

Who Want Me: Critical Annotations on Undesirability

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Abstract

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Who want me? I go to write and no matter what I try to say it looks and sounds like who want me. In my life I move in Blackness, in fatness and their specific kind of womanhood, gathering what the world has to give me, and I'm left feeling unchecked for. So all over the page I write *why y'all not checking for me?* and I swear the page writes back *you know why*. But I don't know. My voice is sexy, I'm smart, and I make my shit look pretty so no, I don't know. I look it up on Google. *why-they-don't-want-me-enter*. All these books come up: voices contemporary and canonical writing about social precarities (presumed, even though the consequences are very real) like Blackness, fatness, and un/desirability. Of course I need them all—my literary cousins and ancestors. Maybe it was them writing back to me. I need to sit with how other writers are talking about race, gender, bodies, and ugliness. I need to sit with them as I think about my own work around love and desire, as I figure out where I can cite them in my life. I will make a

bibliography of annotations for myself, using the research form and making it personal. I hope to map a small piece of the landscape of writers creating Black theory and writing, fat theory and writing, and personal essays from the margins to find my place in it. Is it time I stop chasing those who don't want me?

Who Want Me: Critical Annotations on Undesirability

Who want me? I go to write and no matter what I try to say it looks and sounds like who want me. In my life I move in Blackness, in fatness, and their specific kind of womanhood, gathering what the world has to give me, and I'm left feeling unchecked for. So all over the page I write *why y'all not checking for me?* and I swear the page writes back *you know why*. But I don't know. I make my voice sexy. I try to be smart. All I care about is you thinking I look pretty so no, I don't know. I look it up on Google. Why-they-don't-want-me-enter.

Under colonial constructions of beauty and desire, being fat and brown and queer and femme means being ugly. It means feeling unlovable, being unlovable, and no one disagreeing. Being fat and brown and colonized means to value, desire, and prioritize romantic love—a love that doesn't want you, that will never have you, and to not know how to liberate yourself from the belly of that beast. (Luna)

What do you mean they'll never have me? This is all they've ever said I'm supposed to want. What do you mean they'll never want me? What will I do if no one wants me? Is it just me or is the room getting smaller? Is it just me or is the room the same size and I'm getting bigger? Is it just me or is there no room at all?

...

In their essay “On Being Fat, Brown, Femme, Ugly, and Unloveable”, scholar Caleb Luna is working through what it means to come to terms with undesirability. Desirability is not subjective. It's not determined by instagram likes or follower count. Your mother can't deem you desirable, nor can your best friend, nor a smoking-hot boyfriend. It's not subjective. It's culturally agreed upon. Desirability measures whether you fit a widely recognized standard, a

story of who is right, a story committed to upholding white supremacy, cis-heteropatriarchy, fatphobia, ableism, and class hierarchy. It's a system. Political. All this shit is political.

Luna's essay is negotiating romantic love and desire as a person who exists in a marginalized on marginalized on marginalized body. The essay first establishes some relationships. Being desirable is often tied closely to beauty. If you aren't desirable, you're undesirable. If you aren't beautiful, you're ugly. Thus if you are undesirable, you are ugly. Ugly is not a word that many people choose to sit under, yet Luna does. Many would see this as Luna admitting a weakness, but in the realm of desirability politics, naming insecurity can only be a strength. In fact a related scholar—Da'Shaun Harrison—who defines desirability politics as “that which determine who gains and holds both social and structural power through the affairs of sensuality often predicated on anti-Blackness, anti-fatness, (trans)misogyny, cissexism, queer-antagonism, and all other structural violence”, says that the power in insecurity is that it illuminates these violences. Both Luna and Harrison claim ugliness for this reason. They also both connect themselves theoretically to thinker Mia Mingus, who has studied, written, and spoken about ugliness at length. They take language from Mingus' 2011 speech titled “Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability”, where she says:

We all run from the ugly. And the farther we run from it, the more we stigmatize it and the more power we give beauty. Our communities are obsessed with being beautiful and gorgeous and hot. What would it mean if we were ugly? What would it mean if we didn't run from our own ugliness or each other's? How do we take the sting out of “ugly?”

What would it mean to acknowledge our ugliness for all it has given us, how it has shaped our brilliance and taught us about how we never want to make anyone else feel?

What would it take for us to be able to risk being ugly, in whatever that means for us.

What would happen if we stopped apologizing for our ugly, stopped being ashamed of it? What if we let go of being beautiful, stopped chasing “pretty,” stopped sucking in and shrinking and spending enormous amounts of money and time on things that don’t make us magnificent? Where is the Ugly in you? What is it trying to teach you? (Mingus)

We cling to the notion that “everyone is beautiful to somebody.” But how does that change when it’s undeniable that you are not beautiful to the way the world works? When everything you are is undesirable to power, being unwanted becomes a political identity.

...

You’re not supposed to want me. You’re not supposed to want to take me to Best Buy or the grocery store. You’re not supposed to want to pick me over a lighter-skinned girl or be content to walk next to me as I waddle around in the way that fat girls do, publically holding my hand, tenderly using your thumb to rub mine. I see that.

And yet I write about desire, meaning what it feels like to think someone may want me or what it feels like to want someone it usually feels like I shouldn’t have. I don’t write love stories, mostly because I don’t have any. I have sad stories and weird stories and slightly reckless stories. I write essays around love. I’m fixated because it eludes me. Essays are the place where you locate something on the page, right? I write to find me where lovers lost me. To say what it’s like to chase something and ultimately realize you’re too far behind.

In this world, I have battled my fat, Black body my whole life. By many standards, an ugly body. But even on the page, insecurity doesn’t escape me. I find myself unable to appeal to a certain literary aesthetic while writing what comes naturally to me, which leads me to doubt if my writing is appealing at all. Like, I’m gonna write about what happens to me, and I’m gonna write it how it happens. I’m going to use language that feels good and that doesn’t have the goal

of distancing myself from a reader. I don't want distance. I want someone to be close. And I don't have the desire to imagine new worlds; I haven't spent enough time yet imagining mine. But when I write like this I just end up putting my work beside a short story that's the type that looks good after a thematic and formal hike, that likes hiking to begin with, and wears tight little outfits to do it and my writing feels ugly. Undesirable. Unappealing. The same way my physical body feels in life, and I don't think that's a coincidence. So I've been thinking—what if I sought to be something other than appealing? If appealing wasn't made for me? It's true in life and love, why not in words? Who is doing work around this? Outside of desirable, what is there?

This critical paper has given me a chance to research this by way of who I write about, for, and with. I used to wonder if my little scribbles on sex and heartache as a person in a body like mine existed on their own. Fat Black womanhood can make you feel so alone sometimes. My MFA thesis has shown me otherwise. I am not desirable, and maybe my writing isn't either. But I am not on my own in my preoccupation with this ugly existence. There are people like me, writers like me, concerned with bringing all of this to the page as well. In this study I learned so much. I have evidence of what I found. These are my annotations.

Anthony, JerVae [@jervae]. "Feelings." Part of a photo series, *Instagram*, 17 Dec 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CmSIFd6PYaO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.



My therapist told me I need to heal my inner fat child. She didn't say that, she really said "what part of you feels unacceptable? How old is she? What does she look like?"

The unacceptable part of me doesn't look like this image—fat and happy, fat and unknowing, fat and okay. I have parts of me like this. I don't remember them.

This image features a baby @jervae, a healing artist from Instagram. I think it's a baby JerVae at least; they have the same nose. It's the last photo in a series post, other images including more iterations of JerVae: a statuesque JerVae between pillars, their round body in monumental scale compared to a tiny viewer with white woman hair off to the bottom left side. A soap carving JerVae? I'm not sure. There are suds and a sudsy JerVae figure encased in a giant bubble. Outside the bubble is another figure of them in long johns or something. The two are about the same size. Next, an image of an adult JerVae with their eyes covered by the hands of a child. After, an image that includes a link to a gofundme, gofundme.com/fatblackliberation. And then the image of this baby. Over the baby's body is a cropped screenshot of a text post from JerVae. "How chaotic to put a spirit in a body. The universe play too much." In the background of this photo is what looks to me like high-definition Black skin. What could this mean? The text could suggest a child-like essence—maybe a true essence or an uncorrupted one—confined by skin, representing the body it is impossible to escape. I relate.

The truth is I'm unsure what part of me feels unacceptable. She could be four, she could be fourteen, she could be twenty six years, two months, and nineteen, twenty, twenty one days old. Whatever age, she looks bigger than all her friends, bigger than the t-shirts she wants to wear, bigger than her mother needs her to be. I'm sure there was a time before I felt wrong, yet I was born into a world that doesn't call timeout. How chaotic to put a spirit, which can hardly be written, or read, into a body, which all manners of things will be read onto. Like the words on

baby JerVae's body. The truth is I came here fighting. I came just as I am now: crying over bathing suits. Unable to get pants for my age over my thighs. These are some of my earliest body memories. I don't know what part of me feels unacceptable because growing up, the world couldn't wait to show me I was wrong.

Sullivan, Jazmine. "Jazzy's Tale." *Heaux Tales, Mo' Tales: The Deluxe*. Accessed 2022.

I just didn't wanna be alone
 Growing up a brown skin girl, a fat girl
 Essentially growing up feeling undesirable
 When I got older and I had a man that desired me, it validated me
 It made me feel good about myself
 Therefore, the content that the validation
 Brought me was worth the actual pain
 That the relationship eventually brought me
 It's a sad, scary, and vulnerable place
 When you need to feel love so much
 That you're willing to accept anything. (Sullivan)

Jazmine Sullivan's Grammy award winning album *Heaux Tales* centers Black women and their stories of love, heartache, and desire. Alternating between songs and spoken interludes, this album runs the gamut of matters of the heart: one night stands, ones that got away, wonderful romances, and horrible ones. Whether it's tackling infidelity or wanting to marry rich, *Heaux Tales* allows Black women to tell their own varied stories. The interlude "Jazzy's Tale" comes at a point in the deluxe album when everyone else on the original has already said their piece. It's one of the spoken tracks, and the only one in Jazmine's voice herself. "Jazzy's Tale" serves as a prelude to the song, "Hurt Me So Good", which tells the story of not being able to let go of someone who's no good for you. The song begins with a voice, crooning and pitched up. "Say you won't leave me (won't leave me) / but I need you always", the voice begs. The voice is

kind of chopped and screwed; I almost thought it was a sample. But it's just the voice of Jazmine, only distorted, maybe meant to sound as lost in the pain as she feels she is. "I leave when you're wrong, but don't stay away for long / you make it so hard in making this house a home / I know you're no good, but I just keep hanging on to toxicity" (Sullivan). One thing Jazmine gon' do is sing the truth, and she gets right to the essence of how hard it can be to make your "house", your body, a true home for your spirit when someone is hell-bent on making you out to be uninhabitable. The magic of Jazmine's writing is that listeners in all types of bodies feel so gratefully seen by it that we frown up, telling the speaker to watch herself while putting the shit on repeat.

Because of Jazmine's spoken prologue, it hits different for girls like me. See, superstar Jazmine Sullivan grew up a fat Black girl in the way that I grew up a fat Black girl, and though she's rich and famous now, there are certain realities it's hard to shake when that's the ugly way you've moved through life. Like she says in "Jazzy's Tale", growing up feeling not unwanted but *unwantable* will do a number on you. It will make it so that when someone finally does want you, in whatever way they want you for, you're starving for it, ravenous. So you'll let them feed you whatever they have, even if it's spoiled. And as Jazmine prefaced, it's a vulnerable place indeed.

Cottom, Tressie McMillan. *Thick: And Other Essays*. The New Press, 2019.

I wish I was thick. I mean, hold on haha. I am thick. I am also big, curvy, and plus size if these words are all euphemisms for the word fat. Honestly, that don't bother me. But thick doesn't really mean fat anymore. It's bitches that are a size 8 and the poster child for thickness. (Don't even start on slim-thick—that's just textbook thinness with a tiny round ass.) Still the two are not mutually exclusive; you can be both thick and fat. I'm just not. Thick is 36"-24"-36" type shit. It's your proportions. Thick means fat in all the right places. I'm fat in the wrong ones.

Is *Thick* a book about fat women?

“Just before he asked me for my phone number he said, ‘Your hair thick, your nose thick, your lips thick, all of you just thick’” (Cottom 7). This is a quote from the title essay and taking into account the sentiments, the purpose of this statement is to be a primer for the metaphor about what type of writing the book does. Associated here with ethnographic thick description, Cottom identifies within the descriptor thick, her writing having been essentially described as much:

...an editor told me that I was too readable to be academic, too deep to be popular, too country black to be literary, and too naive to show the rigor of my thinking in the complexity of my prose. I had wanted to create something meaningful that sounded not only like me, but like all of me. It was too thick. (Cottom 12)

Contrary to what the editor thinks, the book is capable of doing it all.

The only thing that the editor said that *Thick* isn't is naive. Essays like “The Price of Fabulousness” on classism, respectability politics, and gatekeeping, and “Girl 6” on the reality of white mainstream culture undervaluing Black female intellectual authority demonstrate that this book has a very firm handle on the way the world works for Black women. It seems to me that

Cottom's writing being "too thick" for the editor means the writing was too far outside of a white standard, which would make sense. I myself have been told that my writing was "readable" in a way that felt like an insult. I write in colloquialisms, with punctuation that isn't always correct but does seek to coach a reader to read a thing exactly the way I would say it. My vocabulary can't do any flips, mostly because I focus too much on a sentence's rhythm or building a voice. My class essays are never traditionally academic—which I can't help but feel would involve a certain level of posturing—and my creative essays are even less so. In short, I don't think that editor would've liked my writing either.

Scholar Da'Shaun Harrison describes the disdain for those of a larger size, or anti-fatness, as historically rooted in anti-Blackness. Thus if you want a word for something that doesn't fit into whiteness, any word that means close to the word "fat" would be a good one. Cottom feels this, which she shows in the book's first essay, "Thick" and the work it does to make these connections of too-muchness readily available. Its placement as the first in the book makes certain that readers don't miss the thick richness of the ideas that follow. The title essay is meant to not only prime readers for the type of writing Cottom does, but also describe how she feels as a Black woman in relation to the world. This thematically undergirds every other essay in the collection. In the essay, Cottom writes that this book is about "all the moments that have shaped what kind of thinker I have become," (17) yet says that "no one quite knows what to make of the work that represents the intellectual journey I took from little black girl to black woman who thinks for a living," (20). Like the work, no one quite knows what to make of bodies that are "thick" either. Are they preferable over thin bodies, a culturally specific sign of "health"? Or are they only a little less wrong than larger bodies, too close to fat to be desirable? In this way the

title is an apt vehicle to consider the essay's in-betweenness. "Thick" moves between narrative and criticism, argument and anecdote. Cottom says of her own prose:

I am hopelessly tethered to reality, not fiction or even creative nonfiction. I may be a storyteller, but even that is more a claim of birthright than any legitimate claim that I can make to the craft of telling stories. I am not even, perhaps, a stodgy sociologist or cut-and-dried ethnographer. My ethnographies have too much structure and my sociology is a bit too loose with voice. A bit slutty it all is, really, jumping between forms and disciplines and audiences. My writing has a high body count, as the kids say. (Cottom 28)

It's interesting that this literary thickness, this refusal to fit in a given space, is likened to promiscuity. This is an opportunity to point out another way in which these assumptions mirror those of the world. Fat bodies have a very specific relationship to desire. There is a sexualization that comes with being "too big", stemming from objectification and an expectation that you're down for anything. Perhaps unintentionally, Cottom is commenting on the complexities of existing in a fat body. But on the other hand this could be very intentional. The only thing that's keeping me from knowing is the question of whether this essay, and by extension this book, wants to take on the stigma that comes with fat Black existence.

Despite not being the eponymous essay, the piece that's doing the thickest work in the book is "In the Name of Beauty". I love this essay. I love the way Cottom writes—associatively. I was taught by a mentor to do a similar thing in my writing. You let the thing you're writing about bloom until it hits something else different but related, and it leaves you with an at times unlikely path to what you wanted to say, like overlapping lily pads. For example in Cottom's essay, the brutality of the comments section on her Miley Cyrus essay in which she critiques Miley's quick adoption and disposal of Black culture leads her to talk about the brutal experience

of giving a lecture at her HBCU in the Miley Cyrus aftermath. While on HBCUs, Cottom moves to how special HBCUs were and are to her sense of self, opening up a chance to reflect on adolescent schooling experiences that stood in opposition to that specialness. By laying these sectional lily pads, she transports us from Miley Cyrus to Black girlhood, seamlessly.

Her adolescence reminds me a lot of my own. In fact, because I can only imagine things that have to do with me, her grade school memories look a lot like my middle school hallway. When Cottom remembers the way the class watched *Grease*, I myself am picturing the 6th grade, Mrs. Moore's class. I'm best friends with Kaley, and I know because she is small and dirty blonde that she is beautiful. What the fuck is dirty blonde. No for real, how do you tell? All I know is I thought she just wasn't into inviting friends on family beach trips like her sister was, until we made another skinny dirty blonde friend. Rebecca. Then the rules changed. "What is beautiful is whatever will keep weekend lake parties safe from strange darker people" (Cottom 44). In these words I recognized Kaley. And that's not the only part I saw my life in.

The essay then begins to articulate what a rejection of the pursuit of beauty can offer Black women in terms of liberation. Cottom writes, "They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder and that ugly is as ugly does. Both are lies. Ugly is everything done to you in the name of beauty. Knowing the difference is part of getting free" (62). This point is in service of the entire book, which has the purpose of calling out the structures that keep Black women down.

Like Luna, like Harrison and Mingus, Cottom understands that ugly isn't self-deprecation, it is social positioning. It is what sits opposite of capital "B" Beauty. If Beauty is thinness, whiteness, affluence, normative ability, and any other power-holding position, then what do we call all outside of that? "Whiteness exists as a response to blackness. Whiteness is a violent sociocultural regime legitimized by property to always make clear who is black by

fastidiously delineating who is officially white. It would stand to reason that beauty's ultimate function is to exclude blackness" (Cottom 45). What else is there to call what I am that points to Beauty as contrived, as weapon formed against me and others like me, but ugly? I could say *by definition I could never be beautiful and it was made to be that way*. But that's the passive voice that power wants me to use. "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing us that he does not exist. That's why naming is political...when I say that I am [ugly], I am not internalizing the dominant culture's assessment of me. I am naming what has been done to me. And signaling who did it" (Cottom 35).

Even in its claim of an ugly identity, I have to wonder if *Thick* is a book about fatness, or if it's really a book about the shades of undesirability related to Black womanness, inadvertently highlighting that the two have come to be politically connected. Throughout essays on medical misogynoir, racism in liberal spaces, shifting academic exceptionalism across the Black diaspora, respectability politics, and sexual violence against Black girls and women—all important conversations—the only essay where the word fat is mentioned is "In the Name of Beauty." Fatness is named to discuss the evolution of beauty ideals, and how beauty relies on what is culturally agreed upon. "The expectation that you should be shocked by Marilyn's dress size also relies on an audience who will share an idea about who is fat. And the audience must share the notion that fat and beauty are antithetical. Of course, fat has not always been juxtaposed against beauty in white western culture. Artists point to the Rubenesque female bodies of the seventeenth century as an example of how fat bodies were once the beauty ideal" (Cottom 42). Yet she goes on to say that whiteness will adjust the beauty standard for body type but never for body color, and that "there is no ideological exception to anti-blackness for black women but through colorism...by definition, black women are not beautiful except for any whiteness that

may be in them” (Cottom 50). To me these statements mean two different things. Or rather, I’m not sure if colorism is the only way our culture rewards proximity to whiteness. The mention of fatness seems to be saying you can be “ugly” in every agreed upon regard, but as long as you’re white you can always be deemed beautiful and as long as you’re Black you can never really be. Thus here fatness only serves to be an agreed upon marker of ugliness, not something that is intrinsically linked to Blackness and hated because of it. This leads me to believe that for the book, thickness doesn’t mean fatness. It means too-muchness, which can include fatness, but *Thick* doesn’t take the stance that anti-fatness may affect Black women in a disproportionate way.

Despite these questions, *Thick* helped form my perspective on the politics of claiming an identity as a way to point to and name power. And it does this in the exact ways Cottom’s editor said it couldn’t. “Dying to Be Competent” is readable *and* academic. As this essay discusses the intersections between status and medical misogynoir, it doesn’t just quote studies at readers, but that doesn’t make it any less academic. For example, Cottom starts the essay by narrating her own dreams. She says her first dreams weren’t of love or marriage or babies. They were of being competent. And competency, she recalls, she associated with the click of high heels on a hard floor. Cottom uses this image to usher in thoughts of what it means to operate in a middle class that plays by rules of capitalist productivity and professionalism. By starting this essay, the goal of which is to critique structural inequity in the personal realm, very close to her Black female body, Cottom gives stats and figures tangible and high stakes. The readability of her narrative offers us handholds as she gets into the argumentative weeds: “Pain, like pregnancy, is inconvenient for bureaucratic efficiency and has little use in a capitalist regime. When the medical profession systematically denies the existence of black women's pain, underdiagnoses

our pain, refuses to alleviate or treat our pain, healthcare marks us as incompetent bureaucratic subjects. Then it serves us accordingly” (Cottom 70). The narrative and theoretical approaches are not only able to coexist, they really bolster each other.

More, Cottom's writing exists as both Southern Black and literary in “Know Your Whites”. In this essay describing the way that a Southern Black existence offers a uniquely intimate knowledge of the ways that whiteness operates, whether that be in conservative spaces or liberal, Cottom emphasizes the importance of this heritage. “I was and am southern, god bless. I am black. I come from black people who are southerners even when they were New Yorkers for a spell” (Cottom 81). In this excerpt, Cottom doesn't just tell us her heritage, she shows us in her mama's, her auntie's, and her own diction. This diction is important for tying her to the history she writes of. She showcases our unique interjections (“god bless”) and units of time (“a spell”), adding flavor to her beautiful prose that you can't get everywhere. This writing doesn't even let the question of “what is ‘literary’ anyway?” insult its intelligence. The conscious choice to call upon Black lineage with language shows that Cottom knows Southern Black writing always has been. In this way, traits that her editor found ugly—readability and familiar voice—become assets here. Maybe they could be assets for me too.

Still, my earlier question prevails. In the essay “The Conflict Between Thick and Fat”, fat theorist Da'Shaun Harrison states, “Mainstream—whereby I mean hegemonic—powers have created a dichotomy between ‘thicc/k’ and ‘fat.’ Anti-fat domination determines who gets to be the former and who is always understood as the latter. This is how desirability/beauty politics show up in our language.” Cottom does not address the way that thickness creates certain standards for people the way that beauty does, or that not locating thickness within fatness is

about proximity to beauty too. Thick is not fat. This book may not have the goal of interrogating the difference between the two.

I need a book that does. I need a book that knows. A book on food issues and the wrong sections you had to shop in at JCPenney and being used.

What would it mean for a book to call itself fat?

Anthony, JerVae [@jervae]. "I'm not from here babe." *Instagram*, 18 December 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CmU33sevAVO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.



"We cannot undo the damage that was done to her. But at least we can summon the courage to speak the naked and the healing truth that must comfort her; wherever she may be."

– South African President Thabo Mbeki

What is this face? Only the oblivious could think it a smile; it's definitely more like a grimace. Your nose scrunched, a corner of your mouth contorted, and groove made in your brow. It's like the face you make when something's pinching you. What's the matter, love? What hurts?

You remind me of someone.

Some called her Saartje Baartman. Her people, her descendants who love her, now choose to refer to her as Sarah, so I will too. Maybe you know her? Black women who write about the historic harming of Black women hardly ever do so without starting with Sarah. She was an enslaved South African woman, all of twenty-something years old, forced to live a life of sexual exploitation. In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, sociologist Sabrina Strings writes about her too. In fact, an image of Sarah—strikingly similar to this image of you—serves as Strings’ covergirl. Where there are tattoos on you, there are beads on her making the same shapes. And she sort of has the same shape, except you can tell she was drawn by someone who thought her body unnatural. They made her into a monster. In that image on String’s cover, she’s chasing the good white people, arms outstretched, ready to catch them and...? Yeah, I don’t know what they thought she’d do. But I know what they were scared of: looking like her, like you. Like us.

Sarah was forced to be a sideshow. Is that something you relate to? Her exploitation was a hit sensation. Her body was famous all over Europe. Crowds marveled at her size—the size of her stomach, her breasts, her labia, her butt. There had been fat people forced to exploit their size before, but Saartjie did numbers. This was a different type of spectacle. As these fine European ladies and gentlemen groped and prodded, laughed and pointed, and reveled in their open and violent disgust, I think what they enjoyed the most is that they could find someone so monstrous so inexplicably...sexy.

Your hair is lovely, figure. And your tattoos are beautiful. You are completely naked yet still so adorned. Except you’re a nippleless being. That kind of negates some of the nakedness, doesn’t it? You know, like how in movies it’s not naked unless there’s nipple. What does it mean to not be thought of as naked even when you are naked? What does it mean to be robbed of your

nakedness, to have it removed? Something similar happened to Sarah. Actually, I think what happened to her may be the reason it's happening to you. Because white audiences and whiteness itself used Sarah's body as both a site of disgust and arousal. There is a lasting legacy of a simultaneous hyper and desexualization of fat Black women. This paradox harmed Sarah in life and death. Andrea Elizabeth Shaw talks about it in her book *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*.

[Myriam] Chancy visited the Musee de l'Homme in Paris where she saw Saartjie Baartman's remains on display. However, Chancy did not see a mummified body or even a skeleton; rather, what she saw were Baartman's genitalia and buttocks, entombed in a display case since Baartman's death in the early eighteenth century. The choice to display Baartman's genitalia and buttocks was influenced by Europe's gendered and racialized perception of sexuality. (Shaw 48)

As Saartjie's genitals and buttocks were displayed in a museum after her death, her nakedness wasn't nakedness anymore, which represents how her sexual enslavement made it so that it never really was. It was something else entirely, something made for consumption. Perhaps you knew this, @jervae's figure, and that's why you use your body to call to it. So that the same can be said for you—naked but not.

In the image of you, everything, it seems, is purposefully more obscure from the waist words down. Across your round middle is a comment from an unnamed user. I don't care that he doesn't have a face. I know who he is. He is supposed to be everything you're not: white, male, right, clothed: "This isn't nice to look at."

Who asked him to look?

What is nice?

Why do you owe it?

You know these faceless white men, interchangeable-faced white men, have been obsessed with who has the right figure since the Renaissance era of painting and before. It's you that's art, my love. According to artists like Albrecht Durer and Peter Paul Rubens, fleshy feminine figures were once exalted. Black ones too. White men encountering the body types of African women during the rise of the slave trade didn't create a racist standard of beauty right away. Rubens and Paolo Veronese just started putting us in the paintings too, bosom and belly equally as plump and revered as white muses, only with dark skin and a servant's headwrap. That was back when "nice to look at" really meant proportionality. "A woman might find herself being considered 'too thin' or 'too fat', given the prevailing preference for proportionate--often implying 'medium'--physiques. But if a lady had to err on one side of the scale, a fat woman was generally preferred to one who might be derisively labeled 'lean' or 'bony'" (Strings 16).

"It looks really unhealthy," the white face goes on to comment over you. What is he referring to? "It" as in your dreamy image, figure? Or with this pronoun is he turning our body into thing, the way they've always turned our bodies into thing. When did unhealthy start to mean unhuman?

Indeed, during the early Enlightenment in England, women would have had new reasons to be concerned about their weight. Several English philosophers and moralists were beginning to draft revisions to standards of taste... The height of beauty, they suggested, should reflect the nation's moral compass as well as its racial caliber. Anything that could be construed as evidence of gluttony, they claimed, was beneath them. (Strings 107)

And lastly, the commenter's unsolicited prophecy: "You're going to die really soon actually." I wonder if men like him gave Sarah Baartman any warning. After years of their abuse, Sarah died at twenty-eight. They all talk the same.

[John Harvey Kellogg] claimed that the 'Hottentot,' using the moniker as a synonym for blackness, were 'blood clocks' in that they had a finite amount of potential, and, it was implied, their time on earth was running out. If left to their own devices, he implies, the African races would become extinct...eugenicists like Kellogg had come to the conclusion that black people were doomed to die off. (Strings 179)

Does dying scare you, figure? I haven't thought much yet of dying. What scares me is all the living. I'm scared of having to pee on a plane. I'm scared of the day I won't be able to pee on the plane, and I'm scared of what my daddy will say about how big I've gotten when he picks me up from the airport. I'm scared that my mama won't be scared to say it too. I'm scared both of them can hear me breathing, and so I'm scared of breathing. I'm scared of the honesty of children in supermarkets. I'm scared of first dates. I'm scared of being called fat to my face. I'm scared of going on walks with my friends. I'm scared of sizing out of stores I love, or stores at all. I'm scared to sleep with people who've already seen me naked. I'm scared of the jumpscare of unsolicited advice. I'm scared I may have a spinal issue that has nothing to do with my weight. I'm scared I actually don't. I don't think much about dying.

The commenter's words are distorted. They ripple across your midsection the way bellies can ripple when struck, the same way water does. In this vein, I wonder about the ripples that distorted everything for Sarah, like maybe the ones that took her to London and France. Contrary to what the self-righteous believe, it all ripples. Their moves just like ours. The ripple of what they did to Sarah is what got us here today, still fighting for our lives, covering our bellies. It's

warped—their assumptions are warped the time is warped. Sarah then could be you now. I can't be sure, it's all distorted. Like the alien voice singing over Jazmine Sullivan. Chopped and screwed.

What's clear-ish is what's under you, the stand you're on. Propped on. Made prop on? Displayed. You look more and more like Sarah every minute. You're on a thing but it's not holding you up. In fact, as I take in an iridescent you—a reflection or an essence—rising higher than the comment, higher than where it's posted on your body, higher than the body and the stand, I'm starting to wonder if you're even on it. I wonder if maybe you transcend it. The caption below it all? "I'm not from here babe."

Parker, Morgan. "Hottentot Venus." *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyonce*, Tin House Books, 2017.

synecdoche — body colonizers don't believe in
Synecdoche: ONLY parts no wholes

"I wish my pussy could live
in a different shape and get
some goddamn respect.

Should I thank you?

Business is booming
and I am not loved
the way I want to be.]

Exoticization just
don't scratch the
same itch

I am an elastic
winter: sympathy

not a forever girl
but as long as
you want me

and shock, addictive
decoration. In the sunlight
my captors
drink African
hibiscus. They tell me

Hendrik?
Heritage?

I look regal bearing fruit.

Saartjie:
"princess"
in Dutch

I am technically nothing
human.

I will never be
a woman.

[Somewhere in my
memory, I was held
by a man who said
I deserved it.]

Now I understand.

No one worries about me
because I am getting paid.

I am here to show you
who you are, to cradle
your large skulls

and remind you
you are perfect. Mother America,
unleash your sons.

Everything beautiful, you own."

"Fatness & health, like race, are
also double agents. They are all used to
tell Black fat people who &
what they are, but they are
also used to tell white ppl
who they should not want to become."
- Harrison

what did that make Sarah?
what does that make me?

■ All I care about now
(2023)

■ All I cared about then
(2017)

Irby, Samantha. *Meaty: Essays*. Vintage Books, 2013.

“Every time I’m mourning the death of what I once believed had been a serendipitous romance, or pouting, disconsolate, because some clandestine relationship will never come to fruition, my go-to method of self-flagellation is ‘He doesn’t love you because you are not pretty’” (Irby 114).

You know what pretty gets you? Chances. People take a chance on pretty. Really, people take chances on skinny, because I’m pretty but the second I can’t return to standing as lithely as you’d like after our picnic on the dock it’s suddenly clear where it wasn’t before that we “want different things”. I’ve always thought this; thin people may not have better outcomes in love, but it’s much more likely that someone is willing to try with them.

Does Irby’s writing resist pretty, or does it redefine it? Samantha Irby’s essays are raunchy. Her writing is the literary equivalent of sitting with your legs open. I like that. Fuck what’s ladylike. We know who made that up, and I’ve always been a firm believer that things need to breathe. As someone whose thighs constantly touch, that’s not happening any other way. Irby’s prose spreads all the way out: there have to be like ten different kinds of essays in *Meaty*. She claims all types of space with form. In the first three chapters alone, there’s a list essay, an interview essay, and something I’m naming the recipessay. The goal of this book is to represent an unpretty existence. *Meaty* is marketed as Irby “laugh[ing] her way through...as she struggles through adulthood,” but Irby’s adulthood isn’t everyone’s adulthood. I feel like Joan Didion struggled through adulthood, and yet her writing has access to a type of romance that Irby’s does not. We know who gets access to romance. The types of experiences Irby has and chronicles are the kind that only happen in a perfect storm of poor, disabled, fat, Black womanhood. Because,

on some level, society will always view these standings as a mess. I think Irby leans into that. *Meaty* gets messy, and ugly, as it sprawls and strews itself across the realm of nonfiction.

In that ugly, the laundry list essay, “At Thirty”, displays prose that is unafraid to need space, to have needs, to vocalize them, and to vocalize taboos. For starters, Irby begins almost every sentence in the essay with the word “I”. This does so much claiming work already, as this is an essay that doesn’t pretend not to be about herself. She begins autobiographically, asserting the right to room for her “flaws”. “I should fucking work out...I am constantly seething in jealous rage...I can’t have multiple orgasms...dudes don’t promptly return my phone calls...and I fell asleep in a bar two weeks ago” (Irby 8). She doesn’t ask if these truths are worthy of writing down because she doesn’t give a fuck about your answer, which then makes them worthy of being written. She puts things on the page I didn’t think I’d ever get to see there. After she tells you who she is, Irby begins a beautiful refrain: a little “I want,” but mostly “I need.” “I need a cook, and I need a maid. I need to go to the dentist and the gynecologist. I need to pay the podiatrist...I need more people to describe me as ‘the funniest person they know’... I need some ugly dudes around to make me feel good about myself” (Irby 9). I revel in the anaphora here because it dares to be luxurious, it claims over and over again “unnecessary” space on the page. Irby doesn’t have to keep saying it. But the space is hers for the taking, and she takes it.

In her essay “Black Beauty”, Irby makes the realization it seems that all fat Black girls come to at some point: she is ugly. It’s clear from the amount of time she spends on her commitment to all the “wrong” foods that she recognizes body size as a premier part of this. Though the book is honest about body size, I’m not sure it’s comfortable with it. It often seems that Irby’s writing makes it a point to beat a cruel world to the punchline. When it comes to fatness, *Meaty* makes the joke before someone else does.

I am a slave to sugar and cheese and totally in love with this new trend of putting bacon on every goddamned thing on the menu, and I have never been shy around a plate of food, but if I was seventeen years old and basically a walking open wound and I was being bombarded by images that reinforce the idea that, as I am, I'm not good enough, I'd have a fucking eating disorder. Bulimia probably, because anorexia requires the kind of restraint and self-control that, as evident by the thunderous clap of these thighs, I am obviously lacking. (Irby 109)

Irby also has an entire essay devoted to fad diets ("The Tapeworm Diet") which she acknowledges are ridiculous, but usually due to some lack of her own that would prevent her from adhering to them. This legitimizing of intentional weight loss is at odds with her prose, which seems to claim her right to exist.

"But beauty is this fixed thing. At least conventionally, and either your face and body are constructed in a way that fits those parameters or they aren't" (Irby 111). This essay isn't a treatise on what Black beauty is, nor does it feature any conventional beauties at all. It's more a meditation on all the ways Irby falls outside of beauty, and is written representation of her claiming ugliness as an identity the way her book claims ugliness as a goal. "Being ugly affords you a unique sort of freedom," (110) Irby writes. Freed from beautiful, Irby is able to be sad (writing about the death of her mother), scared (describing the medical saga of being diagnosed with Crohns), and nasty (lots of talk of diarrhea and blow jobs) instead. Funny too, or what she calls "a jerky smart ass."

In "The Many Varieties of Hospital Broth", Irby describes the vulnerability involved when you suddenly have to go to the hospital and don't know to get your life together before those who come to help you are privy to the mess. "Listen, bitch, had I known I was going to

need for anyone other than that cat to see what I do with my empty beer cans, I would have taken out the recycling. Just step over the piles of laundry and magazines and get the fuck out lest you set off any of my booby traps” (Irby 124). Irby’s writing is like walking through her lived-in apartment, stopping at collected dishes or an open TV guide, letting what you find reveal something about her. This book is an exhibit of her, and it’s fascinating.

Only this time, Irby is the one exhibiting herself, which was very much not the case with Sarah Baartman. Irby’s work isn’t making a display of her body, it’s rather like taking a walk through the clutter of her mind. This internality almost directly upsets the objectification of fat Black women and their lives that can be traced back to Sarah Baartman, except it doesn’t completely. In a different way, she is still giving an outside audience what they want: a spectacle. The book itself is structured in four parts, starting with “Brunch: An Instagram Frittata” and ending with “Ooh, Dessert, And Cocktails!”, suggesting that she sees her life and experiences through the lens of food. Almost defining her actions with eating. Instead of a sex object, Irby offers herself and her fatness as a joke.

Even so, Irby’s writing knows that pretty is a trap. It trades the weak opportunity for something more fulfilling: being represented on the page. Irby achieves this by taking advantage of every facet available to her. This book is an exemplar of how wonderful writing uglily can be.

hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions*. HarperCollins, 2000.

"In Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters*, wise older women who are healers are called in to assist the young woman who has attempted suicide, and they tell her: 'Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, 'cause wholeness is no trifling matter--a lot of weight when you are well'" (hooks 212).

I'd seen this quote before—as an epigraph in Kiese Laymon's book, *Heavy*—but I didn't have any meaning for it until I encountered it in the context of bell hooks' *All About Love*. From the time I first saw it in *Heavy* I was drawn to the connection between wholeness and weight, the logical but no less mind-altering assertion that it all may get a little heavier when every piece of you is accounted for, and that weight might be a sign that you were well. But *All About Love* featured a little bit more of the Bambara quote than Laymon's book did, and that difference in words unlocked something more for me. "Just so's you're sure...and ready to be healed" hooks' quote includes. And I thought oh, this isn't just about wholeness. This is also about the weight of a choice.

All About Love was written as a response to the fear that love does not exist. I think a lot of fat Black existence, including writing, features an element of fear that good love does not exist for us. The truth is, contending with racist fatphobia day in and day out has left us more than a little wounded. Being marginalized in this way feels like a very unloved existence, and we each find ways to feign like we cope on the page. *Thick* finds euphemisms, @jervae claps back, *Meaty* cracks up. I chase the love. Fixate on it in writing. Beg. But hooks' text asks: what if we didn't

have to just cope with the lack? What if we could give ourselves the very thing we are searching for? It's something we could choose. If we're ready.

Each chapter in *All About Love* is a lesson. hooks was a teacher after all, not just of universities, but of movements, communities, and generations. Thus reading this book is like listening to the best kind of seminar. Each chapter—given a one word title and a brief description following a colon—is already lecture-like in naming. Titles like “Clarity: Give Love Words” can be taken as directives as well as descriptions, while chapters such as “Values: Living by a Love Ethnic” sound like a talk jointly hosted by the English and African-American Studies departments that I, for one, am skipping class to go to. In these chapters, hooks uses the toolkit of great professors. She starts by defining an aspect of love, moves into quoting related scholars on the topic, and grounds the lesson in vulnerability with personal anecdotes. Moving through thirteen connected aspects of love, hooks explains what love is and isn't, explains how to love, validates the longing for love, and legitimizes love theorizing. Her prose isn't obscure, but it doesn't hold your hand either. Just like the best teachers I've had, she expects readers to rise to the occasion.

I started this paper with a question. It was never rhetorical. In fact, I see more and more how much I was waiting on an answer. Who will want me? I'll admit that when I asked the question, I was expecting a person outside of me to step up to the job. I was waiting on someone in these texts to give me permission—to exist in the way that I do, to write in the way that I do. I thought I was waiting to see a mirror image of myself in the art that somebody else made to let me know that it was okay to proceed as I am. It wasn't until I read *All About Love* that it clicked for me that this all meant that I was waiting on myself.

Like a good student, I listened keenly to Dr. hooks, took plenty of notes. But every good student also knows that there are just some days you show up and get more than you could've asked for.

One of the best guides to how to be self-loving is to give ourselves the love we are often dreaming about receiving from others. There was a time when I felt lousy about my over-forty body, saw myself as too fat, too this, or too that. Yet I fantasized about finding a lover who would give me the gift of being loved as I am. It is silly, isn't it, that I would dream of someone else offering to me the acceptance and affirmation I was withholding from myself. (hooks 67)

There was a night when I crossed the parking level of my building that houses the dumpster—my hooks text dogeared only a few floors up, right where I asked it to wait for me—that I did in fact start to feel silly. I write about love, but my study of what it means to write from fatness and Blackness has made it clear that I really write about my lack of it. How in the hell is someone else supposed to be brave enough, smart enough, hip enough to my groove to want to keep time to the way all parts of me move, if I don't even have the courage to love or like myself on the page or out loud? How can I ask someone to like me if I've never been willing to, and I know myself the most intimately of anybody in the world? I refuse to give love, desire, intimacy, admiration to myself or my writing yet I beg for it from everyone else. How can I write in a way that claims all of the things I want for myself in life? A voice that doesn't ask permission, one that chooses to give it to itself.

That choice is not a small one. The choice to heal, it's not easy. Accepting all of you, it's not easy. All of anything is going to be more weight. And to finally allow yourself to rescue yourself, to take you in, it's going to be a lot to hold. You not floating by on random bodies

anymore. You not giving in to the ways you were taught to survive. This not a raft no more, it's a boat. And that choice, that type of longevity, that's a lot of weight. Whole lot of weight.

In this book, bell hooks said “simply learning how we have acquired feelings of worthlessness rarely enables us to change things; it is usually only one stage in the process” (54). After almost two years of emotional writing and study, I have a better idea now about who’s responsible for my aching heart. In fact I know exactly who it is. History tells me that it’s probably the same “who” responsible for breaking my grandmother’s heart, and my mama’s, that’s now trying to break mine. The next stage in the process is to choose. Am I taking the weight or not?

Nichols, Grace. *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. Virago, 1984.

In this collection, Guyanese poet Grace Nichols serenades the type of girls who never get serenaded. From the second I started reading, I couldn't believe her song was for me.

If my fat
 was too much for me
 I would have told you
 I would have lost a stone
 or two (Nichols 10)

When this book was first published in 1984, I wonder if people recognized the brilliance of it. I'd guess that most parts of the literary world didn't understand. Even from the cover of the 2012 reprint I can tell they didn't get it almost thirty years later. It features a quote that says "Inside this slim collection there is a fat woman not even fighting to get out", from someone named Terry Eagleton. Tuh! He thought he ate that. He thought that was so clever, I know! Brilliance is all up and through this book. In my used copy, there are annotations from someone I imagine I'd love. On the pages of the poem "Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath", this friend wrote "'Birth of Venus' allusion. FBW represents a plentitude. Classical vs. Hottentot Venus." So I searched birth-of-venus and quickly these lines started to click.

Steatopygous sky
 Steatopygous sea
 Steatopygous waves
 Steatopygous me

O how I long to place my foot

on the head of anthropology

to swing my breasts

in the face of history

to scrub my back

with the dogma of theology

to put my soap

in the slimming industry's

profitsome spoke

Steatopygous sky

Steatopygous sea

Steatopygous waves

Steatopygous me (Nichols 13)

While I was busy writing in pink pen about how all this fat Black history was breaking my heart, my good friend in the margins of this pre-loved book was making critical connections for both of us. The painting “The Birth of Venus” by Sandro Botticelli features representations of sky, sea, and waves, as well as a depiction of the goddess Venus with surprisingly defined abs for the

renaissance era. But this poem is only calling upon Botticelli's painting as a backdrop. The real subject of this poem has an ass much closer to that of Sarah Baartman, which my bookmate aptly noted. This poem's admonition of the racist roots of fatphobia and diet culture were pleasantly surprising, mostly because many fat Black thinkers today learned that from Sabrina Strings. Evidence of this in 1984 demonstrates to me that fat Black women have been resisting oppression through art for longer than I thought.

And then, as I was reading, I reached a door. A bedroom door.

The Fat Black Woman's Motto
on Her Bedroom Door

IT'S BETTER TO DIE IN THE FLESH OF HOPE
THAN TO LIVE IN THE SLIMNESS OF DESPAIR

And I thought, I'm finna get this tattooed on my body. I'm finna walk in a shop and roll my sleeve or pull down my pants. Ima say right here, my fellow artist. I want these words right here. I need them here. I want the ink to get sucked below the layers of my skin in the shape of this poem that Grace Nichols probably wrote for herself, which means she wrote it for me. I need for every time my cells try to attack and eat the ink they die, and pass the ink onto the new cells, and for these words to prevail, and for the same thing to happen forever. I need to be able to see it the next time I'm asked to have weight loss surgery, or the next time I'm tempted to starve. I need to see it when I'm writing and I'm scared that I like what I wrote but no one else will. I need it to remind me why I choose ugly.

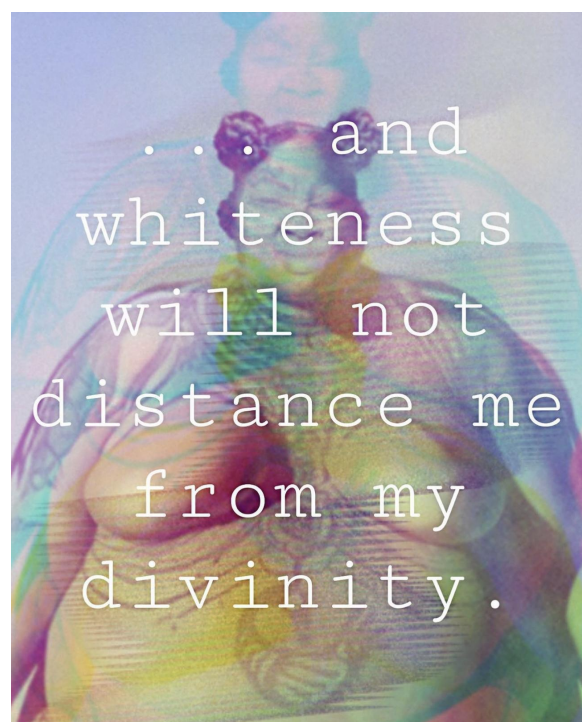
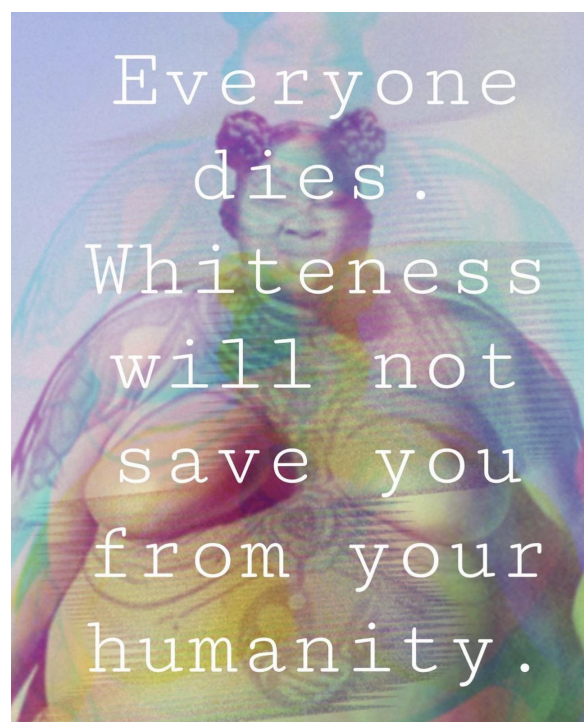
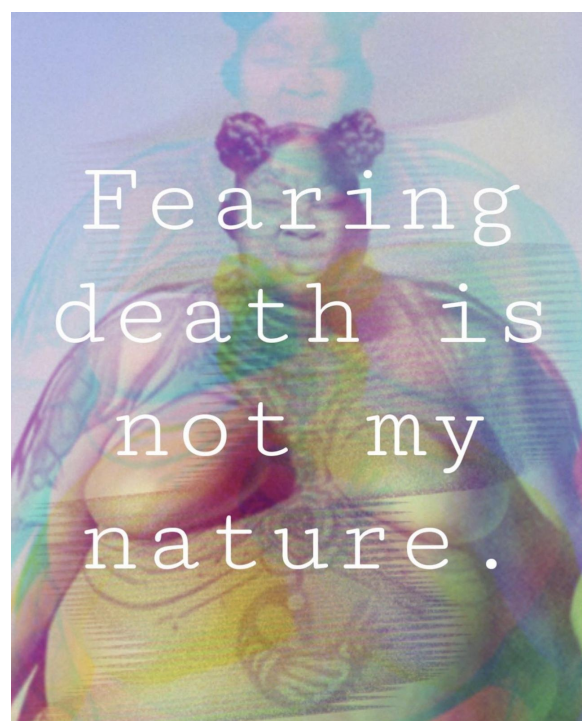
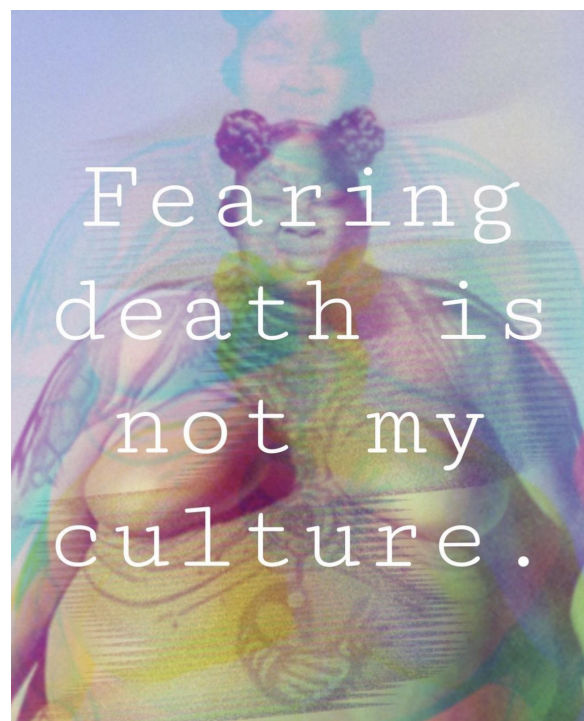
It feels right to end up at this bedroom door. I feel undesirable on the page, in my body, but here at this door is a space that says there will always be enough room for me. There have

been writers who talk about what it feels like to be fat/Black/girl like me. Writers like Grace Nichols who pen whole books of poetry for me. With their work they got to this room before me. They painted the walls pink for me and made sure there were sheets on the bed. They hung pictures of themselves and their ideas for when I will inevitably need to gain heart. And before clearing out they left a lamp on and cracked the door, like they knew I'd be there soon.

Who want me? I want me. I need me. Who checking for me? I'm checking for me and everybody writing in a way that looks big in tight clothes and big in loose ones. The bedroom is the place you retreat to after you've spent all day taking the world's shit. Your bedroom is the place where you have to be naked. My bedroom is a place where I make love, where I read it and write it and manifest it, where I invite it in with rose water spritzes. And before anyone enters my bedroom, including myself, they have to recognize this motto.

This writing is my life. Or it's not my life. But it is how I cope with it. I bring my life to the writing and I used to do it so that I could see it as something beautiful. After studying these writers who make it clear how difficult yet how worth it it is to move unencumbered by beauty, I now know that I write my life to see it as more than that.

Professor Nichols, thank you for saying there's hope in this flesh. I believe that too. There was so much despairing involved in trying to keep my life and my words thin. By thin I mean desirable. By desirable I mean not ugly. I mentioned before that I don't think much about dying. But because it keeps coming up, let me say this: if I lose in writing, which may or may not be my life, let it be healing my relationship with food. If I lose my life, let it be facing my trauma around movement. If I lose, let be trying my hand at love again and again and again and again. Let it always be haters. Let it never be weight. Didn't you hear? There's hope in this flesh. Like Jazmine once said, let it be hoping there's hope for a girl like me.



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