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# **“If I’m shinin’, everybody gonna shine”: centering Black fat women and femmes within body and fat positivity**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this article, we negotiate the tension of Lizzo’s embodiment and the work she is forced to perform to appease and mollify both thin and non-Black audiences. As a Black fat rapper, singer, dancer, and performer, Lizzo at once disrupts the normative image of a performer and becomes a commodified representation of body positivity. Her self-love messaging undoubtedly touches a broad fan base who look to her for guidance and inspiration. But how is she taken up by audiences dissimilar to her? Lizzo’s body-positive politic is presented as being particularly interested in disrupting body terrorism, while some audiences perceive it as a neoliberal model of self-love, failing to challenge systems. We consider ways in which Black fat bodies are consumed and used for their utility, while broader relationships to other Black fat people remain unchanged. We map selections from Lizzo’s creative output in 2019 to demonstrate racialization and fat embodiment intertwined in her performances, leading to the necessary coalition that fat activism must adopt.

## **KEYWORDS**

Anti-Blackness; fat activism; performance; Black fat; fat liberation

## **Introduction: Lizzo as a figurehead of body positivity**

As conversations on the prevalence of eating disorders and body image circulate within popular culture, simultaneous attention has been paid to the body positive movement, with an emphasis on improving individualized body image to combat these threatening factors. This is perhaps the most explicit distinction between the body positive movement and fat activism: while fat activism challenges the cultural context that produces the oppression of fat people, challenging both how a fat person might feel about herself, as well as the ways fat people are systemically marginalized, the former focuses on an individual relationship to one’s own body and how one perceives it, rather than a dedicated commitment to the liberation of fat people as a whole – especially across differences of race, gender, sexuality, size, and ability (Sastre 2014). Charlotte Cooper (2016) identifies body positivity as the product of “gentrification as a vector for loss, erasure[,] and politically convenient forgetting that is happening in some of the most visible forms of fat activism” in

a shift taking place in the late 1990s and early 2000s (171, 146). Nonetheless, as arguably the first openly fat-identified pop singer, Lizzo has become a predominant figurehead for body positivists and fat activists alike, to which people can attach themselves as an icon of these movements.

Lizzo is the stage name of Black fat musician and performer Melissa Viviane Jefferson. Originally from Detroit, Lizzo released her first studio album in 2013. But 2019 became the year that the rapper, singer, dancer, and flutist began to see the fruits of her labor blossom in the form of recognition by the mainstream entertainment industry. Most impressively, her 2017 single “Truth Hurts” became a sleeper hit, securing Lizzo a historic position as the first solo Black woman artist to hold a chart-topping spot since 2012, spending 33 weeks on the charts and tying for the longest-held record of a female rap solo artist at seven weeks – even two years after its initial release (Folk 2019; Trust 2019). Additionally, Lizzo’s 2016 song, “Good as Hell,” found a new audience in 2019, propelling it to spend seventeen weeks on the charts and peaking at number 3 (Billboard 2019). Further, Lizzo received countless industry accolades, including her nomination for Entertainer of the Year by Entertainment Weekly and New Artist of the Year by the American Music Awards, both in 2019.

Lizzo’s music emphasizes self-love and body positivity, rooted in navigating her own Black fat body. But the success of Lizzo’s earlier work is contrasted by the absence of her 2019 releases; the only single from her 2019 album *Cuz I Love You* to reach the Top 100 is the fat-positive dance track “Juice,” spending just four weeks and peaking at number 82 on the Billboard music charts. While “Truth Hurts” and “Good as Hell” are both thematically aligned with Lizzo’s larger public persona of body positivity and self-love that make her appealing to mainstream audiences, neither of the singles are as explicitly rooted in her own Black fat body as “Juice” is. Mirroring the selective engagement with Lizzo’s music and politics, and true to body positivity’s historic siphoning of identity and liberatory politics, Lizzo’s engagement by some activists typically focuses on her fatness at the expense of how her other embodied identities inform her political performance: specifically, her Black womanhood. In this article, we think through our own positionalities and stakes in this work, and map selections of Lizzo’s career in 2019 to demonstrate how her racialization and fat embodiment are intertwined in her performances, consequentially leading to the necessary coalitional approach that both body positivity and fat activism must adopt. Although fat activism and body positivity are not interchangeable movements – despite their close relation – we use them interchangeably to relay that both arenas of disrupting fatphobia need to necessarily center race in an effort to destabilize body hegemony at large.

## Naming where we stand: refusing the ruse of objectivity

If we were to consider what Georgiann Davis and Torisha Khonach offer us through their “paradox of positionality” (2020, 102), we may approach how positionality is inextricably tied to varying readings of Lizzo. In naming and theorizing the paradox of positionality, Davis and Khonach ask: “If we avoid feminist accountability to positionality and choose not to position ourselves in our research, are we thereby stabilizing claims of research objectivity? Are we possibly, albeit perhaps unintentionally, stigmatizing those who do position themselves in their analyses?” (2020, 102). Whereas non-feminist methods would advance that “objective” research pursuits are indicative of rigorous scholarship work, we situate ourselves in this work to eschew any pretenses of objectivity. Davis and Khonach (2020) name the dilemma of being a marginalized person conducting research on or writing about topics that are tied to their identities. We consider how the long tradition of Women of Color Feminisms broadly – and Black Feminism in particular – have identified researcher positionality within scholarship (Christian 1987; Johnson 2016; Lewis 2011). If we assume critical feminist perspectives, we can locate ourselves within this authorship in identifying our own stakes in doing this work. We can name what it means to both be differently racialized fat people of color in doing this work, and the spaces where our particular identities reveal our divergences.

As a Black queer fat feminist scholar, I (Mary) contend with my embodiment in any space I enter. How I am read and received is often bound within the limits of majoritarian perspectives. How non-Black fat audiences take up Lizzo is reflective of my own experiences with non-Black fat people in shared fat-positive spaces. Whether digitally or in person, the flattening of race and Blackness obscures the racialized fatphobia that I and many other Black fat people navigate. The calls for Lizzo to be a stand-in for all fat people reminds me of how often Black fat women and femmes are called upon to provide labor with no assurances that they will be met with reciprocal care. Here, we take up “femmes” as a queer gender that includes feminine trans and cis women, as well as feminine-of-center actors who are also subject to racial-gendered violence. Doing this work with a non-Black accomplice affords the space to practice what it can mean to name anti-Blackness explicitly, encourage a Black-centered fat praxis, and move toward sharing the labor of disrupting anti-Blackness with others.

As a fat queer of color performance scholar, I (Caleb) contend with how my non-Black Latinx racialization shapes my experience of both fatness and race in my ongoing attempts to act as an accomplice in Black liberation. I lend my voice with Mary to humbly model cross-racial coalitional liberatory thinking within fat embodiment, with the awareness that “when positionality statements are offered by those without a deep personal connection to the

marginalized communities they are writing about[,] the legitimacy of their work is strengthened, whereas it has the opposite [e]ffect for those with a more direct connection to the phenomena being stud[ied]” (Davis and Khonach 2020, 107). However, I push back against the implication that a non-Black location offers me objective distance, when anti-Blackness is what Christina Sharpe identifies as “the weather” for us all (2016, 102), further highlighting the necessity of non-Black fat activists to interrogate and integrate analyses of how anti-Blackness limits our imaginations.

Davis and Khonach (2020) suggest that fat studies may be a generative entry point in considering the utility of claiming positionality in work through the genealogy of standpoint theory. We take their perspectives and offer a point of praxis within this paradox. Yes, within research we must consider how our positions inform our questions, methods, and analyses. Yet, if we are to take on the call of The Combahee River Collective (1977) in not relegating identities to the margins, turn to the true utility of intersectionality as a way to read the world and not name a litany of marginalized identities (Crenshaw 1989, 1993), and attend to the nuances of racialized fatphobia (Williams 2017), then it would be not only possible but necessary to keep “the paradox of positionality” (Davis and Khonach 2020, 102) at the forefront not just in research, but in our engagements of media. Positionality is an added helpful tool that allows us to contend with the varying ways in which media socializes us and our engagement with it.

### **Black embodiment in fat studies**

While non-Black fat activists appear keen on identifying with Lizzo as a fat woman, their commitment to her dual status as a fat *and* Black woman and, especially, what that means for both her and fat activism, is less clear. On November 1, 2019, white author Jill Grunenwald published an essay on her Medium account titled, “Love Lizzo? Great. Now Start Loving the Other Fat People In Your Life, Too,” summing up quite well how Lizzo has been taken up by primarily non-Black fat activists: as a figurehead and a metric to compare the behavior toward and treatment of other fat people. The essay by Grunenwald uses Lizzo as a Trojan horse figure of inserting fat activism via body positivity into the mainstream conversation, and challenges nonfat embodied subjects who find themselves drawn to, reflecting on, and inspired by Lizzo to extend their fanaticism toward other fat people. This compulsion overshadows an important influence in Lizzo’s embodiment and message: namely, how being a Black fat woman is central to her performance and her activism. Black fat womanhood carries its own specific history that fat people who are not Black women do not share, and as such, fatness plus Black womanhood cannot be overlooked or separated from one another in comprising Lizzo’s identity.

There is no dearth of scholarship that considers fatness and Blackness together. As early as 2006, Andrea Shaw interrogated the resistance to and reformulation of Western beauty ideals that Black fat women embody. Shaw is clear in her argument that Black fat women pose a threat to Western norms of bodily ideals, and to coloniality itself, in resisting the racialized and gendered norms that colonialism imposes. Shaw posits, Black fat women's bodies are "unruly" and "disobedient" (2015, 9), and signify an oppositional stance against colonial logics. The Black fat female body is used to define not only acceptable Black femininity, but also white femininity, with Evelyn Hammonds suggesting that "The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of 'woman'" (1994, 1). Intimately tied to the project of colonization and demonstrative of white fears of corpulence, characterizations of the Black fat female body evince a racial hierarchy that depends on situating Black femininity as a distinct reversal and failure of white femininity (Forth 2012; Shaw 2015; Strings 2019). This raced and gendered position informed how white Europeans defined their own "civility" against the "primitivity" of Black and Indigenous peoples globally. Where European colonialists boasted of their own slender frames and capacity to "control" their appetites, and thus also capable of curbing "base" behaviors, colonial descriptions of the Global South since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries revealed aversion to and abhorrence of racialized fatness (Farrell 2011; Forth 2012; Strings 2019).

Sabrina Strings (2019) excavates the archives to produce a historical analysis of the rise of the thin ideal and the emergence of fat hatred as contextualized by anti-Blackness. Arguing the transatlantic slave trade and proliferation of Protestantism as the genesis from which colonialists and racist scientific assertions associated fatness with "greedy" Africans, Strings illuminates the extent to which fat hatred is inextricably tied to anti-Blackness (2019, 6, 84). While iterations of fat hatred had propagated through western Europe for over two centuries starting in the seventeenth century, within the United States during the nineteenth century the once distinct condemnations of fatness and religious and racialized others became intertwined "in the context of slavery, religious revivals, and the massive immigration of persons deemed 'part-Africanoid'" (Strings 2019, 6). Where prior works on the formation of fat hatred and the thin ideal treat these as separable phenomena, Strings (2019) argues that they are tied concepts that must be attributed to racialized fear. The Black fat woman's body became a specter for racial and religious fears of "excess" wherein the characterization of Blackness was deemed excessive to the national imaginary of U.S. racial identity. It is used to simultaneously reinforce the racial stratification of Black women and maintain control over white women, all the while producing thinness as inherent to the construction of whiteness, white beauty ideals, and central to white racial identity. In other words, through fatphobia, race brings up a multimethod approach of reifying

racial hierarchies through repressing Black people and Blackness itself as “savage,” while propagating “disciplined whiteness” (Strings 2019, 6). Given the centrality of Blackness and anti-Blackness to the historical formation of fatphobia, we argue that fat studies as an interdisciplinary field necessarily needs to center Blackness, and build upon Black studies and Black feminism. This article is a humble offering for a reimagined canon that does just that.

If fat hatred can be understood as a phenomenon through the language of race, it is critical to attend to the process by which Black people broadly and Black women specifically were made into “flesh” and deemed suitable for unfettered violences within the colonial imaginary. The violences of slavery that have been reproduced in various texts to provide evidence of subjection constitute the realities of bondage, with Hortense Spillers arguing “This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh – of female flesh ‘ungendered’ – offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations” (2003, 207). In particular, Spillers offers us the concept of pornotroting to further contextualize the nature of total objectification that befell Black people in bondage. Pornotroting as a visual process transforms person to flesh within the institution of slavery, wherein flesh is on display as a spectacle to bestow white viewers with an affirmation of their own autonomy (Chaney 2008; Spillers 2003). In creating a distinction between “body” and “flesh”, Spillers acutely describes the state of “total objectification” (2003, 206, 208) that victimizes captive bodies. Through that objectification, Black captive bodies are appropriated for the uses of medical experimentation, human zoos, or any other event that subjects them to whites’ use.

Pornotroting and its facilitation of violent voyeuristic engagements with Black bodies and sexualities figures heavily into the life of Saartjie Baartman and broader proliferations of Black women’s bodies as spectacle. Regarded as the “Hottentot Venus” both in life and after death, Baartman is identified as the most recognizable among the numerous Black women who were carted globally for display (Hobson 2005; Shaw 2006). Baartman was an Indigenous South African woman enslaved and taken to Europe in 1806, where she was displayed in human zoos in London and Paris until her untimely death in 1815 at age 26 (Strings 2019). She was among a large number of Black women facing atrocities in life and death, but her body came to be a signifier of the Black fat body as amoral. She was singled out as representing the entirety of Black people racially, sexually, and physically. Integral to Baartman’s status as indicative of the kind of “primitive” engagement in sensual pleasures that underscores the anti-Blackness of fatphobia was the spectacularizing of Baartman’s *derrière*, discursively produced as exceptionally abnormal against comorbid white standards of thinness, sensationalized and exploited by early race scientists to make arguments about the location of African populations on the “scales” of humanity (Farrell 2011; Strings 2019).



Nonetheless, her body shape was used as a template for fashionable European silhouettes. As relayed by Anne Mastamet-Mason, “where Saartjie Baartman’s body shape characterized by full breasts, narrow waist and extra-large buttocks was viewed by Europeans as ugly, yet later on, the same body, though not acknowledged, was used to inspire the creation of Victorian bustle dress that resembled her body in every aspect” (2014, 113). This mirrors the appropriation of Black esthetics by non-Black people that we continue to witness today. The marriage of fatness with Blackness, as evidenced in the trope of Black women and their imagined large posteriors, continues to circulate within and shape the popular white imagination.

### Reading Lizzo’s visual activism

As a Black fat musical artist, Lizzo’s presence is part of a lineage of Black fat women performers who have pushed back against the limiting paradigms of acceptable fat embodiment to express sexual desires and bodily autonomy (Shaw 2015; Davis 1999; Strings 2019). This genealogy of Black fat women’s embodiment stretches as far back as the early twentieth century, to blues singers Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, who were noted for not shying away from sexually charged lyrics, and includes contemporary icons of Black fat women empowerment Queen Latifah and Missy Elliot (Shaw 2015; Davis 1999). Rooting Lizzo in a distinct lineage of Black fat femme embodiment lends itself to two integral understandings of Lizzo as an individual and the broader context of anti-Black fatphobia: 1) we can contend with the fact that Lizzo’s intervention in a fatphobic world becomes flattened when consumed by nonfat and non-Black audiences especially at particular intersections, and 2) Lizzo’s reception illuminates both a racial past and present that necessitates the exploitation of Black fat women to assuage concerns about overabundance and falling out of the standards of white beauty. In short, fatphobia operates as a technology of anti-Blackness, wherein Lizzo’s visual and aural representation that affords a Black-centered fat-positive intervention is stripped down by an audience that is not yet ready, or rather does not intend, to *listen* to her and the lyrics of her songs as a call for disruption. Instead, these audiences find comfort in their own approximation of humanity effectively distancing themselves from the abjection Lizzo and other Black fat women and femmes navigate. Lizzo’s non-Black audiences do this by choosing to only engage her fatness, while ignoring how her Blackness shapes her performance of body positivity and, by extension, fatness.

Lizzo’s 2019 Video Music Awards (VMA) performance centers Black fat women’s bodies, esthetics, joy, and communal care in an industry that has historically derided or erased the contributions of artists who are fat, of color, and/or women. Performing a medley of her two biggest hits to date, “Truth Hurts” and “Good as Hell,” accompanying her onstage is a large inflated



structure featuring two larger-than-life spheres pushed together, painted golden brown and with an inverted triangle down the middle, meant to imitate, quite literally, a fat, Black posterior in a bikini. The air inside the structure gives it a constant motion, making it to look as if the ass behind her is perpetually bouncing in motion, evoking the West African dance style that has become known as twerking in contemporary U.S. culture. Lizzo shares the stage with dancers and singers who are exclusively Black women of various shades, shapes, sizes, and hairstyles, and who anchor the performance throughout.

Toward the end of her medley, Lizzo drinks from a dazzling bottle and breaks from singing to address the audience directly in a speech: “Let me talk to y’all for a second. I’m tired of the bullshit. And I don’t have to know your story to know that you’re tired of the bullshit, too. It’s so hard trying to love yourself in a world that doesn’t love you back, am I right?” The audience cheers, and Lizzo continues: “So I want to take this opportunity right now to just feel good as hell. Because you deserve to feel good as hell! We,” gesturing to the stage of Black women dancers and singers behind her, “deserve to feel good as hell! So tell me how you’re feeling!” She then leads the crowd in a self-hype moment, challenging them: “On your bad days, how you feeling? (*good as hell*); On your good days, how you feeling? (*good as hell*); And when you’re down on your knees (*good as hell*); when it hurts so bad (*good as hell*); when you don’t know what to do, you got nobody else! (*good as hell*).” Presently, Lizzo intervenes in a room hosting an audience of voyeurs who may share one or two of her identities, but occupy largely none of them. Her insertion of Black fat women’s talent in a predominantly nonfat space and joyous centering of Black fat women is starkly contrasted by the largely white and thin audience members to whom the camera pans, with the important exception of fellow Black fat performer and icon Queen Latifah.

Further, Lizzo’s interventional speech interpellated an audience, with varying levels of embodied privilege to which she does not have access, into the same or similar struggles she faces, strategically flattening this difference in the ephemeral space of the performance, while simultaneously highlighting her mainstream appeal. In a historical moment of increasing emphasis or awareness of body positivity, Lizzo’s messaging appeals to a wide audience that likely has little to no critical analysis of how histories of anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and fat stigma have disciplined the majority of people into negative self-image, bordering on self-hatred. Lizzo speaks from the multiply oppressed standpoint of a Black fat woman: the figure that Strings (2019) and Shaw (2015) have brought to the surface as the embodiment against which contemporary white supremacist beauty politics have been constructed, and on which the entertainment industry was subsequently built. But her messaging raises questions of audience, intent, and awareness – particularly for fans

of Lizzo who are non-Black, nonfat, and especially those who are neither. The consumption of Lizzo's art, performance, music, and messaging in a unidirectional, uncritical manner exposes many gaps. Her performance is undoubtedly subversive and impactful. It also opens up questions of the condition under which her body is allowed to perform without consequence from a majoritarian audience.

Contending with Baartman as an integral historical figure in the coalescence of anti-Black fat hatred, we must consider in what ways Lizzo's presence is subject to voyeurism from an audience that includes those who are dissimilar to her. In December 2019, Lizzo sat courtside at the Los Angeles Lakers basketball game wearing a long black t-shirt dress, tights, and heeled boots with her hair styled in a high ponytail. As the Laker girls performed a choreographed dance to Lizzo's "Juice," Lizzo stood up to dance along while cameras fixated on her reaction to the performance. Dancing and singing along joyously, Lizzo turned her back to the cameras to show that her t-shirt dress featured a cutout over her posterior revealing a matching black thong (Moore 2019). The seconds-long twerking moment on the big screen elicited varying reactions both in the moment and over the course of several days that relayed both joy in her act and displeasure with the moment (Moore 2019).

The racial past/present of Black fat bodies as spectacle arises in this moment where Lizzo's reclamation of her body is contested by a general public that refuses to acknowledge the agency of highlighting her body as she pleases. Lizzo's fat activism is not only apparent in her aural presence, but is also evident in the material fact of her body as simultaneously Black + fat + woman. Centuries into our obsession with the racialized thin ideal, Lizzo's public act of showing off her posterior performs a disruption to these cultural norms that opposes both the historical and contemporary reality of Black fat women's bodies as voyeuristic oddities for non-Black and nonfat audiences, highlighting the refusal to be made a desexualized subject in contrast to the idealized white thin standard of the Laker girls. Although some responses criticized Lizzo for revealing her thong at a "family-friendly" event – despite the presence of Laker girls who consistently wear revealing clothing – a considerable amount of responses revealed public dismay with Black fat women on a much broader level (Moore 2019).

### **Lizzo's complex negotiation**

"I say this on-stage to everybody: 'I'm not gonna sell you the commercialized self-love. I'm not gonna sell you the hashtag self-care. I'm not into that. I feel a responsibility as a pioneer in this wave of body positivity to push the narrative further'" (Lizzo quoted in Stephens 2019). Recognizing her public designation as a body positive activist, Lizzo reassured fans during both live

performances and on Instagram live videos that her work would not reflect simplified, capitalist messages of engaging in body positivity. This assurance comes following her brush with disappointed fans just a year earlier. In a thirty-second advertisement for Weight Watchers' rebrand to WW International, short scenes of people of various genders are engaged in happy moments of running, surfing, trying on clothing, and other such activities. As the scenes flash across the screen, each person is denoted with an "accomplishment." In one scene, "Jordan is ready for 'I do'." He looks at himself in the mirror as he tries on a tuxedo, smiling back at his image with "- 49 lbs" written just underneath his descriptor. Flashing to another scene, "Kendra discovered her voice," with Kendra, a Black actress formerly typecast by her weight now backlit standing upon a stage in a large theater, arms stretched overhead and seemingly proclaiming victory to the audition panel and/or fellow "tryouts." Her weight loss, too, is denoted with "- 83 lbs" underneath this statement. These scenes are set to the tune of Lizzo's "Worship," with lyrics such as "I feel like fire/I feel like rain," "Ooh, I'm lit/ Don't mess with me," and "And baby worship me/Worship me/On your knees/Patiently, quietly, faithfully," providing the soundtrack to these images glorifying weight loss.

While fans expressed their displeasure at the implicit endorsement of weight loss by the musician in a commercial that is at odds with the aims of body positivity, in an Instagram live video (2019), Lizzo relayed that she is "still learning" and in this work we "do not cancel people." Although she apologizes to her fans for the misstep of lending her vocals to praise weight loss, Lizzo's speaking back to fans does more to resituate our expectations of not only public "activists," but Black activists in particular that surfaces with a deeper reading. While there are certainly and inevitably intracommunity critiques, the consistency with which non-Black people feel comfortable lambasting Black women cannot be overstated. Where missteps are expected of all people as we engage in unlearning and relearning, expectations fall on people differently. Lizzo's insistence that we not dispose of her not only asks fans to contend with her as a human being who makes mistakes, but also calls into question how we approach Black women broadly in the larger context of liberation. Whether this reading is apparent to non-Black- and especially non-Black fat audiences who are otherwise quick to align themselves and identify with the artist, is still to be determined. However, Lizzo's complex negotiation as a public figure committed to body positivity and an artist who wants to succeed within the larger entertainment industry raises important considerations for how fat liberation must be approached with nuanced understandings, and especially how Black fat women have historically been engaged as standards for others' pleasure.

Noted by Patricia Hill Collins (2014) as one of the first controlling images of Black women in the United States, the image of the Mammy is not a distant

visual signifier of imposed Black subordination, but rather shapeshifts over time, melding to the sociopolitical wills of white supremacy to reinscribe Black femininity as Other, and Black fat bodies as indispensable only insofar as they are of utility to non-Black and nonfat people. The Mammy, with her large fat body, covered hair, dark skin, and domestic servitude appeases white concerns of Black female hypersexuality that threatens to entice white men away from white women by divesting Black women of their sexual agency (Shaw 2015). In cultural texts such as *Gone with the Wind*, Mammy is depicted as happily serving her white “family,” her entire existence entangled with her white employers’ expectations of her, rendering her incapable of having an inner life, given her domestic responsibilities. Mammy is depicted as not being concerned with her own happiness, goals, or life outside of servitude, and not being bothered by this lack. A visual referent to the “happy darky,” Mammy is of complete utility and expresses no aspirations of her own. This servile position has been imposed on Black women and Black fat women in particular ad infinitum. Within an anti-Black world, Black women and femmes are demanded to perform various types of labor, whether it be physical, domestic, or the often-overlooked emotional labor.

Lizzo’s presence as a Black fat body-positive activist evinces the necessity to consider how her calls for self-love take on different meanings when broadcast to non-Black and nonfat audiences. In a cropped shot of her shoulders and head, set against a gray background, her hair brushed into a side-sweeping pompadour and holding a soft gaze with parted lips, Lizzo meets the gaze of readers on *Allure* magazine’s first cover of the year in March 2019. Lizzo is pictured in this cover image gently cupping her hands around both her name and a message seemingly intended for all, “If you can love me, you can love yourself.” A phrase meant to elicit self-love in a time of persistent affronts to marginalized bodies would suggest that those who have been siloed because of their fat embodiment are deserving of the love they show Lizzo. However, what does it mean to impose onto Lizzo the burden of alleviating *all* people’s fears of fatness and subsequent love for their bodies? And more specifically, how do we negotiate the racial past/present that emerges from such a burden? Within the cultural reality where Black fat femmes are placed in the position of emotional caretaking for non-Black and nonfat people, the work that this statement does is troubling. “Mammification” is woefully ever-present and audiences’ taking a liking to this statement only further reifies U.S. culture’s comfort with Black fat women in servile positions – faithful to a longer genealogy of extractive orientations to Black embodied subjects and Blackness generally under racial capitalism.

Non-Black and/or nonfat body-positive activists are especially susceptible to engaging with Lizzo’s self-love and self-empowerment messaging without considering them in a genealogy of a Black feminist ethos of love and care, sidestepping the necessary engagement with Black feminist political thought entirely.

How does this knowledge shift the target and practice of loving Lizzo? bell hooks defines “love as an action rather than a feeling,” a practice of “openly and honestly express[ing] care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust” (2000, 13–14). With this understanding of love, what it means to *love* someone – be it another person or oneself – requires intention and, in the case of Lizzo as a Black woman, historical context. In 1977, a cohort of Black feminists writing collaboratively as the Combahee River Collective posited “the only people who *care* enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy *love* for ourselves, our sisters and our community” (emphasis ours, para. 9.). For the Collective, their practice of love and care for themselves and other Black women necessitated the centering of their lives in a practice of political struggle – because no one else did so. Thus, when Lizzo is expressing love for herself, she is doing it in a genealogy of Black women who have struggled for freedom that extends beyond the Combahee River Collective both historically and contemporarily, often without the support of those who are not Black women. This is the history that contextualizes Lizzo’s activism, that offers a framework to integrate fat activism into the activism for the liberation of Black women. This is the “further” of body positivity that Lizzo pushes us toward in the statement that opens this section.

Yet, there are aspects of Lizzo’s personhood that continue to be overlooked. The failure to seriously engage what it means to be a fan of Lizzo, to *love* Lizzo, in the context of global anti-Blackness continues to be prevalent amongst audiences that have yet to think seriously about her Blackness. Thinking of Lizzo’s activist work as a performance of Black feminism shifts the focus of her statement from non-Black people loving *ourselves* to us loving Black women including, but definitely not limited to, Lizzo. It also requires we heed the call of bell hooks to understand that loving is an *action*, an act of liberation. The Combahee River Collective wrote that “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (1977, para. 19) – including fatphobia. However, the liberation of Black women needs to also extend *beyond* fatphobia. As Audre Lorde elaborates on the interconnectedness of our struggles, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you” (2007, 132–133). Black feminism has always pushed forward a praxis of interconnectedness and collaboration in the struggle for collective liberation. Rather than being too quick to align our shared struggles as fat people, this intersectional analysis is the framework that non-Black fat activists who admire, praise, and love Lizzo need to adopt. Riffing on the title of Grunenwald’s essay, we challenge non-Black woman readers: Love Lizzo? Great. Now start loving the other Black women in your life, too.

## Conclusion: what Lizzo means for fat activism

This commitment to shared struggle was integrated into the Fat Liberation Manifesto, and was undoubtedly influenced by its Black feminist contemporaries. Authored in 1973 by Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, the third point reads, “WE see our struggle as allied with the struggles of other oppressed groups against classism, racism, sexism, ageism, financial exploitation, imperialism[,] and the like” (para. 3). When interviewed by Charlotte Cooper, Freespirit insists “that many of the early fat feminists were civil rights activists in the U.S.[,] and fat activism owes a debt to that movement[,] as well as contemporary global struggles for self-determination and anti-colonialism” (2016, 180–181). Due to the integrity of Black feminists to the civil rights movement, Black feminism has undoubtedly influenced fat activism from its inception. This historical forgetting of fat activists’ radical, global lens is part and parcel of body positivity’s gentrification.

Out of the shared genealogy of Black feminism and fat activism, we assert the possibility to generate a Black-centered fat liberation that is not dependent on opposition to whiteness or focused on majoritarian aspirations, but one that rests on, as queer of color theorist José Esteban Muñoz asks, “an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009, 1). To truly enact this world, non-Black fat activists must not claim Lizzo at face value, as a mere fat activist and icon, while comfortably overstepping the racial past and present alive in the Mammification of Lizzo. When theorizing and analyzing fat embodiment, we must consider the ways that anti-Black racism has informed stereotypes of fat stigma. To engage with the abjection of fat embodiment as a tentacle of anti-Blackness means we must tend to the shared histories of abjection while never escaping the differences – and especially privileges – of non-Black personhood. But more than *understanding*, all of us, and especially non-Black fat activists, must integrate analyses of anti-Blackness into their frameworks. In doing so, we must understand that fat stigma cannot be overcome until Black women are free. Just as fat liberation requires our collaboration, so too does Black liberation.

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