critical femininities responds to and challenges ubiquitous framings of femininity as “subordination, sexualization, objectification, and superficial narcissism” (Dahl 2012, p. 61). For example, some feminist scholars have theorized femininity as an oppressive patriarchal construct that is imposed upon women (Bartky 1990; Bordo

⁸ This section is derived in part from an article published in *Psychology & Sexuality*, 2020, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/19419899.2020.1822429>

1997; Brownmiller 1984; de Beauvoir 2011/1949; Friedan 1963). For these feminists, femininity is harmfully forced upon women and (re)produces them as powerless objects for men; femininity, therefore, is a site of oppression that must be overcome or eradicated. However, such theorists' arguments often center white, upper-/middle-class women's experiences of femininity and represent attempts by white, upper-/middle-class women to impose their morals and values on *all* women, as working-class women, queer women, trans women, and women of colour have largely been excluded from dominant formations of femininity (Schippers 2007; Scott 2005; Serano 2007). Instead, critical femininities rethinks feminine subjectivities, resisting patriarchal conceptions of femininity to explore "femininity as a genre in all its variations, representations, and materializations" (Dahl 2012, p. 61). Critical femininity studies insists upon (re)claiming and (re)valuing femininities, particularly femininities that have been culturally marginalized and feminine attributes that have been culturally disparaged (Hoskin 2017b). Therefore, critical femininities research centers complex, hopeful, and recuperative approaches to femininities, theorising "the queerness of (all) femininity as well as relations between femininities" (Dahl 2012, p. 58). A critical femininity studies approach to femininity allows me to explore the nuances of queer and fat fem(me)inities by centering marginalized femininities and by positing femininities as valuable, multiple, and complicated.

Of particular importance to this dissertation is the work of Black feminists, who theorize femininity as a racialized cultural construct that (re)produces the devaluation of Black women (Davis 1981; hooks 1982). Because Black women were masculinized (e.g., by having to perform the same labour as Black men) and dehumanized (e.g., as objects to be sexually exploited by white men) under slavery, they have been excluded from what bell hooks (1982) calls the "cult of true womanhood" (p. 48). According to this ideology, 'true' (i.e., white) women are passive,

submissive, sexually pure, virtuous, modest, and confined to the home (hooks 1982). Black women were constructed against this white ideal as immoral, animalistic, and sexually ‘loose’. Consequently, Black women have and continue to exist outside of the narrow confines of culturally sanctioned femininity, and this is used to justify their marginalization. The stereotypes of the ‘Aunt Jemima’, ‘Sapphire’, and ‘Mammy’ demonstrate the lasting effects of slavery and colonization on Black women’s lives, specifically perceptions of their deviations from femininity (hooks 1982). Patricia Hill Collins (2004), for example, explores contemporary characterizations of Black women’s femininities as ‘too masculine’ and ‘too sexual’. As a cultural construct, femininity thus operates in tandem with structures of racism to maintain, perpetuate, and justify the oppression of Black women by excluding them from femininity and pathologizing the differences upon which their exclusion is predicated.

Another key concept from critical femininities that is central to this dissertation is that of femmephobia. Femmephobia “refers to the systemic devaluation of femininity as well as the regulation of patriarchal femininity’ (Hoskin 2019, p. 687). Patriarchal femininity encompasses normative feminine ideals, including whiteness, able-bodiedness, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, youthfulness, and slenderness (Blair & Hoskin 2015; Hoskin 2017b; 2019). Femmephobia targets people, objects, emotions, and qualities perceived as embodying or expressing femininity, with the effect of devaluing femininity and policing deviations from normative feminine ideals (Hoskin 2019). In this dissertation, I explore the role of femmephobia in queer fat femmes’ experiences, charting how queer fat fem(me)ininitities are both devalued and strictly—and often violently—policed. Thus, I draw on the concept of femmephobia to posit femininity as an axis of oppression and analyse the role of femininity in individuals’ experiences of marginalization (Hoskin 2019; 2020).

Fat Studies

My approach to fatness in the dissertation draws significantly on scholarship from the field of fat studies. Fat studies scholars criticize dominant framings of fatness, particularly those of ‘obesity’ or an ‘obesity epidemic’, for the ways in which they marginalize fat bodies. These scholars suggest that notions of ‘obesity’ and an ‘obesity epidemic’ are informed not by scientific ‘truth’ but rather by neoliberal, capitalist, colonial, and white supremacist cultural ideologies of morality, personal responsibility, and health that posit fat bodies as problems in need of fixing (Cooper 1999; Gard & Wright 2005; Strings 2019). Fat studies, instead, explores what people and cultures make of “the simple fact of human weight diversity” (Wann 2009, p. x). Fat studies seeks to understand the ways in which fatness functions simultaneously as a material experience and a discursive construct, with the aim of challenging—and ultimately dismantling—the fat oppression that is pervasive in contemporary Western cultures (Solovay & Rothblum 2009). With its focus on “the cultural production of fatphobia” (Cooper 2010, p. 1020), fat studies offers a theoretical framework for identifying, analyzing, and resisting fat oppression. Moreover, a fat studies theoretical framework creates space for identifying (sub)cultural understandings and discourses of fatness and examining the ways in which they are (re)produced and contested by individuals and communities.

However, too often “the normative subject of the field still tends to be a young(ish), white, cisgender woman, and typically one who is from the Global North” (Rinaldi, Rice, & Friedman 2019, p. 2). Consequently, as fat studies scholar Samantha Murray (2008) argues, a central aim of fat studies must be to explore how “‘fatness’ is not understood as a singular category, but rather is continually constituted and (re)constituted along a continuum of relativity that is governed by a series of gendered, classed, and raced imperatives for normative bodily being” (p. 3). Indeed, fat

studies literature explores how fatness intersects with, and is mutually constituted in relation to, gender (Gailey 2014; Hartley 2001; White 2014), race (Farrell 2011; Mollow 2017; Shaw 2006, Strings 2019; Usiekiewicz 2016) class (Cooper 2016; Farrell 2011; Saguy 2013), disability (Cooper 1997; Meleo-Erwin 2012; Mollow 2015), Indigeneity (McPhail 2017; Robinson 2019), sexuality (LeBesco 2001; 2004; White 2016), and other axes of oppression. Following fat studies scholars who seek to “thicken fat” (Rinaldi, Rice, & Friedman 2019, p. 9), in this dissertation I conceptualize the body and fatness as “used to craft and legitimate race, sex, and class hierarchies” (Strings 2019, p. 6). I position fatphobia as inextricably intertwined with historical and ongoing white supremacist, colonial, elitist, sexist, and imperialist projects of disciplining, controlling, and dominating bodies, minds, and populations (Robinson 2019). Therefore, throughout this dissertation, I seek to provide thickened analyses of queer, fat, and fem(me)inine embodiments, with a focus on the ways in which queer fat fem(me)inities are (re)produced in tandem with dominant structures of race, class, disability, and the like.

*Queer(ing) Fat Studies*⁹

Especially relevant to my dissertation is a sub-section of fat studies scholarship on fatness and queerness. Queer fat studies— fat studies scholarship analyzing the utility of queer theory for conceptualizing and challenging fat oppression—is a particularly useful theoretical framework for my dissertation because my research is located at the intersection of queer and fat subjectivities and is informed by both queer theory and fat studies. Elena Levy-Navarro (2009) asserts that, rather than an appropriation of queer narratives, strategies, or theories, scholarly efforts to queer fatness result from the fact that queers are “woven into the history of fat liberation” (p. 63). Indeed,

⁹ From: Chapter 29 of *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies*, Edition 1, by Allison Taylor (Author)/Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor (Editors), Copyright 2021 by Routledge. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group.

Charlotte Cooper (2016) states that “queering fat activism involves acknowledging the foundational presence and contributions of queers to the movement. It is fat activism done by queers” (p. 192). In tracing the history of the fat activist movement, the intricate ties between queer and fat people are evident and significant. The Fat Underground, *FaT GiRL: The zine for fat dykes and the women who want them*, LG5 (Lesbiennes Grosse Cinq or Five Fat Lesbians), Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, and The Chubsters are all examples of important fat activist groups influenced by and comprised of queer people, activism, experiences, and theories. Because queers have played an integral role in developing, critiquing, and expanding conceptions of fat activism since its beginnings, it could be argued that fat activism has queer roots. Moreover, because the academic discipline of fat studies grew out of fat activist movements (Luckett 2017), it would follow that fat studies shares fat activism’s queer roots.

In earlier queer fat studies work queer is posited as a subject position that can be compared to fatness (Moon & Sedgwick 1990; LeBesco 2004), or as a theory pertaining to sexuality and/or gender (LeBesco 2001; 2004). For example, Michael Moon’s and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1990) meditation on the convergences in fat women’s and gay men’s lived experiences, such as coming out and the closet, asks, “what kind of secret can the body of a fat woman keep” (pp. 26–27)? Similarly, Kathleen LeBesco (2004) argues that fatness is a “subset of queerness” (p. 88). LeBesco (2004) posits fatness as *like* queerness because both have been constructed as ‘problems’ needing to be explained away. For example, both fatness and queerness have been posited as the result of “genes, hormones, [a] fear of being sexually attractive,” and/or “lifestyle preferences over which individuals have considerable control” (LeBesco 2004, p. 85). Further, fat, and queer individuals “share a reputation for sexual deviance” (LeBesco 2004, p. 86) insofar as queers have been posited as predators or publicly ‘flaunting’ their sexuality, and fat people have been

simultaneously hyper-sexualized and de-sexualized. For LeBesco (2004), overall, fatness *is* queer in two principal ways: because fatness is de-sexualized in dominant framings of fatness, fat sex – sex involving a fat person – is queer. Second, fatness affects the ways in which subjects are read as gendered – by “accentuat[ing] the size and shape of certain sexualized body parts,” for example – and can queer the genders of fat subjects (LeBesco 2004, p. 89).

Samantha Murray’s (2008) call to make space for ambiguous and multiple fat embodiments marks a shift in how ‘queer’ is used in queer fat studies. Samantha Murray (2008) uses queer theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to criticize some fat pride strains of fat studies and activisms for how these strains unintentionally (re)produce dominant structures of power predicated upon exclusion and sexist, heteronormative “visual regimes” (Murray 2008, p. 117) that measure a woman’s value by how closely she conforms to normative beauty ideals. Moreover, such fat pride discourses and movements privilege one ‘right’ or ‘best’ way to be fat. Following Murray (2008), Francis Ray White (2016) states that a fat politics premised only on pride and positivity produces “new spheres of fat failure in those who, for whatever reason, cannot learn to ‘love themselves’ or who feel ambivalent about their bodies” (White 2016, p. 26). Overall, Murray’s (2008) work marks an important turn in queer fat studies towards using queer theory as a tool to interrogate both mainstream fat studies and activist notions of fatness.

Indeed, in Cat Pausé’s, Jackie Wykes’, and Samantha Murray’s (2014) edited collection *Queering fat embodiment*, they define queer as “a mode of political and critical inquiry which seeks to expose taken-for-granted assumptions, trouble neat categories, and unfix the supposedly fixed alignment of bodies, gender, desire and identities” (Wykes 2014, p. 4). With this broadened notion of queer as a critique of normativity, Pausé, Wykes, and Murray (2014) create conceptual space to explore the disruptive potential of fatness, and the ways in which queer theory and fat

studies can be mutually informing. Similarly, a branch of literature using anti-social queer theory to analyze fatness emphasizes the productive potential of rejecting attempts to redeem fatness within dominant frameworks of value, and of reveling in the ways that fatness deviates from social norms. Francis Ray White (2013), for instance, draws on Lee Edelman's (2004) notion of queer "not as a fixed identity, but as that which queers [i.e. disturbs or disrupts] the social order," (White 2013, p. 5) to theorize fat subjects are queer(ed) because of the ways in which fatness transgresses "normative standards of gender and sexuality, health and morality" (White 2012, p. 5). For White (2012), queer(ing) fatness involves embracing the ways in which fatness is discursively constructed as non-normative: in doing so, fat subjects may find more livable ways of embodying fatness. Vikki Chalklin (2016b) expands upon White's (2012; 2013) work by drawing on broader notions of queer anti-sociality, specifically the productive potential of shame and trauma, to theorize queer fat subjectivities, activisms, and futures. Chalklin (2016b) argues that queer anti-sociality offers a theoretical lens through which to examine "the complex ways in which an engagement with negativity, pathologization, trauma and shame might pave the way for a mode of fat activism that ... could work towards a radically different understanding of the fat (and queer) subject" (Chalklin 2016b, p. 108). In taking up the "negative" conceptions of fatness (re)produced by dominant obesity discourse, Chalklin (2016b) suggests that fat subjects can re-work these conceptions of fatness. Re-working dominant, negative conceptions of fatness may help fat people to articulate more livable and queer(ed) fat subjectivities that disrupt dominant conceptions of fat subjectivity and create space for the proliferation of a multitude of fat embodiments. Together, these scholars' works posit queer as a critical analytic: queer becomes a critique of normativity and oppressions more generally. This conceptualization of queer enables queer fat studies to broaden the scope of its analyses beyond the intersection of fat/sexuality/gender to, for instance,

norms of embodiment (White 2013; Chalklin 2016b), health (White 2012; 2013; 2016), and time (Crawford 2017; McFarland, Slothouber, & Taylor 2017).

While this literature informs my theoretical framework for this dissertation, I build on the existing queer fat studies scholarship in two principal ways. First, diverging from previous scholars' uses of anti-social queer theories, my ideas about queer(ing) fatness in this dissertation are informed by queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2009). Therefore, I focus on fat futurities and utopias. Understanding queer as “a utopian political term” (Jones 2014, p. 46) is a nascent movement in queer fat studies, used thus far to contemplate the politics of desire (Jones 2014) and where fat's queer potential can be glimpsed in the oppressive present, such as art production and craft (Mitchell 2018) and fat women of colour's burlesque performances (Hernandez 2020). It is this mode of queer(ing) fat embodiment that I draw on most heavily throughout the dissertation.

At the time of writing this dissertation, during the pandemic, it feels radical to imagine a utopian future for fat people. Fat people, especially fat Black people, are too often violently denied a future. As Hunter Ashleigh Shackelford (2021) writes in the context of police killings of fat Black people like Eric Garner in the United States and internationally, “Black fat being means surviving mutating time-altering forms of violence, it means literally defying presumed and prescribed death while surviving more versions of fatality” (p. 254). In writing this dissertation at a time when fat lives—especially fat Black lives—feel precarious, looking for fat futures feels necessary. Accordingly, this dissertation examines potentialities and possibilities for fat (and queer and femme) people, chasing glimpses of fat fem(me)inine utopias.

Second, my approach to queer fat studies seeks to thicken analyses of queer(ing) fatness by incorporating race and other sites of oppression into my work in meaningful ways. Emily Lind (2019) argues “for an expanded sense of what it means to queer fat activism – recognizing the role

that queer codes have played in rejecting white civility” so that “queer is not the only word at our disposal for reading fat activist strategies that talk back to the polite silences and quiet exclusions that enable fatphobia to proliferate. It is important to foster a politics of recognition when it comes to whiteness, tracking how and where the command to ‘act white’ constrains against movements for fat liberation” (p. 190). Put differently, Lind (2019) urges fat activists and scholars to consider the ways in which queer(ing) fatness, fat studies, and fat activism can highlight how “white fat activists perform their whiteness poorly, and in doing so, render whiteness more recognizable and therefore rejectable” (p. 192). Therefore, I follow Lind (2019) in working to disrupt “the dynamics of white silence” (p. 187) in fat studies by interrogating the role of whiteness in the (re)production of queer fat fem(me)inine embodiments and politics.

Intersectionality

Lastly, the theoretical framework of my dissertation is fundamentally informed by intersectionality. The term intersectionality was initially used by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe the oppression Black women experience as both women and Black people. Crenshaw (1989; 1991) argues that single-issue approaches to analyzing Black women’s oppression—such as feminism *or* anti-racism— are inadequate because they elevate one category of analysis over others. Intersectionality addresses this problem by identifying and analyzing the ways in which power relations—for example, sexism, racism, classism, and ableism—are interlocking, mutually constituting and, thus, intersecting (Hill Collins & Bilge 2016). In other words, intersectionality explores how multiple structures of oppression interact to provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of the operations of power, both in individual’s lives and on a structural level (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall 2013; Hill Collins & Bilge 2016; McCall 2005).

Importantly, my use of intersectionality is not additive—simply adding one identity on top of another— but, rather, focuses on “interactive and mutually constituting” relations of power— interrogating how social structures co-constitute and mutually inform subjectivities and oppressions (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall 2013, p. 787). Further, accounting “for the messiness and fleshiness of identities” my understanding of intersectionality recognizes “the impossibility of disaggregating differences or identity categories” (Rinaldi, Rice, & Friedman 2019, p. 3). Therefore, I do not consider queer fat femme embodiment as a site at which three or more pre-existing identities “cross,” but, rather, “as the point... at which those identities emerge, alongside race, class, ability... simultaneously in/as particular types of embodiment” (White 2019, p. 113). Accordingly, I use an intersectional theoretical framework to explore “how societies control multiply marked, differently sized and shaped bodies, and how those bodies act back, through the push and pull of identity interpellation and self-creation as well as through the confrontation of social and nonsocial forces, capacities, and tendencies” (Rinaldi, Rice, & Friedman 2019, p. 3).

Intersectionality theory is important for my dissertation research because I analyze the ways in which queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity—and the according oppressions of homophobia and/or heteronormativity, sexism and/or femmephobia, and fatphobia—work together to shape queer fat femme embodiments and experiences of marginalization. Moreover, an intersectional framework allows me to challenge notions of a universal queer fat femme subject by meaningfully addressing the ways in which participants’ experiences of queer and fat fem(me)ininities are ruptured via other intersections of privilege and oppression including, but not limited to, race, class, and disability. Indeed, sexuality studies, fat studies, and critical femininity studies scholars who engage in intersectional analyses demonstrate the importance of considering how queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity are always already intertwined with other axes of

embodiment and power (e.g., Dahl 2014; Duong 2012; Erel, Haritaworn, Rodríguez, & Klesse 2010; Hill Collins 2004; Hoskin 2017b; Mollow 2017). For example, some femme scholars demonstrate that an intersectional lens enables critical interventions into the (re)production of exclusionary norms of fem(me)ininity, such as those rooted in white supremacy (Dahl 2014; Hoskin 2017b). Therefore, intersectionality offers a theoretical framework that enables my research to substantively attend to multiple axes of privilege and oppression.

Conclusion

This chapter has mapped the multiple, complementary, and often overlapping theoretical frames informing this dissertation. I draw on the tenets from feminist theories of the body, queer theories (of time, gendered embodiment, and femme), critical femininities, fat studies, and intersectionality that I have outlined in this chapter throughout this dissertation. Together, these theories provide a framework that centers the material body as a site of analysis, challenges (hetero)normative understandings of gender and sexuality, insists on the value of fem(me)ininity and fatness, and understands structures of power as always already interrelated. Therefore, my theoretical framework in this dissertation supports my research aims of interrogating formations of queer fat fem(me)ininity for the ways in which they challenge and/or reinforce oppressions like racism and classism, even when they are accommodating of fatness; of understanding why queer fat femme embodiments matter to people in their daily lives; and of insisting on the importance of queer fat femme futures and liberation. In the next chapter, I build on the theoretical framework outlined here by discussing the methodological underpinnings of this dissertation and providing an overview of how I designed and carried out the qualitative research this dissertation is based in.

Chapter 3: Fattening Queer Fem(me)inist Methodologies

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline and reflect on my process of designing and conducting a qualitative research study that collaborates with queer fat femmes to explore queer fat fem(me)inities in Canada. My approach to this study is grounded in feminist research principles. Like the long line of feminist researchers before me, my approach to research, broadly speaking, is one committed to centering marginalized experiences, disrupting traditional and oppressive research paradigms, advocating for social change, and making explicit my own positionality and investments as a researcher (Brooks & Hesse-Biber 2007; Hesse-Biber 2012). As Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2012) writes, “feminist research encompasses the full range of knowledge building that includes epistemology, methodology, and method.” Therefore, I begin this chapter by outlining the feminist epistemologies underlying my project, specifically “femme on femme” research (Dahl 2010), standpoint theory, and reflexivity. I next discuss the methodologies I employ in my research: narrative inquiry, photo elicitation, and autoethnography. Then, I summarize my methods, from participant recruitment to data analysis. Finally, I reflect on the methodological and ethical concerns raised throughout my research process. Because queer fat femmes are a significantly understudied subcultural group (Chalklin 2016a), this project is one of the first to engage in qualitative research in collaboration with queer fat femmes. It is my hope that this chapter offers future researchers blueprints for fattening queer and fem(me)inist methodologies.

A Brief Note on Qualitative Research

Ulrika Dahl (2010) argues that, “within queer studies as a whole, ethnographic work remains secondary to literary or theoretical work” (p. 151). While literary and theoretical queer

scholarship is invaluable, this type of research did not fit with my vision for my dissertation. I turned to qualitative methods because they are often used to “explore new or underresearched areas,” (Leavy 2014) which, as an emergent subculture in the early to mid 2000s that has received little academic attention, certainly pertains to queer fat femmes. Indeed, the roots of qualitative research in “the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s—the civil rights, women’s, gay rights, and peace movements” that pushed for “the asking of new research questions and the reframing of many previously asked research questions and corresponding approaches to research... [and created] a drive to include people historically excluded from social research or included in ways that reinforced stereotypes and justified relations of oppression” (Leavy 2014) is well-suited to the explicitly political aims of my dissertation.

Moreover, my interest is in “thick descriptions” (Clifford Geertz 1993, as cited in Leavy 2014) of queer fat femme embodiment and experience. Qualitative research “offers nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about *particular* lives, experiences, and relationships” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015, p. 21) and is, therefore, well-suited for generating rich ways of thinking about and understanding queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiments. I also appreciate the creativity that a qualitative approach inspires, as qualitative research allows for the use of multiple methodologies and disciplinary forms (Leavy 2014). Qualitative methods, therefore, enable me to merge the study of myself, my participants, and broader cultural norms into one project (Leavy 2014). Ultimately, my aim in using qualitative research methods in this dissertation is to illuminate the importance of documenting and exploring queer and fat and femme lives.

Epistemologies

An epistemology is “a theory of knowledge that delineates a set of assumptions about the social world and about who can be a knower and what can be known” (Harding 1987, as cited in Brooks & Hesse-Biber 2007). My research is grounded in queer and fat fem(me)inist epistemologies that explicitly position queers, fats, and femmes as producers of knowledge. In particular, I root my research in Ulrika Dahl’s (2010) theorization of “femme on femme” research, standpoint theory, and critical reflexivity. In the following subsections, I outline each of these epistemologies.

Femme on Femme Research

Ulrika Dahl (2010), in “Femme on femme: Reflections on collaborative methods and queer femme-inist ethnography,” sketches a fem(me)inist methodology for researchers investigating fem(me)inities. This fem(me)inist methodology is grounded in Lisa Duggan’s and Kathleen McHugh’s (1996) “femme science,” which is critical of the tradition of ‘objectivity’ in research and emphasizes “loving, grateful collaboration” (Duggan & McHugh 1996, as cited in Dahl 2010, p. 143). “Femme on femme” research is explicitly political: it is “motivated by a wish to reconsider (and change) the meaning of *femininity*” (Dahl 2010, p. 151); it is “a response to the privileging of masculinity (even if it is ever so delightful to many of us), as a tuning into a frequency of sisterhood and queer community and a yearning for femme community” (Dahl 2010, p. 164); and it positions “femmes as co-producers of knowledge on a topic that generally has been tied to objectification, passivity, superficiality and so on... to challenge what counts as theory as well as the master voice of the interpreter who so often has reduced feminine subjects to anonymous narrators, or their (queer) images to superficial ‘illustrations’ of theoretical points” (Dahl 2010, p. 158). In other words, “femme on femme” research responds to and resists the cultural devaluation of femininity in mainstream and queer

academia by working in collaboration with femmes to reclaim feminine ways of being and knowing as valid approaches to research.

Dahl (2010), like myself, is an “insider” (Hill Collins 1986) and her “femme on femme” methodology reflects on being “both subject and object of both research and activism. That is, I both participate in, and study, queer feminist movements that seek... to call misogynist contempt for femininity into question and to explore how femininity is queerly lived and practiced” (Dahl 2010, p. 144). Consequently, Dahl (2010) is “often asked about how I can study something to which I also claims political and sexual belonging; questions that suggest underlying anxieties around the issue of objectivity” (p. 144). However, Dahl (2010) is critical of “the idea of the detached and lone scientist as labouring away producing original ideas” (p. 162).

Indeed, Dahl (2010) challenges the (social) scientific imperative for objectivity and distance by advocating for a queer fem(me)inist approach to methodology that disrupts “research and writing conventions that presume stable distinctions between subjects and objects” (p. 154). Dahl’s (2010) “femme on femme” epistemology therefore offers a way of situating myself in relation to my research by affirming and embracing my closeness to and investments in queer fat fem(me)inities.

Feminist & Fat Standpoint Theories

Sandra Harding (2004) characterizes standpoint as a theory, a method, and a methodology that interrogates “relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power” (p. 1). Emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, when feminist researchers “began to interrogate, disrupt, modify, and, at times, radically challenge existing ways of knowing within and across their disciplines,” (Hesse-Biber 2012) feminist standpoint theory criticizes “the very standards for what counts as knowledge, objectivity, rationality, and good scientific method”

(Harding 2004, p. 2). Black feminist theorists, such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990)—who explores the ways that racial and gender oppression intersect to produce a “group knowledge or standpoint” (p. 25) among Black women in the United States—have been fundamental in developing standpoint theory. In fact, standpoint theory calls white, Western research traditions and their imperative of objectivity—what Donna Haraway (1988) calls “the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (p. 189)—into question, challenging their emphasis on ‘value-free’ scholarship that involves the “detachment of the researcher from the researched” (Hesse-Biber 2012).

Instead, standpoint theory argues for “views from somewhere” or “situated knowledges” that emphasize “elaborate specificity and difference” (Haraway 1988, pp. 190-196) or, in other words, the acknowledgement that “knowledge and truth are partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational” (Hesse-Biber 2012). In doing so, standpoint theory highlights how white, Western, masculinist, and colonial ways of knowing have been universalized, misrepresenting, and excluding women, people of colour, Indigenous people, queer and trans people, and other marginalized groups (Brooks 2007). Accordingly, feminist standpoint theory attends to marginalized groups’ experiences as “the starting point from which to build knowledge” (Brooks 2007). From this perspective, lived experience, interpretation, subjectivity, emotion, and feeling are key sources of knowledge (Brooks & Hesse-Biber 2007; Hesse-Biber 2012).

Harding (2009) identifies 4 main tenets of standpoint theory: that individuals’ knowledges are always situated within and limited by their lived experiences; that the lived experiences of marginalized groups contain valuable information for identifying and challenging their marginalization; that standpoint is not innate but, rather, “achieved” by (un)learning the “social relations that we all come to accept as natural” (p. 195); and that, beyond claims of

objectivity or relativism, knowledges should be assessed by whether they are politically useful for and accountable to the marginalized groups they seek to represent. From a standpoint theoretical perspective, then, “the denial of values, biases, and politics is seen as unrealistic and undesirable” (Hesse-Biber 2012). Importantly, feminist standpoint scholars assert that standpoints are multiple and encourage explorations of the intersections of axes of oppression (Brooks 2007; Minh-ha 1988; Sprague & Zimmerman 1993). Ultimately, in divesting from false and oppressive notions of neutrality, objectivity, and rationality, and by centering and (re)valuing marginalized experiences, standpoint theory “can transform a source of oppression into a source of knowledge and potential liberation” (Harding 2004, p. 10).

While standpoint theory is rooted in feminist thought, scholars in fat studies have recently explored the utility of this literature for challenging fat oppression. Charlotte Cooper (2016) states that “who researches fat people and who creates knowledge about fatness is important” (p. 32). This is because most of the knowledge about fatness, in a Western context, is produced by medical and health professionals who (re)produce scientific framings of fatness as obesity (Pausé 2020). Within the dominant “obesity” framework, fat people become “passive, abjected objects” (Pausé 2020, p. 29). Fat people could not possibly produce legitimate knowledges about fatness because they are culturally coded in opposition to neoliberal, Western notions of agency that emphasize (self-) discipline and control insofar as fatness is associated with irresponsibility, being out of control, and lacking discipline (Pausé 2020). Therefore, when fat people protest dominant knowledges about fatness, they are scorned, dismissed, and/or met with violent hostility and disbelief (Pausé 2020). As Cat Pausé (2020) writes, fat people “are not allowed to be the knowers of our own bodies and experiences” (p. 181).

For Charlotte Cooper (2016), then, fat people must be affirmed as “reflective researchers, knowing research participants, activist-researcher-participants and owners of knowledge” (p. 39) and “epistemology derived from fat people’s own experience must be taken seriously in order to know about fat and change how knowledge and power are currently used against fat people” (p. 33). Cooper (2016) proposes “tentative, unorthodox, creative, emotive” (p. 35) ways of knowing to explore anti-oppressive ways of thinking about fatness and fat people. For Pausé (2020), standpoint theory offers a means of doing so. Standpoint theory,

reject[s] the assumptions and Western values embedded in traditional scholarship, and build[s] a literature that both illuminates of how these values and assumptions have shaped understandings of the world, and provides an opposing set of truths to Western truths about othered populations. Using... [standpoint] methodologies allows for fat people to present stories and craft images that juxtapose/contradict those (re) produced within the “obesity epidemic” framework. (p. 180)

However, Pausé (2020) cautions against “confusing the experiences of the current dominant voices in fat studies scholarship and activism with THE experiences of all fat people,” (p. 184) emphasizing a need for exploring and including multiple fat standpoints. Moreover, Laurie Cooper Stoll and Darci Thoune (2020) clarify that fat(ening) standpoint theory does not mean that only fat people can write about fatness—an assertion already complicated by fluid and contextual definitions of fatness (Thoune 2021)—but, rather, that “fat people should be recognized as important knowledge producers” (Cooper Stoll & Thoune 2020, p. 98). Engaging standpoint epistemology in my research thus (re)values the experiences, embodiments, and feelings of queer, fat, and femme people as rich sites of knowledge production.

Critical Reflexivity

Susan Strega and Leslie Brown (2015) argue that critical reflexivity is a core component of anti-oppressive and ethical research practices. Critical reflexivity means, an approach to reflection that focuses primarily on the politics and ideologies embedded within research processes and within the self of the researcher. It requires that we intentionally, consciously, and repeatedly bring our awareness to the question of what influences our perceptions, conceptions, and responses (internal and external) throughout the research process, from inception to dissemination. (Strega & Brown 2015)

Critical reflexivity, therefore, emphasizes the embeddedness of the researcher within the research process, culture, and society. For Strega and Brown (2015), critical reflexivity has two main goals: “to uncover and challenge the power relations embedded in research, and to uncover and challenge hegemonic assumptions about the nature of the world, the self, and research.” These power relations and assumptions implicate white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, alongside other oppressive systems. In uncovering and challenging these power relations and assumptions, researchers can (un)learn taken-for-granted ‘truths’ about the world, themselves, and research processes. Importantly, Strega and Brown (2015) emphasize that “marginality does not protect one from internalizing dominant ideologies, even when those assumptions operate against one’s own best interests,” highlighting how researchers from marginalized backgrounds are not exempt from reproducing oppressions.

Strega and Brown (2015) suggest that critical reflexivity in research begins with the researcher theorizing their own positionality—including their race, class, ability, gender, and other social, cultural, and political positions—and then considering how the researcher’s relationships to power and privilege shape their research decisions and interpretations of research findings. Critical reflexivity demands transparency in researchers’ choices of research problems

and questions, theoretical frameworks, research designs, and/or what findings to include or exclude in writing up the research. Accordingly, critical reflexivity is not a single step in the research process but, rather, “an ongoing process... It is the active and ongoing analysis of how positionality and ideology are shaping decisions, relationships, and interpretations, rather than a static, formulaic declaration of who we are or what we believe” (Strega & Brown 2015). Critical reflexivity pushes beyond a rote recitation or confession of the researcher’s positionality to provide “messy, confessional, and tentative” explanations of their research processes, whereby they share “not only the personal struggles experienced during the research, but also, more importantly, the political struggles that we have not necessarily resolved” (Strega & Brown 2015). The researcher’s aim, in engaging in critical reflexivity, should be to make visible the range of investments, choices, relationships, and strategies involved in their research process, even and especially where they are conflicted. Research results, rather than objective ‘truths’, then become a “co-constructed space that reveals the interaction between the researcher's assumptions and positionality and the voices, stories and experiences of the research subjects” (Nencel 2014, p. 76). Critical reflexivity as a methodology thus allows “the opportunity for raising new questions, engaging in new kinds of dialogue, producing transformative knowledge, and organizing different kinds of social relations” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli 2007).

Practically speaking, Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Deborah Piatelli (2007) offer seven steps for the researcher who wants to practice a reflexive methodology. First, researchers should identify their positionality, including their social locations, biases, epistemologies, and motivations for conducting their research. Second, researchers should examine their (shifting) positionalities in relation to their participants and research sites. Third, researchers should monitor their relationships and interactions with their participants. Fourth, researchers should

carefully listen to their participants by paying attention to nonverbal cues and the physical and emotional research environment. Fifth, researchers should listen to their own voices, reflecting on any confusion or discomfort they experience in the research process. Sixth, researchers must attend to differences in power between themselves and their participants, and how these differences structure these relationships throughout the research process. Finally, researchers should interrogate their data for their biases and emotional and intellectual responses.

Writing on the importance of critical reflexivity in fat studies, Cat Pausé (2020) states that,

being honest about where we stand, and the privileges that we bring into our spaces, is key to ensuring that knowledge around fatness does not further oppress fat people. And acknowledging that the power transferred through white supremacy, through capitalism, through the Ivory Tower, places the largest burdens on middle-class white people within academia to ensure that we are highlighting and prioritizing the voices of those without those privileges. That we are stepping aside whenever possible to allow someone else to speak, and that we are actively creating and safeguarding spaces for other positions and standpoints to be shared within our activism and scholarship. (p. 184)

For Pausé (2020), critical reflexivity helps relatively privileged (e.g., white, upper-/middle-class) fat studies scholars ensure that, in challenging fat oppression, they do not (re)produce other forms of oppression, and that they are creating space for less privileged fat people to participate in building knowledge about fatness. Indeed, in addition to standpoint theory, fat studies scholars also urge those researching fatness to engage in reflexivity. For example, Natalie Ingraham and Natalie Boero (2020) reflect on how, as fat researchers interviewing fat participants, there was often an “assumption of a common experience and shared perspective,” (p. 117) by participants,

such as mutual investments in dieting or similar stories of medical discrimination, which led to greater trust between Ingraham and Boero and their participants. This example highlights the central role that researchers' and participants' embodiments play in shaping power dynamics (Burns 2003; Del Busso 2007). A key part of critical reflexivity is, then, exploring the ways in which the researcher is an "insider/outsider" in the research process (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli 2007).

Merging Epistemologies

Bringing femme, standpoint, and critical reflexivity theories together allows me to locate myself in my research. Like Dahl (2010), I am a femme conducting research with femme communities. I came to this research out of a desire to create different stories and meanings of queer and fat fem(me)inities, fed up with the marginalization of queer fat femmes (myself included) in both queer and mainstream cultures. I am embedded within the femme networks, queer networks, fat networks, and queer fat femme networks that I discuss in this dissertation. I have no interest in claiming objectivity and, instead, emphasize this research as wholly subjective. My own queer fat femme embodiment and my political commitments to challenging heteronormativity, homophobia, fatphobia, sexism, and femmephobia, as well as white supremacy, classism, transphobia, ableism, and other oppressions inflect every aspect of my dissertation.

In conducting "femme on femme" research (Dahl 2010), I share many similarities with my participants. We all identify as queer, fat, and femme, although the definitions of these things may vary. We all, to varying degrees, are politically aligned: discontent with the devaluation of queer fat femmes and hoping this research will change our circumstances. Having similar embodiments and identifications with (some) participants, at times, made the research process

more accessible for participants. For example, I was struck when, at the beginning of an interview, one participant expressed their appreciation that the chairs in the interview room did not have arms and felt sturdy. As a larger fat person, myself, upon arriving to the interview, I had sat down in the chair, made myself comfortable, and given it no further thought. This participant's comment highlights how my own access needs sometimes mirrored those of my participants and, consequently, made accommodating those participants an unconscious process. At the same time, in some ways, I am an outsider in my research. I occupy a privileged position as a white, middle-class, university educated, Canadian, cisgender settler. My queer, fat, and femme networks—personally and professionally—are predominantly white, middle-class, and university educated. This positionality informs all aspects of my research, from the questions I ask in the project, to the relationships between myself and participants, to the theories I use to make sense of my data, to my interpretations.

Methodologies

Methodology is “a theory of how research is done or should proceed” (Harding 1987, as cited in Hesse-Biber 2012). My dissertation incorporates and blends three different yet complementary methodologies: narrative inquiry, photo elicitation, and autoethnography.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is the overarching methodological framework informing my dissertation. Broadly defined, narrative inquiry “refers to a diverse set of methods, a ‘family’ of interpretive approaches to spoken, written, and visual texts” (Riessman 2008, p. 183). Rather than focusing solely on content, narrative inquiry “interrogates intention and language,” exploring how and why individuals construct narratives to describe their lived experiences (Riessman 2008, p. 11). Narrative inquiry explores “both the constructive how and the

substantive whats of interviewing” (Gubrium & Holstein 2012, p. 32). Narratives are understood as “active, socially situated constructions in which individuals draw on various interpretive resources, including discourse, to socially positio[n] themselves and convey who they are and how they have lived life” (Rudman 2015, p. 13). Accordingly, narrative inquiry closely analyzes narratives as “storied,” exploring the strategies, functions, discourses, regulatory practices, and purposes in narratives (Reissman 2008). Narrative inquiry views narratives as always already shaped by social, cultural, institutional, and ideological forces (Hesse-Biber 2007; Reissman 2008).

Narrative inquiry recognizes and analyzes narratives as co-constructed or involving “two active participants who jointly construct narrative and meaning” (Reissman 2008, p. 23). In this way, narrative inquiry positions the researcher as actively involved in the (re)production of narratives, including the “taken-for-granted theories of language and self” (Reissman 2008, p. 37) contained within narratives. The researcher, therefore, is recognized as playing “a major part in constituting the narrative data that we analyze. Through our presence, and by listening and questioning in particular ways, we critically shape the stories participants choose to tell” (Reissman 2008, p. 50). Consequently, narrative inquiry views transcripts and interview data as “by definition incomplete, partial, and selective” (Reissman 2008, p. 50) because they are constructed by the researcher, who ultimately determines how narratives are represented via theories, interpretations, and arguments. As Brushwood Rose and Granger (2013) argue, “no narrative holds, or even invites, a singular interpretation” (p. 219).

Narrative inquiry is a fruitful methodology for researching queer and gendered embodiments (Eves 2004; Faulkner & Hecht 2011). Faulkner and Hecht (2011), in their study of Jewish queer identities, argue that “narratives provide access to individuals’ interpretations of

their identities, culture and social worlds” (p. 833). Moreover, Faulkner and Hecht (2011) assert that narratives “are self-representations; we tell others stories that reflect how we want to be seen and how we see ourselves” (p. 833). Therefore, by focusing on how individuals not only understand, but also actively negotiate and make meaning of their identities (Rudman 2015), narrative inquiry is especially useful for analyzing complex lived experiences, such as those of queer fat femmes. However, narrative inquiry simultaneously recognizes the ways that participants’ narratives “are constrained by the cultural concepts available to them” and must, therefore, “work within the ‘conditions of possibility’ [Foucault, 1977] that are available in the sociohistorical, cultural contexts in which those realities are produced” (Carter & Bolden 2012, p. 266).

I draw on narrative inquiry not only because of its suitability for researching marginalized identities, but also because it complements my theoretical framework. In exploring participants’ constructions and negotiations of their identities, narrative inquiry recognizes and allows for analyses of gender, sexuality, fatness, and other axes of queer fat femme embodiment as constantly and relationally (re)produced. Consequently, narrative inquiry allows me, as a researcher, to identify where and how participants may resist, re-work, or reinforce norms of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. Narrative inquiry is, therefore, useful for understanding how queer fat femmes experience, understand, and make meaning of their multiple and marginalized identities.

Photo Elicitation

Following Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008), I use photo elicitation in tandem with narrative inquiry because “working with images can thicken interpretation. Images can evoke emotions and imaginative identification... and generate collaborative critique” (pp. 179-180).

Photo elicitation involves “using one or more images... in an interview and asking the informants to comment on them” (Bigante 2010, p. 2). Rather than replacing interviews, photo elicitation offers a tool to facilitate, complement, and build upon the traditional interview method (Bigante 2010). Specifically, photos can be used as a means by which participants narrate their experiences (Luttrell 2010). The incorporation of photo elicitation into interview research is important because it often “evoke[s] deeper elements of human consciousness than do words,” and, thus, generates “a different kind of information” (Harper 2002, p. 13). For example, Wendy Luttrell (2010) argues that “photographs... can introduce content and topics that might otherwise be overlooked or poorly understood from an... [outsider] viewpoint and can trigger new information, memories and meanings for the interviewees” (p. 225). Using photo elicitation in combination with narrative inquiry therefore draws on participants’ photographs to better analyze the ways in which participants construct, represent, and narrate their subjectivities (Luttrell 2010). Therefore, I understand participants’ photos as tools for facilitating richer narratives of lived experience (Luttrell 2010).

Key to visual methods, including photo elicitation, are questions of interpretation. Brushwood Rose and Low (2014) highlight some of these questions: “how are images meant to be read? What does the visual do that the verbal or written cannot? What is the relationship between voice and image? How should we interpret the visual stories participants produce” (p. 31)? Informed by visual methods scholar Chloë Brushwood Rose’s (2009) discussion of digital stories, I do not use a photo elicitation methodology to position participants’ photographs “as transparent representations of a subject’s experience or life” (p. 219). Instead, like Brushwood Rose and Low (2014), I view visual texts—in this case, photographs—as “crafted” or “reflecting processes of creation and self-representation through which complex and contradictory meanings

and experiences are revealed” (p. 30). Therefore, my approach to photo elicitation centers the “interpretive work of the researcher as a negotiation, with both the work produced and its author,” and my analysis of participants’ photographs considers not the ways in which photographs capture a ‘more real’ experience, but rather “the fashioning or crafting of the stories” (Brushwood Rose & Low 2014, p. 32) about photographs and the creativity and affects invoked for participants in creating and storying their photographs.

This approach to photo elicitation heeds Brushwood Rose’s and Low’s (2014) caution against the “valorisation of ‘voice’,” (p. 32) which (re)produces notions of “visual media as a way to gain more direct or transparent access to participants’ experiences” (Brushwood Rose & Low 2014, p. 32). In other words, in drawing on participants’ photographs in my interviews, I do not view these photographs as access to ‘true’ representations. Rather, I use photographs and how participants discuss them to better understand their (re)productions and negotiations of queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiments and experiences. Photographs are not understood “primarily as data gathered by the researcher” but rather “as something intentionally offered by the participants... to the world” (Brushwood Rose & Low 2014, p. 34). In this way, like photo elicitation scholars, I am “not so much studying the images as analyzing how informants respond to them, attributing social and personal meanings and values” (Bigante 2010, p. 2).

Vasudevan (2006) argues that “visual modalities make it possible to perform and author new selves that are not only resistant to dominant images but that offer new sites of inquiry and exploration” (p. 214) and are, therefore, rich sites of exploration for issues of “social positioning and identity work” (p. 214). Similarly, DeVault (2018) suggests that feminist visual methodologies provide opportunities for women and other marginalized groups “to express their own subjectivities and to combat simplistic representations” and that a research project’s

“archive of photos... offers a complex and nuanced collective subjectivity” (p. 320). Photo elicitation is, thus, a useful methodology to employ in studying marginalized embodiments.

Specifically, in the context of fatness, Majida Kargbo (2013) contends that visual methods can challenge fat oppression insofar as participant photographs offer alternatives to dominant visual portrayals of fat subjects as ‘headless fatties’— the contemporary dehumanizing practice whereby fat bodies are “rendered visibly foreign and grotesque as any potential for relationality is removed with the excision of the head” (p. 160). The other common photographic representation of fat bodies exists in the form of the ‘before’ photograph whereby the fat subject is “redeemed through its ‘after’ counterpart, which triumphs over unruly embodiment through weight loss” (Hurst 2020, p. 171). Accordingly, Kargbo (2013) argues for the importance of fat people’s self-photographs because,

the visible seams in the process of their production reveal a certain fashioning of the self, an act of becoming in relation to others through the repetition of images... Their “imperfect” repetitions and acts of mimicry are the nascent beginnings of a relation to fatness that does not smoothly transition from bodily alienation to fat acceptance or “fat positivity,” but instead highlights the hidden gaps, ambivalences, and ellipses of... fat identity. (p. 162)

In other words, fat people’s photographs of themselves can illuminate their imperfect and messy relationships to, and feelings about, their fat bodies, creating richer narratives of fat embodiment. Moreover, Kargbo (2013) asserts that using photographs alongside spoken/written narratives may disrupt the (re) production of a mind/body split in research by visually representing fat embodiment. Similarly, Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst (2020) argues that “photographing fatness is a critical activist and artistic intervention with many possibilities, not only due to the openness

of images for interpretation, but also because photographs of fat people can disrupt the temporal logic of ‘before’ photographs, as well as the socio-cultural demands of the forever-malleable body in the west” (pp. 172-173). However, Hurst (2020) simultaneously cautions against fat-affirmative photography that works “to make the fat subject desirable primarily through an appropriation of dominant cultural ideals” (p. 173) such as whiteness, able-bodiedness, heterosexuality, and being or ‘passing’ as cis and middle-class. Using photo elicitation to research fat embodiment thus complements my theoretical framework by invoking the physicality of the queer fat femme body. Overall, photo elicitation positions photos as a rich site for exploring the (re)production and lived experiences of fat embodiment.

Visual methods are also a productive way of researching queer subjectivities. For example, photo elicitation can provide queer subjects whose identities are not often read as queer— like some femmes— opportunities to be represented in ways that they want (Holtby, Klein, & Cook 2015). Photo elicitation can also serve as a form of queer activism because photographic representations of queerness have the potential to subvert dominant conceptions about what queerness can look like (Holtby, Klein, & Cook 2015). Moreover, femme researcher Ulrika Dahl’s book in collaboration with Del LaGrace Volcano (2008), *Femmes of power: Exploding queer femininities*, demonstrates the potential of self-produced femme photographs to create a “queer archive” (Dahl 2010, p. 164) that redresses the lack of mainstream cultural representations of queer fem(me)inities.

In conducting my dissertation research, I found that participants interpreted my request for them to bring photos to their interviews in a variety of ways. Several participants brought in comics, digital art, or memes from the internet with fat-affirmative messaging, such as taking up

space and dressing in styles fat people are traditionally encouraged to avoid like bikinis.¹⁰ Participants may have chosen these images, in part, because “the politics of representation... pose the limit of both language and image for conveying an experience... Sometimes, one’s experience is visually unrepresentable because there is a literal absence of images” (Brushwood Rose & Low 2014, p. 37). In other words, participants may have strategically chosen memes and art if they could not find images of, or did not know how to represent their own, queer fat femme embodiments.

Demonstrating the rich contributions of photo elicitation to my research, in one instance, a participant (Rio; discussed in chapters four and five) brought in photos of themselves from three different ‘stages’ in their queer fat femme journey to show me the different and shifting ways queer fat femme has looked and felt for them. In another instance (Meena; discussed in chapter four), a participant brought photos exclusively of queer fat femme Instagram influencers, de-centering herself and offering examples of how queer fat femme frequently manifests in terms of aesthetics and individual presentation on social media. Therefore, while I do not analyze the photos themselves in this dissertation, photo elicitation was generative of deeper articulations of queer fat femme and, therefore, richer interview data. Photographs are presented in chapters one and four through six of this dissertation to accompany and offer further context for participants’ narratives.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a methodology that “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, &

¹⁰ Due to copyright, ethics, and privacy concerns (as participants were not the creators of most of these images, or the images were of people other than/in addition to participants) a majority of participants’ photographs are not featured in this dissertation.

Bochner 2011). Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) similarly define autoethnography as a researcher drawing on their personal experience “to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences” (p. 1). Specifically, my approach to autoethnography can be classified as what Crawley (2012) calls “analytic autoethnography,” which centers analytic intention to ask: “What can my lived experiences add to social theories of gender, identity, and the body”? Lived experience is important in autoethnography because the researcher’s “social location is likely shared by many others and informative to a broader project of understanding power in everyday lives. Focusing on the mundane trappings of daily events orchestrated by texts, interactions, and social structure... illuminates the relations of ruling in our lives” (Crawley 2012). Thus, my use of autoethnography brings personal experience and critical theory together to illuminate “the place of the subject [i.e., researcher] amidst broader social structures in ways that challenge both dispassionate ‘objective’ academic prose and the dismissal of memoir as ‘just’ stories” (Lee & McAvan 2021, p. 192).

Choosing autoethnography makes perfect sense for my research because, as Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) write, “autoethnographers sometimes begin projects with personal experiences that we want to understand more fully, deeply, and meaningfully” (p. 47). As I discuss in the first chapter of this dissertation, I was drawn to this research out of a desire to make sense of my own experiences of intersecting queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity. Therefore, autoethnography offers me, as a researcher, “a method for articulating [my] personal connections to—and [my] investment in—identities, experiences, relationships, and/or cultures” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015, pp. 15-16).

Autoethnography is a complementary methodology to narrative inquiry and photo elicitation, as autoethnographic research is often accompanied by interviews with other similarly

identified or aligned individuals (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011). Crawley (2012) suggests that analytic autoethnography actually “works best as part of a larger project of interviews or fieldwork.” For example, Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) argue that interviews, when combined with autoethnography, offer “a way to connect our personal experiences, epiphanies, and intuitions to those of others,” with differences in experience between the researcher and participant having the potential to “deepen and complicate our own stories” (p. 55).

Autoethnography, therefore, complements my use of narrative inquiry and photo elicitation because autoethnography offers opportunities to connect my own experiences to those of my participants, producing thicker understandings of queer and fat fem(me)inities (Lillrank 2012).

Using autoethnography is also a part of my commitment to reflexivity and standpoint theory. Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) contend that autoethnography is rooted, in part, in 1980s feminist theories of subjectivity and reflexivity, and that these works could be considered part of the corpus of autoethnographical scholarship. Indeed, autoethnography, as a methodology, recognizes “the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process,” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011) including decisions about why and “who, what, when, where, and how to research” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011). More broadly, Black feminist researcher Griffin (2012) argues that autoethnography can inspire reflexivity in researchers about the ways in which they are complicit in and complacent with structures of oppression. Likewise, Crawley (2012) argues that key to autoethnography is “authoring situatedness in time, place, and context relative to the relations of ruling.” In these ways, autoethnography is a reflexive methodology.

Crawley (2012) explicitly locates autoethnography’s epistemological basis in standpoint theory because of standpoint theory’s emphasis on the role of the researcher; argument that

standpoints are achieved; emphasis on the necessity of theorizing upon lived experience; and attention to feelings. For Crawley (2012), because standpoint theory views lived experience *as* knowledge, standpoint theory challenges “a narrative/theoretical split in scholarship,” and affirms autoethnography’s legitimacy as a means of knowledge production. Similarly, Griffin (2012) argues that autoethnography, fused with Black feminist thought, requires “a standpoint rooted in interrogation, resistance, and praxis” (p. 143). Overall, autoethnography, like standpoint theory, centers and creates knowledge about inequalities, subjectivity, and politics (Crawley 2012). Thus, autoethnography offers a means of not only incorporating reflexivity, but also my own standpoints into my research.

Incorporating autoethnography is an explicitly femme-inist choice because of the value autoethnography places on subjectivity and emotionality (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011). For autoethnographers, emotion and creativity are part and parcel of rigorous analysis (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015). Carolyn Ellis (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015) describes how, traditionally, “personal experience, storytelling, care and emotions, and bodies were considered ‘feminine’ and unpredictable and, therefore, a barrier to producing objective and rational research, even though subjectivity, experience, emotions, and bodies are integral elements of research and rationality” (p. 8). Moreover, autoethnography is a vulnerable act: “the goal of autoethnographic projects is to embrace the *vulnerability* of asking and answering questions about experience so that we as researchers, as well as our participants and readers, might understand these experiences and the emotions they generate” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015, p. 39). In these ways, autoethnography draws upon and reclaims feminized ways of knowing as valuable methods of knowledge production.

Moreover, autoethnography is an effective method for negotiating my status as an insider because, as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) write, “when researchers do *autoethnography*, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity.” For Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015), similarly, autoethnography offers “an *insider’s* perspective on the practices, meanings, and interpretations of cultural phenomenon/experiences” (p. 31). Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) further suggest that “insider knowledge can be used to call attention to the complexities of commonly held, taken-for-granted assumptions about these cultural phenomena” (p. 31). Thus, autoethnography provides a means of writing myself, as an insider, into my research.

Autoethnography is also “an important methodology in producing fat scholarship and building the field of fat studies” (Pausé 2020, p. 184). Fat studies scholars have often turned to autoethnography because “fat people are primarily spoken about rather than speaking subjects” (Lee & McAvan 2021, p. 181). For Lee and McAvan (2021) part of the powerful potential of autoethnography for fat studies scholars is that it “can give fat writers a powerful way of not only addressing everyday oppression, but making sense of broader social structures (including discourses) that stigmatise and pathologise” (p. 181). Similarly, Jen Rinaldi, Carla Rice, and May Friedman (2019) suggest that, as “a common approach in fat studies scholarship, autoethnography connects the personal to the political by illustrating how oppression is experienced, navigated, and felt” (p. 7). In fat studies, then, autoethnography brings lived experiences of fatness together with fat studies’ alternative theorizations of fat embodiment. For example, Cat Pausé (2020) writes that she uses autoethnography “to allow my own experiences to reflect back upon theory and knowledge created by others in the fat studies literature” (p. 176).

Ultimately, for Lee and McAvan (2021), fat autoethnography is a hopeful and vulnerable act because fat autoethnographies, in highlighting oppressive bodily norms, also reveal how those norms “might be critically reworked and re-understood through theoretically informed narratives of the self that not only critique the world we live in, but engage collectively with other fat voices into creating a more just, body positive world” (p. 184).

Similarly, there is a longstanding queer tradition of telling “life stories by way of theorizing a life not widely published or publicly encouraged” (Crawley 2012). In fact, femme icon Joan Nestle’s (1987; 1992) writings are highlighted by Crawley (2012) as examples of this queer legacy of life stories that theorize “bodies, identities, sexualities, performativities, and subjectivities.” My use of autoethnography, therefore, carries on the femme legacy of drawing on personal experience to theorize and generate knowledge about femme gender, sexuality, and embodied subjectivity (Brightwell & Taylor 2021; Schwartz 2018a).

Methods

Methods are “technique[s] for (or way[s] of proceeding in) gathering evidence” (Harding 1987, as cited in Hesse-Biber 2012). I conducted interviews with fifteen self-identified queer fat femme women and non-binary individuals living in Canada. I also conducted autoethnographic research through a process of reflective journaling and note-taking and incorporating my personal narratives into the dissertation. This research was approved by the Office of Research Ethics at York University.

Recruitment

My approach to recruitment used nonprobability sampling, where “respondents are selected using some non-random procedure, such as surveying particular groups of individuals of interest” (Miner, Jayaratne, Pesonen, & Zurbrügg 2012, p. 15). While nonprobability sampling

does not provide generalizable findings, it is inexpensive and allows for “convenience sampling” or the recruitment of participants from places the researcher has ready access to, such as the researcher’s personal networks (Miner, Jayaratne, Pesonen, & Zurbrügg 2012). The personal networks I used for recruitment consisted of social media groups for queer people, fat people, and/or femme people—a majority of whom are women— with some groups specifically for people in my home city of Toronto, Canada, and others having an international membership. I was already a member of a number of these social media groups and joined a few others specifically for the purpose of recruitment.¹¹ Social media was a useful tool for recruitment and through using social media I was able to reach networks well beyond my own. For example, one participant told me that they had seen my recruitment poster in a Facebook group for fat women in Edmonton, a large Western Canadian city, where I do not have any existing connections. I also used snowball sampling to recruit participants, whereby existing and potential research participants, in addition to other people invested in the topic of the research, reached out to their own networks (Hesse-Biber 2007).

A limitation of snowball sampling is that “it can create systemic sources of sampling error because participants are likely to recruit others who share similar characteristics in addition to the character of interest” (Miner, Jayaratne, Pesonen, & Zurbrügg 2012, p. 16). Indeed, ten of my participants were friends with one other participant or, in one case, the partner of another participant. This limitation is apparent when looking at my sample of participants, which is relatively homogenous in terms of demographics (discussed further below). In addition to producing a sample of participants with similar social locations, snowball sampling also

¹¹ Facebook groups I circulated my recruitment poster in included Curvy Palz; Fat Friends; Femmes in Academia; Fat Studies; Queer Toronto; and Fat, Awesome and Queer (FAQ).

generated a group of participants with similar understandings of and reference points for queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity.

My requirements to participate in the research stated that individuals had to identify as queer, fat, and femme, as women or non-binary, and live in Canada. I used an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of the demographic information of my participant sample (age, gender, race, income bracket, disability, education, and where they fall on the ‘fat spectrum’ of ‘small’ to ‘super’ fat). This information was obtained from participants prior to the interview via a form that I emailed to them (Appendix B). However, this information was secured after arranging the interview because, in my excitement that people wanted to participate in my research, I did not use any sort of initial screening tool or form. It is probable that a screening tool or form could have helped to ensure a more diverse sample, as I would have been able to select which participants I wanted to interview from a pool of interested parties, and actively tracked the demographics of my sample. Instead, I interviewed participants as they contacted me, which resulted in a largely white sample that I then, retroactively and unsuccessfully, attempted to make more racially diverse (discussed further below).

While I made targeted attempts to recruit queer fat femmes of colour to participate in my research—by making social media posts in the same groups that specifically called for queer fat femme of colour participants (Appendix C)—I was unsuccessful. Only twenty percent (n=3) of my participants identified as queer fat femmes of colour. The overrepresentation of white queer fat femmes is also, in part, reflective of the whiteness of my personal networks. My sample is also (at least primarily) English-speaking, as I am only fluent in English and all recruitment posts and interviews were in English.

In terms of demographics, twelve participants identified as white (80%), one as Black (6.6%), one as Latinx and white (6.6%), and one as East Indian and white (6.6%). Ten participants identified as disabled (67%). Participants were between the ages of twenty-four and forty-six, with a mean age of thirty-four ($SD = 7$). Eleven participants identified as cis women (73%), one as a non-binary trans masculine femme (6.6%), one as non-binary (6.6%), one as a genderfluid femme (6.6%), and one as a genderqueer woman (6.6%). The average income range for participants was twenty to forty thousand dollars (CAD) per year. This income range is low in a Canadian context, and reflective of participants' occupations as students (20%), early career professionals (27%), artists (13%), and gig economy or contract workers (20%). One participant self-identified as small fat/ fat (6.6%), ten as fat (67%), one as midsize fat (6.6%), and three as fat/ superfat (20%). A majority of participants were university educated and held graduate degrees (53%, $N = 8$), while the rest held bachelor's degrees (47%, $N = 7$).¹²

Participants were retroactively offered a one-hundred-dollar (CAD) gift card—Visa, Mastercard, or President's Choice—for their participation in my research. I did not originally offer compensation for participation, and the gift card was not advertised in the recruitment process. On some posts in social media groups, potential participants asked if I was compensating participants, suggesting interest in and a possible expectation of payment or honoraria. Looking back, I would have included compensation for participants in my initial project design, and I discuss this in further depth in the final section of this chapter.

Participants were given the option of using their real name or a pseudonym in the research. I was grateful that the Office of Research Ethics at York University offered participants the option to use their real names, as this allowed me, where participants consented, to credit

¹² See Appendix D for this information in table form.

participants as fellow theorists and to acknowledge the collaborative nature of knowledge production (Dahl 2010). As previously discussed, part of Ulrika Dahl's (2010) femme-on-femme research methodology—a key frame for my own methodology— involves affirming participants as co-researchers or collaborators in knowledge production, and Dahl suggests that while anonymizing participants can be helpful for those “who are marginalized and who may experience a very clear and present danger of being subjected to discrimination and even hate crimes,” a downside of anonymity is that “it also serves to reproduce the hierarchy of a named author and the unnamed ‘informant’... Rendering interview subjects anonymous actively reproduces the idea of the author as ‘theorist’ and the interviewee as providing ‘illustrations’ of the author’s theoretical points” (p. 158). Therefore, to resist this hierarchy and acknowledge participants as fellow theorists, I have attributed participants’ ideas to their real names where they provided consent.

As fifteen participants constitutes a relatively small sample size, this research is not well-suited for making generalizations. However, the small size of this sample is effective for exploring the “‘meanings’ individuals attribute to their given social situation[s]” (Hesse-Biber 2007, p. 119). Therefore, my findings in this dissertation should be considered as “rich data from the perspectives of selected individuals” (Hesse-Biber 2007, p. 123) on the topic of queer, fat, and largely white, cis, disabled, young(er), highly educated, middle-/working-class fem(me)inities.

Interviews

I conducted in-depth interviews because they are issue-oriented and useful for understanding lived experience and subjective understanding; therefore, in-depth interviews are well-suited for exploring a specific topic and gaining focused information (Hesse-Biber 2007).

Interviews were held in-person and via video conferencing software, depending on the accessibility requirements and locations of participants. I offered participants a variety of in-person interview locations, from a private room at any Toronto public library branch to a study room on York University's campus. Most participants selected a private room at a city public library branch, but one participant specifically requested to meet at a public coffee shop and three others (who I knew outside of the context of the research) asked to be interviewed in my home. Interviews averaged one and a half hours in length. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted using a loose interview guide (Appendix A), with questions developed from a review of past literature on queerness, fatness, and/or fem(me)inity. A semi-structured approach to interviews allowed for the development and pursuit of new questions and to follow new directions brought up by participants (Hesse-Biber 2007). Participants were asked to bring three photographs that spoke to their experiences of queer fat femme to the interview, and to discuss the meanings of their photographs. Each interview was audio-recorded, and I took notes about ideas or questions that arose after each interview. After the fifteenth interview, no new themes were generated, and I ceased data collection.

Transcribing, Coding, & Analyzing Interview Data

I transcribed all fifteen interviews with the assistance of Otter.ai, a speech to text transcription application that uses artificial intelligence to generate transcripts. I uploaded the audio files of each interview to Otter.ai and, working with the rough transcripts the application produced, edited the transcripts by re-listening to the audio recordings of the interviews. My edited drafts of the transcripts produced by Otter.ai were the transcripts that I used to analyze the interviews. The transcription process was an effective way of familiarizing myself with the interview data, and I kept a running document of ideas for potential themes during this process.

I conducted a thematic analysis of my interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke 2006; Riessman 2008). My analysis of transcripts focused on the “told” or participants’ “reports of events and experiences” (Reissman 2008, p. 54). For the purpose of my analysis, I considered narratives as “brief, bounded segment[s] of interview text” (Riessman 2008, p. 61). I sought to generate “thematic categories across individuals” (Riessman 2008, p. 61) while preserving and grouping individual stories. My analysis was informed by “prior and emergent theory, the concrete purpose of the investigation, the data themselves, [and my] political commitments” (Riessman 2008, p. 54). Themes were identified based on their importance to the research questions (as stated in chapter one), rather than prevalence, in an effort to highlight marginalized experiences, which are often overlooked by qualitative methods rooted in white, patriarchal, Western ways of knowing (Charmaz 2017; Ferguson 2013). Importantly, Riessman (2008) suggests that the aim of thematic analysis is not to generate statistically representative or generalizable findings but, rather, “to develop a theoretical argument” (p. 55).

My analysis of the interview data involved four main steps, as Riessman (2008) outlines. First, I did initial readings of the interview transcripts, highlighting sections and making notes where things stuck out to me. Second, I re-read the interview transcripts looking for and creating preliminary categories. Third, I generated themes by reading the transcripts again through the lens of my preliminary categories. Fourth, I consulted existing scholarship to extend and thicken my themes by, for example, looking for perspectives my themes might not include (Riessman 2008).

Thematic analysis was especially useful for my research because thematic analysis can be “theory-saturated from the beginning” (Riessman 2008, p. 66). According to Riessman (2008) thematic analysis views prior theory and scholarship as a resource for the interpretation of data.

Therefore, a main part of my data analysis involved going between my primary data and the scholarship of others to “enliven an emerging theme and complicate... it” (Riessman 2008, pp. 66-67). This analytic approach was especially useful for introducing queer, fat, and/or femme of colour theories and perspectives into my findings and addressing the whiteness of my sample.

Incorporating Autoethnographic Insights

I generated autoethnographic materials for analysis throughout the research process. To begin, I wrote personal narratives for each of the questions in my interview protocol (Appendix A) prior to conducting interviews as a form of “self-interview” (Crawley 2012). I then wrote journal entries in a notebook throughout the interview process, jotting down my feelings about and responses to interviews. Finally, after I conducted my thematic analysis of my interview data, I wrote a journal entry reflecting on how my initial responses to my interview questions changed throughout the research process. These three sources of material provided the foundation for the autoethnographic components of this dissertation (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015).

My approach to incorporating autoethnography into my dissertation is informed by Ellis’, Adams’, and Bochner’s (2011) conception of narrative autoethnography: incorporating personal narratives into the analysis of the narratives of others. In this form of autoethnography, the main emphasis is on participants’ narratives, and the researcher’s personal narrative is used to frame their analysis of participant-driven data (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011). Therefore, I use autoethnography in this dissertation to draw on my own experiences “to complement, extend, and/or contextualize... interviews, and analysis” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015, p. 85). Using my analysis of my interview data—specifically the themes around which I centered each

dissertation chapter—as a starting point, I analyzed where my own experience might be written into the dissertation (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015).

I have woven pieces of my personal experience into the dissertation in the form of short and contained narratives, one to open the dissertation (chapter one) and the other in the conclusion (chapter seven), connecting “my words, ideas, and feelings with existing research and theoretical ideas, letting my insights around one brief experience create ever-expanding possibilities, relationships, and contexts” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015, p. 93). To be as reflexive as possible, I have laboured to further write myself into this dissertation by identifying and interrogating my own assumptions, decisions, and social locations. These analyses take place in my discussions of my research design (in this chapter) and my data (in chapters four, five, and six) (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015).

At the same time, my use of autoethnography in this dissertation is contained and limited because I am all too aware of the fact that the dissertation is a publicly accessible document. I worry about the risks of disclosing too much personal information in this dissertation. As Georgiann Davis and Torisha Khonach (2020) wonder in the context of fat studies, “what are the emotional costs associated with positionality? Does publicly describing one’s personal experience with a stigmatized characteristic, in this case fatness, create emotional turmoil for the researcher” (p. 107)? For example, I fear being harassed by hostile, anonymous readers on the internet, and find some memories and experiences too mentally distressing to revisit. Therefore, while I aim to be reflexive in this dissertation, attempting vulnerability and engaging in sometimes uncomfortable reflection, I have also held back in many places for my own safety.

Further Ethical & Methodological Concerns

In keeping with my commitment to critical reflexivity, I use the remainder of this chapter to reflect on ethical and methodological concerns that arose throughout the research process. While I have already reflected my positionality or standpoint(s) and the complexities of being both “insider/outsider” (Hesse-Biber 2007), there are two main ethical concerns I wish to address in further detail: participant compensation and photo use.

Participant Compensation

As previously mentioned, participants were compensated one-hundred-dollars (CAD) in gift card form for their participation in my research, but this was only well after I finished my interviews. During my initial recruitment phase, I received a very small number (n= 2) of questions—in the form of comments on public social media posts—as to whether participants would be paid, to which I replied, no, and received no further comment. I felt that, as a graduate student, the small amount that I could pay participants out of my own pocket would be potentially insulting and that, therefore, this money would be better spent on my own living expenses. In full transparency, while my income at the time was low, especially living as a single person in a major and expensive city, it was higher than the average graduate student due to grant success and a research assistant position. I could have afforded to offer participants a very small honoraria and chose not to. I am embarrassed to say that this decision was uninformed: made without reference to current best practices for research or, indeed, real reflection on the values I hold and wish to advocate for as a researcher.

An encounter on social media changed my mind. During the second and final recruitment phase, when I was specifically looking to recruit queer fat femmes of colour, I was called out in a comment exchange on a social media post (Figure 2).

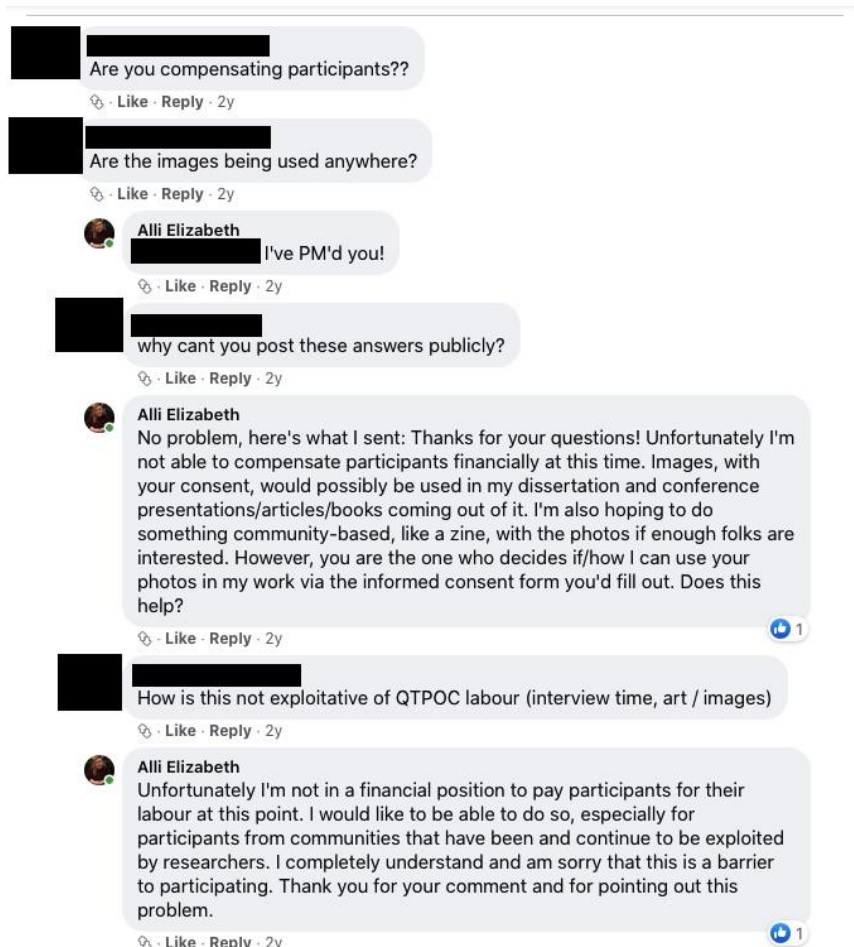


Figure 2. © Allison Taylor

In this exchange, the commenter suggested that not compensating participants of colour was exploitative of their labour, in particular their time and photos. In my reply, I attempted to acknowledge that this was a problem and a possible barrier to participation and thanked the commenter for pointing this out. While, initially, this interaction invoked my own “white fragility” (DiAngelo 2011) it then caused me to reflect on my decision not to compensate participants. Was my failure to compensate participants up-front a part of my failure to recruit more participants of colour and participants from other marginalized groups? What kind of participant was I assuming would volunteer for my research? What assumptions was I making, or message was I sending about the value of participants’ labour?

After sitting with this discomfort, talking with respected colleagues, and consulting with my supervisor, I made the decision to retroactively compensate my participants. I submitted an amendment to the ethics board at my institution, and it was approved. I am grateful that I was able to offer greater compensation to participants (\$100 CAD) through access to a graduate student fieldwork cost fund at my university, as opposed to what I could have offered if covering the cost, myself (\$25 CAD). However, even accessing this fund was a privilege because students have to pay out of pocket, and it takes several weeks to be reimbursed. Had I not received additional funding through grants, allowing me to have savings, I could not have afforded to even temporarily ‘front’ the cost of this expense. While I could have initiated a third recruitment phase where compensation was included in the call for participants, I chose not to because of concerns about the time and funding constraints of my graduate program. This meant that I was not able to ascertain if offering compensation to participants affected recruitment and that my sample remained limited.

My purpose in detailing these events is, of course, to be transparent about my recruitment process and the (white, middle-class) privilege that affected my research decisions and, ultimately, my participant sample. But I also want to reflect on what it means, ethically and methodologically, to compensate participants. Through the lens of Dahl’s (2010) “femme on femme” research, where participants are co-researchers, it makes perfect sense that participants would be compensated, because doing so acknowledges their crucial, active, and central role in the research. However, for graduate students, this issue remains fraught. Is it best to compensate research participants, however small the amount, as a token or gesture?¹³ How can the historical and ongoing ways that research institutions exploit and oppress marginalized groups be best

¹³ From what I have learned through the process, I would suggest that the answer is yes.

navigated by those without access to sufficient research funds or income? I hope that my experience can help other graduate student researchers as they grapple with these questions.

Issues of Gaze with Photographs

In this same social media exchange, the commentor expressed concerns over where images would be used (Figure 2). This concern can be contextualized, in part, by Stefanie Snider's (2018) argument that fat bodies (alongside disabled bodies, queer bodies, bodies of colour, and other marginalized bodies) are culturally coded as "ugly," and, therefore "become spectacularized—they are the centre of spectacles meant to be viewed and absorbed" (p. 347). Similarly, Holtby, Klein, and Cook (2015) found in their photovoice study with queer and trans youth that some participants expressed "concerns regarding how images produced through the study would be taken up and used by people outside the queer community," with one participant retracting their photo "out of concern for how it might be taken up by 'the outside world'" (p. 328). These considerations of the ways in which marginalized bodies are subject to hostile, harmful, and/or violent gazes are important, as my dissertation incorporates some participants' photographs. While I tried to mitigate the possibility of harm through a comprehensive informed consent form (Appendix B), where participants provided consent for the different contexts in which each photo could be used, I cannot guarantee that participants' photos will not be taken up in ways that (re)produce oppressive ways of looking at and thinking about queer fat fem(me)inities. Furthermore, photos of a person render them highly visible, and being 'out' or publicly visible as queer, fat, and/or femme is not always safe or possible. This may have informed who could take part in my research as, for example, people of colour are especially subject to femmephobic and fatphobic violence. This may also have informed some participants' decisions to use digital art and memes as their photographs for this project.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the epistemologies, methodologies, and methods of my dissertation research. Drawing on (queer) fem(me)inist and fat epistemologies and methodologies, I sought to create an ethical and innovative research project to work with queer fat femmes in Canada. In some ways, this was a success while, in other ways, as a researcher and activist, I still have much to learn. My hope is that, in this chapter and the larger dissertation, I am transparent about those successes, lessons, and failures. I also hope that my experiences as an early-career researcher offer food for thought for future scholars looking to fatten queer and fem(me)inist methodologies.

Chapter 4: Queer Fat Femmes' Fraught Relationships with Fem(me)ininity¹⁴

Introduction

“We need to talk about the pressure to be femme when you’re fat,” declares journalist Bex Vankoot (2017) in an article for *Ravishly*, an online feminist magazine. Discussions of the fraught relationship between fatness and fem(me)ininity are commonplace amongst queer, fat, and/or feminist communities in recent years (Ospina 2017; Small 2017). Indeed, queer fat femme participants in my dissertation research articulated complicated experiences with fem(me)ininity as a result of their body size as well as queerness, race, gender, and class. In this chapter I explore queer fat femmes’ fraught relationships with fem(me)ininity. In particular, I focus on the societal demands placed on queer fat femmes to embody a narrowly defined culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. This fat fem(me)ininity is predicated upon being hyper-feminine and informed by fatphobic, white supremacist, heteronormative, cisnormative, and classist feminine ideals. Consequently, I argue that culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity is exclusionary of fat trans and non-binary femmes, larger fat femmes, fat working-class femmes, and fat femmes of colour. I then conceptualize culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity as an unattainable ideal by exploring participants’ feelings of failure in relation to this fat fem(me)ininity. Finally, I chart the pressures to approximate culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity that participants experience, including the violent policing of their fat fem(me)inine embodiments, especially where they deviate from norms of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. Ultimately, with this chapter, I examine fem(me)ininity as a site of tension and marginalization for queer fat femmes.

¹⁴ This chapter is derived in part from an article published in *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, 2021, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/21604851.2021.1913828>

Fatness & Fem(me)ininity: A Brief Review

Fat studies literature on fatness and gender—femininity in particular—suggests that, in the Western cultural imaginary, fatness is incompatible with and excluded from normative notions of femininity. Cecilia Hartley (2001) asserts that “modern American standards require that the ideal feminine body take up as little space as possible” (p. 61). According to Irmgard Tischner and Helen Malson (2010), “femininities are produced and constituted in terms of bodily appearance” (p. 91) and, consequently, “normative femininity is constructed as, and signified through, smallness” (p. 101). At the heart of this devaluation of fat femininities is their violation of gender and sexuality norms (Murray 2008), in part because normative femininity is predicated on slenderness and smallness. As a result, fat femininities become “ungainly, unfeminine and unworthy of appreciation” (Hartley 2001, p. 64). The exclusion of fatness from normative femininity is inextricably tied to the racist, colonial, and classist logics also informing dominant feminine norms; thus, this exclusion plays an integral role in maintaining the whiteness of normative femininity (Senyonga 2020; Shaw 2006).

At the same time, fat studies scholars consider how fatness is feminizing. For example, fatness can accentuate body parts culturally coded as feminine, including breasts and hips (White 2014), and fatness is often associated with the feminized and feminizing qualities of softness and curviness (Gailey 2014). Francis Ray White (2019) contends that, while fat can be “a fleshy obstacle” to normative gender, “fat is also desired, cultivated and put to use precisely as a ‘vehicle’ through which to embody gender” (pp. 118-119). For example, White (2019) finds that, for some fat trans women, the (re)distribution of fat can emphasize a desired feminized body shape. However, despite the possible feminization or feminizing effects of fatness, normative femininity remains exclusionary of fat embodiment, for “fat is non-normatively gendered—not in that it shifts

gender one way or the other, but that it shifts away from binary categorization altogether” (White 2014, p. 11). Put differently, fatness calls into question the processes of binary categorization and hierarchization that are essential to the (re)production of normative gender structures. Thus, normative gender is exclusionary of fatness, removing fatness from the domain of normative femininity.

In the context of femme, my previous research coupled with interview data from my dissertation suggests that, within queer and femme communities, femme is also often conceptualized as exclusionary of fatness. In my master’s research (A. Taylor 2018)—a thematic analysis of queer fat femme women’s personal narratives in published short essays and blogs—I found that femme communities internalize and (re)produce the fatphobia endemic to broader Western culture. For example, queer fat femme writer Zoe Whittall describes popular representations of femme as “tall, skinny, with some tattoos and a snap to her strut. She’s sex on wheels. She’s power. She’s who I want to be when I throw up my dinner” (Malik & Whittall 2002, p. 143). Authors of the other narratives I analyzed also overwhelmingly describe fatness as an obstacle to being read as femme by others and feeling femme themselves. In my dissertation research, some interviews with queer fat femmes confirm this finding. For example, Kat states that “femme and fat don’t always interact well. There’s this concept of what femme should look [like]... you’re often expected to take up less space, so being bigger is often difficult and it doesn’t quite mesh with... the queer concept of femme.” Similarly, Kristy describes how when she was a younger lesbian, “fat meant that femme was impossible.” Kat’s and Kristy’s sentiments demonstrate how some dominant femme images and ideals (re)produce feminine norms of slenderness and smallness and, therefore, position fat femmes outside of the realm of intelligible fem(me)inity. Thus, femme embodiment, too, is frequently conceptualized and represented in

ways that exclude fat bodies. Overall, scholarship asserts that fem(me)ininity is often tied to slenderness in femme subcultures, queer subcultures, and the broader culture.

However, many participants in my current research suggest that a more nuanced relationship between fatness and fem(me)ininity exists. In fact, a majority of my participants identify a dominant cultural conception of fat fem(me)ininity or, in other words, a set of norms by which queer fat femmes may be culturally intelligible as fem(me)inine. As one participant, Allison, states “there are really heavy, specific expectations about what it means to be feminine” for queer fat femmes. What do these expectations or norms of intelligible fat fem(me)ininity entail?

A Culturally Intelligible Fat Fem(me)ininity

Lauren suggests that “you can be [a] queer fat femme... but then there are expectations around how you're doing the femme part of that... you always have to be really high femme.” One aspect of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity multiple participants mention is the use of beauty and/or fashion products to craft a specific and hyper-feminine or high femme aesthetic. For example, Joanna speaks about “that specific look that queer fat femmes have with dark lipstick, winged eyeliner, perfectly sculpted eyebrows.” Similarly, Meena, discussing a photograph of a queer fat femme Instagram personality, says “she's got the false eyelashes and the red lipstick... To me it was like, yes, this is the height of femininity.” These narratives suggest that extensive and expert makeup application is key to achieving a queer fat femme ‘look’. Bringing hair and fashion into the picture, Meena speaks of seeing fat fem(me)ininity overwhelmingly represented as involving “a full face of makeup... wearing false lashes... a cute outfit... [and] heels.” Stéphanie describes how, “when I think of fat femme people... I think often of high femme, like, long hair that’s styled, often curled or in a certain haircut ... colorful feminine outfits that are tight fitting but still flattering, and heels and accessories.” Allison similarly articulates this fat

fem(me)ininity as a “super fancy swing dress, fancy hair, real intense makeup scene.” According to these participants, culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity requires significant attention to almost all aspects of appearance, from makeup to hair to clothing to accessories. Overall, in order to be intelligible as fem(me)inine, fat femmes must use particular beauty and fashion products to craft a heavily made up and styled aesthetic.

Participants also identify a particular body shape as central to cultural ideas about fat fem(me)ininity. Sookie states that “the cultural conception of what high femme looks like is this hourglass bombshell kind of look.” Alex describes this body shape as “a thin person stretched out... the ideal body shape... just slightly bigger than the ideal body size.” For Rachel, the emphasis with this body shape is on “tits and ass.” Lauren elaborates on this point: “you can be fat, but only in the right ways and, the right ways are more towards that hourglass shape. Or maybe you deviate from that a little bit, but you’ve got to have huge tits.” Tracy similarly articulates how “fatness in certain places on the body is more acceptable, like having big boobs or big hips and ass for femme bodies.” In these quotations, participants identify ‘right’ or socially acceptable distributions of fat for fem(me)inine bodies. This body shape notably aligns with cisnormative ideas of feminine ‘womanliness’, in particular with the emphasis on ‘curvy’ breasts and buttocks. Indeed, Sookie explains the logic behind the relative social acceptance of particularly shaped fat fem(me)inine bodies where they state that “folks who have the hourglass shape are much more accepted into [fat] femme identity because they're more in alignment with dominant, patriarchal ideals of what beauty does or doesn't look like.” Intelligible fem(me)ininity therefore encompasses an hourglass body shape, with particular emphasis on breasts, hips, and buttocks.

In describing culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, participants repeatedly mention pin-up aesthetics as an example. Allison says that a key part of being read as fem(me)inine as a fat

woman is that “you have to be a 50s pin-up.” Joanna describes how queer fat femme oftentimes looks “pin-up girl- esque,” and expresses how “I feel like that’s a big part of queer fat femme... is pin-up culture.” Vanessa also discusses “this idea of the high femme especially that fat women are getting encouraged to project, which I call... ‘the pin-up girl fat femme’.” Participants associate specific clothing labels with pin-up-esque fat fem(me)ininity, including ModCloth—a notably expensive online retailer of vintage-themed clothing that carries up to a size 4X— and Toronto-based Rosie the Rebel, which one participant describes as “in line with my personal femme aesthetic, sort of retro... high heels, red lipstick.” For participants, then, pin-up is representative of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. Pin-up, with its emphasis on makeup, hourglass silhouettes, and overall hyper-femininity, functions as an example of intelligible fat fem(me)ininity.

The manifestation of a dominant queer fat fem(me)inine aesthetic as pin-up is unsurprising given that pin-up is a “popular signifier for desirable womanhood” and the feminist history of pin-up, specifically how “pin-up has presented women with models for expressing and finding pleasure in their sexual subjectivity” (Buszek 2006, p. 12). For example, one participant in my research explains how “I was in love with pin-up girls, and I still am. That hyper-femininity, I was really, really attracted to it for a long time ... because... there were some women of bigger builds in the pin-up era, and it felt like a way to be sexy.” For this participant, because there are such limited ways for fat women to see themselves and feel seen by others as sexual subjects, pin-up is important because this aesthetic offers a way to (re)claim her sexuality and fem(me)ininity. Indeed, much contemporary feminist activism surrounding pin-up involves “manipulat[ing pin-up] in ways that upend the expectations of the genre—whether representing women of a different race, body type, background, or even gender” (Buszek 2006, p. 347). Using pin-up in this way allows a variety

of people who are excluded from dominant formations of fem(me)ininity—including dominant representations of pin-up— to (re)claim a culturally intelligible feminine sexuality. Fat burlesque, for example, often draws on pin-up aesthetics to “redefine... the fat body as an object of sexual desire and as home to a desiring sexual subject” (Asbill 2009, p. 300) and to “celebrate, promote, and represent the fat body, in all its glorious excess” (Ratliff 2013, p. 129). Indeed, Yessica Garcia Hernandez (2020) explores fat women of colours’ burlesque communities and performances, arguing that their engagements with burlesque offer glimpses of liberatory fat futures because of the feelings of desire and pleasure they elicit in performers and audiences. This scholarship demonstrates how pin-up is critically and strategically engaged with by those who have traditionally been excluded from dominant conceptions of “desirable womanhood” (Buszek 2006) to (re)imagine futures where racialized and fat bodies are valued.

Together, participants identify a specific type of fem(me)ininity that fat femmes can work towards approximating in order to be culturally intelligible as fem(me)inine. Sookie describes this fem(me)ininity as involving a “fixation, which is definitely based in misogyny and patriarchy, on... what high femme does or doesn't look like and... an ascription of high femme as the only way in which femininity and femme identity can be recognized.” With their reference to “high femme,” Sookie invokes the notion of a femme subject who purposefully uses the trappings of femininity—including lipstick, high heels, dresses, and skirts— to embody a powerful hyper-fem(me)ininity (Galewski 2005; Walker 2012). Ultimately, culturally intelligible fem(me)ininity for fat femmes involves being impeccably and extensively made-up, using cosmetics like eyeliner and lipstick; being hourglass shaped with the ‘right’ distribution of fat, but not ‘too’ fat; having long and styled head hair; and wearing ‘flattering’ and overtly or traditionally feminine clothing. Participants thus articulate a dominant and narrow cultural conception of fat fem(me)ininity that,

as I will explain in the following section, creates limited and limiting parameters of intelligibility for queer fat femmes.

Exclusions: Who Culturally Intelligible Fat Fem(me)ininity Privileges & Leaves Out

In identifying a culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, participants are critical of who this fem(me)ininity privileges and whom it leaves out. In this section, I contend that the culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity that participants identify is predicated upon being, at the very least, hyper-feminine, fat ‘in the right places’, white, cisgender, and upper-/middle-class. This finding extends my earlier argument that intelligible fat fem(me)ininity is circumscribed by limited and limiting norms (A. Taylor 2018) by demonstrating how those norms are tied to, and rooted in, cisnormativity, classism, sizeism, and white supremacy, at the very least. Therefore, although norms of intelligible fat fem(me)ininity encompass (a specific type of) fatness, they must be interrogated for who they continue to exclude and why. Participants highlight these exclusions in their interviews and are critical of cultural norms of fat fem(me)ininity for how they reproduce the exclusion of and violence against queer fat femmes, pointing to the experiences of trans and non-binary fat femmes, working-class fat femmes, larger fat femmes, and fat femmes of color in particular.

Cisnormativity & Trans/ Non-binary Femmes

Participants note that culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity is rooted in and reinforces cisnormativity and is exclusionary of and harmful for trans and non-binary femmes. Sookie explains that “when I talk about what the expectations [of fat fem(me)ininity] are... I think talking about high femme identity and expectations is probably the best container to put on that and also is the mechanism by which transfeminine people are most frequently shut out” of fem(me)ininity. Sookie elaborates on this point by sharing their personal experiences as a “furry” queer fat femme

genderqueer woman: “I feel like, for folks... who are AMAB [assigned male at birth] and maybe embodying femme in a way that's super furry, like myself, they get even further shut out of that space because of this transmisogyny that exists.” Here, Sookie points to normative conceptions of femininity as hairless, which is criticized by feminist scholars like Sontag (2004) as infantilizing. Indeed, when discussing what culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity looks like, Sookie cites “longer head hair, and no body hair.” Consequently, for Sookie,

my furriness coexists as simultaneously as impactful as my fatness when it comes to existing outside of a binary conception of what womanhood should or does look like... As much social reproach that I am on the receiving end of for my fatness and expansiveness as a human being, that's equally matched with the social reproach that I'm on the receiving end of as a result of my hairiness, so I'm pushing back on femininity [with] both of those vectors at the same time.

Sookie, then, experiences their hairiness as intersecting with and compounding the marginalization they experience on the basis of their fatness. Sookie cites “a fixation on high femininity as the be all and end all of femmeness [as] a mechanism of that violence.” Sookie therefore highlights how norms of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity can exclude trans and non-binary embodiments of fem(me)ininity, in this case those whose fat fem(me)inine embodiments are hairy or furry.

Similarly to Sookie, Stéphanie also suggests that embodying a narrow cultural version of fat fem(me)ininity “is exponentially harder for trans women,” and notes how she has seen that “if you are femme and you don't present as high femme and you're fat and trans it must be so freaking alienating... your identity would be read all wrong on so many levels.” Stéphanie's sentiments echo Sookie's lived experiences, illustrating how norms of fat fem(me)ininity run parallel to those of normative femininity, and exclude trans and non-binary people from being recognized as

fem(me)inine, creating limited and limiting terms under which a fat person's fem(me)ininity can be recognized and (relatively) accepted.

Participants identify the expectation of an hourglass body shape, or a certain distribution of fat that emphasizes the breasts, hips, and buttocks as another way that culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity reinforces cisnormativity. Lauren recounts an experience at a local cabaret show featuring trans and non-binary performers and elaborates on how “they had brought in this performer... who is a very fat and femme presenting person. In burlesque and cabaret, there's a kind of fat that's acceptable, like, hourglass curves. There's certain ways that that embodiment is celebrated. But this performer didn't conform to that, like, their body was fat. It was just so wonderful.” Lauren's narrative emphasizes the complex ways that fatness, in particular the distribution of a person's fat on their body, interacts with and (re)produces gender. Predicating an acceptable version of fat fem(me)ininity on an hourglass body shape may therefore exclude trans and non-binary fat bodies from being intelligible as fem(me)inine. Although, as previously noted, for some trans women, insofar as their fatness emphasizes a feminized body shape (White 2019), their fatness may help them to fit in with or come in proximity of the idealized fem(me)inine hourglass figure.

Relatedly, non-binary participants discuss how they feel that limited notions of fat fem(me)ininity, coupled with restrictive norms of non-binary embodiment, conflict with their desired queer fat femme presentation. Kat describes how “when people think of non-binary, there's this one image that comes to mind, and it's the skinny, white, androgynous person.” Rio points out that “‘androgynous’ means to look masculine” and discusses how, because they deviate from this popular conception of non-binary, it took them a long time to realize that they “can, in fact, be high femme” *and* non-binary. Not only, then, is there a fatphobic and femmephobic dominant

notion of non-binary embodiment, but this dominant image of non-binary embodiment polices who can and cannot see themselves as non-binary. Further, the apparel and accessories that Rio uses to express their non-binary queer fat fem(me)ininity—they cite prosthetics, packers, and stand to pee devices as examples—are often not easily accessible in larger sizes or accommodating of fat bodies. For Alex, their distribution of body fat emphasizes their chest and hips, and they often wear a binder to deemphasize their chest to feel more comfortable in their body and gender presentation. These different examples of queer fat femme non-binary experiences all demonstrate that femmephobic and fatphobic norms of non-binary identity, and cisnormative notions of fat fem(me)ininity, place non-binary queer fat femmes in difficult positions. Non-binary queer fat femme participants, thus, emphasize the cisnormative nature of dominant fat fem(me)inine norms and the limited and limiting effects these norms have for non-binary people’s expressions of and engagements with fat fem(me)ininity.

Furthermore, non-binary participants highlight how the availability of clothing options reinforces culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity and, more broadly, cisnormative notions of fem(me)ininity and the feminine body. For example, Rio, a non-binary transmasculine femme, finds that they do not often even have the option to deviate from intelligible fat fem(me)ininity when it comes to fashion: “it is much easier for me to find a dress that looks really good on me than a pair of slacks. It’s just how things go in this world of gender binaries and fatphobia. So, I fell really naturally into it [hyper-femininity] because I liked... feeling like the clothes I was wearing looked good on me.” Rio’s comments demonstrate how the boundaries of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity are circumscribed by larger structures, like the ‘plus size’ fashion industry, which in turn reinforce cisnormative understandings of fem(me)ininity. Ultimately, participants highlight how, in centering expectations of no body hair, being fat ‘in the right places’

and ‘right ways’, and wearing particular clothing styles, culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity assumes and expects a cisgender subject and devalues, marginalizes, and excludes fat trans and non-binary embodiments of fem(me)ininity.

Classism & Working-Class Femmes

Participants also suggest that working-class fat femmes are marginalized by norms of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. Sookie beautifully summarizes this point in their interview: “sometimes class oppression especially means folks can’t access the trappings of femmeness, and at no point should we be making the trappings of femmeness a prerequisite. Femme is a space, I would assert, that folks dressed in dirty coveralls are equally welcome into and should have space made to be in.” With “the trappings of femmeness,” Sookie refers to the beauty and fashion products that participants articulate as central to reproducing a culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity earlier in this chapter. Sookie’s point, here, is that culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity is often coded as upper-/middle-class because it is tied to certain types of makeup, clothing, and other products that require a large amount of money and time to find, purchase, and use. Participants mention costly brands, including ModCloth and Sephora, as representative of the types of products that fat femmes are expected to use to reproduce a culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. In one of my interviews, a participant specifically highlights the expensive beauty and fashion products used by a ‘plus-size’ model in an Instagram photograph when I ask her what makes the photo speak to queer fat femme. This participant notes “the strappiness, the hair, the eyeliner and mascara... especially those kinds of robes. Eventually, I hope to be able to afford one.” For this participant, it is precisely these expensive “trappings of femmeness” that represent queer fat femme in this image. This participant’s statement demonstrates how the use of beauty and fashion products are incorporated into dominant cultural

conceptions of fat fem(me)ininity, and how this fat fem(me)ininity in turn excludes people who cannot afford those products.

In general, ‘plus-size’ clothing is more expensive than ‘straight size’ clothing, a phenomenon Sookie refers to as “fat tax.” For example, Alex describes how “I get super frustrated, obviously, with clothing shopping. H&M had a plus size section, and then they got rid of it. I was so frustrated when that happened. It’s so, so hard to find affordable plus size clothing. I’ve spent so much money at Torrid. Like, so much money.” For Alex, embodying culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, or even just finding clothes that fit, is costly and time-consuming, demonstrating the inaccessibility of an immaculately and expertly styled fat fem(me)inine ideal. Another participant relays similar sentiments about the (lack of) affordability of ‘plus-size’ clothing, highlighting how class and body size can intersect where she recounts a story about a fat acquaintance looking for a dress for a special occasion, and a thin acquaintance’s suggestion of buying a custom-made, designer dress. This participant retorts: “as if that’s an affordable option... I was just like, what the fuck? ... It was classed and sized and so intersecting... [especially given] the way fat people don't make as much money as thin people.” This participant flags how, often, fat women earn less money than their slender counterparts (Fikkan & Rothblum 2012). Therefore, fat women must spend significant amounts of time finding clothing, which is expensive, while on relatively small budgets. The expensiveness of ‘plus-size’ clothing, coupled with the expectation or pressure to use particular and expensive beauty and fashion products, thus makes culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity accessible only to those who can afford it.

Sizeism & Larger Fat Femmes

The classist dimensions of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity clearly intersect with sizeism in many participants’ experiences. Not only is ‘plus-size’ clothing expensive, but ‘plus-

size' clothing also does not often accommodate larger fat bodies. For example, Lauren, a self-identified "mid-sized" fat, emphasizes the inaccessibility of the "pin-up aesthetic" central to some representations of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)inity because "I'm [just] trying to find comfortable underwear in my size." Lauren's sentiment conveys anger at the expectation to be 'sexy' when she struggles to meet even her basic clothing needs due to the lack of clothing made in larger sizes. Meena similarly describes her frustration at "being in plus- size shops and not being able to find my size. It's like, come on guys, you're literally a plus-size store, so why is everything in 1X or 2X? Or even with the some of the lingerie, like, I can wear some of it, [but] I can't wear all of it." For Meena, who self-identifies as between fat and super fat, "as you get bigger, your choices dwindle." Meena discusses how she knows "a lot of people who are just two sizes smaller than me and their experiences are so different because there's so much more they can do. Like one girl... she got to model stuff for [a clothing brand], but we're just three sizes different, so that's still out of reach for me." Meena's experience illuminates the difficulties that larger fats—those who wear larger sizes than those carried even in plus size stores—experience in finding clothing.

Sookie echoes Meena's sentiments, expressing how "I feel like institutionally that's something that lots of queer fat femmes are up against... when it comes to accessing clothing given that most retailers top out at a particular size. Like, Torrid goes up to a 6X and, if you're above a 6X, does that mean that you have free-range to go naked? Because awesome! But I don't think that's actually what's happening." Consequently, as Sookie states,

we're stuck... not being able to clothe ourselves the way we would ideally like to. And I think because femme often is very much about an aesthetic for lots of folks, and the way I frame and sometimes and have heard others frame it is putting on femme armor, being

denied access to that armor is particularly painful because we are restricted in how we can express ourselves by a clothing market that erases us and doesn't provide for those needs. For Sookie, not being able to find clothing in their size inhibits their ability to express their fem(me)ininity, resulting in feelings of hurt, exclusion, and erasure. Sookie further describes how “there's so many garments that are inaccessible. And I've been thinking a lot recently about how I would express myself and how I would dress myself if I had access to a full range of clothing, and how the way I do express myself is configured by what is and isn't available to me.” These participants clarify how larger fats are excluded from embodying fat fem(me)inine norms because the tools for crafting this fat fem(me)ininity are quite literally not made for larger fat bodies. Consequently, having a larger fat body can conflict with norms of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. The fat fem(me)ininity demanded of fat people is thus inherently exclusionary of larger fat bodies and predicated upon a specifically sized and shaped body.

Racism, White Supremacy, Whiteness, & Femmes of Colour

Culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity is also, importantly, racialized. White participants note the white privilege they experience, and how this privilege facilitates the reading of their fat fem(me)ininites as culturally intelligible. Stéphanie describes representations of fat fem(me)ininity—specifically in online spaces such as Tumblr and Instagram— as mostly “white, cis women,” and states that, “as a white person, it's much easier for me to see myself than for people of color.” Vanessa similarly articulates that “I'm a conventionally attractive white girl... I just [need to] show up.” Both Stéphanie and Vanessa speak to the privilege they experience as white queer fat femmes, and the ways that their whiteness makes it easier for their queer fat fem(me)ininites to be culturally represented and accepted. Indeed, Sookie identifies white supremacy as “salient as [a] stickiness point in queer fat femme embodiment,” suggesting that

norms of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity are often steeped in whiteness and white supremacy.

Accordingly, participants of colour discuss their exclusion from dominant ideals and representations of fat fem(me)ininity. For Ngina, a Black queer fat femme, representations of fat fem(me)ininity are “still definitely pretty white. But there are definitely ladies of color, communities of color, that are coming up. I try to prioritize following those rather than communities where I see it's mostly white queer fat femmes, because there's lots of spaces for them, but I want to see people of color on my feed. Not just similar looking people.” Rio, too, explains how, “as a white-passing Latinx person, that's been a complicated other[ing] factor” in relation to fem(me)ininity. Representations of Latinx fat fem(me)ininites are so important for Rio because “when I have found other fat Latinx people... it's been so liberating, and specifically fat femmes really like giving it in that beautiful femme way that is so unique. So, when I find it, when I see it, it sings in my heart. But I don't see it very often.” Ngina’s and Rio’s experiences in relation to dominant representations of fat fem(me)ininity suggest that whiteness is, in fact, central to a culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, and that fat femmes of colour are—as they have historically been—excluded from normative notions of (fat) fem(me)ininity. For Ngina and Rio, this means not seeing their queer fat fem(me)ininites reflected in larger femme communities and feeling Othered by those communities.

Not only is fat fem(me)ininity overwhelmingly represented as white, but the styles associated with this fat fem(me)ininity are racialized. Femme scholar Ulrika Dahl (2014) criticizes the privileging of “vintage pin up high femme” as the “style du jour” (p. 605) in femme communities for its invocations of white supremacist and imperialist pasts and presents. Dahl (2014) asks “what... are the consequences of (trans)national femme organizing and aesthetic

practices invoking 1950s legacies of high femininity that also have ties to white supremacy, US (cultural) imperialism, and nationalism” (p. 608)? Dahl (2014) suggests that centering this fem(me)ininity “runs the risk of transforming femme into a category of whiteness and thus to exclude,” (p. 614) and that, therefore, “a femme movement that remains dominated by white femmes and that wishes to be ‘inclusive’ must take the ‘bad’ feelings that... imperialist and racist histories evoke for femmes of colour equally seriously” (p. 618). In other words, in centering femme identity, in part, on vintage pin-up aesthetics, femme communities (re)center white supremacist and imperialist styles, (re)producing these structures of oppression in femme communities and marginalizing femmes of colour. Critical race theorist Amber Jamilla Musser’s (2016) contention that “the very ideology of the pinup celebrates whiteness and nationalism through the appropriation of sexualized white women’s bodies, thereby making pinups of nonwhite women implausible” (p. 67) responds to Dah’s (2014) critical interventions by highlighting how femmes of colour are inherently excluded from the ‘pin-up’ fat femme ideal. Thus, Dahl (2014) and Musser (2016) suggest that the dominant cultural conception of fat fem(me)ininity is tied to larger, racist feminine ideals that privilege whiteness and exclude queer fat femmes of colour.

Similarly, the privileging of an hourglass body shape—or of a distribution of body fat emphasizing the breasts, hips, and/or buttocks—is racialized. In fact, a cultural fixation on the size and shape of breasts and buttocks is linked to the ongoing marginalization of Black women and, in particular, fat Black women. Amy Farrell (2011) points to the historical example of Saartjie Baartman, also known as the ‘Venus Hottentot’, who was a member of the Khoikhoi tribe in South Africa and sold into slavery, then brought to England to be exhibited and studied in the early nineteenth century. In written accounts of Baartman’s anatomy, her fatness is emphasized, such as the “blubber” on her buttocks and the “fat hanging mass” of her breasts (Cuvier 1817, as cited in

Farrell 2011, p. 66), and perceived as signifying Black women's racial inferiority via notions of excess. Sabrina Strings (2019) argues that "the purported size of [Bartman's] bottom, in tandem with her presumed general rotundity, placed Sara [Saartjie] beyond the pale of fair-skinned, European norms of beauty" and that, more broadly, by the end of the eighteenth century, "racial theories had linked fatness to blackness in the European imagination. And they had also linked thinness to whiteness" (p. 98). For Strings (2019), this racialization of the fat body, in particular the buttocks and breasts, "both degrade[s] black women *and* discipline[s] white women" (p. 211). In other words, Black women's bodies are scrutinized, objectified, and subjected to violence for the ways that their fatness connotes inferiority. Meanwhile white women's bodies are (self-) regulated and policed as a means of upholding racial distinctions and white supremacy via a focus on slenderness. The fetishization and hyper-sexualization of Black women's fatness, and this "association between fatness and black femininity" (Strings 2019, p. 202), influences contemporary representations of Black women's racial inferiority: the fat mammy, the jezebel with the large butt, and the fat/oversexed/over-fertile Black 'welfare queen' (Farrell 2011). However, as Kathy Deliovsky (2008) writes, "sometimes, racial and ethnic markers, for example full lips or 'big butts' are appropriated into normative definitions of feminine beauty and become markers of beauty when on the bodies of white women" (p. 56). Consequently, in the context of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, fat distributions that emphasize the breasts and buttocks have been appropriated into a marker of intelligible fem(me)ininity for white femmes. In this way, culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity recuperates some (white) fat bodies "into codes of white civility," (Lind 2020, p. 190) through an emphasis on the very same body shape and parts used to oppress women of colour. Not only, then, is the body shape central to culturally intelligible fat

fem(me)ininity deeply embedded in racism, but it also continues to privilege white fem(me)ininites.

Culturally Intelligible Fat Fem(me)ininity as Reproducing Oppressions

Emerging from participants' criticisms of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity is an overall understanding that this fat fem(me)ininity only includes particular types of fat bodies and actively reproduces the exclusions of normative femininity. The norms that root culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity are decidedly classist, cisnormative, fatphobic, and white supremacist. Although emerging representations of fat fem(me)ininity are inclusive of (a particularly sized and shaped) fatness, they must, therefore, be interrogated for who they continue to exclude and why.

Current conceptions of femininity as compatible with, or intelligible within the context of, certain fat bodies reproduce "an uncritical re-hierarchising of a 'fat' aesthetic over a normative 'thin' one" (Murray 2008, p. 90) and, thus, many of the violences as normative fem(me)ininity. I have previously argued that "fat [femmes] are pressured to be feminine, [and] this femininity has very narrow parameters that (re)produce boundaries of 'acceptable' fat femininity, marginalizing alternative queer fat femme-ininities that deviate from these parameters" (A. Taylor 2018, p. 469). Participants in my current research suggest that it is oftentimes queer fat femmes who are simultaneously marginalized on the basis of race, class, and other axes of oppressions who experience this particularly acutely. My analysis in this section also highlights how, as discussed in chapter two, using queer as a critical analytic can illuminate the ways that fat studies and activism (re)produce oppressive structures of gender and sexuality (Wykes 2014).

Big Fat Failures

Femme scholar Hannah McCann (2018) argues that “normativity is a fantasy at best, even as it has real effects” (p. 144). In other words, normativity is an unachievable ideal. Indeed, participants overwhelmingly express feeling like failures in relation to culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, suggesting that this fem(me)ininity is unattainable, even for those who fit the particular ‘type’ of fat embodiment privileged by this model of fem(me)ininity. Tracy explicitly articulates feelings of failure at least four times in her interview. For example, she states that “I feel like a failure on the femme front,” and later discusses her “failure to be the right kind of feminine.” What about culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity lends itself to such feelings?

For Meena, culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity is “always more effort than I ever do... I'm not going to wear heels, I'm not doing my hair every day, and I'm not doing a full face of makeup [or] wearing false lashes.” Ngina feels similarly, stating that “I just can't do it on a regular basis.” Allison, too, states that “I didn't end up going down the super fancy swing dress, fancy hair, real intense makeup scene for long because I couldn't maintain ... that level of maintenance.” These participants simply do not have the (significant and required) time, energy, or resources to devote to approximating culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. Not only does approximating culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity require more time and labour than participants have to offer, but approximating this fem(me)ininity also requires skills that participants feel they lack. Indeed, Liz feels that she lacks the fundamental “skills of doing the femme thing... just having the skills to put your eyeliner on straight... takes practice. I didn't have it.” Joanna brings together the ideas of labour and skill as central to embodying culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity where she discusses how “I'm never going to be that aesthetic because I'm too lazy, but I do what I can

to fit in with that. Like, I do my eyebrows—not perfectly lined up and stenciled and whatever, but I fill them in... I can't do eyeliner to save my life or else I would.” Emerging from participants’ comments is a picture of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity as requiring amounts of time, labour, and skill that are simply not feasible for many queer fat femmes.

Three participants actually express anxiety over how I may judge or perceive their fem(me)inities at our interviews. In particular, participants worry about how to ‘show’ me they are queer fat femmes. Meena, at our interview, confides that “even last night I partly was like, I have to paint my nails to show that I'm femme.” Rio, similarly, mentions “really being stressed out that if I cut my hair, when I came, you'd be like, come on, why are you here?” Stéphanie also discusses how, “coming into this interview I was like, oh my god, how am I gonna dress? I don't know how I'm going to look queer, fat, and femme.” Meena's, Rio's, and Stéphanie's comments reveal a real concern over their own embodiments of fat fem(me)ininity, and whether their fat fem(me)inine embodiments will be read by others as fem(me)inine ‘enough’.

These concerns were not isolated to the context of interviews. Lauren expresses feeling this anxiety on an almost daily basis: “it feels like to be a queer fat femme is to always have to be on, and to always have to be presenting yourself in a certain way. I've certainly felt anxiety at times, even in closer circles, of being like, fuck, I need to do my hair like this, or I need to put my makeup on, I cannot be seen in this way.” Stéphanie also experiences larger worries that “I'm not what comes to mind when people think of queer femmes.” Allison, when comparing herself to queer fat femmes on Instagram, says “I view myself not as up to that level,” suggesting that her own fat fem(me)inine embodiment does not ‘measure

up'. Lauren, Stéphanie, and Allison all compare, and find themselves lacking in relation to, the dominant image of fat fem(me)ininity. Sookie, too, feels that "some folks encountering me in my various states as a genderqueer woman would maybe not make space for me in the realm of femme" offering the example of how "today I'm wearing my denim coveralls, and a little turtleneck and I always have quite short hair, or your standard half- shaved queer cut. Sometimes my mustache is more there, or my beard is more there. Depending on the season my body hair on my legs, under my arms, and my bear patches on my chest are more visible." Notably, Sookie's worries about not being seen as fem(me)inine hinge on their deviations from culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, principally the expectations of long head hair, no body hair, and hyper-feminine clothing.

Consequently, Stéphanie states that "your identity is taken more seriously if you are more on the high femme spectrum of things. Not necessarily that you yourself are being taken more seriously." Stéphanie's comments demonstrate how the process of upholding a single fat fem(me)inine embodiment as the only way to be fat and fem(me)inine occurs in a deeply misogynistic culture where fem(me)ininity is always already devalued. As Sookie suggests, "because we live in this cis and heterosexist hellscape, a lot of the time, folks, even with queer community have a very specific idea of what femme-ness does or doesn't look like or encompass." Sookie warns that the consequence of privileging "high femme as the only way of being femme" is that "we're really policing who can and can't hold femmeness within themselves as something that could be empowering." Sookie's comments highlight how privileging a limited and limiting fem(me)ininity as the only, best, or right way of being fat and fem(me)inine inevitably makes queer fat femmes feel like failures because culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, much like normative fem(me)ininity, is an unattainable ideal.

In this context, Tracy’s statement that “what it means to be fat and femme... has its real sources of failure,” makes perfect sense. Overall, participants’ comments in this section illuminate their feelings of failure in relation to a dominant cultural image of fat fem(me)ininity that posits a specific embodiment as the only way to be intelligible as fat and fem(me)inine. Participants’ experiences suggest that queer fat femmes feel a great deal of inadequacy and anxiety about their own embodiments of queer fat femme in relation to dominant norms of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. This finding runs parallel to femme scholars’ criticisms of the privileging of a narrow vision of femme more broadly—that of the high femme who enacts an intentional femme-ininity—for (re)imposing fem(me)inine norms against which femmes feel ‘not femme enough’ (McCann 2018). Ultimately, as Ulrika Dahl (2017) writes, to be (queer and fat and) femme is to “be humiliated and full of feelings of inadequacy” (p. 39).

Pressures to Approximate Culturally Intelligible Fat Fem(me)ininity

In my analysis thus far, I have demonstrated how queer fat femmes experience and find themselves lacking in relation to a culturally intelligible yet unattainable fat fem(me)ininity. This fat fem(me)ininity reproduces classist, cisnormative, fatphobic, and white supremacist fem(me)inine norms. In this section, I examine the pressures exerted on queer fat femmes to embody dominant norms of fat fem(me)ininity. Participants feel pressured to approximate culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity because embodying this fem(me)ininity counters the potentially masculinizing or defeminizing effects of fatness and offers access to desirability, safety, and broader social acceptance and respectability.

Masculinizing & Defeminizing Pressures

Some participants feel pressure to embody norms of fat fem(me)ininity because, in deviating from those norms, they worry about feeling or being perceived in masculinizing or defeminizing ways. Stéphanie describes these worries as reflective of how “my gender is perceived through the lens of my fatness.” Kristy expands on Stéphanie’s meaning, describing how, growing up as a fat person, “always my femininity was under question,” and, consequently, she faced “jokes about trying out for the football team.” Kristy’s reference to football exemplifies the ways in which fatness can be masculinizing or defeminizing for women because football players are often thought of as especially masculine with their bulk and taking up of space— qualities that conflict with normative notions of fem(me)ininity. Kristy’s narrative therefore highlights how fatness can be masculinizing or de-feminizing. As Sookie suggests, “fatness operates... to... challenge patriarchy in a very particular way by meaning that, as feminine people, we take up a lot of space, and the cardinal rule of femininity is being small and demure and not taking up space.” Sookie’s analysis reiterates scholarly criticisms of the dominant fem(me)inine ideal of slenderness.

To negotiate the potentially masculinizing or defeminizing effects of fatness, some participants actively manage their gender presentations. For example, Allison says that “I have not worn jeans in three years, at least... I was really trying to be feminine, because I was worried more about presenting masculine and I felt that that didn't suit me.” Similarly, Joanna discusses how “whenever I’ve put on like a fake mustache or something like that for fun, I always end up being like, oh god, I look like a dude. Or even wearing pants. I don't wear jeans really because I feel like it makes me look more manly.” Both Joanna and Allison worry about— and manage their bodies through, for example, the use of clothing, to prevent— being read in masculinizing or defeminizing ways that contradict their own attachments to fem(me)ininity. Kristy, Allison, and Joanna all, more broadly, experience culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity as (re)producing

limited conditions by which they might be perceivable—to themselves and others—as fem(me)inine.

Stéphanie states that, “there’s a weird dichotomy of where you’re either fat and femme, or you’re not a woman or you’re not feminine at all... in our North American understanding of femininity and masculinity.” With this point, Stéphanie captures a fraught relationship between fatness and fem(me)ininity whereby fat femmes’ grasps on fem(me)ininity are extremely tenuous and hinge on the extent to which they can embody intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. Where participants do not or cannot embody normative notions of fem(me)ininity, they feel alienated from their orientations towards femininity because their fatness is seen as masculinizing or de-feminizing. Participants, therefore, highlight how they experience pressures to approximate intelligible fat fem(me)ininity to avoid feeling and being read as masculine or unfeminine.

Desirability Pressures

Participants also feel pressure to embody culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity to access desirability. Allison states that,

I used to feel that as a fat person, in order to be sexy, you have to be super, hyper-feminine. That hyper-femininity... felt like a way to be sexy...I was really consumed with... appealing to cis het men, because that's what I thought I needed to do, and I didn't think that I had a lot of options about how to do that... I feel now that [hyper-femininity is] ... a trap. Sometimes it's that we're still just catering to what we think men want... I figured out that what I loved about it wasn't the actual aesthetic, it was what I thought it could provide for me.

Allison suggests that embodying intelligible fat fem(me)inine norms can offer queer fat femmes some access to desirability. Allison reflects critically on how, rather than feeling oriented towards

culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity for her own pleasure, she was trying to fit within (hetero)normative frameworks of desirability. Joanna similarly discusses feeling undesirable where she deviates from intelligible norms of fat fem(me)ininity, describing how “I feel like I’m a less sexual being because I’m fat, which is something that I’m working hard on. I feel like putting on a dress is making myself more of a sexual person, and putting on jeans is making myself look tougher, or just less appealing.” Joanna, too, works to approximate culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity to feel desirable. Lauren describes more broadly how queer fat femmes experience “that pressure to be dateable or fuckable... [and how] you need to present yourself in a certain way” to be dateable or fuckable. These comments suggest that working to approximate intelligible fat fem(me)ininity can provide participants with access to desirability.

However, Tracy highlights a limitation to the (relative) access to (hetero)normative desirability granted via the embodiment of intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. Tracy states that “fat femmeness can also be dehumanized by its gross oversexualization so... it's fetishized and... [this] make[s] me feel immensely ill.” In other words, Tracy finds that intelligible fat fem(me)ininity is oftentimes fetishized, sexualized, and objectified. Tracy’s narrative illuminates how, although the culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity can be perceived as (relatively) desirable, this desirability is bound by broader sexist and heteronormative logics of sex, gender, and sexuality that devalue and marginalize all femininities by sexualizing and objectifying fem(me)inine bodies. For queer fat femmes of colour, this fetishization is likely intensified given the intersecting hyper-sexualization of femininities of colour with the hyper-sexualization of fatness and the sexualization of fem(me)ininity in general (Athelstan 2014; Hill Collins 2004; Pyke & Johnson 2003). Overall, then, while participants highlight how they are pressured to embody culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity to gain relative access to heteronormative frameworks of desirability, they are

simultaneously critical of those frameworks for how they reproduce the broader devaluation of fem(me)ininity.

Safety Pressures

Moreover, many participants discuss pressures to approximate intelligible fat fem(me)ininity in public spaces to make themselves feel safer or mitigate violence. For instance, Rio discusses “dressing in a femme way for other people to be more accepting of my fatness and my body and my queerness, because there was that conformity aspect of safety.” Elaborating on this, Rio describes how “with the very long hair and wearing lipstick every day... the amount of side eyes I got about being fat or the amount of micro- aggressions I got about my body were reduced so dramatically. To an amount that, when I think about it, it's kind of scary. So, it became a response like, oh, if I do femme, I am safer. It wasn't something I was loving doing.” Rio uses their first photograph (Figure 3) from our interview to capture this version of their queer fat fem(me)ininity, describing this photo as representative of when “I was really leaning into the rewarding parts of being femme.”



Figure 3. © Rio [image reproduced with permission]

These rewards include feeling socially accepted and receiving compliments from strangers on their “prettiness.” Rio suggests that the reduced harassment they experience with long hair and lipstick occurs because they are “easier for straight and cis people to understand” when they align with some dominant fem(me)inine norms. Stéphanie similarly discusses how “there’s things that I’m not even conscious that I’m doing to try to take up less space or to be less visibly queer or less gender non-conforming... I think it’s to do with how I think I’ll be perceived... it’s not something that I’m happy to do and that feels right. It just prevents me from feeling awful later.” For

Stéphanie, her self-surveillance for adherence to fat fem(me)inine norms is deeply internalized, as this quote suggests, and explicitly for the purposes of avoiding violence from others. Indeed, Joanna suggests that “as a femme person, that works against some of the discrimination and oppression that I face because that's what's accepted,” highlighting how, insofar as she aligns with culturally acceptable fat fem(me)inine norms, she experiences some reprieve from discrimination in public spaces. Lauren, therefore, notes that, “if you're making those decisions [about how to express your fem(me)ininity] from a point of survival, because we are all also surviving in a world that's really hateful and harmful, you do... what you need to.” Participants thus experience pressures to approximate culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity to access safety, and oftentimes will do what they can to fit in with this fat fem(me)ininity to mitigate the consequences (discussed in the following section) of failure to conform.

Social Acceptance & Respectability Pressures

Overall, participants discuss the ways in which approximating culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity makes them feel more socially accepted. Lauren points out that “there are still so few ways that you can be fat and accepted” as a queer fat femme, and notes “the constant barrage of social pressures around ways that you can be fat in public... you don't get to have a sweatpants, messy hair, no makeup day, and it be cute.” Joanna similarly describes how, “there's a lot of pressure when you're fat to be a pretty fat person... I feel pressure to put on a full outfit [and] make sure my hair doesn't look sloppy... If I'm going to be fat... at least I can prove that I'm taking care of myself by wearing makeup and looking nice.” In doing so, Joanna feels “that I'm more accepted as a person.” Therefore, for Joanna and Lauren, actively working to embodying norms of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity offers access to relative social acceptance.

Stéphanie, too, notes the relative acceptance she receives when working to approximate norms of fat fem(me)ininity in comparison to “someone who is fat and who’s a woman who doesn’t make an ‘effort’,” and suggests that the relative acceptance she receives is the result of “making an effort to make yourself presentable and to overcome the unflattering aspects of your presentation, which are your fatness, by upping the feminine presentation.” Here, Stéphanie illuminates how approximating culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity offers relative access to social acceptance because this fem(me)ininity makes her fatness more palatable by bringing it within the realm of respectability. Stéphanie further discusses how “being rewarded as a fat person when you’re seen as making an effort to appear feminine as someone who is a cis woman and who is seen presenting it in a feminine way that’s hyper-feminine... feels good... but also, it feels like, okay, I have dignity as a human by being rewarded for performing in a way that people understand and that they value.” Stéphanie’s narrative illustrates how embodying culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity can offer queer fat femmes relative access to social acceptance because this fem(me)ininity is rooted in normative gender ideals, thereby compensating for, or mediating the disruption that fatness can pose to normative fem(me)ininity. Participants’ comments overall demonstrate how broader social acceptance and respectability—which are tied to the reproduction of dominant gender norms—constitute significant pressures to embody culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity.

Mediating Factors

While approximating norms of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity can offer some queer fat femmes relative access to intelligible fem(me)ininity, desirability, safety, and social acceptance and respectability, this access is directly mediated by their social location.

In other words, it is a privilege to be able to work towards approximating normative fat fem(me)ininity in the first place— a privilege always already mediated by race, class, gender, and other axes of oppression. As Lauren states,

you can be fat, but only in the right ways... Or maybe you deviate from that a little bit, but you've got to have huge tits, right? You have to have a pretty face, right?... And that's with age as well ... [There are] societal things that says... 'this is what your allotment is, if you're going to dare make demands beyond your allotment, you better have some privilege somewhere to make it easier for everyone else to swallow'.

Lauren highlights the ways in which privilege—in this case 'pretty' privilege and age privilege— facilitates easier access to cultural intelligibility as fat and fem(me)inine and, further, mitigates the consequences of deviating from culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. Indeed, Sookie identifies how,

my identity as a white settler for sure insulates me from some of the more virulent, racialized fatphobia, and especially where it intersects with misogyny. I don't move through the world at large and suffer the same virulent violence that queer fat femmes of colour do... Black and Indigenous POCs [people of colour] have horrendous tales of things that I have never had to experience, even greater levels of dehumanization.

Sookie's comments suggest that white settler fat people's expressions of fat fem(me)ininity are inherently more culturally intelligible and, therefore, less subject to policing and oppression in a white supremacist and colonial society. White fat fem(me)ininites, although mediated by class, disability, and other axes of oppression, are inherently privileged as 'more acceptable' than fat fem(me)ininites of colour.

Similarly, Liz notes that “it’s very easy as a cis woman to be read as femme. If I go out in jeans and a t-shirt and sneakers, I’m going to be read as femme unless I do something.” Liz highlights the privilege cis fat women have in accessing culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, and the ways in which fem(me)ininity is more easily perceived when embodied by fat cis women. As Francis Ray White (2014) asks in their article on the intersection of fat and trans embodiments, “what about those women who never had a ‘rightful’ claim to femininity” (p. 89)? Read together, Liz’s comment and White’s (2014) line of questioning illuminate the cis privilege inherent to being able to lay a culturally recognized claim to fem(me)ininity in the first place.

Ultimately, in this section, I wish to make clear that the social rewards that participants do/not receive from approximating culturally intelligible fem(me)ininity are dependent upon their race, gender, class, and other axes of identity. These axes of identity significantly affect participants’ abilities to approximate norms of culturally intelligible fem(me)ininity in the first place. Therefore, although all participants experience pressures to approximate culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, the degree to which these pressures may be mitigated via the embodiment of fat fem(me)inine norms vary depending on participants’ social locations.

Material Consequences

Policing Fat Fem(me)ininity

The pressures exacted upon participants to embody culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity are coupled with material and violent consequences where participants do not or cannot approximate this fem(me)ininity which, considering participants’ feelings of failure and the unattainability of normativity, is almost always. In fact, a number of

participants recount experiences of overt and violent harassment. For example, Rachel recalls how, when walking down the street, “this guy screamed at me... ‘go on a diet, bitch’.” Tracy, too, experiences “moments of pure bigotry where a stranger calls me a fat bitch or something like that.” Vanessa similarly mentions having “fat whore” yelled at her out of the window of a passing car. This harassment is gendered, via the uses of the terms “bitch” and “whore,” targeting participants for not just their fatness but for their deviations from feminine norms.

Sookie describes the harassment they experience as “a nonstop onslaught,” detailing how,

when I exit my home, presenting myself in the way that's most comfortable... from the second I leave the house until I come back, I am subjected nonstop to a variety of expressions of social disapproval. So that's [from] sidelong glances, to actual, audible tut-tutting from elderly ladies, to dudes who yell shit at me out of cars, to being pushed on transit or subway platforms as though I'm not there, to looks from people at my legs as though I have picked the hair up off the ground... and glued it on to be disgusting.

For Sookie, the policing of their queer fat fem(me)ininity is ever-present and violent. From stares to verbal harassment to physical violence, Sookie experiences severe repercussions for existing in the world in ways that challenge ‘acceptable’ notions of fat fem(me)ininity. Together, these examples highlight how queer fat femmes are routinely harassed, in violent ways, for their unwillingness or inability to conform to norms of intelligible fat fem(me)ininity.

Where participants deviate from culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, they also experience job discrimination. Liz describes feeling like “too much” in relation to “the femininity I’m expected to do in a straight-focused workplace.” As discussed earlier in this

chapter, in relation to normative slender fem(me)ininity, fat fem(me)ininity becomes excessive (Hartley 2001). Liz, for instance, discusses how she does not wear shirts that do not fully cover her chest to work because they expose cleavage, making her feel too sexual for the workplace. Liz's example echoes notions of fat fem(me)ininites as inherently excessive and, thus, unseemly. Tracy adds to this comment, explaining how,

I sense that my fatness has influenced getting jobs or not getting jobs, [along with] my gender presentation... I would never be the right person for [a certain type of] job, for example, because of my body or my failure to be the right kind of feminine. I had a job interview ... and I remember going into that interview space really well dressed and really well prepared and even the way the space was set up, the way they looked at me, it just felt like I did not fit, physically or relationally.

For Tracy, as a fat fem(me)inine person, her fem(me)ininity, similarly to Liz's, becomes "inappropriate" in certain spaces—like offices—that adhere to strict upper-/middle-class notions of feminine modesty and restraint. Fat femininities are, therefore, policed and marginalized in workplaces. Ultimately, Liz's and Tracy's comments suggest that their failures to properly embody intelligible fat fem(me)ininity directly affect not only how they are perceived at work as 'good' or 'appropriate' employees, but also whether they will find work and the type of work they can get in the first place.

Policing Fem(me)ininity Writ Large

In relation to their broader failures to embody normative—i.e., slender—fem(me)ininity, participants identify additional sites of discrimination. For example, participants describe how the explicit and violent harassment that they experience in public spaces is coupled with the fact that public spaces are, largely, physically inaccessible.

Stéphanie says that “the world is not designed for me to fit in it, literally.” Many participants discuss, for instance, the inaccessibility of public transportation, such as subways, streetcars, and buses. Alex states that, “I hate taking public transit as a fat person... The seats are not wide enough, and then you get the stink eye from people for daring to be fat while having to sit down.” Vanessa similarly describes how “a lot of times, I’ll be sitting, and someone will go to sit next to me and then they basically sit on me because they feel like, because I bigger and I’m flowing into the extra space, they can still just take that space, they are entitled to that space.” Participants discuss airplanes, trains, and seatbelts in cars as inaccessible, too. As Kristy states, when you’re a fat person, “the size of the chair matters, the shape of the chair matters.”

Beyond transportation, participants discuss how their bodies often do not fit in a variety of public spaces, including theatres, restaurants, clubs, bars, doctors’ offices, and bathrooms. Meena, for instance, discusses how “some restaurants I will avoid because I can’t sit there... If it’s ever just booths, I’m like, forget it, I’m not going.” Kat describes how even their local queer bookstore is “a very small venue, [and] when it’s a really small venue, and you’re a fat person, you’re just like, oh no, I’m too much, and that really sucks.” For these participants, physical environments that do not accommodate their fat bodies evoke feelings of personal responsibility and shame and, as Meena describes, ultimately limit the places they can go. As Lauren describes, “it’s a challenge to move a fat body through those spaces,” citing “dance parties [that] are super, super packed capacity-wise” as another example. While most participants make clear that they perceive “small design spaces” as the issue, not their bodies, they still feel, as Meena describes, “like the world is saying this is not for you, you do not belong here, or we don’t want you.” Critical disability and fat scholars explore the

ways in which public spaces are not built to accommodate and, thus, inaccessible for fat bodies— a phenomenon referred to as “spatial discrimination” (Owen 2012). Adding a critical femininities lens (Dahl 2012) to this analysis, I suggest that this spatial discrimination is gendered: public spaces work to literally contain fat fem(me)inine bodies via restrictive physical environments.

Dating, too, is a significant site of discrimination for participants in relation to their broader deviations from normative fem(me)ininity.¹⁵ Most participants rarely receive messages first on dating websites and are the ones to initiate discussions a majority of the time. Where they do initiate conversations, as Kat states, “I generally don't get a response... it's always this quiet silence.” Stéphanie says that “I could write the same bio on Tinder [a mobile dating app] as someone else and not get any matches.” Indeed, Kat describes how discrimination in this context plays out according to “who talks to you, who shows that they're interested in you, who flirts with you, who wants to date you, who responds to your messages, whose bodies are more seen in the community and valued and looked at.” Here, Kat describes a clear hierarchy of desirability in dating communities, where queer fat femmes are often overlooked as potential partners. Joanna, expressing frustration about these types of experiences with dating, states that “I just don't understand the point of dating, I'm going to be alone forever.” In the context of dating, then, participants’ failures in relation to normative fem(me)ininity result in their exclusion from being seen as viable dates, even in queer communities.

Overall, Rhea Ashley Hoskin’s (2019) concept of femmephobia offers a useful theoretical lens for understanding the material consequences discussed in this section. As

¹⁵ This paragraph is derived in part from an article published in *Psychology & Sexuality*, 2020, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/19419899.2020.1822429>

previously mentioned in chapter two, femmephobia describes the policing of deviations from normative feminine ideals and the broader devaluation and marginalization of femininity. The concept of femmephobia highlights how the material consequences that participants experience, as described in this section, can be directly tied to their deviations from culturally intelligible (fat) fem(me)ininity and understood as sustaining hegemonic systems of gender. Participants' experiences illustrate how violence occurs where queer fat femmes deviate from culturally intelligible (fat) fem(me)ininity— deviations which are always already mediated by race, class, able-bodiedness, and gender identity.

Effects of Material Consequences

Tracy describes, overall, feeling like, as a queer fat femme, she encounters discrimination “every fucking day... It happens in different ways. It happens in structural, social, cultural ways that feel impossible all of the time, from physical space to basic human rights, to access to care, to access to all kinds of shit.” Consequently, Sookie describes how, “I use an astronomical amount of energy every single day deflecting, ignoring, shutting out, engaging in positive self-talk, to recover from all of these micro/macro- aggressions.” Rachel similarly states that “I often feel like I don't have the energy to just be out in the world.” For these participants, navigating the world on a daily basis is exhausting and, sometimes, impossible. Because of the toll that just existing takes on participants, many, like Joanna, express that “I just don't do things that I want to,” thereby avoiding public spaces. The material consequences that participants experience where they deviate not only from culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, but normative fem(me)ininity more broadly, indicate that queer fat femmes encounter marginalization on multiple levels, and that this marginalization directly affects queer fat femmes' senses of belonging in the world.

Space Matters: The Classed and Racialized Dimensions of Material Consequences

The types and locations of public spaces that participants negotiate, along with their social locations in relation to those spaces, affect the marginalization that participants experience. For example, Sookie and Tracy discuss how they often see more fat bodies in rural and/or working-class spaces, so they feel less targeted in terms of their body size in those spaces. Instead, for Sookie and Tracy, their queerness and gender expressions are more visible and a target of discrimination in those spaces. While Sookie and Tracy highlight the role that class can play in relation to public space, critical race scholar Sherene Razack (2002) analyzes the ways in which race also affects “who does/not belong in a space” (p. 18). Razack (2002) argues that public spaces are built to segregate, contain, and, thus, limit people of colour; for people of colour, therefore, “the city is experienced differently” (p. 16). Razack’s (2002) argument highlights the white privilege informing many participants’ negotiations of public spaces and suggests that queer fat femmes of colour may experience intensified material consequences in public spaces.

Black Feminist Interventions in Fem(me)ininity

There is a longstanding history in feminist thought of white feminists theorizing femininity as an oppressive patriarchal construct that is imposed upon women (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1997; Brownmiller 1984; de Beauvoir 2011/1949; Friedan 1963). However, as discussed in chapter two, these theorizations of femininity center white, upper-/middle-class women’s experiences of femininity, as working-class women, queer women, trans women, and women of colour have largely been excluded from dominant formations of femininity (Schippers 2007; Scott 2005; Serano 2007). With my predominantly white participant sample’s desire to shift away from hyper-femininity, this chapter may be read as asserting

that fem(me)ininity itself is oppressive or marginalizing. In this section, I clarify that, with my line of argumentation in this chapter, I do not wish to replicate the longstanding white, upper-/middle-class feminist tradition of demonizing femininity.

One participant of colour, Meena— who identifies as East Indian and white— discusses her attachments to hyper-femininity as a woman of colour, stating that “I know there's so much pushback about... why is it that the only acceptable way of being fat is to be hyper-feminine? Which I understand and yet at the same time... what about me?” When read through a Black feminist theoretical lens, Meena’s statement might reflect “the historical difficulty for women of color to mark their own bodies and their already-lack of proper femininity” (Lewis 2012, p. 113). Indeed, Black feminists such as bell hooks (1982) and Angela Davis (1981) analyze Black women’s relationships to femininity under slavery in a United States context, and how femininity, as a cultural construct, continues to operate in tandem with structures of racism to maintain, perpetuate, and justify the oppression of Black women by excluding them from femininity and pathologizing the differences upon which their exclusion is predicated. Consequently, “Black femme-inist” theorist Sydney Fonteyn Lewis (2012) argues that “femmes of color [may] utilize a disruptive hyperfemininity in order to insert themselves into a feminine identity that has been denied to them” (p. 113). For queer fat femmes of color, then, high femme or hyper-fem(me)inine embodiments can powerfully resist the widespread cultural devaluation of fem(me)inities of color. Meena’s comment, contextualized by Lewis’s (2012) analysis, highlights an important distinction to make when considering the fraught relationship between fatness and fem(me)ininity in this chapter. The issue is not fem(me)ininity itself but, rather, the misogynistic, femmephobic, racist, classist, cisnormative, ableist, ageist, and fatphobic (at the very least) structures that

dictate narrow and oppressive parameters around how fem(me)ininity can look, who can claim fem(me)ininity, and whose femininities are recognized, valued, and privileged.

In fact, as Rhea Ashley Hoskin (2017a) argues, “the disempowering of femininity is a colonial project.” White, Western feminine ideals are used by European colonizers to devalue and dehumanize Indigenous femininities—which were valued in pre-contact Indigenous communities (Horswell 2005)—so that they become “more accessible and within the grasp of the white man” (Anderson 2004, as cited in Hoskin 2017a). In other words, understandings of femininity as solely oppressive are rooted in colonial gender structures. By insisting on the value of femininity and embodying femininities as fat people, queer people, people of colour, disabled people, working-class people, and/or non-binary people, participants engage in the work of decolonizing femininity. However, the fat fem(me)ininities represented by my participants are but a narrow sample of an incredibly diverse constellation of fat fem(me)bodiments and the white and settler privilege many of my participants experience informs their relationships to and embodiments of fem(me)ininity.

Conclusion

This chapter has used interview data to build on previous scholarship about fatness and fem(me)ininity that suggests that fatness and fem(me)ininity are mostly incompatible. My findings indicate that, for queer fat femmes today, the relationship between fem(me)ininity and fatness is much more complex. Participants contend that a particular type of fem(me)ininity is demanded of fat femmes and articulate this fem(me)ininity in a narrowly defined way: impeccably and extensively made-up through the use of eyeliner and lipstick, at the very least; hourglass shaped and not ‘too’ fat; having long and styled head hair; and invested in beauty and fashion trends. This

fat fem(me)ininity creates limited and limiting parameters of intelligibility for fat fem(me)ininities, reproducing the exclusions of normative femininity by privileging an upper-/middle-class, cisgender, fat ‘in the right places’, and white subject, alongside classist, cisnormative, fatphobic, and white supremacist gender norms.

Importantly, all participants express feelings of failure or inadequacy in relation to this culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, suggesting that this fat fem(me)ininity is largely an abstract ideal. Simultaneously, participants experience enormous pressures to embody culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, and the violent policing of their embodiments of and deviations from this fat fem(me)ininity. These consequences are especially pronounced for queer fat femmes of colour, trans and non-binary queer fat femmes, working-class queer fat femmes, and other multiply marginalized queer fat femmes. The disproportionate whiteness of my participant sample may, however, affect the degree to which hyper-femininity is criticized, as Black fem(me)inist theorists highlight the importance of hyper-femininity for femmes of colour, who have been and continue to be excluded from cultural conceptions of fem(me)ininity.

Ultimately, this chapter highlights queer fat femmes’ fraught relationships to and negotiations of fem(me)ininity, and how these relationships and negotiations are complex, diverse, nuanced, and always informed by other axes of oppression. This chapter demonstrates how, as Dorothy Allison (as cited in Dahl 2017) suggests, “inadequacy and shame are the condition, where we [femmes] live, the crack in the [queer fat femme] soul” (p. 39). In the next chapter, I explore the productive potential of these feelings of inadequacy and shame to (re)define queer fat femme in liberatory ways.

Chapter 5: (Re)Defining Queer Fat Femme¹⁶

Introduction

While, as described in the previous chapter, participants experience expectations, pressures, and consequences from their failures to embody a culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, participants also experience queer fat femme embodiment as pleasurable, powerful, and full of possibility. Focusing on participants' discussions of resilience and resistance, in this chapter, I ask: what does queer fat femme do for participants? My analysis in this chapter is framed by Hannah McCann's (2018) recent scholarship on queering femininity, which I use to explore the capacities of queer fat femme that participants articulate. Putting participants' discussions of what queer fat femme does in conversation with how they define queer fat femme, I argue that queer fat femme might be (re)defined not as a singular aesthetic or politic, but instead as a site of orientation towards or feeling(s of) fem(me)ininity, where individuals experiencing oppression on the basis of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity can join together to identify, resist, and heal from common and overarching oppressions. Thus, in this chapter, I frame queer fat femme as a space of liberation with an emphasis on collectivity, relationality, and possibility.

(Re)Defining Femme in the Academic Literature

In her 2018 book *Queering femininity: Sexuality, feminism, and the politics of presentation*, femme scholar Hannah McCann criticizes both feminist and femme understandings of fem(me)ininity along a binary of (dis)empowerment, whereby fem(me)ininity is either (hetero)normative and oppressive, or consciously chosen/queered/performed and, thus, resistant.

¹⁶ This chapter is derived in part from an article published in *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, 2021, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/21604851.2021.1913828>

McCann (2018) argues against a focus on “the level of individual gender presentation” (p.10) or individual embodiment in conceptualizing fem(me)inine resistance to oppressions, which is often a key tenet of arguments that position fem(me)ininity as empowering. McCann (2018) is critical of binary and individualizing understandings of fem(me)ininity as empowering because such understandings rely on continuously shifting norms against which empowered fem(me)ininity must be positioned and, therefore, constantly (re)produce new norms of empowered fem(me)ininity and, simultaneously, disempowered fem(me)inine ‘others’. McCann (2018) argues that “this necessarily leads to a fracturing and an inward turn of political attention to how group members oppress one another, rather than looking at how division filters in from broader society or considering common experiences of oppression” (p. 101). In other words, for McCann (2018), a focus on individual fem(me)inine embodiments reproduces neoliberal logics that fracture connections between fem(me)inine individuals by positioning individuals, rather than structures of oppression, as the problems in need of addressing.¹⁷ Consequently, McCann (2018) suggests that scholars embrace “the possibility of taking a break from femme as a site of identity politics” (p. 118) in order to “question our assumptions about normal altogether and discontinue seeing our individual embodiment as a site of resistance” (p. 11).

As an alternative to binary and individualizing theorizations of fem(me)ininity, McCann (2018) argues that scholars might shift their attention from what femme *means*, representationally—i.e. “claiming what it ‘ought’ to do to be resistant”—to, instead, “what femme embodiment ‘does’ in terms of affects, pleasures, failure, and reimagining possibilities”

¹⁷ Lucy Aphramor (2020) launches a similar criticism of Health at Every Size (HAES), citing the ways that HAES (re)centers Eurocentric, colonial, white supremacist values and ways of thinking that are mired in, for instance, individualism and binaries. Aphramor’s (2020) criticisms demonstrate how both fat and femme movements can replicate the structures of oppression they work to undo, and the importance of pushing back against both making individuals the focus of resistance and binary understandings of disempowerment/empowerment or oppression/liberation.

(p. 118). Put differently, McCann (2018) sets aside questions of whether fem(me)ininity is oppressive or resistant for individuals, or good or bad for feminism, and, instead, explores the feelings and capacities that fem(me)ininity might engender for people. Drawing on affect and assemblage theories, McCann (2018) argues for analyses of fem(me)ininity that focus on “joy, capacity, possibility, structural limitations, and hope, all of which open up spaces where flesh and objects are refigured as agential in new and exciting ways... where attention to transformative possibilities is focused on” (p. 78). McCann (2018) writes that,

there is much to be found in examining the play, joy, pleasure, fun, failures, sensations, and material assemblages of femininity. But here the body itself is not politics. To examine the femme assemblage, for example, is to disperse the focus on femininity from the individual to the collective, to see the points of intersection and connection, even as there may be other very significant differences... We would do well to see the commonality in our embodied assemblages that subject us to so many forms of violence, in a myriad of ways... Taking into account affective assemblies points to our common bonds, and suggests that violence is a collective issue. (p. 143)

For McCann (2018), then, analyses of what femme *does* facilitate explorations of the interconnections between fem(me)inine subjects and the shared, overarching oppressions that shape all fem(me)inine lives.

Following McCann (2018), I do not wish to use this chapter to position queer fat femme as an inherently resistant and empowering embodiment by charting how queer fat femme participants subvert norms via individual representations, appearances, and embodiments. In interviews with femmes in Australia, McCann (2018) found examples of “femme groups using images of fat (but often otherwise traditionally feminine-presenting) women in their group

materials... as a signifier of femme in an attempt to reject the idea of a ‘normative’ thin feminine woman” (p. 95). However, this positioning of fat femme as “inherently breaking from the boundaries of normal femininity, and therefore representing an essentially queer position” leaves femme in a precarious position when, inevitably, “subversive signifiers will be reabsorbed into mainstream norms” (McCann 2018, p. 95). As my previous chapter demonstrates, a particular fat fem(me)inine ideal has, in fact, been incorporated into mainstream norms. Therefore, using this chapter to advocate for alternative individual expressions of fat fem(me)ininity as the path to liberation may only perpetuate this problem, and a binary of (dis)empowered fat fem(me)inities, foreclosing opportunities for collectivity amongst queer and fat fem(me)inine people.

Instead, in this chapter I consider the feelings and possibilities that queer fat femme embodiments create. I contend that participants’ articulations of queer fat femme gesture towards what queer fat femme embodiments ‘do’. Specifically, I suggest that queer fat femme embodiment has the potential to generate feelings of pleasure and freedom, create community, and sow seeds for collective queer fat femme liberation. I explore the following themes from my interviews in the next section: queer fat femme as enabling a reclamation of marginalized identities; queer fat femme as offering scripts for queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiments; queer fat femme as containing glimpses of utopian queer and fat fem(me)inities; queer fat femme as providing subcultural intelligibility; queer fat femme as facilitating a sense of safety and protection; and queer fat femme as creating opportunities for coalitions with other marginalized communities.

What Does Queer Fat Femme ‘Do’?

Queer Fat Femme as Enabling a Reclamation of Marginalized Identities

A first function of queer fat femme, as a majority of participants articulate, is that queer fat femme embodiment may support individuals' reclamations of sites of marginalization. Participants discuss queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity, in particular, as sites of marginalization that queer fat femme embodiment helps them (re)claim. Rio explains that "society wants me to be homophobic to myself, and wants me to hate my body, and wants me to be uncomfortable with the fact that I love my femmeness." Rachel similarly describes the widespread cultural devaluation of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity: "all [three are] perceived as identities by others that are often considered too much... They're all feminine almost qualities in a way, and so therefore they're seen as big and excessive, which... means that they're all subject to that misogynist scrutiny." These quotes from Rio and Rachel highlight participants' recognition of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity as intersecting axes of oppression that shape queer fat femmes' lived experiences.

However, Sookie states that, "when I'm able to own something the power it has to hurt me is really taken away." Indeed, Sookie describes queer fat femme as, that space of challenge... It's three separate descriptors that are framed as undesirable in our particular social-cultural setting. Like, being other than you are 'supposed' to be to access treatment with basic respect and decency ... So, for me, [queer fat femme is] an image of ownership and of embrace of what I shouldn't want to be as what I am and do want, more than anything, to be. A holding and embrace of those reviled vectors of identity.

For Sookie, recognizing that queer, fat, and femme are sites of marginalization enables a politicized reclamation of those embodiments, transforming feelings of hopelessness into feelings of anger and defiance, and providing a less oppressive understanding of their queer fat

femme body. Stéphanie similarly articulates how queer fat femme helps her with “reclaiming fat, as a word, reclaiming queer, not reclaiming femme but claiming femme, and in a context where it felt right to express that and to visibly or vocally claim those terms that have been used against me.” Reclamation is central to queer fat femme for Allison, too: “queer used to be an insult, and fat used to be an insult, and I don't know that femme ever was an insult, but certainly the things to do with gender and all of that have been used as insults for many, many eons, and [queer fat femme is] to take all that back, and reclaim it into one big label... It's really giving the finger to everybody.” For Sookie, Stéphanie, and Allison, then, reclamation is a central function of queer fat femme in that queer fat femme offers them more livable ways of embodying queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity.

In Allison's experience, the reclaiming of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity via queer fat femme allows her to be “celebratory of my identities and unapologetic.” The importance of the ability to reclaim queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity via queer fat femme is further illustrated where Rio states that queer fat femme enables them, “to be able to confidently put all these identities together in a way that isn't traumatic or scary” which, in a queer-, fat-, and femininity-hating world, is so often the case. For example, Sookie recounts an experience of seeing herself reflected in street art of a “booby, topless troll” (Figure 4):

when I saw it, I was like, oh my god, someone has created an unauthorized portrait of me. Because what I think of when I have thought about myself in the world, I often do feel like... this monstrous being in that I'm too big and too loud and too out there... I can remember a time of my life where finding commonality with this fat troll image would have felt really painful but now, I'm in this headspace where it feels really powerful... [because] when I'm able to own something the power it has to hurt me is really taken

away. And so, for me this image is this reclamation moment of [my] unauthorized portrait, like, let's record me with my twin over here and be silly and funny about it.



Figure 4. © Sookie [image reproduced with permission]

For Sookie, their connection with the “topless booby troll” offers them a means of acknowledging the ways that they, like the troll, exist outside of dominant conceptions of fat fem(me)inine beauty. However, in this case, Sookie is the person drawing the comparison and,

therefore, is able to experience joy in a collective experience of misfitting. Thus, Sookie's narrative highlights the feelings of connection and mirth that queer fat femme produces by creating space for people to reclaim queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity. Together, Allison, Rio, and Sookie's quotes suggest that queer fat femme offers individuals less oppressive ways of embodying queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity by positioning queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity as viable subject positions with affective capacities beyond shame and sadness. The notion of queer fat femme (A. Taylor 2018) and, more broadly, femme (Hoskin 2017b; Lewis 2012; Serano 2013) as a (re)claiming of femininity by those excluded from dominant norms of femininity is an established one in femininities scholarship and offers further support for this finding. Therefore, queer fat femme can facilitate the (re)claiming of marginalized embodiments and, in doing so, be a site of collective identification and resilience.

Queer Fat Femme as Offering Scripts for Queer and Fat Fem(me)inine Embodiment

Participants also discuss the capacity of queer fat femme to offer scripts for queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiment, which are not provided by the broader culture. Ngina discusses finding queer fat femme via Instagram communities: “[I] combin[ed] those identities together after seeing it around the internet... and just feeling like, yeah, this is a string of words, a string of identities, that I can definitely put together, and I feel that describes me well.” Ngina describes how, on Instagram,

because there's these online hashtags and people are actively posting and engaging, even if it's just throwing up a picture every once in a while, that in and of itself, it gives a bit of a marker, kind of a landmark, that you can go to and say, oh, here's one place that I can go and see people who kind of look like me or are having similar experiences. And then from there, you can branch out and find other communities, other hashtags, other people

that you can follow... to know that there are people out there that feel good about themselves in the body that they're in, so if they can do it, why can't you do it? It's a bit of an inspirational thing.

For Ngina, finding queer fat femme online, and being able to locate herself within this community, helps her to understand her own embodiment and connects her to others like her, engendering feelings of connection and affirming her own fem(me)inine attachments and expression. Stéphanie also describes coming to queer fat femme “through definitely a lot of seeing people on Tumblr identify as such... Seeing queer fat femme people online really helped me put it together and understand what it could look like.” Stéphanie states that queer fat femme “gave me an understanding of myself... It feels really good to find those words and how they fit together.” For Stéphanie, seeing queer fat femme people online creates an opportunity or option that she never even knew existed, opening the door to more livable ways of existing in her queer and fat fem(me)inine body. Likewise, in Meena’s experience, finding representations of queer fat femmes on Instagram gives her the language to say “oh, yeah, that’s me.” For Ngina, Stéphanie, and Meena, finding and relating to queer fat femme-identified people online offers them a means of naming and envisioning previously unimaginable possibilities for themselves as queer and fat fem(me)inine people.

Tracy further highlights how seeing other queer fat femmes on Instagram can offer scripts for queer and fat fem(me)inine people where she discusses her love of “certain fat fashion accounts that embody something beyond what it means to just look good, but whose bodies and aesthetic are so non-assimilatory. This is an inspiration for me. I sometimes think about things I’ve seen when I’m putting my own clothes on. It feels really, really good.” For Tracy, seeing other queer fat femmes online offers her inspiration for her own queer fat femme embodiment,

(re)positioning queer fat femme embodiment as a site of community, connection, creative expression, and fun. Similarly, Sookie describes how,

when I was able to go to NOLOSE [a meet up for fat lesbians and queer folks], for months afterwards I was wearing whatever the fuck I wanted and just being really as aggressively fat as I've ever been because I knew there was this whole community of people doing the same thing... It's always just such a majestic scene to behold to see all of these rotund, bikini-clad or -less bodies together in the sunlight instead of hidden away.

Sookie's narrative suggests that the scripts for queer and fat fem(me)inities provided by queer fat femme do not necessarily involve a specific aesthetic but, rather, can be more broadly about engendering feelings of hope, community, possibility, and resilience.

Recognizing the crucial role queer fat femme representations play in their own lives, participants also discuss how they try to role model queer and fat fem(me)inities for others. For Allison, "I want to give back. I have I have grown into my identity, and I want to share it and help other people grow into their identities... and show people that there are other options." Allison discusses using her artistic practice (Figure 5) as a means of doing so: "my stitching photo, it was me in the process of my art, but also in the process of sharing my bigger ideas or community and what art and community can do together, and why our identities can be our strength."



Figure 5. © Allison [image reproduced with permission]

Art, for Allison, offers a medium for conveying her ideas about queer fat fem(me)ininity. These ideas may be difficult to express in other formats because, as is so often the problem within the politics of representation (Brushwood Rose & Low 2014), language to describe queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity fully and affirmatively does not readily exist. As Allyson Mitchell (2018) argues, artistic practice can be an important site for generating ideas about fat vitality and value. Allison's narrative supports Mitchell's (2018) argument, as she uses her art to offer scripts for queer and fat fem(me)ininities.

Lauren, too, describes how, for younger family members,

it has always been important to be a person in their lives that models something different, especially being a fat person, being a fat woman, and being really unapologetic about it. It's been especially important and reminds me of the importance of visibility. So... that's a really important role for me in terms of queer aspects, in terms of signaling that there are lots of ways you can play with gender, that you can throw out the rules around femininity, and that fat bodies are good bodies, and knowing that they have a joyful connection to me. That's a really important part of how I live this life.

For Lauren, by spending time and talking with her younger family members, she exposes them to alternative ways of being and thinking, providing different paths for their lives that they may not have previously considered. Meena similarly states that "I want to be that image of, like, you can live your life and do whatever and it doesn't matter what size you are. It's just very important to me to try and be an example to the younger girls in my life... Just, you know, Auntie living her best life." Allison's, Lauren's, and Meena's narratives highlight participants' awareness of the lack of scripts for and representations of queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiments, and how they see their own queer fat femme embodiments as providing 'roadmaps' or, to borrow from Ivan Coyote (2016), queer fat femme "survival guides" for future generations.

Queer Fat Femme as Glimmers of Utopian Queer Fat Fem(me)inities

Not only do participants articulate queer fat femme as offering scripts and representations in which participants can see themselves, but, relatedly, participants suggest that queer fat femme embodiments can expand existing ideas about and norms of fat fem(me)inine embodiment. In particular, participants' narratives exemplify how queer fat femme embodiments offer possibilities for other ways of being as fat and queer fem(me)inine people or, in other words,

glimpses of utopian fat fem(me)inities. José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) theorization of queer utopias offers a useful framing for this finding because Muñoz argues that "queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality," (p. 185) and that "queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (p. 1). Muñoz's (2009) conception of queerness resonates with participants' framings of queer fat femme as a desire for queer and fat fem(me)inine possibilities that exceed present norms of gender, sexuality, and embodiment.

Utopian queer fat fem(me)inities can sometimes be glimpsed in alternative representations of queer and fat fem(me)inities. For instance, Rio describes ephemeral glimpses on nights out of "someone who is a queer Latinx man who is fat and femme and has that beautiful soft look and is still serving us this masculine vibe while bringing in ... whether it's a perfectly coiffed hair, or really messy hair and some lipstick, whatever it is that is queering their identity that is soft and femme." These glimpses offer Rio the opportunity to see their own embodiment reflected back to them, something they are denied in dominant culture and even within some femme communities. These glimpses open the door to Latinx queer fat femme futures for Rio. Similarly, Stéphanie cites a multi-disciplinary artist who she follows on Instagram as offering important scripts for her own queer fat femme embodiment:

their online presence is really very inspiring to me. And I think the way that they talk, and the fact that they're very open and caring and kind, and their lisp and the way that they take pictures of their body, like full body pictures, and their outfits are very colorful, wearing like floral patterns or cuts that you wouldn't expect to see on their body type, which are not what we would call 'flattering' in the beauty industry or in the fashion industry. It just makes me deeply happy.

The Instagram artist Stéphanie discusses here pushes against dominant formations of fat fem(me)ininity, illuminating alternative futures, often unseen or inconceivable in dominant culture. In these two quotes, Rio and Stéphanie illustrate the potential for representations of queer and fat fem(me)inities to not only create scripts and spaces for themselves in the world, but to also continuously broaden the terms of queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiment.

For queer fat femmes experiencing marginalization on the basis of other axes of identity, seeing other queer fat femmes like them is particularly important. For example, Rio describes how, “the really downtrodden, fat, Latinx person is a well-documented stereotype. So, when I have found other fat Latinx... femmes really like giving it in that beautiful femme way that is so unique... it sings in my heart... It is kind of like seeing this magical other version of a part of my soul out there shining on.” For Rio, queer fat femme offers them another way of envisioning and embodying queer and fat fem(me)ininity as a Latinx person. Relatedly, in Kat’s experience as a non-binary queer fat femme, finding other non-binary queer fat femmes is central to their own ability to come out as non-binary. Kat describes how,

my only options based on the environment around me was, I have to look masculine, or I have to look skinny—one or the other or a combination of both, and there’s no other options. So, I was sort of like, well, I guess I’m a woman, maybe, question mark? And it wasn’t until I actually moved to [a bigger city] ... that I was like, there’s femme non-binary AFAB [assigned female at birth] people, and I’m not the only one. We exist! And we don’t have to be skinny!

Here, Kat demonstrates how meeting non-binary queer fat femmes quite literally makes their non-binary queer fat femme embodiment something viable and tangible. More broadly,

participants' narratives highlight how queer fat femme representations can help them to imagine possibilities and futures for themselves.

Utopian queer fat fem(me)inities are also glimpsed in participants' descriptions of queer fat femme. For example, Lauren describes queer fat femme as "this niche, [where] I don't have to contort myself to fit into the expectations of whatever it may be ... it is full of so many possibilities." Indeed, participants' descriptions of their queer fat femme embodiments emphasize celebration, play, possibility, and exploration. Rio describes how "femme can be the red lipstick I want to wear while I wear men's clothing... Femme can be that my hair is a big curly mess on top, and let's say I wear eye makeup, that can still be femme. It can be that I'm in a dress, and I'm wearing a packer, and have my chest bound, but I am still feeling femme." For Rio, queer fat femme creates space for "the fact that, usually when I want to wear a dress, I also want to bind my chest. When I do that, I feel really happily femme."

In contrast to the picture of Rio presented in chapter four (Figure 3), Rio's other photograph from our interview reflects what queer fat femme looks like for them now (Figure 6).



Figure 6. © Rio [image reproduced with permission]

Rio describes this photo as reflecting “how femme looks for me now, even though I think before I would have put this on and been like, this is my attempt at butch... Understanding that I could still wear clothes that I like, which is my sweaters and my button up shirts, and still feel sassy and femme, was really important to me.... Femme is how I feel, so that means what I'm wearing will become femme if I am feeling femme.” Rio’s narrative illuminates how the feelings of possibility and potentiality engendered by queer fat femme can enable participants to explore their queer fat fem(me)inities in ways that may not have felt possible before, pushing beyond normative notions of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity. Through queer fat femme, something different, something more livable—in Rio’s case, an expression of queer and fat fem(me)ininity that, previously, would have felt butch—becomes possible. Accordingly, for Rio, queer fat femme becomes pleasurable and full of potentiality.

Lauren similarly articulates queer fat femme as facilitating an ability to explore “what feels good,” by, for example,

play[ing] with those things... and try[ing] the things that break some of those rules [of intelligible fat fem(me)ininity]. Like, I’m going to mix this pattern with that or, as a fat woman, I’m going to wear horizontal stripes, and I’m gonna wear a crop top, right? Like all the rules around ‘this part of the box is for certain kinds of bodies’. It’s like, no, no, no, no, we can play with that... It’s saying, here is a box full of things, some of the things in this box are really shitty or toxic, or mediated by rules, and you can do away with them, and you can do your own thing... It provides that option to other people of being like, you can still play with femininity.

Like Rio’s narrative, Lauren’s quotation exemplifies how queer fat femme facilitates feelings of possibility and play, where she can long for and imagine different ways of being fat and

fem(me)inine. Allison and Stéphanie also speak of the utopian potential of queer fat fem(me)inities in discussing, for example, growing out their body hair and wearing tight-fitting clothing, and how these things elicit feelings of excitement and hope about less oppressive fat fem(me)inine futures. Together, participants describe queer fat femme as creating space for fat fem(me)inine embodiments that offer alternatives to culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity. Not only do participants' quotes here gesture towards queer and fat fem(me)inine utopian futures, but they also offer a "glimpse [of] the worlds proposed and promised by queerness" (Muñoz 2009, p. 1) with their rich descriptions of queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiments. Thus, rather than being solely a space of painful limitation, here, participants' narratives gesture towards the space that queer fat femme can also create for joy, play, exploration, and possibility.

*Queer Fat Femme as Providing Subcultural Intelligibility*¹⁸

For many participants, queer fat femme also provides a label they can use to connect with and identify themselves to others within their communities. For example, Stéphanie broadly states that she uses queer fat femme "to announce who I am." Indeed, Lauren describes how queer fat femme has grown in recent years to be "its own kind of signifier in queer community."

A majority of participants discuss queer fat femme as a "signifier" in dating contexts. In Joanna's experience, "when I'm on dating apps and stuff, it's definitely clear that that is what I am, and [it's] easy to see other people who are also like that." For Joanna, "these identifiers [of queer, fat, and femme] solidify when I'm thinking about dating and what I'm looking for in other people." Joanna's narrative suggests that queer fat femme functions to make her own queer fat femme embodiment intelligible to others, and also to help her identify others like her, facilitating connections between queer fat femmes. Similarly, for Ngina "[queer fat femme is] how I would

¹⁸ This section is derived in part from an article published in *Psychology & Sexuality*, 2020, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/19419899.2020.1822429>

describe myself to someone who has not met me, or [on] a dating profile if I needed to.” Kat also finds queer fat femme useful in navigating dating contexts, as they describe how they use queer fat femme to signal who they are to potential partners, thereby making themselves intelligible as a desirable and desiring subject, something that fat people are often denied.

Kat also touches on queer fat femme as a “‘notice me’ sort of thing,” describing how certain styles become popular amongst queer fat femmes as a means of signaling identity: “when you’re femme, how do you show other people you’re queer when you’re dating? It’s just like, please notice me! So, I understand that. Like side-shaves, I get it, the colored hair, I totally understand. It’s like the birds that follow the coloured feathers, it’s a mating thing.” Kat’s quote demonstrates how queer fat femme—in this instance, particular aesthetic cues defined as central to or indicating queer fat fem(me)ininity—can offer some participants a sense of intelligibility within their communities. Because (in)visibility is a struggle for femmes broadly, (Blair & Hoskin 2015) visibility as a queer fat femme might be especially important for some people. While I suggested in the previous chapter that expectations of a singular queer fat femme aesthetic can be harmful, this finding suggests that a common set of aesthetic cues can also sometimes facilitate intelligibility for some queer fat femmes, which can be important for dating and connecting with other queers, femmes, fats, and queer fat femmes.

While some participants are optimistic about queer fat femme offering subcultural intelligibility, other participants point out that queer fat femme does not have the same traction and widespread recognition as, for example, ‘bear’ would in gay men’s communities. Rio states that “fat men in the gay community don’t have it easy... but being a bear is actually a category. If someone’s like, I’m into bears, great, I know what that means... There’s not an analogue in the queer, female-bodied world, that I know about anyway... It sucks.” Here, Rio relates the painful

experience of there being “a lack of language for wanting to love someone who looks like me. The fact that there is not a good word for that breaks my heart a bit. Like there’s no way for me to signal [that], other than saying fat queer femme for fat queer femme.” In Rio’s experience, queer fat femme is either not a widely recognized or used term in dating contexts or it does not have resonance for them when looking for partners. This example from Rio suggests that while queer fat femme offers some subcultural intelligibility, it is by no means as recognized or credible a subcultural identity as is bear.

To negotiate this dilemma, Sookie adopts a “lady bear” identity as part of their queer fat femme embodiment. Sookie describes their lady bear identity as a way to “challenge... this idea that bear culture is specifically this masculine thing because, within queer men’s culture, there’s space that’s carved out... [for] the existence of fat, hairy bodies ... And I don’t find that that space has been carved out when it comes to fat queer femininity.” Sookie’s lady bear identity is indicative of some of the creative and strategic ways that queer fat femmes negotiate their (in)visibility, and the possibilities that queer fat femme embodiment can offer participants for intelligibility in queer, femme, and/or fat communities.

Queer Fat Femme as Feeling Protected & Safe

Participants also articulate queer fat femme as a site of protection or safety. Sookie, for instance, describes queer fat femme as “the satin floral cape in gregarious colours that I wrap around myself to stay safe in this patriarchal hellscape.” Elaborating on this description, Sookie recalls,

watching *What’s eating Gilbert Grape* (1993) as a young person, and the mother... being one of the only superfat folks that were in my immediate environment and feeling abject terror that at some point in my life, I would be ‘reduced’ to wearing a colorful quilt as a

cape instead of being able to access a jacket. And now when I think about that media representation, the idea of wearing a colorful cape to keep myself warm as a fashion statement makes me feel really happy and encompasses how I feel about femme. It's like a patchwork of warmth that is a space where safety can happen and where I'm protected from the elements.

In Sookie's narrative, queer fat femme supports a shift in their feelings about their fatness from fear to acceptance and, perhaps, embrace. Sookie's description of queer fat femme suggests that queer fat femme offers a site of refuge or respite from harmful cultural ideas about queerness, fatness, and fem(me)inity. Similarly, Rio articulates queer fat femme as a "protective mantra" that reminds them that "it is okay to go through this world without putting up an incredible wall against people. It can be inviting, and it can be genuine, and it can be optimistic, even, and loving." Like Sookie, for Rio, queer fat femme offers protection against oppressive norms and, further, provides them with a sense of hopefulness about the world. Rio describes seeing other queer fat femmes as engendering "this wonderful feeling of someone else found safety in these identities that are often seen as painful or hard or limiting." Rio and Sookie also use the language of healing in describing queer fat femme, citing queer fat femme as "a space where it's possible to be... healed." These participants' references to healing demonstrate how queer fat femme can offer protection or safety from a queer-hating, femininity-hating, and fat-hating world by providing them with the shelter necessary to explore less oppressive meanings and embodiments of queer fat fem(me)inity.

For other participants, the protection or safety queer fat femme offers is more literal.¹⁹

For example, Kat discusses queer fat femme as protective where they describe it as a "way of

¹⁹ This section is derived in part from an article published in *Psychology & Sexuality*, 2020, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/19419899.2020.1822429>

publicly declaring who you are so you don't deal with assholes." Kat articulates how, "when you date, people look at bodies, and so then it's sort of like, okay, this is an identity that people are going to see... so all my dating sites or profiles always feature like 'I am fat, and cuddly'. I always have at least one full body photo, which, it's a lot to have that, but I do." Kat expands on this point, stating that,

when you start dating, you're doing what everyone else is doing—you're just taking pictures, and then you show up to the date and the person's like, oh, and it's like, great. So, a lot of it [labelling myself as queer fat femme] was a practical thing. It was like, I don't want to go on dates with these people who make me feel shitty, and who aren't interested in my body ... So dating was really when it was like, okay, I guess I really do have to start saying this and identifying as this, otherwise I'm going to have shitty dates endlessly. And it was a really quick filter.

For Kat, then, queer fat femme functions as a protective mechanism by publicly declaring who they are to others to circumvent negative, private interactions. Liz recalls a similar experience on a dating website of "having [the] person see a full body photo and dropping the conversation. So, I try to get full body photos of myself out there on dating sites, and just anywhere that me being fat might be a factor in people deciding whether they like me. I want to be up front with it." Liz, responding to this experience of rejection, now uses full-body pictures in her public dating profile in an attempt to avoid similar hurtful rejections in the future. In Kat's and Liz's experiences, then, queer fat femme—whether explicitly written on a dating profile or implied via full-body photographs included with a dating profile—can provide a proactive and strategic way of navigating spaces, like dating websites, where they might experience harassment, hate, or violence because of their non-normative embodiments. These strategies

reflect the creativity and resilience of queer fat femmes, as they negotiate an oppressive world. Queer fat femme can, therefore, offer more literal protection or safety for participants.

Queer Fat Femme as Creating Coalitions

Finally, participants discuss queer fat femme as facilitating and supporting coalitions with other marginalized communities. Sookie describes their queer fat femme embodiment as, a liberatory space because it lets me marry all of these elements of who I am with my commitment to liberatory politics, and so it allows me to encompass and speak to all of that simultaneously... to my deep commitment to liberation for all and my investment in challenging sizeism and weight stigma and white supremacy and dismantling patriarchy and challenging capitalism.

For Sookie, queer fat femme is inherently connected to not only fatphobia, heteronormativity, and femmephobia, but also white supremacy and capitalism. Sookie takes their inspiration for this understanding of queer fat femme from critical and historical conceptions of queerness:

because queer has this history of negativity associated with it, identifying as queer often gives rise to conversations around reclamation and... what it means to be outside of normative, dominant culture, whatever that looks like. So, it ends up being a point of connection across difference a lot of the time, and a space where there's a potential for the unification of struggles.

Sookie's analysis of the capacities of queer fat femme, here, is reminiscent of Cathy J. Cohen's (1997) argument for "the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics" (p. 440). This conception of queerness challenges a single axis focus on (white, middle-class) gay and lesbian sexuality and, instead, points towards the overarching structures of sexual oppression that affect groups across

different axes of oppression. As a result, a more capacious and coalitional queer politics becomes possible. Sookie also specifically mentions the Combahee River Collective in their interview—a collective of Black feminists “actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” who sought to develop “integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (Combahee River Collective 1977) — as informative of their understanding of queer fat femme. Central to Sookie’s understanding of queer fat femme, then, is the work of Black feminists and queer theorists, which pushes past single-issue politics to recognize the ways that all oppressions are mutually reinforcing. Black feminist and queer writings, therefore, encourage collective and coalitional forms of resistance amongst queer fat femmes. Sookie’s narrative gestures towards a continued femme legacy of learning from and working in coalition with Black feminists, a tradition which can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s when femme elders—including fat femme icon Joan Nestle (1987) — first became politicized via their involvements with civil rights and Black liberation movements (Brightwell & Taylor 2021).

Like femme communities, in the field of fat studies, “much of our vocabulary for understanding racialized fat is indebted to black feminist/femme theorizing” (Choudhury 2021, p. 248). As Athia N. Choudhury (2021) argues, through coalitions between fat studies and feminists of colour “we are better able to engage with how race, gender, and fatness are codified under the same system of racial capitalism” (p. 248). Sookie, drawing on the work of Black fem(me)inists and queers, highlights the ways that queer fat femme can be understood as tied to the disruption of white supremacist, colonial, and neoliberal values such as individualization via an emphasis on collectivity and coalition.

Participants suggest that a main reason for queer fat femme's capacity to facilitate coalitional politics is because queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiment can often highlight similarities in oppression with other marginalized groups, serving as "a point of connectivity," as Sookie states. Sookie elaborates on this point:

within all three of those vectors, [there is] this devaluation of our physical bodies that we're encouraged to engage in, in juxtaposition with what is considered the dominant ideal of what it means to be a human being, and [queer fat femme is an experience of] being shut out of that space. And so, if we can recognize these commonalities, while holding our differences as important and real, it can be a space where we can leverage those shared experiences to complicate our understanding of what each of these distinct vectors of identity do or don't mean for folks and how they can be employed to push back on these containers that we're all being forced to desire to fit into.

Here, Sookie describes how queer fat femme illuminates feelings of exclusion and marginalization on multiple fronts. Familiarity with these feelings can position queer fat femmes as, sometimes, more open to learning about and understanding other people's experiences of unbelonging and oppression. Sookie provides the example of how,

the experience of moving through the world in a fat body is one of embodied marginalization that has some points of connectivity... not the same but points of connectivity with experiences of embodied racialization and of embodied transphobic violence, for example... It's a point of connectivity I would say around body terrorism... and what it's like to live with that terror system where we're divorced from ourselves and where we're pitted against one another a lot of the time. That's the whole point of trying to insist on single vector struggles is to separate us from one another, and so if we can

find where we should come together, that's super powerful.... And so, I've had lots of interesting conversations with folks who identify as BIPOC, who identify as non-binary/trans, about those intersections. To me, queer is the space where we bring those things together and lift each other up for our collective liberation.

Sookie's invocation of the concept of "body terrorism," coined by Sonya Renee Taylor (2018) to describe "the structural and systemic emotional, psychological, and physical violence meted out against 'different' bodies all over the planet," (p. 55) is useful for theorizing queer fat femme's capacity to generate coalitions, as this concept situates different bodily-based violences such as racism, transphobia, and fatphobia within "the larger social framework of violence and intimidation that allows oppression and injustice to thrive" (p. 56). Sookie's narrative, combined with Sonya Renee Taylor's (2018) analysis, illuminates how queer fat femme—in affirming the intersecting nature of oppressions—can offer a lens for understanding the way that all oppressions are interrelated. This insight allows for a focus on collective liberation rather than discrete and individualized resistance strategies and movements.

Similarly to Sookie, Stéphanie expresses that,

we [queer fat femmes] have to put up with a lot of shit and a lot of stigma around our bodies, around our gender expression, around our sexuality and how we navigate the world. The world is not made for us on multiple levels. So, we have to advocate for ourselves, but because we're at the axes of three different systems of oppression, it's often that when we advocate for ourselves, we end up advocating for others who not necessarily have all three but who benefit from our advocating for one of them, and that demands compassion for yourself and for others, and understanding.

Stéphanie's narrative suggests that, because queer fat femme embodiment is informed by multiple axes of oppression, awareness of and advocacy for issues that queer fat femmes experience often relate to or encompass issues that other marginalized groups experience. The intersectional nature of queer fat femme embodiment may, then, position queer fat femmes as uniquely able to understand experiences, and engage in coalitional activisms, across axes of oppression. Participants specifically mention trans and/or disabled communities in discussing shared experiences of oppression. For instance, Stéphanie describes how,

I feel like I'm left out sometimes or not necessarily people's priorities. And I feel like that's why I relate a lot to trans people but also disabled folks. I feel like we often share some concerns. And definitely people who are disabled in different ways than I am, I don't share their concerns for myself, but I do share them as someone who's aware of them. So, I feel like we can share some struggle there.

Here, Stéphanie identifies how her queer fat femme embodiment makes her especially aware of or empathetic to some of the struggles that trans and/or disabled people experience and how, as a result, she can advocate for these communities in working towards her own liberation.

Stéphanie also points to how "I feel like I relate a lot to trans people, or especially non-binary people, because there's some overlap between our experiences of being seen in public places. Of course, mine doesn't have to do with dysphoria or with being seen as the right gender, but with being seen as fully that gender and given the same dignity and understanding." In other words, because gender norms are rooted in fatphobia and cisnormativity, fat and trans people may, sometimes, find commonality in their experiences of gender marginalization. Sookie similarly suggests that,

when it comes to being trans and non-binary, the experience of always becoming, or expectation of always becoming... fat folks have very little opportunity to live in the present moment because we're encouraged to think of ourselves as incomplete or always in the process of or expected to be in the process of change. That's similar for folks who are expected to medically transition within a cissexist system. And so that, for me is a big point of commonality there.

Sookie's analysis echoes that of Francis Ray White (2014; 2019), who also finds commonality (and tension) in experiences of trans and fat embodiment (and seeks to theorize the two together). Stéphanie's and Sookie's narratives, then, illuminate a commonality between fat and trans embodiment. These narratives demonstrate how queer fat femmes' experiences of gender align with some trans folks' experiences of fatness and/or gender, creating commonality between the two communities and opportunities for coalitional activism. There is room for difference in experience—for example, where Stéphanie notes being seen as less of a woman as a fat person versus a trans person being misgendered—but the oppressive structures—in this case, rigid and (hetero)normative binary gender systems—are a site of commonality and, therefore, potential coalitional resistance.

As a result of their intersectional politics, participants also articulate an ability to reflect on and identify the privileges they experience in relation to other queer fat femmes. Sookie describes queer fat femme as “a space where I can recognize liberatory potential through the centering of folks who are experiencing the greatest level of violence and oppression.” Sookie further states that,

experiencing marginalization ourselves... through the vectors of femme and fatness and queerness, if we also occupy whiteness and live with an able body or neurotypical

experience, those aren't excuses to not do work to make sure that that space can be as safe as possible for everyone. So... I can occupy fatness and femmeness but I don't... understand myself as queer outside of understanding myself as queer as an intersectional liberation space that holds responsibility to ensure that I'm doing that work, too. Yes, it's very tiring to be a queer fat femme, but it's more tiring if you're a queer fat BIPOC femme who's living with disability and neuro-divergent and experiencing class oppression.

Sookie's narrative demonstrates how participants' awareness of the marginalization that other groups experience can help them to reflect on their positionality and privilege. Consequently, participants are able to advocate for and in coalition with other marginalized groups, but also within queer fat femme communities to center the experiences and needs of less privileged queer fat femmes.

Overall, participants are eager to forge coalitions with other marginalized communities. Their narratives highlight the power of such coalitions to identify and resist overarching structures of oppression. Queer fat femmes, therefore, articulate a key capacity of queer fat femme embodiment as the facilitation and nurturing of connections with other marginalized groups, connections which can help achieve collective liberation.

(Re)Defining Queer Fat Femme

How might queer fat femme's various capacities be brought together to (re)define queer fat femme? To consider this question, in this section, I explore how participants define queer fat femme. Participants define queer fat femme as: inclusive, open, and welcoming; a feeling or related to feminized feelings; an orientation; and a collective response and resistance to marginalization.

Queer Fat Femme In/Ex/clusions

In defining queer fat femme, participants are critical of placing boundaries around what queer fat femme can mean or look like. Participants overwhelmingly express that, regardless of a person's physical appearance, they can be queer fat femme, resisting firm definitions of queer fat femme. Kat describes queer fat femme as "different for everyone," and suggests that "what [queer fat femme] means is up to each person, it's such a broad term. People might be like, it's more feminine, [but] it's like, some people have a mustache and identify as femme, or some people have a full beard and identify as femme. Like, it's very nuanced and tailored per person." Kristy similarly suggests that queer fat femme "is quite self-constructed." For Kat and Kristy, femme is defined by the individual, rather than external forces. For Lauren, queer fat femme "as a word, as an identity, is this beautiful, exploratory category that doesn't have boundaries to it in terms of gender, or gender presentation, or size, or any of these things." Lauren elaborates on this point: "[queer fat femme is about] what works for each individual kind of person. Femme doesn't have borders or anyone policing those borders... [it] is for everybody... And no one can tell you that what you're doing is not femme if it's femme to you." With her narrative, Lauren also advocates for leaving queer fat femme's meanings and aesthetics open and fluid. For Sookie, "it's a very difficult to define thing[s] outside of individual conceptions. I don't think femme is a container that we can put particular parameters on, it's a pretty lofty space that folks might occupy while looking very different or feeling very different." Sookie further details how she is committed to "expanding our understanding of femmeness as a welcoming space for everybody... Femme is whoever feels they are, and there's nothing about you that isn't if that's how you feel about yourself." Stéphanie, too, describes queer fat femme as "whatever makes you feel connected to your femininity" and "what you'll wear or what you'll put on or how you'll act

in the world.” This expansiveness in meaning is important for Stéphanie, who explains that “people who identify as queer, fat, and femme have an understanding of themselves that is very analytical, very critical, very thoughtful, and to me shows an understanding of gender and sexuality and bodies that's really expansive and makes room for all people, and I feel like that gives us a superpower.” Participants therefore largely resist providing firm definitions of queer fat femme and are hesitant to place boundaries or borders around its meaning, instead favouring inclusivity and openness.

What particularly strikes me in these definitions of femme is the way that *feelings* of queer fat fem(me)ininity—what makes a person *feel* queer fat femme—are emphasized as determining a person’s queer fat fem(me)ininity (discussed further below). McCann (2018), however, urges caution in relation to this “radical indefinability of femme” (p. 112) where the individual is positioned as “the ultimate creator of femme meaning” (p. 113) for the ways in which such an approach can (re)produce an individualized and neoliberal femme politics. Therefore, while I am intrigued by participants’ open-ended articulations of queer fat femme, I am also hesitant about the ways that some participants’ narratives center individual presentation. My exploration of the notion of *feeling* queer fat femme, hinted at here and discussed at length later in this chapter, may help to address this quandary.

A notable exception to participants’ openness in defining queer fat femme is in relation to cisgender heterosexual occupations of queer fat femme. In fact, some participants express feeling uncomfortable or angry when fat femme is taken up by (perceived) cisgender heterosexual people. Kat adds this qualifier to their assertion that queer fat femme is defined by the individual person: “but it is a term used by specifically queer or gay or not straight people, basically. It's not a straight term, but in my in my honest opinion, femme is a very specific push against straight

femininity, and a push against the patriarchy.” Rachel similarly states that “I hate the appropriation, the cis appropriation, of femme... I know it's generational, but it drives me nuts... In general, I'm resistant when straight or cis women claim the word femme... My understanding of femme, certainly when I was younger, [is that] it was a lesbian identity... It's like a feeling of protectiveness.... I do feel like, for me, it is linked.” For Kat and Rachel, queer fat femme is a queer, gay, or lesbian embodiment. Rachel further explains that,

I feel like now, the way I see a number of folks use it, it feels like it's completely divorced from sexual orientation, and that doesn't feel comfortable either to me because I feel like you're not respecting or understanding the history and also confusing it with the word feminine. And it's not feminine. But then I have moments... where I confuse it as well, because language evolves, and the word is going to evolve. It might not necessarily be a dyke word, but to me it still feels like a dyke word. For some reason that's so important to me. Even though I think that's a bit of an old school perspective.

For Rachel, femme is necessarily related to dyke identity though she wonders to what extent this perspective is located in the ideas about femme specific to the time, place, and communities in which she discovered femme. For Lauren, a lack of recognition of femme's queer history and roots is central to her discomfort around the expansion of queer fat femme. Lauren adds to her description of queer fat femme as open that,

femme has come to be this really important queer community thing. So, there are some times where I might get a little bit irked if someone is like, 'I'm femme', and I'm like, but do you have any sense of the historical work that has been done to break down femininity? And who's done that work? And what it's access to? And are you a cis, straight person who [is] just picking it up as this fun short form of femininity? Because

it's not... It has more to me, but I would never be like, 'no, you're not femme'. I might just be, like, I don't know that that word means what you think it means! Not that it has a clear definition, but I think that you think that it does, and in a commodified way. And in the same ways that body positivity has been hijacked from fat liberation, where I'm like, you keep saying that word, aahhh! So, there's that kind of thing where yes, femme absolutely can be for everybody. But there's ways that, as that language creeps into the mainstream, where people pick it up and say, 'I'm femme', I'm like, what? That means something!"

Lauren, here, expresses frustration over uses of the term femme by those who de-politicize and de-contextualize femme, subsuming femme into a post-feminist politics of women's empowerment (McFarland & Taylor 2021). Rachel suggests that this tension might exist because,

there also isn't really another word to describe unapologetic femininity. And I think it is something that's lacking in our language, to describe that for straight women... So, it's interesting to feel protective of a word and its history. But it's also interesting to see its impact on the wider culture. The fact that people are wanting to embrace it, it feels annoying and appropriative, but it also feels flattering. And so confusing.

Here, Rachel points to the limits of language, and the ways that impoverished cultural understandings of femininity—as oppressive, as superficial, as frivolous—do not provide conceptual space for thinking and talking about the potentials and capacities of femininities from a variety of perspectives, including those of cisgender heterosexual women. Together, Kat's, Lauren's, and Rachel's narratives demonstrate the struggle that some queer fat femmes experience in relation to the broadening of meanings of femme. They all express a desire for, at

the very least, the recognition of femme's queer roots in some contemporary expansions of femme.

However, for Sookie,

I always have very strong feelings about femme as a space that is open to everyone, regardless of how other points of their identity might line up. And that becomes a little bit complicated when we're talking about straight, cisgender folks. But ... maybe someone is straight and cisgender and also asexual and so, for that person, I don't disagree with having access to femme space, and frankly, what is gender anyway? What is attraction? Why should I or shouldn't I have an investment in shutting people out of the space that I find liberatory? Ensuring that non-binary and transfeminine people... as well as feminine cisgender men... have access to that space [of femme] is more important to me than being like, straight, cisgender ladies can't come in, right? Because like, the straights are not okay, they need as much help as they can get.

Here, Sookie points out the difficulties of policing the boundaries of queerness and challenges the idea that a person's queerness can be always or easily intelligible within existing frameworks of gender and sexuality. Sookie, in troubling the stability of conceptions of queerness and who is acknowledged and accepted as queer, also calls into question, then, who is 'queer enough' to claim femme. Therefore, while acknowledging femme's queer roots, and remaining respectful of some participants' understandings of queer fat femme as a uniquely queer embodiment, I suggest that at least some sense of openness is central to contemporary notions of queer fat femme.

Feeling (Queer Fat) Femme

Relatedly, participants define queer fat femme as a feeling. Participants discuss feeling femme, meaning that they feel an innate or intrinsic orientation towards or attachment to

fem(me)ininity. For Tracy, queer fat femme “really is a feeling and I can think of a million moments where I felt very powerful in those three things merging together.” Vanessa asserts that “femme is here [gesturing to her heart] it's not here [gesturing down her body].” Similarly, Rio states that “for me a femme look is really how I *feel*, it's what I'm bringing to whatever I am wearing... Femme is how I *feel*, so that means what I'm wearing will become femme if I am *feeling* femme.” Queer fat femme, in these participants' articulations, is located internally, rather than hinging on external appearances. Kristy also emphasizes that she is queer fat femme “regardless of things that other people would count as femme... There are people who think of me as not that femme. But I don't feel less femme when I'm wearing jeans and a T shirt than I do... when I'm doing something fancy or doing something more overtly feminine.” For Sookie, too, “I am no [more] femme wearing lacy, floral lingerie, and a baby doll dress than I am when I'm wearing a giant plaid shirt.” With these quotes, participants articulate queer fat femme as a feeling, as something that is intrinsic, deeply felt, and that remains constant regardless of what they wear or look like.

Indeed, participants discuss experiences of dissonance between an internal sense of (femme) self and their external appearance when they shift away from a traditionally fem(me)inine gender expression. For example, Rio describes how, a few years ago, “I gave butch a shot, hoping that [it] would become comfortable the way femme did. And it never really did. *It never felt good the way femme did.* And I would get dressed in the morning and be like, I'm gonna wear my butch clothes. It didn't ever quite work for me.” Similarly, Rachel describes how “when I was eighteen, I shaved my head because it was like obligatory for white lesbians at that time to shave their heads... But as soon as I did it, I was like, I have to wear dresses every day... Suddenly I had to go buy skirts, and that freaked me out...It was just *a feeling of not feeling right*

in my body.” For Rio and Rachel, moving away from femme and towards androgyny or butch feels wrong, affirming that femme is something they innately *feel*.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that aesthetics are not a part of queer fat femme as, for Rachel, queer fat femme is about a way of being fem(me)inine “that I can't really describe. But... I *feel* it when I dress up... It's something I can see and *feel*.” Rachel's quote suggests that feelings of queer fat femme, or feeling queer fat femme, can sometimes and for some queer fat femmes be tied to and engendered via clothing and appearance. However, ultimately, as Vanessa states, “I would never say that I'm butch, because it's not who I am. I am a femme person... regardless of whether or not I've drawn my eyebrows on that day.” Queer fat femme is, therefore, as participants describe, something that a person feels internally and that remains true and meaningful regardless of (though it may sometimes be connected to) external appearance. This theme is consistent with the way that participants also define queer fat femme as open and without boundaries because, if queer fat femme is something that someone feels, and what it means to feel queer fat femme is not circumscribed, feeling queer fat femme remains open to anyone for whom it resonates.

Participants also define queer fat femme in terms of feelings, especially tenderness, vulnerability, and softness. Stéphanie describes how,

I think femme has to do with nothing that's innate or that's pre-determined.... I really don't adhere to gender essentialism or biological determinism, but I think that a characteristic of femmes is that we're caring, on varying levels of course and nothing can be applied to everyone. But from my experience, a lot of femmes are very intuitive and caring and tuned into each other and to other people's needs, and those are characteristics

that are feminine in our culture, but I think we choose to use them in ways that are healing and helpful.

Stéphanie also discusses the “compassion and tenderness and understanding and vulnerability that we [queer fat femmes] can have for each other and for the world.” For Stéphanie, queer fat femme encompasses feminized characteristics including care, compassion, and understanding and she articulates queer fat femme in relation to feeling tender and vulnerable. Kristy, too, articulates queer fat femme as involving “caregiving,” citing the ways that, in the 1940s and 50s, being femme involved caring emotionally—and sometimes financially—for butch partners (Kennedy 1997). Tracy, who brings tissues to our interview, describes herself in an email exchange prior to our interview as “such a crier” and “a weepy fat femme,” engaging in vulnerable displays of emotion. Along similar lines, Lauren discusses how queer fat femme can be seen as “too much” not only physically, but emotionally, invoking notions of fat fem(me)ininity as excessive. Ultimately, in participants’ narratives, feelings are central to how queer fat femme is embodied or experienced, in particular feelings that are feminized and devalued in the broader culture. Understanding queer fat femme in terms of feelings reflects a general emphasis on feelings such as softness (Schwartz 2020c) and vulnerability (Cvetkovich 2003; Dahl 2017; Schwartz 2020b) in femme cultures at large.

Beyond emotions that are culturally coded as feminine, Tracy articulates queer fat femme as being about joy and “feeling good internally... The feeling part [of queer fat femme] feels big: feeling safe, feeling loved, feeling respected, feeling seen, feeling desired.” Tracy’s quote ties the two ways that participants discuss feelings in relation to queer fat femme together: queer fat femme offers a means of feeling good or right intrinsically and internally, while also facilitating certain emotions—joy, safety, desire, tenderness, vulnerability, compassion, and understanding.

This focus on feeling(s) is consistent with McCann's (2018) call for a different approach to theorizing fem(me)ininity that focuses on the affects that fem(me)ininity engenders. Queer fat femme is, therefore, something that is deeply felt and connected to feelings.

Queer Fat Femme Orientations

Participants also define queer fat femme as something that influences how they relate to and exist in the world, what Sara Ahmed (2006) refers to as an "orientation." Ahmed (2006) argues that to be oriented is "to be turned towards certain objects, those that help us to find our way" and affects "how we reside in space" (p. 1). Indeed, participants articulate queer fat femme in terms that are deeply resonant with Ahmed's (2006) theorization of orientations. For example, Alex discusses how queer fat femme "inherently colors and affects everything that I do— how I how I occupy spaces, how I respond to things, how I engage with things." Kat similarly emphasizes queer fat femme as shaping their broader relationship to things, articulating queer fat femme as "this ethereal concept that is a form of expression but also a form of being and a form of seeing yourself in the world." For Rio, queer, fat, and femme are "solidified into a pillar of how I experience the world." In these quotations from Alex, Kat, and Rio, queer fat femme is a mode of residing in space and navigating the world.

Likewise, Tracy refers to queer fat femme as "a sensibility," explaining how, it's a way of being. It's a relationship to a whole bunch of things and people... It's a relationship to queerness and it's a relationship to gender, and to class. For me... [it is] a way of relating to myself, the people in my life, the people in my culture, people in my history. And I figure that has a lot to do with desire, and I think mostly for a desire for myself, really, like, what I want in the world.

Stéphanie offers a description of queer fat femme that is similar to Tracy's, where she describes queer fat femme as "a way of navigating the world that's linked to so many contexts," such as gender, sexuality, fatness, and relationships with others. These quotations from Tracy and Stéphanie illustrate how queer fat femme, as an orientation, brings certain objects near (Ahmed 2006). For example, both Tracy and Stéphanie flag how their queer desires bring certain relationships—to others and themselves—into reach.

Ultimately, participants frame queer fat femme as shaping how they exist in, negotiate, and relate to the world. Queer fat femme, therefore, orients participants towards certain objects and ways of "inhabiting and embodying spaces" (Ahmed 2006, p. 11). Queer fat femme embodiment, like Ahmed's (2006) theorization of lesbian desire in her work on orientations, creates possibilities "that might not have otherwise been reachable within the body horizon of the social" (p. 103). In the context of participants' articulations of queer fat femme, these possibilities include alternative and more livable understandings of fatness, fem(me)ininity, and queerness—ones that are capacious of desires for fat fem(me)inine bodies and futures—as well as communities and cultures that affirm those understandings.

I am not the first scholar to suggest that conceptualizing fem(me)ininity or fatness within this framework holds potential. Robyn Longhurst (2014) finds Ahmed's (2006) ideas relevant to fat embodiment because of the ways that fat bodies do not fit, discursively and materially, in dominant culture and space. Ulrika Dahl (2014) uses Ahmed's (2006) concept of orientation devices to explore how femme identity coalesces around vintage aesthetics. Queer fat femme may, therefore, be defined in part using Ahmed's (2006) work on orientations.

Queer Fat Femme as Collectivity

Finally, participants define queer fat femme in terms of collective experiences of marginalization and liberation. Ngina frames queer fat femme as a community of “people trying to live their best lives, but they happen to have this identity where it’s like, hey, I’m queer, hey, I’m fat, hey, I dress in a femme fashion, look at me, celebrate me, come join my community and let’s do this together.” In Ngina’s quote, queer fat femme is a site of connection between people who claim common identifiers, where they can join together to celebrate those identifiers. Building on Ngina’s quote, in perhaps one of my favourite quotes from my interviews for this dissertation, Sookie defines queer fat femme as,

a space where it’s possible to be heard and listened to and affirmed and held and healed, and where we’re able to take things we’re not supposed to or ‘allowed’ to be and own them and revel in them, and throw glitter at each other and wear brightly coloured mumus and spin around and paint our nails or not, and where we can find commonality, perhaps around the experience of being reviled, and honour and value each other in the face of that collectively, which is super powerful.

Indeed, Sookie defines “the heart of my queer fat femmeness as this space of connection and liberation and mutual support and growth and bright lipsticks.” For Sookie, then, queer fat femme is a site of collective celebration and resistance, where people experiencing marginalization on the basis of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity can find community and more livable ways of existing together. Both Ngina’s and Sookie’s definitions center collective experiences of marginalization and liberation efforts. These definitions suggest that queer fat femme is important for participants because of the ways in which it offers a sense of community, and the possibilities it creates for collectively (re)imagining queer, fat, and fem(me)inine embodiment. Queer fat femme embodiment is (re)imagined not in terms of individual

appearances but, rather, in terms of creating queer fat femme futures that contain more than oppression, shame, and pain.

Analysis

Having explored the variety of ways in which participants discuss the capacities of and define queer fat femme, how might queer fat femme be (re)defined? In other words, what unites participants' articulations of queer fat femme? I suggest that queer fat femme might be (re)defined in terms of collectivity, via participants' emphases on shared oppressions and the celebration of a diversity of queer fat femme embodiments. I am struck by participants' centering of collectivity, in particular how participants discuss community as a way of valuing themselves and each other. Indeed, participants' interviews illuminate the deep commitment that queer fat femmes have to caring for and supporting each other. Queer fat femme's liberatory potential may, then, result from the capacity of queer fat femme to create space for queer fat femmes to relate to each other about, and mobilize around, (dis)similar²⁰ experiences of queer, fat, and femme embodiment and oppression. In this way, defining queer fat femme does not necessitate placing firm definitions of or boundaries around individual queer fat femme appearances. Instead, this approach to defining queer fat femme creates space for a multiplicity of queer fat femme embodiments by centering collective experiences of marginalization, without (re)investing in any singular queer fat femme appearance as the right or best way to be a queer fat femme. This conception of queer fat femme resists the neoliberal and individualized conceptions of resistance that McCann (2018) criticizes. Rather than a singular aesthetic or,

²⁰ Meaning that while queer fat femmes relate to each other about and mobilize around similar experiences of identity, dissimilar experiences (differences in race, class, disability, and other axes of identity, privilege, and oppression) offer queer fat femmes with opportunities for growth and the building of coalitions. I discuss this idea further in chapter six.

even, politic, queer fat femme can be (re)defined in terms of its capacities: for feeling, for healing, for community, and for liberation.

While this analysis is seemingly paradoxical to the findings of the previous chapter, I suggest that this contradiction in research findings may actually prove productive for (re)thinking fem(me)ininity. May Friedman (2020) argues for the power of uncertainty and ambiguity to challenge “the colonizing forces that laid down frameworks of certainty with absolutely no regard for the complex and beautiful realities that shift and dance around us” (p. 247). I am, therefore, uninterested in espousing certainties about, for example, a difference in ‘normative’ versus ‘queer’ fat fem(me)ininity. Femme scholars show how such lines of argumentation reproduce a feminine ‘other’ and continue to locate resistance at the site of the individual. Instead, drawing on Friedman (2020) and McCann (2018), I emphasize ambiguity as perhaps the most productive (in)conclusion to reach because, as McCann (2018) argues, analyses of fem(me)ininity should be capacious and able to exceed binary and reductive framings of fem(me)ininity as good versus bad, oppressive versus liberatory. Fem(me)ininity can be all of these things simultaneously. Fem(me)ininities are deserving of nuanced analyses that consider what fem(me)ininity does, and why and how people form attachments to fem(me)ininity. Scholars must move past making a case for ‘keeping’ or ‘getting rid of’ fem(me)ininity if fem(me)ininity’s queer potential is to be theorized (McCann 2018).

Queer fat femme, as I demonstrate in this and the previous chapter, can simultaneously offer a site of collective resistance and liberation *and* (re)produce norms that exclude and harm queer fat femmes. I offer my analysis in the previous and current chapters as an example of capacious fem(me)ininities scholarship that can investigate who and why fem(me)ininities harm while maintaining fem(me)ininity’s value. As Stéphanie states, queer fat femme is “a complex

identity and it's beautiful, it's interesting, there's a lot of genius in it.” I hope that my analysis does justice to the complexity, beauty, and genius of my queer fat femme participants.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed the question of what queer fat femme ‘does’ for participants, responding to Hannah McCann’s (2018) call for analyses of fem(me)ininity that consider the capacities engendered by fem(me)ininity. I have suggested that queer fat femme: enables a reclamation of marginalized identities, including queer, fat, and femme; offers scripts for queer fat femme embodiment; contains glimpses of utopian queer and fat fem(me)ininites; provides subcultural intelligibility; facilitates senses of safety and protection for people in a world that often makes them feel vulnerable and unsafe; and creates opportunities for coalitional resistance to overarching oppressive structures. Further, I have charted how queer fat femme is defined in terms of openness, feeling(s), orientations, and collectivity. I argued that queer fat femme is most effectively defined not in terms of a singular aesthetic or politic, but instead in terms of feeling, healing, community, and liberation. Continuing my analysis of queer fat femme collectivity, relationality, and community, my next chapter examines the emerging phenomenon of “femmeships” (Schwartz 2020a) between queer fat femmes.

Chapter 6: The Erotics of Queer Fat Femmeship

Introduction

The only thing more powerful than a femme is the network of relations she's built herself; our love for each other is fierce. There is something miraculous about femme networks of care and all the ways they can fuel you, sneak up when you least expect it, protect you, set you free. There are potent magics, sometimes dangerously so, in the innumerable manifestations of femme, and in the boundless ways we care for each other and our kin. (Willes 2017)

This quotation from a 2017 review by Brett Cassady Willis of Canadian writer Kai Cheng Thom's (2016) *Fierce femmes and notorious liars: A dangerous trans girl's confabulous memoir*, announces "femme kinship" as nothing short of magic. Willis' (2017) description of "femme kinship" resonates deeply with the ways in which my participants discuss what they refer to as "femmeship." Although relationships between queer fat femmes is not a topic that is a part of my interview guide (Appendix A), participants talk, unsolicited and at length, about their fat femmeships, describing them as "magic," a "beautiful spark," "nourishing," and more. In this chapter, building on the centrality of collectivity to participants' understandings of queer fat femme, I explore participants' descriptions of fat femmeships or, in other words, relationships between queer fat femmes. I frame my analysis of femmeships using Andi Schwartz's (2020a) doctoral research on femme internet culture, as this is the first piece of scholarship to offer a scholarly conceptualization of femmeship. I position my participants' descriptions of their fat femmeships within Schwartz's (2020a) framework, also drawing on literature about communities of care (Eales & Peers 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018; Spade 2020) to extend this framework. Then, weaving together fat studies literature on fat sex, theorizations of femme sexuality, and

queer theory, I build on Schwartz's (2020a) analysis to explore the sexual nature of participants' fat femmeships. I argue that fat femmeships may be thought of as expressions of what Audre Lorde (1984) calls the erotic because of the glimpses they can offer of alternative and liberatory ways of relating to and desiring queer and fat fem(me)inities.

Femmeships in the Academic Literature

In her dissertation chapter titled "Femmeship: Political alliances and communities of care," Andi Schwartz (2020a) introduces the term "femmeship" to the academic literature, which is used by one of her interviewees to describe their connections with other femmes. The femmes Schwartz (2020a) interviews describe relationships between femmes as "transcend[ing] geographical boundaries and generations... [and] becom[ing] sources of healing, even motivation to stay alive" (pp. 140-141). Describing how she was deeply affected by such descriptions, Schwartz (2020a) states that "as I transcribed my interviews and listened to our voices break as we talked about what femme friendships mean, it became clear that describing them as friendships is insufficient" (pp. 140-141). Accordingly, Schwartz (2020a) develops "the term 'femmeship' to understand femme connections as politically significant friendships that take the form of political alliances and communities of care" (p. 130). Schwartz (2020a) brings together a variety of bodies of literature to conceptualize femmeships: queer critiques of community that highlight "unbelonging" (Halberstam 2008b) as central to subculture formation; friendship studies scholarship that posits friendships as political alliances (Baltzly & Elipoulos 2009), as blurring binaries between friendship and desire, and as resistant to heteronormative and patriarchal norms (Doyle 2007); and late twentieth century theories of women's relationships, including Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum" (1980) and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's (1975) analysis of nineteenth century "loving friendships" between women. Using this scholarship,

Schwartz (2020a) argues that there are two central components to femmeships: political alliances and communities of care.

As political alliances, femmeships are rooted, at least in part, in common political beliefs, struggles, and aims. For example, insisting on the value of femininity in a masculinist culture. A key function of femmeships is, therefore, to create spaces for discussing and aligning to collectively resist shared oppressions and for giving and receiving support in working towards shared political goals. Schwartz (2020a) highlights the political work that femmes must engage in in order to cultivate femmeships, as femmeships require resistance to patriarchal positionings of other feminine people as competition (e.g., for partners or to be ‘the most attractive’). For femmes, then, “valuing and supporting each other is often a political battle” (Schwartz 2020a, p. 147) that requires conscious effort. Overall, as political alliances, femmeships reflect femmes’ collective creations of “their own structures, politics, skills, and rituals” (Schwartz 2020a, p. 147).

As communities of care, femmeships involve “giving and receiving emotional support, pooling resources and providing material assistance, and receiving advice and wisdom from older generations” (Schwartz 2020a, p. 155). Schwartz (2020a) describes how shared or similar experiences, often “based on the very fact of being femme,” (p. 155) foster kinship among femmes. As communities of care, femmeships are, as Schwartz (2020a) states, “like family” (p. 149). Femmeships therefore involve support and care, in a variety of forms.

In addition to being political alliances and communities of care, Schwartz (2020a) finds that “there is still something elusive and unnameable” about femmeships, reflecting on the reverence, mysticism, and power inherent to her interviewees’ descriptions of their femmeships. However, Schwartz (2020a) cautions against an uncritical romanticization of femmeships, as

doing so can obscure private conflicts and reinforce existing structures of oppression such as white supremacy and classism within femme communities. Ultimately, Schwartz (2020a) suggests that “the value of... femmeships, takes on a mythical or mystical quality: it cannot be explained, you simply must know it to know it. If nothing else, this speaks to the incredible personal value that femmes place on their relationships with other femmes: too sacred to even speak of” (p. 157).

Affirming & Extending Femmeships as Political Alliances and Communities of Care

Many of the ways in which my participants speak about fat femmeship can be analyzed through the lens of Schwartz’s (2020a) conception of femmeship as politically significant friendships that often manifest as political alliances and communities of care. In this section, I discuss my interview data that fits within Schwartz’s (2020a) framework. I outline the main ways that participants’ fat femmeships take the form of political alliances and communities of care, detailing how participants’ descriptions of their fat femmeships affirm and, in some cases, extend Schwartz’s (2020a) findings. To support my extensions of Schwartz’s (2020a) findings, I draw on scholarship about communities of care (Eales & Peers 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018; Spade 2020).

Fat Femmeships as Shared or Similar Experiences

A first way that my interview findings affirm Schwartz’s (2020a) conception of femmeship is with how many participants articulate their fat femmeships as rooted in shared experiences of (queer and fat) fem(me)inine embodiment and oppression. Speaking of the ways that fat femmeships are important to her, and bring her joy, Lauren states that,

I think it's the validation piece. It's knowing that you will be able to understand and empathize, and there's less translation work that has to happen. I know that my straight-

sized friends will have empathy and will understand and will listen to the shitty parts of what it's like to navigate the world. But there's something to just having that understanding that comes from a shared lived experience. There's less translation work that has to happen. And that there can just be that shared understanding is important.

Lauren describes fat femmeships as “those one-to-one relationships where you [are] at a level of kinship or understanding where you have more familiarity with each other's lives to be able to connect about your day-to-day stuff.” For Lauren, fat femmeships are rooted in and formed from familiar or shared understandings, a desire to be with others who ‘get it’. Sookie also discusses how “femmeships are really nourishing and a space where we can talk about what it's like to be these people in the world.” Central to Sookie’s description of fat femmeships, like Lauren’s, is how femmes are united by the fact that they move through the world as queer and fat fem(me)inine people. Similarly, in Kat’s experience, fat femmeships are important “because we're all going through the same things and it's hard to talk about it with other people because they don't recognize what's going on... So, talking with other people who understand, who have gone through it, instead of trying to tell your skinny friend that, hey, this is a thing [feels good].” Kat, like Lauren, emphasizes the “translation work” that fat femmeships can alleviate, because of their foundation in common understandings of the realities of queer fat femme daily life. Accordingly, for Lauren, Sookie, and Kat, fat femmeships are rooted in, and important because they create space for, solidarity and deeper, common understanding of the challenges and joys of life as a queer fat femme.

Illuminating some of these common bonds that form the basis of her fat femmeships, Rachel—who describes fat femmeships as “exciting”—explains how fat femmeships can encompass “practical things like shopping and sharing clothes or clothing swaps, the reality of

the discussions around desirability and sex and stuff like that... [because it] is very unique when you are queer, fat, and femme.” Other participants mention shared or similar experiences of (un)desirability and sex, for example, as frequent sites of fat femme comradeship or fat femmeship. In Joanna’s description of her desire for fat femme friends, a need to find people with shared experiences is central. Joanna states that “things like dating were really getting to me because all my close friends are fairly thin and complain about how hard dating is, and then I compare myself to them and that’s really hard. I was like, I think I should probably have some friends who are also fat who get the kind of stuff I’m going through.” In these quotes, Rachel and Joanna point out some of the concrete and oppressive experiences queer fat femmes desire to connect with each other and build fat femmeships around, such as clothing and dating.

While shared experiences of embodiment and oppression are significant sites of connection between fat femmes so, too, are common political goals. As Sookie states, “I feel like fat femmes often are drawn together if we’re politicized.” For example, Tracy speaks about how her online fat community is brought together not only by shared experiences, but also common political goals:

I feel like every time I meet with them, I smile my face off. I feel so happy to be around other fat people wanting to talk about fat stuff, because it's been a lost piece of vitality in my life lately... To be talking about fatness and reading together and having these conversations about liberation together, feels so fucking good... I think seeing and being with other fat people is really the most important thing in my whole life, especially folks who are thinking and talking about fat liberation.

Relationships based in shared commitments to fat (and queer and femme) liberation involve, for Tracy, “being in creative collectives or doing cultural production work and organizing events...

clothing sales, clothing swaps, public things like that, cabarets or shows or talks or that kind of really organizational stuff [in addition to] street activism driven stuff where there's more impromptu activist work going on.” Tracy’s experiences of fat femmeship highlight how similar experiences of oppression can orient fat femmes towards similar political aims, offering another site of common ground for fat femmeship formation. Fat femmeships are, therefore, rooted in shared or similar experiences of embodiment, oppression, and political activism.

Because most of my participants occupy similar social locations of gender, race, class, and disability, the emphasis in interviews is on similarities in experiences as foundations for fat femmeships. However, Dean Spade (2020) in the context of their work on mutual aid projects, suggests that, where “people come together on the basis of some shared need or concern in spite of their different lived experience... by working together... members could learn about experiences different from theirs and build solidarity across those differences” (pp. 14-15). Here, Spade (2020) offers a lens for understanding fat femmeships as sites where fat femmes come together around shared concerns of femmephobia, fatphobia, and heteronormativity, and how, with a more diverse participant sample, participants may articulate learning about and building solidarity across differences in race, class, age, disability, and gender, such that “one urgent issue unspools into a broader vision of social transformation” (p. 15). Future scholarship on femmeships should, therefore, investigate the importance of femmeships rooted in differences in lived experience.

Fat Femmeships as Healing

Participants also discuss the potential for fat femmeships to be spaces of healing. Participants use terms like “soothing,” “nourishing,” “home,” and “a great de-stressor,” to describe being with other queer fat femmes. For Rio, finding fat femme friends and growing

closer to them means “having those people in my life more directly and consistently who I can talk to about my fatness and my femmeness [which] has been hugely healing.” Having other fat femmes to relate to about their experiences is restorative for Rio, in part, because these fat femmeships, as described in the previous section, are spaces of commonality and shared understanding. Rio recalls going to a sex club with another queer fat femme as an example of the healing potential of fat femmeships:

We were at [the sex club] ... and she would keep smiling at me and say, ‘we’re the tallest people here,’ and then smile and be like, ‘and the fattest!’... And the more she would giggle about it and get excited, the more I was like, I can be excited about this?! Like, I can live my body outside of this sex space and within it, and I can be just as giddy about being here as someone else? I can actually access the excitement that everyone else is experiencing here? I can be part of all of this? And that was a really pivotal moment and really cool for me. She and I then went on to attend a few [butch/femme events] together, which w[ere] great event[s]. She would usually invite me saying, ‘hey, do you want to go be tower femmes and see if any of the tiny butches want to dance with us?’... And it became this really exciting celebration of going to a place specifically to be large, in so many ways, and queer, and also to know that I was going to dress femme and that it was going to be an exciting thing for me to do. Those events were really informative for me to be able to confidently put all these identities together in a way that isn't traumatic or scary.

In this narrative, Rio’s fat femmeship becomes a space of healing in several ways. First, as previously stated, there is a bond centered on shared embodiment and experience. Moreover, in creating a space to bond over their shared experience, Rio’s fat femmeship offers room for

imagining, embodying, and relating to others about queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiment differently. Rio's fat femmeship actively celebrates queer and fat femme embodiment, centering fat fem(me)inities as sources of connection and excitement and pleasure, which stands in stark contrast to the "traumatic and scary" ways that Rio's fat fem(me)inine embodiment is understood in the larger culture.

Sookie also describes their fat femmeships as healing. Sookie states that "[my best friend] and I will say frequently to each other that our femmeship is what gives us life," and later on powerfully declares that "my best femme and our femmeship keeps me alive." Mad and crip scholars Lindsay Eales and Danielle Peers (2021) argue that "there is no more important queer project than for neuroqueers, crips, and non-normates more generally to survive," and that "care work and play... are essential for both of our existences. We survive only with and through each other" (pp. 165-166). Eales and Peers (2021) make clear how the work of collective survival is critical and political, and Sookie's comments about fat femmeships suggest that fat femmeships, like communities of care, offer invaluable resources for staying alive.

For Sookie, fat femmeships more broadly constitute a "space of safety and rest" because of "the respite that comes when you don't have to justify your existence." In Sookie's experience, then, fat femmeships are healing because of the shelter they can offer from a fat-hating and femmephobic culture, and the space they provide for existing in community with others like them.

Indeed, in Allison's experience, fat femmeships are "normalizing" because of, the idea that there are other people that go through similar things, or we can relate to each other, and that there's not anything wrong with us.... Being part of these [queer fat femme] communities has really allowed me to find acceptance and a better way of living

where you are not always seeking to cure things, but instead to live your best life... in the way that you want to live.

Fat femmeships are healing for Allison because, in being rooted in shared experience, they enable her to locate the ‘problems’ of queerness, fatness, disability, and fem(me)ininity outside of herself and find other, more livable ways of existing in the world in a marginalized body. Allison’s fat femmeships, like Rio’s, offer alternative ways of embodying and imagining queer and fat fem(me)ininities in community with other queer fat femmes.

Moreover, for Tracy, fat femmeships mean that people “can see me in really whole, loving, powerful, political ways.” In Tracy’s experience, fat femmeships are healing in that they create spaces where she can be seen for who she is, in affirming ways. In fat femmeships, Tracy’s queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiment becomes lovable, political, and powerful, rather than something undesirable or to be changed. Fat femmeships are healing, then, in a variety of ways for participants. The healing potential of fat femmeships is often connected to their foundation in shared experiences and the community that fat femmeships offer for finding less oppressive ways of existing as queer fat femmes. Indeed, fat femmeships, as communities of care, demonstrate how “care be celebrated and recognized and valued as survival making and revolution making and love making” (Eales & Peers 2021, p. 173).

Fat Femmeships as “Lifting Others Up”

Schwartz (2020a) discusses how part of the political nature of femmeships is the work they do to advocate for other femmes, especially those experiencing other intersecting oppressions. My finding from the previous chapter that queer fat femme can facilitate coalitions between marginalized groups and self-reflexivity among queer fat femmes echoes Schwartz’s (2020a) finding. Consider, for example, Sookie’s sentiment that their fat femmeship “has always

had space for lots of other people, and where a point of connection is our shared desire to and love of lifting others up.” Here, Sookie emphasizes fat femmeship as a place for doing the political and care work of supporting and advocating for other femmes. Fat femmeships, then, can also be a space of care and support for femmes, where there is a focus on working in community to resist not only shared oppressions but also those affecting fellow and multiply marginalized femmes. This point harkens back to my use of Spade’s (2020) work on mutual aid projects to argue that differences in lived experiences within fat femmeships can teach fat femmes about other systems of oppression and build solidarity across those differences for the purpose of collective or coalitional resistance.

The Limits of Fat Femmeships

However, like Schwartz (2020a) suggests, participants’ narratives reveal that there can be limits to fat femmeships as political alliances and communities of care. Tracy states that,

I do this work [of community building] to be happy and to be in good relationships. And it's not that it doesn't erase the shit that exists outside of that, not at all, it really doesn't. It pads it a little bit and it creates these very beautiful opportunities for living, right? But when bad shit happens, I'm reminded, 'oh, yeah, right, everything is fucked up, like, mostly things are really fucked up'. And those shitty moments shock me, even though they're commonplace. I expect it in a way but it's also just truly awful... It really makes me angry... It hurts.

In this narrative, Tracy highlights one main limit of fat femmeships. Although fat femmeships offer refuge from the larger culture, they do not make up for or erase the inevitable moments of marginalization—hurt, humiliation, shame, and pain—that come with existing in a queer and fat fem(me)inine body in Western culture.

Femmeships are not only limited in the extent to which they can address queer fat femmes' marginalization in the larger world, but also by the ways that femmes, themselves, can let each other down. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018), a queer disabled femme of colour writer, writes of their experiences in building and sustaining "care webs"—disability support systems "controlled by the needs and desires of the disabled people running them" that "work from a model of *solidarity not charity*—of showing up for each other in mutual aid and respect" (p. 41). In care webs, Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) finds that "often... we experienced the places where interdependence didn't just magically work out as betrayal, letting each other down. We had so many hopes for each other, so much belief that we could be everything to each other, effortlessly and automatically, through shared identity" (p. 58). For example, Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) discusses instances where people's access needs are not complementary and misunderstandings that arise about others' needs cross-disability. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) highlights the ways that, although communities of care are often centered on shared needs, concerns, and/or politics, moments of disappointment and hurt can also be part of care work.

For example, one participant describes how,

I was at a friend's house and friend of her's came by. We were all chatting and they were talking about a well-known athlete, someone I hadn't heard of... Her friend... says... 'oh, he *used* to be very good looking, but he's gained so much weight.' And I cringe. I'm thinking, what the fuck, and my friend says nothing. My thin queer friend says nothing. I say nothing, but I'm completely repelled. I just want to leave; I can't look at this person anymore... I was so mad. And I was so mad that I had said nothing and that my friend had said nothing. So, I guess I'm saying this because... I've developed strategies around

what it takes for me to take care of myself ... [but] I'm not always successful with these strategies, obviously.

This part of Tracy's narrative highlights a second limitation of femmeships, specifically how, even within femmeships, structures of marginalization can be replicated—fatphobia, white supremacy, classism, and ableism, for example. As Tracy suggests, when this happens within femmeships— spaces where people 'should know better' or assume a common experience or politic— those moments can be especially hurtful or painful and evoke feelings of disappointment and betrayal. Ngina also speaks of this limit to femmeships in discussing how queer communities, more broadly, (re)produce white supremacy:

I don't want to say I've avoided the queer community, but I definitely haven't gone out of my way to actively seek out volunteer opportunities or get involved in organizations and things like that the way I have with Black communities or communities of color... or feminist communities... I find them just a little off-putting. We have a pride parade every year [and] last year was the first year I went, and I don't think I want to go again because it's very, very corporate... And also, it's very white here. We are struggling with the issue of having police and military at the Pride parade, and whether that is going to be a thing... I'm probably not going to go to pride this year, because I just don't feel like this community... necessarily feel[s] that queer people of color are a part of their community [or] are a welcome part of their community. It makes me feel excluded and I don't want to participate in that.

While Ngina speaks of the broader queer community, scholarship suggests that similar situations can manifest within femme communities where queer femmes of colour are marginalized by the (re)centering of whiteness via femme communities' chosen aesthetics or political aims (e.g.,

Dahl 2014). Therefore, like Schwartz (2020a) I do not want to overstate the potential of fat femmeships or suggest that fat femmeships exist outside of the larger culture in which they are formed.

Summary

In many ways, participants describe fat femmeships similarly to how Schwartz (2020a) frames femmeships. Writings on care communities, especially by Mad, crip, trans, and racialized people, thicken my analyses of the ways that fat femmeships can function as or like communities of care. Fat femmeships are rooted in common experiences—of queerness and fem(me)ininity and fat embodiment—and shared political aims. Like Schwartz (2020a) contends, there is often an assumption amongst (queer fat) femmes that other (queer fat) femmes will share their politics. Fat femmeships are also articulated as healing, which accords with fat femmeship as both a political alliance and a community of care. Specifically, participants discuss how fat femmeships offer space to collectively identify and resist their marginalization. Participants also discuss the emotional labour queer fat femmes perform for each other to create safe(r) spaces and to help one another find less oppressive ways of embodying queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity. Participants' articulations of fat femmeship also align with notions of political alliances and communities of care where participants describe queer fat femme as facilitating coalitions among marginalized communities for mutual support and for challenging common oppressions. Finally, participants hint at the limits of femmeships which, as Schwartz (2020a) argues, can arise from personal conflicts and the reproduction of larger structures of oppression in femmeships.

Ultimately, Sookie defines femmeships as “these powerful spaces of transformation and resistance, celebrating three things we’re ‘not supposed to’ celebrate in loud and great ways by shaking our bellies and wearing very little clothing, or wearing lots of clothing depending on

what our preferences might be.” This quote exemplifies how fat femmeships can be analyzed through the lens of Schwartz’s (2020a) work. Fat femmeships constitute political alliances—coming together around, resisting, and transforming three marginalized forms of embodiment—and communities of care—collectively healing from and imagining less oppressive ways of existing within a heteronormative, femmephobic, and fatphobic culture.

Fat Femmeships Online & In-Person

Schwartz’s (2020a) study focuses on femmeships in the context of social media, although she acknowledges that in many instances the femmeships she examines also exist offline.

However, my participants discuss the utility and functions of online fat femmeship alongside in-person fat femmeships, using photographs to represent and thicken their descriptions of their fat femmeships. For some participants, online fat femmeships are more sustainable and accessible than in-person fat femmeships. Many of Lauren’s queer fat femmeships are online,

because it's harder to put together and sustain in person... in a [large] city ... where there's so many people. Like, all the queers are here, but there's also the intense pressure to survive. To be able to make your rent and all those things prevent, for me, at least, a lot more of that kind of sustained, in-person community building. Whereas, online, it's much easier to have those connections.

In Lauren’s experience, then, online fat femmeships offer spaces of community and connection that, otherwise, she would not have the resources to access or sustain. Lauren’s comments are reminiscent of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s (2018) writings about the virtual care web, “Sick and Disabled Queers (SDQ),” and how, by nature of existing online and apart from mainstream disability rights spaces, SDQ was “accessible to the many sick and disabled queers who were isolated, homebound, or had limited energy or ability to travel physically to an in-

person meeting” (p. 60). In this way, the internet can be an incredibly useful and valuable tool for facilitating fat femmeships, especially for fat femmes experiencing forms of marginalization that present barriers to in-person community. Describing what her online femmeships look like, Lauren states that they are,

about people connecting with and validating and lifting one another up through whatever it is, whether that's like, they're validating shitty experiences that happen that we write about online. That can be something that happens on Instagram, like, it can happen in private messages, or it could be in emails, as well.

Lauren’s online fat femmeships are, as Schwartz (2020a) finds of femmeships, “established and nurtured more often behind the scenes: through likes and comments, through sharing images privately, chatting via direct messages, or moving beyond the platform entirely” (p. 131).

Lauren’s description of online fat femmeships mirrors Piepzna-Samarasinha’s (2018) description of SDQ as centering on talking, witnessing, and sharing resources—both tangible resources like money, medications, and equipment, and intangible resources, like friendships, support, and information. Fat studies scholarship illuminates how fat people, too, look to the internet and virtual fat communities, “to take back control of their identities and bodies” (Davenport, Solomons, Puchalska, & McDowell 2018, p. 279) by accessing discourses, knowledges, and resources about fatness that are rooted in lived experience rather than medicalized framings of fat. Lauren’s online fat femmeships, in centering on connecting with and supporting other fat femmes to identify and challenge the conditions of their marginalization, fit within Schwartz’s (2020a) framing of femmeships as political alliances and communities of care, as well as broader disability and fat studies discussions of virtual care communities.

Pushing beyond the scope of Schwartz's (2020a) findings, my participants also talk about their fat femmeships in the context of in-person relationships. Interestingly, participants use their interview photos to describe their in-person fat femmeships. Lauren's photo (Figure 7) captures a moment between her and a queer fat femme friend one night before going out to a local queer event.



Figure 7. © Lauren [image reproduced with permission]

Lauren describes the photo as, “just two queer fat femmes on a bed having a ball and enjoying the joys of each other's femmeship. Fat femmeship, really. This photo to me was very much a moment about that kind of kinship and connection and friendship, and the really vital importance of having people in your life that bring you that joy.” Looking at this photo, the kinship, connection, friendship, and joy Lauren describes are evident in the playful and smiling expressions on both queer fat femmes’ faces, and the ways that their bodies are intertwined and touching. The photo conveys affection, intimacy, and pleasure.

Sookie also selected a photo²¹ of their best friend for their interview because “I knew solidly that since this is about queer fat femmeness that I definitely would be talking about [my best friend].” Describing this photo, Sookie states that,

The reason I chose this picture is because [my best friend] and I look really cute.... and we're wearing matching outfits. I wanted [a] representation of our friendship, and I think that that is a good one of us just being gregarious and femme-tacular. Just a couple of lady bears... [My best friend] in that photo looks very similar to how she looked the first time I ever saw her, so you can see that she's quite a stately human being and takes up quite a lot of space and is really my inspiration as a human feeling of being loud and proud and not taking shit from anyone, because she's solidly a mama bear in her lady bear-ness and the claws, similar to my own, do come out. She is my strongest advocate and deepest love.

Here, Sookie uses a photograph to represent their in-person femmeship with their “best femme,” describing their femmeship as “gregarious” and “femme-tacular.” In this quote, the physicality of queer fat femme embodiment plays a central role: Sookie expresses a love and admiration of and

²¹ Consent was not obtained from all people appearing in this photo and, therefore, it is not used in this dissertation.

desire for their “best femme,” in part because she is “stately,” “takes up quite a lot of space,” and is “loud and proud.” Sookie gestures towards the value of in-person fat femmeships as sites of a collective occupation of physical space. In these ways, participants use their photographs to demonstrate the importance and possibilities engendered by in-person fat femmeships, suggesting that they are important sites of analysis for future femmeship scholarship.²²

The Political Work of Building Fat Femmeships

Schwartz’s (2020a) argument about the political work that goes into femmeships—because they require a shift from viewing other femmes as competitors to sources of support—rings especially true for my queer fat femme participants. Sookie suggests that fat femmeships are particularly powerful politically in the following quotation:

As fat people we’re not encouraged to spend time together, as is the case for many folks experiencing marginalization, because there is power in numbers and it’s much harder to target a group of people who are physically together... When we’re a unit, we’re pretty intimidating because we take up a lot of space... So, I think it can be really easy in a world that tells you all the time that you’re wrong and bad to start feeling that way, and when you’re able to be with other people who are having similar experiences and come together around that, it’s this powerful, liberatory thing. It really reframes that thinking and makes space to be sassy as fuck.

According to Sookie, fat femmeships challenge the fatphobia that positions a person’s own fatness and other fat people as things to avoid, lose, or hide. Fat femmeships offer fat femmes

²² This suggestion is complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and fluctuating restrictions and safety measures. In-person gatherings are not safe or accessible for many people. Apart from the pandemic, many disabled femmes write about the inaccessibility of in-person gatherings and events (McFarland & Taylor 2021). While I am suggesting that in-person femmeships are important sites for future analysis, I do not mean to question or undermine the value and necessity of virtual communities prior to, during, and beyond the pandemic.

spaces to exist together in fat bodies, challenging the fatphobia—both internalized and external—that keeps fat people apart and loathing of themselves and fat others. Fat femmeships, therefore, require the political work of unlearning or challenging internalized fatphobia, as well as the misogynistic imperative that femmes be in competition with one another.

Magic & Mysticism

Like Schwartz (2020a) finds of her participants' descriptions of femmeships, my participants' descriptions of fat femmeships exhibit magical qualities and frame fat femmeships as sacred. For my participants, fatness plays a significant role in the “magic” of femmeship. Rio gestures to the importance of fat femmeships where they describe how,

I feel like femme magic is such a real, beautiful thing. Specifically, femme fat magic is so, so important to me. And by magic I just mean the beautiful spark that we often encounter with each other, where I feel like sometimes femmeness can be very scary with someone who is not a fat, if only because it can feel like a move of radical self-acceptance to be like, I am a fat femme and I'm going to show off the curve of my belly, you're going to see the fat in my arm, you're going to see the fat in my thighs, and I'm going to dress femme and I'm going to be fucking cute. Or I'm gonna wear tight clothes and you're going to see all of my body; it's not going to be hidden. Where for a skinny femme, like, yeah, okay, everyone is happy to see you, like... there's not as much of an active political need for extremely thin femmes to be celebrated.

Rio's sentiment mirrors the mysticism Schwartz (2020a) discusses, while also highlighting the unique challenges that queer fat femmes face, emphasizing the importance of femmeships between *fat* femmes. For Rio, part of the magic of fat femmeships lies in the space they create for celebratory embodiments of queer and fat fem(me)inities. Ultimately, Rio speaks of fat

femmeships with reverence, conveying that there is something “elusive and unnameable about the connections made between [fat] femmes” (Schwartz 2020a, p. 156).

New Considerations & Directions

While participants’ descriptions of their fat femmeships affirm Schwartz’s (2020a) conceptualization of femmeship in many and important ways, they also extend her findings, largely with their considerations of *fat fem(me)inine* embodiment. In particular, my participants’ descriptions of their fat femmeships extend a theme that Schwartz (2020a) touches on but does not fully explore: femmeship as sexual. Schwartz (2020a) argues that femmeships challenge “the binary of desire and friendship” (p. 142), drawing on scholarship on queer friendship (Doyle 2007) and (lesbian) feminist literature on women’s relationships (Rich 1980; Smith-Rosenberg 1975) to theorize femmeship as binary-defying. Indeed, the ways that my participants speak about their “best femmes” or fat femmeships are laden with desire, sensuality, and intimacy. Sookie, for example, describes meeting their best friend at a queer event: “I saw her across the room at and was like, I don't know if I want to fuck you or if I want to spend my life with you. I don't know what's happening but I need to go hold you right now.” Describing this relationship as a “romantic friendship,” Sookie speaks of,

the fervor of femmeship as this space where one can see oneself reflected and also held in the fullness of who one is. It's very rare as a queer fat femme to be able to show up in your entirety and be celebrated. And those friendships are spaces where that happens, and so romance is certainly present there. Falling in love with ourselves and each other is a powerful and transformative thing.

This description of the feelings of “fervor,” “romance,” and “falling in love” that, for Sookie, are part of fat femmeship, is noteworthy because such a description suggests that, as Schwartz

(2020a) argues, femmeships exceed popular understandings of relationships by encompassing dimensions of friendship, intimate partnership, flirtation, sensuality, love, and sexual attraction. However, for some of my participants, fat femmeships are explicitly sexual relationships. For the remainder of this chapter, I build on Schwartz's (2020a) conception of femmeship to explore the sexual dimensions of fat femmeship. I consider what theorizing fat femmeship and sexuality together might further illuminate about femmeships.

'Fat Femme 4 Fat Femme': Femmeships as Sexual Relationships

In describing their fat femmeships, participants not only blur boundaries between friendship and desire but also explicitly situate fat femmeships as, sometimes, sexual. In these instances, fat femmeships encompass sexual relationships between queer fat femmes. Revealing of my own positionality, I did not consider this topic in crafting my interview questions. One participant, Rachel, expresses how "I'm constantly really excited about how younger queer fat femmes or queer femmes are dating each other. That's so new. I remember ... [when] femmes didn't date." Indeed, historically, femme sexuality has often and exclusively been tied to butch as part of a dyad (Kennedy & Davis 1993). Femmes have, subsequently, sought to (re)define femme "on its own terms" (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri 2002, p. 13). Femmeships as sexual relationships may be newly intelligible due to this femme activism to render femme sexuality visible apart from butch-femme relationships. In this section, I ask: what do sexual fat femmeships look like and do?

Fat & Femme Sex(uality) in the Academic Literature

Part of the importance of theorizing the sexual dimensions of fat femmeship is because of the ways in which fat people are marginalized as sexual subjects. Francis Ray White (2016) contends that, quite literally, "fat people [are] marked as fucking failures" (p. 963). According to

White (2016) the dominant idea that fatness “will impair one’s ability to have ‘sex’, positions fat people negatively in relation to a hegemonic model of sexual ‘success’ which assumes certain (hetero) normative standards of sexual desire, function and reproductivity” (p. 963). Indeed, in Western cultures, fat people are represented as sexually unattractive and lacking sexual agency, with fat sex depicted as a “deviant desire,” a fetish, disgusting, or impossible (Pausé 2016). Fat feminine sexualities, in particular, are both hyper-sexualized and de-sexualized: hyper-sexualized by the association of fatness with excess and de-sexualized because of the fat body’s purported unattractiveness (Braziel 2001). My own research (A. Taylor 2020) on queer fat femmes’ experiences of dating extends these arguments to a queer context, finding that queer fat femmes are often either (or sometimes simultaneously) de-sexualized or fetishized in queer dating contexts.

Moreover, discourses of fat sexuality are decidedly heteronormative, with “the focus for heterosexual fat women in mainstream media images... usually on validating their sexual desirability... [and] representations of heterosexual fat men in media... focus[ing] on validating their sexual desires” (Pausé 2016). Not to mention, within these discourses, sex itself is conceptualized in heteronormative ways, reproducing penetrative intercourse between a cis man and a cis woman as the norm (White 2016). These discourses also privilege men’s experiences of fat sex as, within patriarchal Western culture, women are largely “denied sexual agency” (Pausé 2016). Therefore, fat women,

are presented with the dilemma as to whether to construct their own ideas of sexuality, independent from heteronormative narratives, or to deconstruct the existing narratives and position their sexual identities as contrasting. Do they demand to be acknowledged as equal to the norm, or celebrate their differences apart from the norm (Richardson, 2000)?

Or is it possible to embrace and acknowledge their unique position while refusing to accept anything less than full sexual citizenship? (Pausé 2016)

Fat lesbian activist communities challenge these dominant ideas about fat sexuality, with a commitment to “present[ing] a diverse array of fat lesbian bodies and to challeng[ing] cultural norms of appropriateness” (Hester & Walters 2016). In their introduction to *Fat sex: New directions in theory and activism* Helen Hester and Caroline Walters (2016) discuss, for example, *FaT GiRL: A zine for fat dykes and the women who want them*, a San Francisco-based zine in the 1990s that “included stories, interviews, comics, poetry and an incredible array of photo spreads showing fat women enjoying sex.” Hester and Walters (2016) also discuss the work of Nomy Lamm, a fat and disabled femme, in particular her zine *I’m so fucking beautiful* which, “discusses the author’s embodied experiences of the sensuality of fat flesh (‘fat is fun! [...] fun to suck on’), and accompanies many of its articles with erotically-tinged nude sketches of fat female bodies” (Hester & Walters 2016). Fat lesbian activists have, therefore, laboured to (re)imagine possibilities for fat sex beyond the heteronormative, misogynistic, and fatphobic present.

In line with the work of these queer fat activists, White (2016) cautions against recuperating “fat people back into the very structures of sexual attractiveness or heteronormative courtship that have produced their stigmatization in the first place” (p. 969) by, for example, insisting that fat people, too, can “be sexually functional and engaged in respectful, responsible sexual activity” (p. 974). Instead, White (2016) uses antisocial queer theory, specifically Lee Edelman’s (2004) theorization of reproductive futurism and Jack Halberstam’s (2011) work on queer failure, to suggest that fat sex can be conceptualized as queer precisely because of the ways in which fat sex is seen as “substandard, sterile and closer to death than to ecstasy” (White

2016, p. 974). This conceptualization of fat sex as queer offers a means of (re)imagining fat sex in capacious, ambiguous, and messy ways that can account for fat people's feelings of ambivalence about their bodies, rather than demanding fat pride. White's (2016) work facilitates considerations of fat sex "as not just good instead of bad, but as something other than successful or failed" (p. 975).

I wonder, then, about using fat femmeships as an alternative means of exploring fat sex beyond a binary of failure or success. In other words, what might theorizing upon fat femmes' sexual experiences with one another offer for (re)imagining fat sex? Writing and theorizing femme sexuality is not a new endeavour, as femmes such as Amber Hollibaugh, Joan Nestle, and Minnie Bruce Pratt offer "vivid narratives of their erotic and sexual fantasies, desires, and encounters, emphasizing activities such as fisting, cunnilingus, the use of dildos, and anal sex" (Brightwell & Taylor 2020, p. 30) in their life writings. Ann Cvetkovich (2003) draws on these femme writings to explore the productive possibilities of (re)casting femme sexual desire and agency as "receptive" rather than "passive." Most recently, Ulrika Dahl (2017) builds on Cvetkovich's (2003) work to consider femme receptivity more broadly as vulnerability, which Dahl (2017) suggests is the "glue" connecting femmes to one another: femme vulnerability is a desire "to be seen and touched by other femmes" (p. 47) or, in other words, to belong. My interview findings illuminate the potential of sexual fat femmeships to further (re)imagine fat and fem(me)inine sexualities.

Interview Findings

First, participants articulate the power of sexual fat femmeships to help them negotiate difficult feelings about their bodies, such as shame and hatred. Alex describes how, with an intimate partner, "I'm less self-conscious about my body, if I'm with other fat people, femme, or

otherwise even.” Kat similarly describes how “one of my other partners, who is... also fat, we feed off each other, like, good vibes, appreciating our bodies, which is really, really nice.” In these quotes, Alex and Kat suggest that sexual relationships between queer fat femmes can create spaces for them to feel less self-conscious about their bodies, at least in part because of a shared embodiment.

Indeed, Meena suggests that fat femmes desiring one another can help with their feelings about their own bodies because, “if I find other fat women desirable and attractive, why can't I think that someone might actually be into me?” Likewise, Alex suggests that,

another piece of coming to terms with those as intersecting identities was... being attracted to other fat femmes and being able to go like, I find these bodies attractive, probably that means other people find this body [attractive]. Like, I am attracted to these femmes who look like me, so I feel like there's a very unique intersection between fatness and queerness in in that way, or between all three of fatness and femmeness and queerness, that you can see other fat femme queers and see yourself reflected in a way that you wouldn't necessarily be able to as someone who's heterosexual— that you don't have that opportunity to see and appreciate an aesthetic and body that looks like yours.

For Meena and Alex, the fact that they desire queer, fat, and fem(me)inine bodies pokes holes in the normative messaging they receive about the undesirability of their own queer fat fem(me)inine bodies. Those holes create space for Meena and Alex to consider themselves as sexual subjects, capable of desiring and being desired as queer fat femmes. The “reflection” of their own queer and fat fem(me)inine body in their queer fat femme partner’s body creates unique conditions of visibility and possibility for queer fat femmes.

Interestingly, Sookie suggests that their fat-affirmative politics facilitate their desire for other fat femmes:

I'm very into other fat people sexually or romantically because my politics are so closely married to my being that often they impact the way I experience my desire. It's funny to think of it because I can remember a time in my life where I didn't find other fat people attractive because of internalized fatphobia. And I think coming into a deep love of myself— which is complicated because it's hard to maintain that self-love in a world that repeatedly tells me that I'm wrong and bad, that I don't deserve to exist— [and] coming to value my fatness and to recognize it as liberatory has really made space for me to be like... look at all these fat babes all over the place.

In Sookie's experience, then, politically (re)valuing fatness facilitates a shift in their desires towards fat bodies. Fat femmeships, as sites of reclamation of queer and fat fem(me)inine embodiments, may create conditions within which queer fat femmes become desirable.

Another central feature of participants' descriptions of their sexual fat femmeships is feeling and touching fat fem(me)inine bodies. Meena describes the feeling of being with other fat femmes as,

almost this feeling of like, 'you're so pretty and you're so beautiful'! When they are fat it's like your flesh... it's soft bellies and breasts and hips. That's just this feeling of, like, you're with a marshmallow. Or there was this one girl and I was like, gosh, she's like a cloud. Every time I touch her, it's soft... It's just very... not like [a] mutual admiration society, although it can be a bit of like, 'you're so beautiful', 'you're so beautiful', but... it's hard like now that I'm trying to think about it... Just... it's nice.

Liz, too, speaks of dating other queer fat femmes as feeling “so good. Touching a body that's like mine has been utterly transformative. It's so wonderful... it's just like, loving her body has really helped me to love mine. The joy of touching her, it's like, this is how my body must feel, too, and maybe it's okay for people to be attracted to me. It's just so beautiful. It's really special.” Rio, too, recalls,

this experience when I was with my then partner, the other fat, queer tower femme ... when I was running my hands over the curves of her body and then my hand hit my own hip, and there was no amount of, ‘oh no, she is beautiful, but I am not’, right? Like when I realized, oh, no, my body is like hers, and [if] I think her's is beautiful, I have to think mine is beautiful, even if I've been saying that, like, actively embodying this fat positive experience, there's another layer of like, oh, yes, I do.

Rio describes, more broadly, how,

I have always loved having close relationships with other fat queer femmes. Predominantly the other people who have not been men that I've dated have been fat queer femmes... And I think, for me, those identities are so close together, and I find them so beautiful that being with someone else who has had those experiences is a moment of pure, radical magic, because both of you can really know that oh, yes, someone else is going to grab this roll, and they're going to see it as a beautiful, sexy thing, and then I'm going to grab theirs.

These quotations from Meena, Liz, and Rio position sex between fat femmes—specifically, the touching and feeling of each other's fat and fem(me)inine bodies that happens during sex—as nothing short of magical, transformative, beautiful, and almost indescribable.

Interestingly, Rio describes how the feelings that arise during sex with another fat femme linger beyond the immediate moment. Rio states that,

when I take a shower, I try to feel all of my stretch marks and think about a time I have loved my body every single time, and then think of all the times I have loved people who have stretch marks, and specifically all the times I've had queer relationships with people who have had stretch marks, and people who have loved my stretch marks. I use my body as a very powerful grounding moment to be like, this is the thing that will keep me together and continue to love myself. I remember that I am in this body, and it is with me my entire life, so I should probably take care of and love it.

For Rio, the desire they feel in their sexual encounters with other queer fat femmes—a desire for fat fem(me)ininity—becomes a desire for themselves.

Theorizing Fat Fem(me)inine Sexuality in Fat Femmeships

Returning to José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) utopian theorization of queerness, which I discussed in chapters two and five, I contend that fat femmeships, where they manifest as sexual relationships between queer fat femmes, can offer glimpses of fat and femme sexual futures. These futures imagine fat fem(me)inine embodiments as sites of connection, pleasure, desire, and joy. Emergent fat studies work (Hernandez 2020) similarly locates sites of eroticism and pleasure—specifically fat women of colour's burlesque performances—as sites of world-making. Similarly, femme scholar Juana María Rodríguez (2014), via an analysis of Latina femme sexual performance art, draws on the realms of sex, pleasure, and the erotic to theorize decolonized and queer futures. Therefore, in this section, I conduct a close rereading of participants' sexual experiences with other queer fat femmes to generate insights about how fat femmeships may offer glimpses of liberatory queer fat femme futures.

Recall, for example, how Rio discusses “running my hands over the curves of [their partner’s] body,” and how they and their partner grab each other’s rolls in intimate moments. For Rio, their fat flesh melds into that of their queer fat femme partner’s in moments of “pure magic.” These fleeting moments of intimacy and touch between fat femmes illuminate alternative ways of describing and embodying fat fem(me)ininity that feel otherworldly. Similarly, there is a clear reverence for her partner’s fat fem(me)ininity where Meena describes touching her partner’s body as like touching a “marshmallow,” stating that “gosh, she’s like a cloud. Every time I touch her, it’s soft.” These descriptions of fat femme sexual encounters exceed current frameworks for talking about and understanding fat fem(me)inine sex and provide glimmers of fat and femme sexual futures where fat and fem(me)inine embodiment can be desirable, pleasurable, and even liberatory.

Where Rio recounts touching and feeling their stretch marks in the shower, remembering the stretch marks on their lovers’ bodies and their lovers’ caresses of their own stretch marks, Rio quite literally traces the ephemera of femmeships. As Muñoz (1996) argues, “ephemera... is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired” and can be found in “traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things” (p. 10). For Muñoz (1996), queerness is “transmitted” and fleetingly visible through ephemera because, in the present, queerness only exists as “fleeting moments”; ephemera offer glimpses of “queer lives, powers, and possibilities” (p. 6) with the urgencies, sensations, and feelings they leave behind. The ephemera of sexual fat femmeships, for Rio, might be feelings of (self-)love, desire, and possibility.

Fat femmeships, therefore, might offer glimmers and traces of utopian sexual futures for fat fem(me)inine people, where fatness and fem(me)ininity are embraced, desired, and sites of

desire, connection, and potentiality. Sexual fat femmeships suggest that there are other ways of embodying, enjoying, and desiring fat fem(me)inities. Importantly, as White (2016) cautions against, this framing of fat femme sex does not (re)incorporate fat femmes into existing sexual norms and structures, which are complicit in their current marginalization. In this queering of fat femme sexuality, there is no hierarchizing of sexual acts or imperative to have specific kinds of sex because the focus is on feelings and sensations, touching and being touched. This framing of sexual fat femmeships illuminates the potential pleasures and liberation to be found in fat femme sex: connection, vitality, possibility, and hope.

The Erotics of Fat Femmeship

My hope in incorporating fat femme sexuality into the framework of femmeship is not to “‘domesticate’ and privatize [fem(me)inine] sexuality and argue that identity is reducible to sexual desire” (Dahl 2017, p. 45). This is Dahl’s (2017) criticism of Cvetkovich’s (2003) analysis of femme sexual receptivity in butch/femme relationships. Furthermore, considering that one of my participants identifies as asexual and asexuality scholars’ criticisms of Western culture as a “sexusociety” where sexuality is an imperative (Przybylo 2011), I do not wish to suggest that sex is a required or universal component of fat femmeships or that sex is the only way to revision fat fem(me)inine sexuality and embodiment. Accordingly, I find Audre Lorde’s (1984) notion of the erotic a productive means of framing my analysis of fat femmeship. Lorde (1984) argues that,

the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling... When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative

energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our work, our lives.

Lorde's theorization of the erotic is rooted in her self-described positionality as a "'Black lesbian feminist warrior poet mother" (Hall 2004, p. 146), and also "the traumas of racism and discrimination... among African American women" (Musser 2014, p. 147). Feminist scholar SaraEllen Strongman (2018), writing on the history of interracial sex in feminist movements, argues that a central yet under-discussed tenet of Lorde's erotic is that "the erotic can bridge differences between individual women and encourage understanding and alliances" (p. 48).

While not all femmes are women and not all women are femmes or fem(me)inine, if broadened to encompass all fem(me)inine people, Lorde's (1984) erotic offers a means of understanding the roles of desire, pleasure, connection, joy, and bodily sensation in femmeships that includes but does not necessitate or privilege sex. This is because, for Lorde (1984) the erotic encompasses more than sexuality including, for example, "the sharing of joy, whether physical emotional, psychic, or intellectual," such that "dancing, building a book-case, writing a poem, examining an idea," all become "erotically satisfying experience[s]." The erotic, then, suggests that the intimacy, connection, pleasure, and possibility glimpsed in participants' narratives of sexual experiences with other queer fat femmes can also be found in other experiences where queer fat femmes feel a deep connection with one another. Participants' descriptions of their fat femmeships outside of sexual encounters also contain a desire for each other, themselves, and a more livable world. Where participants describe shopping for clothing together, talking about the difficulties of dating together, 'liking' each other's social media posts, or even just being in each other's physical presence, this desire is clear. Indeed, Amber Jamilla Musser (2014) argues that the erotic is "about a space where community is formed" via "communal affective bonds" where

“the individual is important only insofar as she serves to buoy the rest of the community” (p. 147). Musser’s (2014) reading of the erotic, therefore, foregrounds community, connection, affect, and plurality. The values of plurality, community, and connection central to the erotic capture queer fat femme participants’ resistance to neoliberal and colonial imperatives of individualization, as discussed in chapter five. Fat femmeships, therefore, are another way that queer fat femmes resist and forge alternatives to overarching structures like capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism.

For Lorde (1984),

once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives....Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.

Fat femmeships, in leaving ephemeral traces of other ways of desiring, connecting with, and embodying fat fem(me)inities, offer space for queer fat femmes to recognize a desire for themselves, for each other and for a better world. The desire that is glimpsed in participants’ sexual encounters with other queer fat femmes is not a desire that is limited to sex and individual fat femme bodies; rather, this desire speaks to a collective longing for a better world. This

conceptualization of fat femmeships as expressions of the erotic is consistent with Dahl's (2017) assertion that vulnerability—manifesting as a desire to be and belong with other femmes— is what holds femme, individually and collectively, together.

Adrienne Maree Brown (2019), in conversation with Cara Page of the Audre Lorde Project, discuss Lorde's legacy of "self-love, collective love, and desire and pleasure," thirty years after the release of "Uses of the erotic." Brown (2019) and Page ask: "how do we center creation and desire as integral to liberation?... Because this world begs of us to be, to move out of scarcity, move out of fear, move out of crisis, and not imagine anything abundant or transformed, not to move out of desiring one another and being desired as powerful, fully living beings." Understanding fat femmeships as expressions of the erotic creates space to analyze how fat femmeships facilitate a desire for oneself and each other, whether sexually, politically, or in other ways. In doing so, fat femmeships are healing, offering visions of a better world. I, therefore, argue for an additional understanding of femmeships as expressions of the erotic, in addition to political alliances and communities of care. This notion of femmeship accounts for desires—sexual and otherwise—and is capable of theorizing the world-making potential of fem(me)inities. Weaving together notions of femmeships as expressions of the erotic *and* communities of care, is Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's (2018) reminder that "building ways of creating care are... the work of making the next work, the world we want" (p. 35).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I built on the previous chapter's emphasis on collectivity in (re)defining queer fat femme to explore the emerging phenomenon of fat femmeship. Using Andi Schwartz's (2020a) conceptualization of femmeships as political alliances and communities of care, and scholarship on care communities, I have explored how my participants' discussions of their fat

femmeships fit within this framework. Extending Schwartz's (2020a) notion of femmeship, I then examined participants' descriptions of their fat femmeships as sexual relationships. Ultimately, I argued that femmeships should also be considered as expressions of Audre Lorde's (1984) erotic, because they enable queer fat femmes to access a desire for themselves and each other, and pleasurable and liberatory ways of being in the world. Understanding femmeships in this way suggests that they are, indeed, magic.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Since I wrote the journal excerpts introducing this dissertation, my relationship to queer fat femme has changed in unanticipated and significant ways. My queer fat fem(me)ininity is now bound to the (ongoing) trauma of living through a global pandemic. I even wrote this dissertation in the time of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has especially critical ties to the subject matter of my dissertation: fat bodies, disabled bodies, racialized bodies, poor bodies, and feminine bodies have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, whether because structural inequalities position these bodies as more susceptible to exposure, because they are overrepresented in professions that are deemed essential, or because they are the first to be discarded and discounted when hospitals are overwhelmed with the sick and dying. I have been scared for myself, for my loved ones, and for my queer, fat, and femme communities.

I have also negotiated my relationship to my disabled body and mind since my initial journal entry. During this pandemic, I have regularly experienced chronic pain, panic attacks, depressive episodes, and brain fog so thick that my mind feels like sludge. On their own, these impairments would be challenging. Coupled with the pandemic, in many ways, life while writing this dissertation has felt like too much to bear.

As a result, queer fat femme has changed for me. My body is already in pain and exhausted by the time I finish brushing my teeth in the morning—I do not have the spoons for makeup or outfit planning. Even if public gathering spaces were open, I worry that the lack of (fat-friendly) seating, the crowds packed into small venues, and the question of accessible washrooms, would prove limiting. I am acutely aware that what queer fat femme meant and looked like for me, prior to the pandemic, is in many ways no longer possible. I can no longer tether my queer fat fem(me)ininity to my appearance or to now inaccessible events or physical

spaces. My fem(me)ininity cannot be dependent on what I wear or how I do my makeup. While I still love the feel of a swishy dress around my calves, swiping lipstick across my lips, or creating a (almost never) perfect eyeliner wing, I now feel femme without these things. Queer fat femme is now, for me, (s)low²³— undone, imperfect, emotional, messy, and slow-moving and thinking.

At the same time that I have been, in many ways, grieving my former queer fat femme self, I have also been immersed in the words of my queer fat femme participants. Reading the transcripts of my interviews as I “‘transition’ into disability” (Kafai 2021, p. 187) has offered me a soft space to land and find my footing as a disabled queer fat femme. I saw my own experiences mirrored in participants’ raw recounting of the hatred they experience every single day: from the bruises that linger on thighs from too-small seats; to the shame of having ‘fat bitch’ yelled at you from a passing car; to the stares you receive for taking an elevator instead of the stairs or sitting in a disabled seat on public transit as a fat person. Participants’ stories of violence forced me to reckon with the ways that being a queer fat femme, especially one who is disabled or experiencing other compounding oppressions, is wounding, hard, and painful. Their stories made me feel seen and heard in ways I had not previously experienced.

I was also inspired by my participants’ articulations of queer fat femme. Before beginning my interviews, I imagined that my dissertation might make arguments about the radical ways that queer fat femmes disrupt normative femininity with their fiercely ‘flab’ulous aesthetics and attitudes. Instead, as those aesthetics and attitudes moved out of my reach, my participants propelled me towards different ideas about why queer fat femme matters. Through the words of my participants, I learned how queer fat femme can be a site of possibility, care,

²³ My idea of (s)low femme brings together Schwartz’s (2018b) idea of low femme as anxious, depressed, and ‘failed’ expressions of fem(me)ininity, and fat (Mitchell 2018; Tidgwell, Friedman, Rinaldi, Kotow, & Lind 2017) and crip (Kafai 2021; Kafer 2013) notions of time that emphasize slowness and resistance to capitalist imperatives.

healing, and collectivity. My fem(me)ininity now centers on an unrelenting insistence upon the value of femininized ways of being, like interdependence and vulnerability, that are necessary in caring for my disabled body-mind . This understanding of queer fat femme gives me hope and helps me breathe on days when COVID statistics, pain, and anxiety suck the air from my lungs. In my participants' stories, and the resulting dissertation, I see potential: for more capacious and generous understandings of queer fat femme, for a more livable world for queer, fat, and femme people, and for myself.

Summary

In this dissertation, I have argued that queer fat fem(me)ininities are sites of intense regulation and policing and, at the same time, sources of collective resistance, resilience, and healing. In particular, queer fat femmes' strategies of resistance, resilience, and healing contain glimmers of more livable worlds for queer fat femmes, where they are valued and desired. Chapter one introduced my dissertation's overarching questions, objectives, and arguments, and explored why this research matters, both in the context of existing scholarship and my own lived experience. Chapter two laid out the theoretical framing of the dissertation, identifying and explicating the key concepts from feminist theories of the body, queer theories (of time, gendered embodiment, and femme), critical femininities, fat studies, and intersectionality that inform this research. Chapter three provided an outline of and reflections on my methodology—a queer fat fem(me)inist fusion of narrative inquiry, photo elicitation, and autoethnography.

I developed my overarching argument in chapters four through six, where I presented the findings of my dissertation research. Chapter four explored the emergence of a set of norms circumscribing culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity, how these norms are rooted in fatphobic, white supremacist, heteronormative, cisnormative, and classist fem(me)inine ideals,

and how participants are marginalized by these norms, from feelings of exclusion or inadequacy to violent harassment and policing. In chapter five I took a different approach, analyzing what queer fat fem(me)inities *do* for participants in the face of their marginalization. Specifically, I (re)positioned queer fat femme as a site of orientation towards or feeling(s of) fem(me)ininity, where individuals experiencing oppression on the basis of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity can join together to identify, resist, and heal from common and overarching oppressions. Chapter six provided a closer look at one way that queer fat femme embodiment can be a site of resistance and healing by focusing on the emergent phenomenon of fat femmeships. Chapter six argued that, if understood through the lens of Audre Lorde's (1984) erotic, fat femmeships enable queer fat femmes to access culturally discouraged desires for themselves and each other; these desires offer glimpses of pleasurable and liberatory queer fat femme futures. In this final chapter, I conclude the dissertation, describing how this research has changed my own thinking and its potential to shape future scholarship.

Implications

My dissertation, in centering queer women and non-binary people, demonstrates that the relationship between fatness and femininity is more complex than suggested by previous analyses of cisgender, heterosexual fat women's femininities. My findings indicate that, while (some) fat women may now have access to a culturally intelligible fem(me)ininity, activists, scholars, and fat people must be wary of the systems of oppression (re)produced by this fem(me)ininity. This finding underscores the importance of queer approaches to fat studies, especially those outlined in chapter two that advocate for using 'queer' as a critical analytic to trouble norms of gender, sexuality, and embodiment (Chalklin 2016b; Murray 2008; White 2012; 2013; 2016; Wykes 2014). My work in this dissertation suggests that queer theory offers an

invaluable tool for identifying and resisting normative, oppressive structures of gender and sexuality in fat studies and activism. Indeed, my participants' lived experiences of queer and fat fem(me)inities demonstrate how normative notions of fem(me)inity marginalize, limit, and ultimately fail queer fat femme people. Participants' queer fat femme embodiments chafe against the constraints of normative fem(me)ine ideals. Consequently, participants disrupt "the very foundations of heteronormative binary gender" (White 2013, p. 28) with their refusals to fit their queer fat fem(me)ine embodiments into neat categories, and their insistence that fem(me)inity is multiplicitous, collective, and felt.

By illuminating enriched conceptions of fat fem(me)inities, my dissertation demonstrates what is overlooked when queer fat femme is reduced to aesthetics or visual representations. As my participants highlight, queer fat femme goes beyond the surface, engendering unique feelings, affects, capacities, relationships, and possibilities that point in the direction of better worlds. Fem(me)inity should not, then, be dismissed, devalued, or underestimated as singularly oppressive or frivolous in fat studies or queer theory; instead, queer, and fat scholars should pursue complex, hopeful, and recuperative explorations of queer and fat fem(me)inities. In particular, by putting critical femininities, femme, and fat studies literature into conversation, my dissertation offers fat scholars a path for analyzing fat fem(me)inities beyond binaries of good/bad and oppressive/liberating. I hope that my dissertation inspires generous and queer future readings of fat fem(me)inities.

Conversely, critical femininities researchers should take care to attend to the intersection of fatness in their analyses of fem(me)inity. As mentioned above, fem(me)inities do not automatically become liberated in being embodied by fat people. Fat femmes are not, therefore, inherently 'queer' or 'resistant' by nature of their fatness— how Hannah McCann (2018) finds

that fat femmes are positioned in some femme communities. Rather than focusing on individual fat femme embodiments, my dissertation argues that it is more productive to look at the collective and affective dimensions of fat fem(me)ininitities. Additionally, fatness inherently thickens attachments to and lived experiences of fem(me)ininity. In particular, participants' experiences of marginalization (outlined in chapter four) suggest that femmephobia—the policing and devaluation of femininity (Hoskin 2017b)— compounds with fatphobia (as well as racism, classism, and other oppressions) in complex and violent ways. Fatness, therefore, must be centered as an axis of identity, privilege, and oppression in future considerations of fem(me)ininitities.

My dissertation also emphasizes the importance of engaging with the body and *embodied* notions of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininitities. Specifically, my research in this dissertation highlights queer fat fem(me)ininity, and the queerness of fat fem(me)ininitities, as grounded in the body. This finding resonates with the arguments of fat (Murray 2008) and femme (Dahl 2017) scholars who argue that notions of fat and femme subjectivities, respectively, must consider the material body to account for the fact that subjectivity is always already embodied and to avoid (re)producing a mind/body split. Indeed, the queer fat femme body is a principal site of marginalization. Queer fat femmes' physical bodies are policed for their size and expressions of gender and sexuality. The queer fat femme body is also a site of connection to others, whether in the form of sexual fat femmeships or, more figuratively, as a common site of oppression across other axes of difference. Further, the queer fat femme body is a site of potentiality: fat futures can be glimpsed in the acts of touching one's own or another's fat body, or in being touched. This finding suggests that research on queer and fat fem(me)ininitities must engage with the materiality of bodies, not only for their central role in experiences of oppression, but also for the

liberatory possibilities material bodies may offer. Therefore, my research facilitates a (re)connection of “the body to the self,” enabling “a means to live the fat body in ways that explore more fully its political potentialities in an intersubjective world” (Murray 2008, p. 182).

By (re)focusing on embodiment in my research on queer and fat fem(me)inities, this dissertation also offers a means of (re)conceptualizing fat fem(me)inine agency. As I discuss in chapter two, conceptions of femme as “high” and “fierce” are criticized as (re)producing neoliberal logics where the individual is the locus of agency and resistance (Dahl 2011). Similarly, Murray (2008) is critical of dominant conceptions of fat agency for replicating an individualizing, neoliberal notion of resistance that does not address larger structures of oppression (e.g., focusing on fat individuals ‘changing their minds’ and deciding to love their fat bodies without criticizing the oppressive structures that make certain bodies un/lovable). Instead, like Chalklin’s (2016b) analysis of the potential of “negative” affects, such as shame and trauma, my research emphasizes communal bonds, feelings, and sensations in analyzing queer and fat fem(me)inine agency. Following McCann (2018), my research de-centers the individual, instead exploring the possibilities engendered by relationships between queer fat femmes. Consequently, my dissertation demonstrates the productive potential of conceptualizing fat and femme agency in collective, intersubjective ways. Specifically, my dissertation advances understandings of how negative feelings, like shame and failure, are productive of thickened forms of fat and fem(me)inine resistance, such as kinship and political coalitions.

Consequently, my dissertation offers an alternative to the success/failure binary by which fat bodies are so often judged, as White (2016) argues in relation to fat sex. Indeed, rather than setting up a binary where queer fat femmes must engage in one type of behaviour or aesthetic or politics, in this dissertation I draw on McCann (2018) to challenge binary notions of oppressive

or liberating, good or bad, successful or failed. My dissertation does not demand that queer fat femmes must “love themselves” (White 2016) because my focus on collective and intersubjective understandings of fat fem(me)inities allows room for contradictory and complex feelings, aesthetics, and politics.

My dissertation also cements the importance of thinking about and searching for fat utopias and where we might glimpse them on the horizon (Muñoz 2009). Thus far, as outlined in chapter two, a majority of queer fat scholarship has focused on anti-social queer theoretical approaches to queering fatness. However, Allyson Mitchell (2018), building on Jackie Wykes’ (2014) argument about the potential of Muñoz’s theorization of queer futurity, contends that “when fat bodies are valued there is a future potential or a vitality associated with fatness. Thinking of fatness like queerness, as ‘on the horizon,’ means that it is yet to be realized and can be glimpsed in moments of cultural production, social media, spending time with fat friends, and so on” (pp. 148-149). Working from Mitchell’s (2018) argument, my dissertation highlights some of the sites where queer fat futures can be glimpsed. Specifically, as my dissertation demonstrates, these sites include moments of intimacy and touch, between fat bodies or with one’s own fat body; taking pleasure in and desiring fat and fem(me)inine flesh; building friendships and political movements with other queer fat femmes; and focusing on how queer fat femme *feels*. When there is, quite literally, no future for fat people—especially fat Black people (Shackelford 2021)—as made especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, seeking out other ways of thinking about and being fat become invaluable. My dissertation provides an in-depth example of the ways that theorizing fat futures constitutes an important mode of queering fatness and, specifically, queering fat fem(me)inities.

Uniting all of these implications are the ways that they make whiteness visible in analyses of queer and fat fem(me)inities. As Lind (2019) argues of queer(ing) fatness, and Dahl (2014) and Musser (2016) argue of fem(me)ininity, whiteness is often insidiously (re)centered in conceptualizations of fat and femme embodiment and resistance. My dissertation highlights how whiteness structures dominant conceptions of fat fem(me)ininity, not only in terms of aesthetics but also in terms of ideology. (Re)conceptualizing fat fem(me)inities in ways that emphasize intersubjectivity, community, and feelings pushes back against white supremacist and colonial ways of theorizing gendered fat embodiment.

Limitations

A most glaring limitation of my dissertation research is the result of the significant under-representation of queer fat femmes of colour in my participant sample. This under-representation is my own fault, at least in part because of the mistakes with recruitment that I discussed in chapter three. I have struggled with disappointment and unease at the whiteness of my research. Queer fat femme communities are informed by the activism of— and grown, expanded, and sustained by— femmes of colour. My dissertation does not do justice to these past, present, and future queer fat femmes of colour. My findings are, therefore, limited in the extent to which they reflect the embodied experiences of queer fat femmes of colour. While I have tried to center analyses of whiteness, white supremacy, and colonialism in this dissertation, these analyses do not speak to lived experiences of the intersection of racism, heteronormativity, femmephobia, and fatphobia. Future research should explore this intersection to avoid that which I have criticized in this dissertation: a dominant conception of queer fat femme as white, able-bodied, young, fat ‘in the right places’, cisgender, and otherwise privileged.

My dissertation also, largely, does not address the fact that myself and the queer fat femmes I interviewed are settlers, living on stolen land. During my PhD, I lived and worked in Tkaronto, territory stolen from nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples that is still home to many Indigenous people. The topics of this dissertation—principally heteronormativity, fatphobia, and femmephobia—are bound up with the historical and ongoing colonization of Indigenous populations by white Europeans and their ancestors. For example, Margaret Robinson (2019) explores how settler norms of gender and sexuality and body size intertwine, such that the slur “squaw,” used against Indigenous women, is “marked by excess fat, excess sexual appetite, and excess reproduction... The ‘squaw’ represents Indigenous women as taking too much space, physically, morally, and socially ... Like the ‘Black Welfare Queen,’ the ‘Squaw’ reaffirms White body [and gender] norms and sexual morality, justifying White domination over populations framed as lacking self-control” (pp. 19-20). Scholarship such as Robinson’s (2019) points to the necessity for future work on queer fat fem(me)inities to grapple with colonialism, heteronormativity, fatphobia, and femmephobia, as these systems of oppression are mutually constituting. As I have indicated in this dissertation, what queer fat femme responds to, resists and reworks are settler colonial constructs and impositions (Minai 2020). The liberation of queer fat femmes is, thus, tied to the liberation of Indigenous peoples, Black people, and other people of colour.

Conclusion

Queer fat femme—the embodiment of queerness, fatness, and fem(me)ininity—brings together (at least) three highly stigmatized modes of being in the world. To exist as a queer fat femme, historically and in the present, is to experience pain, hate, violence, shame, and failure.

These experiences generate resilience and creativity, as queer fat femmes develop strategies for negotiating, surviving, and sometimes even thriving in a world that denies their value. By finding each other—on the internet, in books, at dances—and affirming their collective existence, queer fat femmes are creating blueprints for better worlds. Worlds where fatness and fem(me)ininity are treated with love and dignity, desired, sites of pleasure, and full of possibilities. Although queer fat femme has its pitfalls (especially where it reinvests in white supremacy and other oppressions) it can also engender anti-oppressive, coalitional politics, and contain promises of a more livable life. In fattening fem(me)ininitities— theorizing fem(me)ininity as softer and more capacious—I hope that this dissertation offers a steppingstone to such queer fat femme futures.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Section I: Informed Consent

- 1) Do you have any questions about the Informed Consent form?

Section II: Identifying Questions

- 1) When and where were you born?
- 2) Where do you live currently?
- 3) What words do you use to describe yourself?
 - a) Are there alternatives to queer, fat, and femme that you use or prefer? If so, what are they and why?
- 4) Would you consider yourself a part of any queer, fat, and/or femme communities currently and/or previously? Where? Can you tell me about them?
- 5) For how long have you identified as:
 - a) Queer?
 - b) Fat?
 - c) Femme?
 - d) Queer fat femme?
- 6) Do any other identities (race, class, disability, etc.) inform your understanding and experience of queer, fat, and femme? If so, what are they and what language do you use for them?

Section III: Meaning of Queer Fat Femme

- 1) What does:
 - a) Queer mean to you?
 - b) Fat mean to you?
 - c) Femme mean to you?
 - d) Queer fat femme all together mean to you?
- 2) Could you tell me the story of how you came to 'queer fat femme'?

Section IV: Photo Elicitation

- 1) What was the first photo you thought of when I asked you to pick 3 pictures for our interview?
 - a) Why?
- 2) For each photo:
 - a) Why did you pick this picture for our interview?
 - b) What do you see in this picture?
 - c) Are there any stories attached to this picture for you?
 - d) What do you feel when you look at this picture?
 - e) How does this picture speak to 'queer fat femme' for you?

Section V: Experiences of Discrimination

- 1) Do you find that you feel excluded, discriminated against, or oppressed as a queer, fat, and femme person?

- a) Could you give me an example of a time this happened?
- 2) Are there certain spaces or communities where you feel discriminated against, oppressed, or excluded from?
 - a) How or why?
 - b) Could you tell me about a time you felt this way?
- 3) Would you tell me about a specific time when you felt discriminated against, oppressed, or excluded based on your queerness, femme-ness, *and* fatness?
- 4) Tell me about your experiences as a queer fat femme in queer communities specifically?

Section VI: Experiences of Resistance

- 1) How have you responded to and/or processed feeling excluded, discriminated against, or oppressed?
- 2) Could you tell me about any strategies you have for responding to/processing/challenging exclusion or discrimination?
 - a) What is a story about a time you used one of these strategies?
- 3) Could you tell me if or how 'femme' affects how you respond to and/or process and/or challenge/resist these experiences?
 - a) Is there a specific time that comes to mind?

Section VII: Concluding Thoughts

- 1) Is there anything you want to talk about that we haven't yet?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Date: _____

Study Name: Queer(ing) Fat Fem(me)inities: The Politics of Queer Fat Femme Embodiment

Researcher Name: Allison Taylor, Principal Investigator

- PhD Candidate in the department of Gender, Feminist & Women's Studies at York University

Purpose of the Research: To explore why the identity of 'queer fat femme' is meaningful for women and gender non-conforming individuals, and to examine experiences of discrimination based on queerness, fatness, and femininity. The research will be conducted via one in-depth interview that partially centers on participant-provided photographs. The research will be presented and reported for a dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: Participants are asked to provide digital and/or hard copies of three (3) personal photographs and to partake in one (1) in-depth interview. The estimated time commitment for each participant is 2.5 hours.

Risks and Discomforts: Participants might experience minor psychological/emotional risks by being part of this research project because they are being asked to elaborate on their experiences of discrimination. Talking about these experiences may trigger painful memories or feelings for participants. To mitigate this risk, participants can pause or end the interview at any time and can decline to answer any questions they do not wish to address.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: Your participation in the research project offers you the opportunity to critically reflect on your experiences of identity and discrimination in a safe space. Your participation in the research project also provides you with the opportunity to share positive and meaningful visual representations of yourself via your three personal photographs. The overall research project aims to contribute to the inclusion of queer, fat, and femme voices in academic literature, and to benefit queer fat femme women and gender non-conforming individuals by increasing public understanding about their identities and experiences of discrimination.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff, or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality: The methods of documentation used in this research project include participant photographs, and audio recordings, hand-written notes, and typed transcripts of participant

interviews. Hard copies of data will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic copies of data will be securely stored in encrypted and/or password-protected USB keys, laptops, and/or other portable electronic data devices. Data will be retained indefinitely (unless otherwise requested by the participant), archived, and securely stored in a password-protected external hard drive. Data will be archived for the purpose of possible future use, specifically future academic conference presentations, journal articles, and book manuscripts.

Unless you choose otherwise all information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The interviewing or recording of each participant will not be associated with identifying information.

Only the researcher and the researchers' supervisor and two (2) dissertation committee members will have access to this information.

The data collected in this research project may be used – in an anonymized form - by members of the research team in subsequent research investigations exploring similar lines of inquiry. Such projects will still undergo ethics review by the HPRC, our institutional REB. Any secondary use of anonymized data by the research team will be treated with the same degree of confidentiality and anonymity as in the original research project.

Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Allyson Mitchell. You may also contact the Graduate Program in Gender, Feminist & Women's Studies.

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Delegated Ethics Review Committee, which is delegated authority to review research ethics protocols by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I, _____, consent to participate in the study "Queering Fat Fem(me)inities: The Politics of Queer Fat Femme Embodiment" conducted by Allison Taylor.

I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____ Date _____

Participant: _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Principal Investigator: Allison Taylor

Additional consent:

1. Audio recording

I consent to the audio-recording of my interview(s).

2. Use of photographs

I _____ consent to the use of images of me (including photographs), my environment and property in the following ways (please check all that apply):

In academic articles	[] Yes	[] No
In print, digital and slide form	[] Yes	[] No
In academic presentations	[] Yes	[] No
In media	[] Yes	[] No
In thesis materials	[] Yes	[] No

Signature _____ Date _____

Participant Name _____

3. Consent to waive anonymity

I, _____, consent to the use of my name in the publications arising from this research.

Signature _____ Date _____

Participant Name _____

Appendix C: Targeted Recruitment Social Media Post for Queer Fat Femmes of Colour

**CALLING ALL
QUEER
FAT
FEMMES
OF COLOUR**

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS:

- / Queer, fat, and femme?**
- / A person of colour?**
- / A woman or gender non-conforming?**
- / A person living in Canada?**

You are invited to share why 'queer fat femme' is meaningful for you and your experiences of discrimination based on your queerness, fatness, and femininity.

For more information please contact: Allison Taylor, 



This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Research Ethics at York University

Appendix D: Participant Demographics Table

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Race	Education (Degree)	Fat Identity	Income (\$/year)	Disabled (Y=yes)	Age
Allison	cis woman	white	bachelor's	fat	20-40,000	Y	33
Kat	non-binary	white	bachelor's	fat	under 20,000	Y	25
Alex	genderfluid femme	white	master's	fat	40-60,000	Y	28
Joanna	cis woman	white	bachelor's	fat	40-60,000		26
Meena	cis woman	East Indian and white	bachelor's	Fat to super fat	20-40,000		34
Kristy	cis woman	white	master's	fat	20-40,000	Y	46
Lauren	cis woman	white	PhD	midsize fat	under 20,000	Y	31
Ngina	cis woman	Black	master's	small fat to fat	over 80,000		30
Rio	non-binary trans masculine femme	Latinx and white	bachelor's	fat	40-60,000		27
Sookie	genderqueer woman	white	master's	fat	20-40,000	Y	35
Stéphanie	cis woman	white	bachelor's	fat	under 20,000	Y	24
Tracy	cis woman	white	master's	fat to super fat	20-40,000	Y	44

Liz	cis woman	white	bachelor's	fat to super fat	over 80,000	Y	41
Vanessa	cis woman	white	bachelor's	fat	20- 40,000		39
Rachel	cis woman	white	master's	fat	60- 80,000	Y	43

* This table is derived in part from an article published in *Psychology & Sexuality*, 2020, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/> 10.1080/19419899.2020.1822429

Appendix E: Social Media Recruitment Post

CALLING ALL
**QUEER
FAT
FEMMES**

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS:

- / Queer, fat, and femme?
- / A woman or gender non-conforming?
- / A person living in Canada?

You are invited to share why 'queer fat femme' is meaningful for you and your experiences of discrimination based on your queerness, fatness, and femininity.

For more information please contact: Allison Taylor, 



This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Research Ethics at York University

Appendix F: Detailed Recruitment Poster

Participants Needed for Research on QUEER FAT FEMMES

Study Title: 'Queering Fat Fem(me)ininitities: The Politics of Queer Fat Femme Embodiment'

LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS WHO SELF-IDENTIFY AS:

- / Queer, Fat, and Femme
- / Female or gender non-conforming
- / A person living in Canada

Looking for volunteers to take part in a study of women and gender non-conforming individuals who identify as queer, fat, and femme.

This study examines why 'queer fat femme' is a meaningful identity.

This study also explores queer fat femmes' experiences of discrimination on the basis of queerness, fatness, and femininity, alongside race, class, disability, and other factors.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to partake in one (1) interview, to which you will be asked to bring three (3) personal photographs that speak to what 'queer fat femme' means to you.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and would take up approximately 2.5 hours.

To learn more about this study, or to participate in this study, please contact:

Allison Taylor, PhD Candidate

Email: [REDACTED]

York University, Department of Gender, Feminist & Women's Studies



This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Research Ethics at York University
This research study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Appendix G: Participant Demographic Information Collection Form

1. **Name:**

2. **Age:**

3. **Gender & Pronouns:**

4. **Racial/Ethnic Background:**

5. **Education:**

6. **Where, or do, you identify on the ‘fat spectrum’?**

Super/Infini fat: Fat: Small Fat: Other (please describe):

7. **Please circle the income bracket that applies to you:**

Under \$20 000/year \$20 000-\$40 000/year \$40 000- \$60 000/year
\$60 000- \$80 000/year \$80 000 +/year

8. **Do you have a disability/disabilities?**

Yes No