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Eat Your Heart Out: Sexuality, Race, and Rape in Roxane Gay's *Hunger*

In her raw and illuminating memoir *Hunger*: *A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017),[1] Roxane Gay recounts the multifaceted oppression she faces as a fat Black woman navigating a society that shames and disables her body.[2] Gay's memoir explores the traumatic events that triggered her downward spiral into the soft folds and plush curves she embraced as a defensive buffer between her body and the looming threat of male violence. In the opening pages of *Hunger*, Gay expresses candidly, "I began eating to change my body.[3] I was willful in this. Some boys had destroyed me, and I barely survived it. I knew I wouldn't be able to endure another such violation, and so I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away."[4] As a young girl, Gay is happy and thin. She is raised in a wholesome, middle-class, Haitian family. A "*good* Catholic girl," her life takes a drastic turn when, at the age of 12, she is raped by a boy she trusts.[5] In brief, she falls in love with a classmate who ignores her in public and objectifies her in private. At the time, Gay clings to the belief that the boy shares her amorous feelings. One day while riding bikes through the woods, they arrive at a secluded cabin where the boy, eager to impress his friends, boasts about his sexual escapades. Thereafter, the gang holds her down and violently rapes her one after another. Gay describes, "I wasn't a girl to them. I was a thing, flesh and girl bones with which they could amuse themselves."[6] In the end, what is meant to be a leisurely outing in nature ultimately casts dark shadows over her life. She secretly carries the pain of her trauma for decades, which gradually develops into insatiable physical and emotional hunger. Gay expresses, "The story of my life is wanting, hungering, for what I cannot have or, perhaps, wanting what I dare not allow myself to have."[7] As a ravenous adolescent, her desperate need to build a fortress of flesh profoundly affects the trajectory of her life.

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[1] Roxane Gay, *Hunger*: *A Memoir of (My) Body* (HarperCollins, 2017), Kindle.

[2] Throughout this paper I will mainly describe Roxane Gay as "fat," as opposed to using euphemistic terms such as "plump" or "heavy." In *Hunger*, Gay establishes that she would like others to refer to her as fat: "They will say things like, 'Don't say that about yourself,' because they understand 'fat' as something shameful, something insulting, while I understand 'fat' as a reality of my body." She continues, "It's insulting to think I am somehow unaware of my physical appearance. And it's insulting to assume that I am ashamed of myself for being fat, no matter how close to the truth that might be." (Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 58). In essence, in this paper I respect the terminology Gay uses to describe herself.

[3] In the same vein as Gay, many large people prefer to be described as "fat" as opposed to the medical terms "obese" or "overweight". For example, Bianca Wilson highlights, "I used the term fat to refer to anyone who sees themselves as larger, heavier, or rounder than average, as well as to refer to the population of people who are categorized as "overweight" or "obese" according to medical guidelines (which change periodically)." See Bianca D. M. Wilson, "Widening the Dialogue to Narrow the Gap in Health Disparities," *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), pp. 54-64 (p. 54), Kindle ed.

[4] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 4.

[5] Ibid., ch. 11.

[6] Ibid., ch. 11.

[7] Ibid., ch. 51.

In examining this narrative, my analysis of *Hunger* is situated within the context of Literary and Cultural Studies and applies an intersectional feminist critique. Inherently interdisciplinary, this approach interweaves the theories of Judith Butler and Audre Lorde with the frameworks of Fat Studies and feminist disability theory. In this paper I argue that Gay's mobilization of the memoir functions as a formal and rhetorical strategy to resist the simultaneous marginalization of race, sexuality, and body size, transforming the private trauma of sexual violence into a public, systemic indictment of white-centric patriarchal demands for feminine "smallness." My analysis relies upon Butler's theory of gender performativity to interpret Gay's body as a subversive, political act and engages with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's Social Model of Disability to frame her marginalization as systemic disablement.

Performing Gender: The Unruly Body and the Heterosexual Matrix

The root of Gay's disablement–and her subsequent shattering of gender norms–lies in the aftermath of the assault, where her weight dramatically increases as she grapples with her psychological wounds via compulsive eating. Gay's fluctuating weight is inextricably linked to her evolving sexuality. As she confesses, "Sometimes, I get so angry when I think about how my sexuality has been shaped. I get angry that I can draw a direct line between the first boy I loved, the boy who made me into the girl in the woods, and the sexual experiences I have had since."[8] This trauma-shaped sexuality, in turn, profoundly influences her relationships. As a young woman, she is terrified of traditional masculinity, so she seeks safety in a loveless relationship with a gentle older man. Thereafter, her exploration of lesbian partners, while at first promising, ultimately yields a series of fleeting connections driven by a yearning for love and safety. Subsequently, Gay's exploration of her bisexuality sows a fruitless field of desire and self-doubt. Following these futile romances, Gay enters into a toxic relationship with a sadistic cisgender man who is emotionally abusive. Crucially, this paper examines the intricate correlation between Gay's sexuality, relationships, and struggles with disordered eating, including cycles of binge-eating, bulimia, and restrictive diets.

From an early age, Gay perceives that society values women for being silent and slim–traits that are pleasing to the patriarchy: "This is what most girls are taught–that we should be slender and small. We should not take up space. We should be seen and not heard, and if we are seen, we should be pleasing to men, acceptable to society."[9] Following Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, these traits are not expressions of an internal identity but are the compulsory, repeated bodily acts–the performativity–that constitute the legible category of "woman" within the dominant social order. Butler states explicitly that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."[10] Lorde highlights that white women conform to these traditional ideals as a form of survival: "[I]t is easier once again for white women to believe the dangerous fantasy that if you are good enough, pretty enough, sweet enough, quiet enough…and marry the right men, then you will be able to coexist with patriarchy in relative peace…."[11] As a child, Gay describes herself as "pretty and sometimes sweet."[12] But in the

[8] Ibid., ch. 71.
[9] Ibid., ch. 4.
[10] Judith Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," *Gender Trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Taylor and Francis e-library, 2002), pp. 101-180 (p. 179).
[11] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Sister Outsider*: *Essays and Speeches* (1984; repr., Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 107-116 (p. 112), Kindle.
[12] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 10.

aftermath of the rape violently inflicted upon her body, she understands that it is not enough for her to avoid patriarchal backlash by assuming traditionally feminine physical qualities: Black women, Lorde notes, quickly learn that their lives are "stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest."[13] Because Gay discerns that sitting pretty will not protect her slight Black body, she willfully expands to 577 pounds, an act that functions as a radical refusal of this compulsory feminine performativity. And while she is no longer thin–she is silent. Yet, unlike the "good girl", she destructively sets out to deter the male gaze. In turn, however, she is misgendered for the way she expresses femininity. Men overlook her visibly voluptuous breasts and address her as "Sir" because of her size, race, and hairstyle. Gay points out that "Black women are rarely allowed their femininity."[14] Patriarchal society's narrow view of femininity leaves no room for Gay's *doing* of gender. Her body becomes illegible within the social framework Butler terms the Heterosexual Matrix,[15] which demands what Butler describes as "relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire."[16] By disrupting the Matrix with her size, Gay is subjected to social misrecognition and de-gendering. In turn, she perceives that women cannot de-sexualize their bodies without men stripping them of their womanhood too.

As time passed, Gay remained tongue-tied about the trauma she experienced at the hands of the boy in the woods. Although she could not openly discuss the disturbing abuse she bore, her body expressed the fear, shame, and anger that she dared not utter in spoken word; consequently, her once thin and obedient body grew steadily larger. Binge-eating became Gay's preferred form of relief.[17] Her eating disorder narrative, however, complicates research outcomes that explore overarching differences in the binge-eating disorders of white women compared to Black women. Kathleen M. Pike and colleagues maintain that binge-eating disorder is more prevalent among minority ethnic groups, concluding that Black women who suffer from binge-eating disorder are less likely than white women to also develop bulimia nervosa. They suggest that this discrepancy is related to "cultural differences in concerns about weight and shape."[18] Such clinical perspectives, however, fail to account for the systemic burdens of marginalization.

Systemic Hunger: The Intersection of Race, Trauma, and Disordered Eating in Women

More recent intersectional research by Rachael Holly and Danielle Dickens demonstrates that binge-eating in Black women is not primarily due to simplistic "cultural differences," but is instead significantly associated with chronic stress resulting from gendered racism. This critical lens frames compulsive eating not as a psychological flaw, but as a direct behavioral response to the continuous, intersecting violence of sexism and racism. They explain:

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[13] Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," p. 112.

[14] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 75.

[15] For an overview of the Heterosexual Matrix, see Judith Butler, "Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix," *Gender Trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Taylor and Francis e-library, 2002), pp. 45-91.

[16] Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," *Gender Trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Taylor and Francis e-library, 2002), pp. 3-33 (p. 23).

[17] Some characteristics of binge-eating include eating a large amount of food within a short period of time, feeling a lack of control during the period of eating, eating more quickly than usual, eating to the point of discomfort, eating excessively even when one is not hungry, eating alone to avoid feelings of embarrassment, and feeling shame or depression after eating large amounts of food. For a comprehensive overview of binge-eating disorder, see American Psychiatric Association, *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), pp. 174-5.

[18] Kathleen M. Pike et al., "A Comparison of Black and White Women with Binge Eating Disorder," *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 158.9 (2001), pp. 1455-1460 (p. 1459). doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.158.9.1455.

Gendered racism refers to discrimination based on gender and racial identity, which is a common experience for many Black women. To cope with gendered racism, Black women may utilize behaviors that are associated with adverse mental health outcomes known as maladaptive coping. Examples of maladaptive coping include disordered eating, like binge eating and emotional eating.[19]

Gay's experiences must be viewed against this backdrop of compounded, gendered racial stress. She does not merely eat to excess; she eventually–although briefly–develops bulimia. This challenges Pike et al.'s generalization that cultural factors insulate Black women from body image pressures. As a young woman in an abusive relationship with a fatphobic partner, Gay becomes acutely concerned about body image as she struggles to conform to dominant societal ideals.

While Pike and colleagues recognize the limitations of their study, noting that further research needs to be done to explore "the relationship between race, degree of acculturation, socioeconomic status, and eating disorders,"[20] they neglect to explore the connection between the abuse of women and eating disorders. Their salient oversight of this integral factor reflects a reluctance among some scholars to examine the pervasive reality of male-perpetrated violence against women. Understandably, it has become standard practice for mental health professionals to examine eating disorder patients' experiences of abuse at the hands of men. Nicole Moulding underscores that "[s]exual abuse has been widely identified as higher in women diagnosed with eating disorders since the mid-1980s, with higher rates of physical abuse also increasingly recognized over this period."[21] More recently, Lily Bellehumeur-Béchamp and colleagues have offered a poignant explanation for how early violations–such as the one Gay endured in the woods–alter a survivor's trajectory. They note that when a child's "environment is disrupted by trauma or maltreatment, emotional regulation may fail to develop properly," a rupture that directly "contribut[es] to the development of disordered eating behaviors."[22] Indeed, Gay's narrative powerfully demonstrates the profound impact of abuse on the development of eating disorders and, as such, it is a crucial factor to consider when examining the roots of one's erratic relationship to food.

As discussed, Gay was abused and betrayed by a boy she trusted, a disheartening yet common narrative in Western society and the world today. Women are more likely to be battered by a person they know than by a stranger.[23] Angela J. Hattery emphasizes that "[i]ntimate partner violence (IPV) is an epidemic in the contemporary United States; a quarter (25%) of all women report at least one act of violence at the hands of their intimate partner."[24] Although abuse of women by men is pervasive, Black women are more often the target of male abuse than white women: "[They] disproportionately experience violence at home, at school, on the job, and in their neighborhoods."[25] Even as children, Black women experience slightly higher rates of sexual abuse than white women. Numbers are likely

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[19] Rachael Holly and Danielle Dickens, "Exploring the Relationship Between Gendered Racism, Identity Centrality, and Binge-Eating Symptoms Among Black Women," *Graduate Student Journal of Psychology*, 23 (2024), pp. 19-32 (p. 19).

[20] Pike et al., "A Comparison," pp. 1459-60.

[21] Nicole Moulding, "'It Wasn't About Being Slim': Understanding Eating Disorders in the Context of Abuse," *Violence Against Women.* Sage Journals, 21.12 (2015), pp. 1456-1480 (p. 1456). doi: 10.1177/1077801215596243.

[22] Lily Bellehumeur-Béchamp et al.,"From Childhood Interpersonal Trauma to Binge Eating in Adults: Unraveling the Role of Personality and Maladaptive Regulation," *Nutrients*, 16.24 (2024), pp. 1-13 (p. 2). doi:10.3390/nu16244427.

[23] Ángel Castro et al., "Childhood Sexual Abuse, Sexual Behavior, and Revictimization in Adolescence and Youth: A Mini Review," *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10 (2019), pp. 1-5 (p. 2). doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02018.

[24] Angela J. Hattery, "Sexual Abuse in Childhood–Intimate Partner Violence in Adulthood–Struggles for African American and White Women," *Race, Gender & Class*, 16.1 (2009), pp. 194-217 (p.195). jstor.org/stable/41658868.

[25] Susan Green, "Violence Against Black Women–Many Types, Far-Reaching Effects," *Institute for Women's Policy Research*, 2017. iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/race-ethnicity-gender-and-economy/violence- against-black-women-many-types-far-reaching-effects/ [accessed 1 Sept. 2020].

higher than those documented because Black families are less likely to report abuse to authorities as a result of their lack of trust in police and social service organizations.[26] As Lorde highlights, "The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences."[27] Black women are oppressed in different and deeper ways than white women.

Significantly, child abuse is a strong predictor of binge-eating and obesity in adulthood. Victims of childhood sexual abuse are prone to food obsession and binge-eating. Olga Khazan elucidates that "[they] willfully put on weight to desexualize, in the hope that what happened to them as children will never happen again."[28] Jennie G. Noll and colleagues suggest that adults who suffer from severe childhood abuse are apt to be significantly heavier than adults who experience milder forms of childhood abuse. Crucially, sexual abuse has been associated with binge-eating disorder,[29] described as "a comorbid condition evident in obese adults."[30] Consequently, because childhood sexual abuse is linked to binge-eating disorder and Black girls are abused at higher rates than white girls, Black women are more likely to be "overweight."[31] The prevalence of fatness among Black survivors, however, does not lead to increased support. On the contrary, it renders them targets of a discriminatory medical gaze that frequently invalidates their pain.

The Racial Politics of Diagnosis: Anorexia, Binge-Eating, and the Medical Gaze

Sufficient medical attention often hinges on the social value of the sufferer. Problematically, as Gay illustrates, in most societies fat bodies matter less. This devaluation is deep-seated in Western culture. Amy Farrell traces the history of fat shame, noting that fatness has long been stigmatized as a sign of "uncivilized" behavior and a lack of self-control, distinguishing the "primitive" body from the "civilized" thin body.[32] Laurie Stoll argues that this creates a cycle where fatness must be understood not merely as a health or aesthetic concern, but as a critical human rights concern. She emphasizes that "fat *is* a feminist issue, but it is also fundamentally a *social justice* issue that continues to intersect with other systems of inequality like gender, race, and class in very problematic ways. For example, fat women are stigmatized more than fat men in U.S. society, and the fattest women are penalized the

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[26] Maryann Amodeo et al., "Childhood Sexual Abuse Among Black Women and White Women from Two-Parent Families," *Child Maltreatment*, 11.3 (2006), pp. 237-45. doi: 0.1177/1077559506289186.

[27] Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," *Sister Outsider*: *Essays and Speeches* (1984; repr., Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 57-61 (p. 61), Kindle.

[28] Olga Khazan, "The Second Assault," *The Atlantic*, 2015. theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/12/sexual-abuse-victims-obesity/420186/ [accessed 1 Dec. 2020].

[29] It is important to highlight that the words "obese" or "morbidly obese"–medical terminology–are not supported by fat feminist advocates. Marilyn Wann highlights that "[t]he federal government, health insurers, medical doctors…–each alleged authority draws its own line between fat and thin, does so at different weights, and may redraw the line at any time. For example, a Blue Cross of California health insurance underwriter admitted to me in 2003 that the company's weight limit for people it deems "morbidly obese" (and thus uninsurable) had changed six times in the preceding decade." See Marilyn Wann, "Foreword: Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution," *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), Kindle ed.

[30] Jennie G. Noll et al., "Obesity Risk for Female Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Prospective Study," *Pediatrics*, 120.1 (2007), pp. e61-e67 (p.e62). doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-3058.

[31] The term "overweight" is not supported by the fat feminist community. Wann underscores that " '[o]verweight' is inherently anti-fat. It implies an extreme goal: instead of a bell curve distribution of human weights, it calls for a lone, towering, unlikely bar graph with everyone occupying the same (thin) weights." (Wann, "Foreword," *Fat Studies*).

[32] Amy Erdman Farrell, "Fat and the Un-Civilized Body," *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), pp. 70-93.ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pensu/detail.action?docID=865462.

most." [33] The systemic discrimination in healthcare that Stoll describes (e.g., doctors who fat shame patients) mirrors Gay's experience of navigating a world designed to exclude her.[34] She compares the plight of a skinny individual with anorexia to that of a fat person who binge-eats: "My rage is often silent because no one wants to hear fat-girl stories of taking up too much space and still finding nowhere to fit. People prefer the stories of the too-skinny girls who starve themselves and exercise too much and are gray and gaunt and disappearing in plain sight."[35] It is telling that *anorexographies*, typically authored by white women, are ubiquitous while autobiographies that focus on binge-eating are scarce. Indeed, this discrepancy is likely linked to the fact that anorexic bodies, although often emaciated and impaired, are more in line with female gender norms. Feminist disability theorist Garland-Thomson underscores that "[d]epression, anorexia, and agoraphobia are female-dominant, psychophysical disabilities that exaggerate normative gendered roles."[36] Hence, anorexic bodies arguably benefit from their normative femininity.[37] As Marya Hornbacher puts it in her autobiography *Wasted* (1997): "A strange equation, and an altogether too-common belief: One's worth is exponentially increased with one's incremental disappearance."[38] In essence, while fat bodies are frequently ridiculed, thin ones are typically idolized, as in the case of American model Edie Sedgwick, "It Girl" of the '60s. It is no secret that while bulimic bodies often go unrecognized, the fashion and advertising industries largely iconize anorexic bodies. Hornbacher highlights that "bulimics do not usually bear the hallowed stigmata of a skeletal body. Their self-torture is private, far more secret and guilty than is the visible statement of anorectics, whose whittled bodies are admired as the epitome of feminine beauty."[39] One of the most revered anorexic models, Kate Moss, went so far as to boast about her thinness: "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels."[40] Her mantra was quickly adopted by the pro-anorexia community.[41] To an extent, even Gay falls prey to dominant ideals–as she too venerates the anorexic body:

> There is something about gaunt faces and sharply angled bodies of anorexic girls that at once attracts and repulses me. I wonder what holds their bodies together. I envy the way their flesh is stretched taut against their brittle bones. I envy the way their clothes hang listlessly from their bodies, as if they aren't even being worn but, rather, floating–a veritable vestment halo rewarding their thinness. [42]

Although Gay acknowledges the extreme measures anorexic girls must take to achieve thinness, she nevertheless applauds their determination: "They have the commitment to do what it takes to have the bodies they want."[43] Yet, she simultaneously despises a society that shames fat bodies and encourages women to wither away in order to satisfy impossible standards. It is noteworthy that higher rates of white women suffer from anorexia than Black women who, as discussed, more commonly struggle

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[33] Laurie C. Stoll, "Fat Is a Social Justice Issue, Too," *Humanity & Society*, 43.4 (2019), pp. 421–441 (p. 428). doi.org/10.1177/0160597619832051.
[34] Ibid., p. 428.
[35] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 55.
[36] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," *NWSA Journal*, 14.3 (2002), pp.1-32 (p. 17).
[37] Ibid., p. 17.
[38] Marya Hornbacher, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* (1997; repr., HarperCollins, 2006), p. 4, Kindle.
[39] Ibid., p. 153.
[40] Kate Moss, "Kate Moss: The Waif That Roared," interviewed by Brid Costello, *Women's Wear Daily*, 13 Nov. 2009. beauty-industry-news/beauty-features/kate-moss-the-waif-that-roared-2367932/ [accessed 21 January 2023].
[41] Alexandra Topping, "Kate Moss's Motto Give Comfort to 'Pro-Anorexic' Community," *The Guardian*, 20 Nov. 2009. theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/nov/20/kate-moss-motto-pro-anorexic/ [accessed 15 January 2023].
[42] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 55.
[43] Ibid., ch. 55.

with binge-eating, a disorder linked to "obesity."[44] Thus, the marked difference in the quantity of texts published about thin women compared to those published about fat ones echoes the status quo: the lives of white women matter more.

While the medical community marginalizes fat Black women's mental health struggles, the legal system mirrors this delegitimization in its treatment of the abuse inflicted upon them. In her memoir, Gay does not explicitly detail the plethora of reasons for which a person of her profile–a fat, Black, bisexual woman–might feel discouraged from reporting her perpetrator to authorities. However, it is telling that even as an adult Gay has not revealed the name of her abuser. Some scholars suggest that this silence is often systemic rather than incidental. Shaquita Tillman et al. argue that African American women face unique barriers to disclosure, specifically the pressure to uphold the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype and a sense of cultural obligation to protect Black men from a legal system that historically mistreats them.[45] Furthermore, Brittany Slatton and April Richard emphasize that Black women are frequently excluded from the category of the ideal victim to which white women belong, often forced to navigate stereotypes that hypersexualize them, thereby reducing their credibility when they do attempt to disclose assault: "Black women's delegitimization as victims means they are less likely to be believed and therefore become targets of officers who sexually victimize. These experiences make it difficult for Black women to trust law enforcement and hesitant to disclose sexual victimization to them."[46] Just as Black women are excluded from the category of the "ideal victim," fat women are similarly stripped of credibility. Until recently, they were sometimes treated as so insignificant that even authorities cast their rape cases aside. Tracy Royce notes that the authorities do not always take the sexual abuse cases of fat women seriously: "Law enforcement officials, charged with upholding hard-won laws protecting women from physical and sexual violence, may revictimize rather than rescue fat women. Fat women who have been sexually assaulted have disclosed that police officers have refused to take their reports and ridiculed them as insufficiently attractive to rape."[47] It can be surmised that fat women who are victims of sexual abuse sometimes consider it futile to seek help in institutions traditionally deemed safe spaces.

Gay's silence, therefore, must be understood as a response to a double bind: she is stripped of credibility by her size, yet rendered hyper-visible and vulnerable by her race. As Lorde poignantly points out, this "distortion of vision" is central to the Black female experience:

> Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness.[48]

This paradox of visibility places Gay in a precarious position upon which, Lorde argues, capitalism hinges: "Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people."[49] Consequently, the cutting reality for Black women is that they

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[44] See, for example, Ruth H. Striegel-Moore et al., "Eating Disorders in White and Black Women," *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 160.7 (2003), pp. 1326-1331. doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.160.7.1326.

[45] Shaquita Tillman et al., "Shattering Silence: Exploring Barriers to Disclosure for African American Sexual Assault Survivors," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 11.2 (2010), pp. 59–70 (p. 64). doi: 10.1177/1524838010363717.

[46] Brittany C. Slatton and April L. Richard, "Black Women's Experiences of Sexual Assault and Disclosure: Insights from the Margins", *Sociology Compass*, 14.6 (2020), pp. 1-12 (p. 4). doi: 10.1111/soc4.12792.

[47] Tracy Royce, "The Shape of Abuse: Fat Oppression as a Form of Violence Against Women," *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009) p. 153, Kindle ed.

[48] Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," *Sister Outsider*: *Essays and Speeches* (1984; repr., Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 29-32 (p.31). Kindle ed.

[49] Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," p. 108.

are bullied and belittled every day. Lorde relates that "increasingly, violence weaves through the daily tissues of our lives–in the supermarket, in the classroom, in the elevator, in the clinic and the schoolyard, from the plumber, the baker, the saleswoman, the bus driver, the bank teller, the waitress who does not serve us." Because these daily violences are often dismissed by a society that views Black women as "inherently strong" or "inherently promiscuous," the specific trauma of sexual abuse is easily brushed aside.[50] Gay underscores that the voices of all women victims, regardless of body size or race, hold less gravitas than the voices of male perpetrators. Hence, some women feel they cannot speak up at all because, as Gay highlights, usually the stories of men are taken more seriously: "He said/she said is why so many victims (or survivors, if you prefer that terminology) don't come forward. All too often, what "he said" matters more, so we just swallow the truth. We swallow it and, more often than not, the truth turns rancid. It spreads through the body like an infection."[51] Ultimately silence and food become Gay's poison of choice.[52] Erratic eating is her obsession, her "physical manifestation of the silence of what she should have said, needed to say, couldn't say."[53] And so, "as the weight of that silence [chokes her],"[54] she grows bitter and big, closing herself off from a hostile society that feeds on the scraps of her dignity.

As a teenager, Gay feels relieved to be studying at the prestigious boarding school Exeter: "how upper-middle-class girls run away, to be sure."[55] On campus, she has unlimited access to a smorgasbord of food. Free from her family's watchful eye, she eats and eats to try and appease the insatiable pain rooted deep inside of her. She relates, "I was swallowing my secrets and making my body expand and explode. I found ways to hide in plain sight, to keep feeding a hunger that could never be satisfied–the hunger to stop hurting."[56] Throughout her memoir, Gay returns to the idea that she consciously created her big body as a safety blanket to protect herself from the menacing male gaze: "I wanted to be fat, to be big, to be ignored by men."[57] When as an adolescent she briefly falls sick and loses weight, she immediately works to re-expand her body upon returning home from the hospital. She describes food as offering her immediate relief and gratification:

> This is the body I made. I am corpulent–rolls of brown flesh, arms and thighs and belly. The fat eventually had nowhere to go, so it created its own paths around my body. I am riven with stretch marks, pockets of cellulite on my massive thighs. The fat created a new body, one that shamed me but one that made me feel safe, and more than anything, I desperately needed to feel safe. I needed to feel like a fortress, impermeable. I did not want anything or anyone to touch me.[58]

This act of willful self-expansion can be read as a radical refusal of the compulsory citation of feminine smallness, a strategy that finds subversive agency in the refusal to replicate the norms of gendered embodiment. Accordingly, Gay must be careful that her body does not grow too small, too penetrable and open to attack. And so, food becomes Gay's closest companion. Consequently, as she is

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[50] Roxanne Donovan and Michelle Williams, "Living at the Intersection: The Effects of Racism and Sexism on Black Rape Survivors," *Women and Therapy*, 25 (2002), pp. 98-100. doi.org/10.1300/J015v25n03_07.

[51] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 11.

[52] Many people who are infatuated with food pour their compulsions into cooking while others become entrapped in eating disorders. Hornbacher points out that "[s]ome people who are obsessed with food become gourmet chefs. Others get eating disorders." (Hornbacher, *Wasted*, p. 12). However, some people simultaneously become skilled cooks and fall into the clutches of eating disorders.

[53] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 11.

[54] Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence," p. 34.

[55] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 16.

[56] Ibid., ch. 16.

[57] Ibid., ch. 23.

[58] Ibid., ch. 6.

increasingly consumed by the demands of her emotional and physical appetite, she grows more detached from the world around her. In turn, Gay's struggle with her weight–in tandem with race, sexuality, and undigested trauma–leads to a slew of other obstacles, namely interpersonal, with which she must contend.

While attending high school, Gay was largely rejected by her peers. Black students were wary of her because she did not adhere to their notions of a Black girl, and white students did not accept her because they were perplexed by her Nebraskan middle-class background: "I was an anomaly, and I didn't quite fit their assumed narrative about blackness. They assumed that all black students attended Exeter by the grace of financial aid and white benevolence."[59] Gay was neither Black enough nor white enough for the standards of fellow students, a predicament not uncommon to Black people. Lorde relates: "Growing up, metabolizing hatred like a daily bread. Because I am Black, because I am woman, because I am not Black enough, because I am not some particular fantasy of a woman, because I AM."[60] Akin to Lorde, Gay feels isolated on several levels and objectionable to people of all backgrounds. More specifically, she feels invisible to boys her age, "because of [her] blackness, because of [her] size, because of [her] complete indifference toward [her] appearance. Because [she] read so much."[61] Gay is ultimately stuck in a social double bind.

Disablement by Design: The "Normate" and the Politics of Space

It is significant that Gay's white peers presumed she was of a lower socioeconomic background. Various factors may have contributed to this false assumption. In the United States, minorities are less likely to be as financially stable as their white counterparts. White women, Black women, and Black men earn considerably less than white men for their labor.[62] Lorde points out of that among these groups Black women have the lowest median income in the United States.[63] Perhaps unsurprisingly, white men have easier access to attractive jobs; they are more likely to fill prestigious positions that provide power and career ladders.[64] As a result, minorities may have less access to healthy food because of lower wages and limited access to well-paid jobs, and so they are unable to afford a healthy lifestyle on par with white individuals. Patrick M. Kreuger and Eric N. Reither explore the multifaceted factors that play a role in obesity disparities, taking into account "health behaviors, biological and developmental factors, and social environment."[65] In their analysis of social environment, they note that there may be a correlation between one's ability to afford wholesome groceries and obesity. Similarly, Paul Ernsberger infers that the higher price of nutritious food may deter individuals of low socioeconomic status–predominantly minorities–from following recommended dietary guidelines. Importantly, he maintains that one's diet is greatly influenced by the status of their neighborhood.[66]

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[59] Ibid., ch. 43.

[60] Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," *Sister Outsider*: *Essays and Speeches* (1984; repr., Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 141-172 (p.148), Kindle ed.

[61] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 25.

[62] Eileen Patten, "Racial, Gender Wage Gaps Persist in U.S. Despite Some Progress," *Pew Research Center*, 1 July 2016. pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/01/racial-gender-wage-gaps-persist-in-u-s-despite-some-progress/ [accessed 13 January 2023].

[63] Audre Lorde, "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," *Sister Outsider*: *Essays and Speeches* (1984; repr., Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 35-41 (p. 41), Kindle ed.

[64] Tomaskovic-Devey, Donald. "Gender and Racial Inequality at Work: The Sources and Consequences of Job Segregation," *Economic Geography* 70.3 (1993), pp. 45-76 (p. 46). doi.org/10.2307/144001.

[65] Patrick M. Kreuger and Eric N. Reither, "Mind the Gap: Race/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Disparities in Obesity," *Curr Diab Rep.* 15.11(2015), pp. 1-9 (p. 2). doi: 10.1007/s11892-015-0666-6.

[66] Paul Ernsberger, "Does Social Class Explain the Connection Between Weight and Health?", *The Fat Studies Reader*,

Low-income individuals are more likely to live in poor neighborhoods high in crime and pollution where outdoor activity is not always possible and healthy fare is not easily accessible. Therefore, low-income individuals are more likely to eat a fat-rich diet and to complete less exercise.[67] In essence, Black women are often constrained to consume unhealthy foods because of their precarious financial and living circumstances.

Because Black women in the United States tend to have lower incomes than white men, white women, and Black men, it is fathomable why they are more frequently evaluated as "obese."[68] The rate of obesity is considerably higher among non-Hispanic Black women (56.9%) and Hispanic women (43.7%) when compared with the frequency of obesity in non-Hispanic white women (39.8%).[69] Yet, poverty and health aside, it is perhaps social exclusion that comes at the highest price to a fat individual's sense of self-worth. Ernsberger stresses that "[a]lthough there is some evidence that poverty is fattening, a stronger case can be made for the converse: fatness is impoverishing."[70] Fat people are often treated as social pariahs, which ultimately costs them jobs, education, and fulfilling relationships: "Social stigma against fat people leads to diminished social status and ultimately poverty through discrimination in education and employment. Social stigma also restricts choices in a life partner, leading to downward mobility through marriage. Stigma, discrimination, and the resulting negative self-image and poverty are powerful stressors on the individual."[71] Evidently, it may not be obesity that causes health issues, for which a high BMI has often been blamed, but rather the effects of social rejection.[72]

Undoubtedly, women have traditionally been pressured to be thin, and thus they bear the brunt of discrimination.[73] Ariane Prohaska and Jeannine Gailey note that "[i]f a woman is, from the pursuer's viewpoint, unattractive or fat, she is deviant. Accordingly, deviant women are viewed as deserving of negative treatment from others."[74] In her memoir, Gay repeatedly describes the instances she is shamed for her body. She lists the slew of insults that are commonly reserved for fat women who are perceived as non-normative: "pig, fat pig, cow, sow, fatty, blimp, blob, lard ass, tub of lard, fat ass, hog, beast, fatso…"[75] We can infer that while Gay's big body evades the male gaze, reserved for more obedient bodies, she instead becomes subject to the sadistic male stare. April Herndon maintains that "pointing out body size publicly can injure the psyche enough to impose silence. The cultural script reads that once called out on being fat, a woman reassumes her proper place and remains quiet."[76] Hence, because Gay does not conform to notions of normative femininity, she is often humiliated, excluded, and

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eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York University Press, 2009), pp. 25-36 (p. 26), Kindle ed.

[67] Ibid., p. 26.

[68] It is important to keep in mind that people who identify as Black do not necessarily identify as African American. Racial identity is complex and personal.

[69] Craig M. Hales et al., "Prevalence of Obesity and Severe Obesity Among Adults: United States, 2017–2018," *National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief*, 360 (2020), pp. 1-7. cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db360.htm.

[70] Ernsberger, "Does Social Class Explain the Connection," p. 26.

[71] Ibid., p. 31.

[72] Ibid., pp. 27-31.

[73] Tracy Royce explains that both fat men and women experience prejudice. However, women are particularly discriminated against for their big bodies because they have to "contend with unrealistic, ever-narrowing beauty standards and the considerable importance that society places on female appearance." See Tracy Royce, "The Shape of Abuse: Fat Oppression as a Form of Violence Against Women," *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009) p. 151, Kindle ed.

[74] Ariane Prohaska and Jeannine Gailey, "Fat Women as 'Easy Targets': Achieving Masculinity Through Hogging," *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), pp. 158-165 (p. 162), Kindle ed.

[75] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 39.

[76] April Herndon, "Disparate but Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies," *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Indiana University Press, 2011), ch. 11.

dehumanized.[77] In sum, the discrimination and harassment she experiences as a result of her weight, closely tied to issues of gender and race, sets her back socially and emotionally.

Yet, if nearly half of Black women in the United States are obese, then Gay is just as "normal" as non-obese Black women.[78] Joyce L. Huff expresses that "[o]f course, in both fat and disability studies, it is now commonplace that the idea of the "average" or "normal" individual represents not a statistical average, but rather a cultural ideal, which carries the weight of an ideological imperative."[79] Society discriminates against Gay for failing to adhere to a rigid, socially constructed prototype. Thus, although the fat Black body is normal by statistical standards, the heart of the issue is that Gay's body deviates from the obedient bodies of thin *white* woman: she is not ideal. Jia Tolentino describes the ideal woman as "generic," a person who "looks like an Instagram–which is to say, an ordinary woman reproducing the lessons of the marketplace, which is how an ordinary woman evolves into an ideal."[80] Gay does not "engineer" her appearance to please the demands of capitalism,[81] and so her fat Black body is doubly damned for its size and color. As a result, she is acutely disabled by society. Garland-Thomson reminds us that "[f]emale, disabled, and dark bodies are supposed to be dependent, incomplete, vulnerable, and incompetent bodies. Femininity and race are performances of disability."[82] Throughout her memoir, Gay does not frame herself as disabled by her weight, but rather as a woman who struggles, both literally and figuratively, to fit into a culture that is too small-minded to make space for marginalized bodies. By patriarchal standards, Gay is inferior Other, and she is repeatedly punished in both micro and macro, covert and overt ways for straying from deeply entrenched notions of the ideal.

Ironically, however, it is more common to be disabled than it is to be normal. Yet, we have been surreptitiously conditioned to seek the status of the *normate*, a term coined by Garland-Thomson:

> [It] usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them. If one attempts to define the normate position by peeling away all the marked traits within the social order at this historical moment, what emerges is a very narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual people.[83]

We are well-acquainted with the figure of the normate–a white, heterosexual, cisgender man with health, wealth, and power under his belt. As Garland-Thomson reminds us, only a small portion of the population adheres to the privileged profile of a normate while, on the contrary, disability is normal

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[77] In her ecofeminist work, Adams makes sharp connections between the male domination of women and animals, namely pigs: "If animals are the absent referent in the phrase 'the butchering of women,' women are the absent referent in the phrase 'the rape of animals.' The impact of a seductive pig relies on an absent but imaginable, seductive, fleshy woman." See Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*: *A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory* (1990; repr., Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 23, Kindle ed.

[78] It is important to note that Gay takes issue with the term "BMI," as do most fat activists. She explains that the term was devised by "the medical establishment to bring a sense of discipline to undisciplined bodies." Furthermore, she expresses her unease at the use of the term "obese", and especially the more dramatic term "morbidly obese." These terms can feel like an indictment or "death sentence", according to Gay. (Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 4).

[79] Joyce L. Huff, "Airplane Seats and Fat Bodies as Contested Spaces," *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), pp. 176-186 (p. 178), Kindle ed.

[80] Jia Tolentino, "Always be Optimizing," *Trick Mirror*: *Reflections on Self-Delusion* (Penguin Random House, 2019), pp. 63-94 (p. 63).

[81] Ibid., p. 64.

[82] Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability," pp. 7-8.

[83] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Disability, Identity, and Representation: An Introduction," *Extraordinary Bodies*: *Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, (Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 5-18 (p. 8).

and to be expected as we age: "disability is perhaps the essential characteristic of being human. The body is dynamic, constantly interactive with history and environment. We evolve into disability."[84] Furthermore, disability knows no boundaries and cuts across age, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality.

The field of feminist disability studies does not necessarily perceive the fat body as impaired because the physical functions of fat people are often not compromised, as in Gay's case. Feminist disability scholars do, however, understand fat people as frequently disabled by the social, cultural, and political context in which they are immersed. As Garland-Thomson describes it, "Feminist disability theory's radical critique hinges on a broad understanding of disability as a pervasive cultural system that stigmatizes certain kinds of bodily variations."[85] Gay suggests that she supports the social model of disability:

> I don't know if fat is a disability, but my size certainly compromises my ability to be in certain spaces. I cannot climb too many stairs, so I am always thinking about access to space. Is there an elevator? Are there stairs to the stage? How many? Is there a handrail? That I have to ask myself these questions shows me a fraction of the questions people with disabilities must ask to be out in the world.[86]

Gay subverts the notion that her big body is inherently wrong and, in turn, she highlights how her body is framed as inferior within an environment that presents structural and socio-emotional obstacles because it has been shaped in relation to normates. In essence, she illustrates how public spaces cripple fat people because they are not accessible to their bodies.

Since most people will not succeed in conforming to the narrow ideals of the normate, and they will be disabled at some point in their lives, Garland-Thomas underscores, citing Eve Sedgwick, that it is essential to employ a "universalizing view" of disability rather than a "minoritizing" one: "Disability–like gender–is a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment."[87] Yet, despite that disability influences every aspect of life, some disabilities are more visible and less acceptable than others.

In order to cope with a complicated web of disabilities as a fat, Black, bisexual woman, Gay devotes her energy to solitary intellectual activities. In her darkest moments, she expresses that writing nourished her weary soul: "I often say that reading and writing saved my life. I mean that quite literally."[88] Similarly to other writers who suffer from eating disorders, e.g., Marya Hornbacher and Stefanie Covington Armstrong, Gay throws herself into reading, writing, and daydreaming as means of escape.[89] As a high school student, she describes these activities as precious outlets that offer relief from the toil of daily life. Thus, it is through her vivid imagination that she achieves transient respite: "I learned how to tune out my parents, my brothers, people on the street. I learned how to live in my head, where I could ignore the world that refused to accept me, where I could block out the memories of the boys I couldn't forget, no matter how much time and distance yawned between me and them."[90]

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[84] Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability," pp. 20-21.
[85] Ibid., p. 5.
[86] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 86.
[87] Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability," pp. 4-5.
[88] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 12.
[89] It is worth highlighting that people who suffer from eating disorders are often academically inclined, or rather, headstrong. Hornbacher illuminates that "people with eating disorders tend to be both competitive and intelligent. We are incredibly perfectionistic. We often excel in school, athletics, artistic pursuits. We also tend to quit without warning. Refuse to go to school, drop out, quit jobs, leave lovers, move, lose all our money. We get sick of being impressive." (Hornbacher, *Wasted*, p. 136).
[90] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 30.

Gay's fantasy world is a place she goes to seek solace from a society that has repeatedly abused and refused her. As an insecure college student, creative solitude is integral to her romantic life. Gay relishes chatting with love interests online, yet the idea of meeting them in person is more than she can swallow.

During Gay's college years, she is naïve to non-normative sexualities and unaware that she can feel simultaneously attracted to people of various genders and sexualities. She relates, "Saying I was gay wasn't true, but it wasn't a lie. I was and am attracted to women. I find them rather intriguing…. And, in those early days, I enjoyed dating women and having sex with them, but also, I was terrified of men."[91] Thus, during her stint far from home, in a rare phone call to her parents, she comes out as "gay" so as to deflect their attention from her deep-seated issues.[92] Gay's family does not welcome her coming out with open arms because her sexuality does not adhere to their religious Haitian traditions.[93] Coming out, however, is easier than putting words to her trauma. Gay is attracted to women because, in part, she feels safe in their presence. She trusted they would not hurt her like the men to whom she falls prey. Yet, although the women she dates do not exploit her sexually, they are ill-equipped to support her emotionally, and so Gay settles for the crumbs of their love:

> I had gotten in the habit, you see, of dating women who wouldn't give me what I wanted, who couldn't possibly love me enough because I was a gaping wound of need. I couldn't admit this to myself, but there was a pattern of intense emotional masochism, of throwing myself into the most dramatic relationships possible, of needing to be a victim of some kind over, and over, and over. That was something familiar, something I understood.[94]

Akin to the binge-eater who eats and eats only then to feel great shame, time and again Gay seeks out relationships that retraumatize and humiliate her. In essence, Gay resorts to familiar, although toxic, ways of coping with her unprocessed pain. Her romantic relationships leave her hungering for love, a lack she seeks to alleviate through food.

Indeed, there are manifold layers to Gay's eating disorder. She feels worthless in the wake of the sexual abuse she suffered, so she binge-eats to pacify her pain. Subsequently, in an incessant vicious cycle, she feels guilty for the quantity of food she consumes, and so she also binge-eats in order to alleviate the shame she feels for overeating. Elyse O'Loghlen and colleagues highlight that "negative thoughts about oneself and feelings of worthlessness precede binge-eating episodes, which may act as a temporary strategy to cope with these feelings. However, over the long term, renewed feelings of shame about one's binge eating behaviors and body may promote further binge eating to cope, perpetuating the cycle of shame and binge eating."[95] Yet, Gay's deep sense of worthlessness not only stems from her own sense of self. She is repeatedly fat-shamed by her partners, and thus they too feed her cycle of binge-eating. For example, in one of her relationships her partner avoided being seen with her outside of the home: "Most of the time, as you might imagine, we were not together in public because I was just not good enough. I never looked nice enough. I talked too loud. I breathed too loud. I slept too loud…. I didn't eat food correctly. I ate too fast."[96] Ironically, just as Gay works up the pluck to pursue romance beyond the virtual sphere, her partners shame her into staying out of the public eye.

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[91] Ibid., ch. 68.
[92] Ibid., ch. 68.
[93] Roxane Gay, "Roxane Gay: On Messiness, Not Belonging, and What Being Queer Taught Her About Being a (Bad) Feminist," interview by Theodore Kerr, *Lambda Literary*, 17 Sept. 2014. lambdaliterary.org/2014/09/roxane- gay-on-messiness [accessed 4 January 2023].
[94] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 68.
[95] Elyse O'Loghlen et al., "Shame and Binge Eating Pathology: A Systematic Review," *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 29.1 (2021), pp.147-163 (p.148). doi:10.1002/cpp.2615.
[96] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 74.

In her thirties, Gay desperately seeks to reduce the size of her body so as to feel socially acceptable. She starves herself by day and purges by night. She relates, "I ignored my yellowed teeth and my hair falling out and the acid burns on my right fingers and the scabs on my knuckles."[97] She emphasizes the grim reality that society does not care about the issues of fat women: "When you are fat, no one will pay attention to disordered eating or they will look the other way or they will look right through you. You get to hide in plain sight. I have hidden in plain sight, in one way or another, for most of my life."[98] On the contrary, the eating disorder experiences of young, skinny, anorexic girls are of primary concern: "We have to worry about the emaciated girls being fed through a tube in the nose, not girls like me. And also, I was really so old to be dealing with what we think of as an adolescent problem."[99] Additionally, anorexia is traditionally considered a white woman's illness,[100] another reason for which the stories of anorexic women arguably matter more.

After two years, Gay realizes her imprisoning cycle of anorexia, bingeing, and bulimia is unsustainable. Consequently, she adopts a vegetarian diet: "I became a vegetarian because I needed a way of ordering my eating that was less harmful"[101] Vegetarianism may serve as a means for people with eating disorders to restrict their feeding behavior in a more socially acceptable manner. Anna M. Bardone-Cone and colleagues highlight that study participants who stated that "there was a relation [between vegetarianism and their eating disorder] reported that being vegetarian helped them to lose weight and maintain the eating disorder and provided another way to eliminate calories and feel in control."[102] Gay adopts a vegetarian diet for four years in an attempt to control her eating behavior and to navigate the public sphere devoid of a deep-seated sense of shame.

Throughout her memoir, Gay expresses the humiliation and frustration she feels as a big woman navigating a medium-sized world that belittles her body. Indeed, even in the most banal of places, she is made to feel like Other. Trivial tasks that most people take for granted become difficult hurdles that demand foresight and trigger distress. She relates:

> My body is wildly undisciplined, and yet I deny myself nearly everything I desire. I deny myself the right to space when I am in public, trying to fold in on myself, to make my body invisible even though it is, in fact, grandly visible. I deny myself the right to a shared armrest because how dare I impose? I deny myself entry into certain spaces I have deemed inappropriate for a body like mine–most spaces inhabited by other people, public transportation, anywhere I could be seen or where I might be in the way, really.[103]

It is a misconception that fat people are slothful and sit at home devouring junk food. Rather, they often stay out of the public eye to avoid degradation and discomfort. Royce depicts the demeaning public experience of many fat women: "Perpetrators of verbal abuse of fat women need not have any prior relationship with their victims to dispense their vitriol. Fat women have disclosed their hurt, anger, and humiliation at being accosted, shamed, jeered at, yelled at from passing cars, preached to, poked, pinched, and offered unsolicited diet advice by strangers of both sexes."[104] In brief, fat women

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[97] Ibid., ch. 57.
[98] Ibid., ch. 57.
[99] Ibid., ch. 57.
[100] Clinical psychologist Maria Root explains that "[e]ating disorders, referring to anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, have been described as white female phenomena. In fact, anorexia nervosa, coined the 'Golden Girl's Disease' specifically refers to a pursuit of a white, Western European ideal of beauty run amuck." See Maria P. P. Root, "Disordered Eating in Women of Color," *Sex Roles,* 22.7 (1990), pp. 525-536 (p. 525). doi.org/10.1007/BF00288168.
[101] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 57.
[102] Anna M. Bardone-Cone et al., "The Inter-relationships Between Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders Among Females," *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietics*, 112.8 (2012), pp. 1-11 (p. 5). doi:10.1016/j.jand.2012.05.007.
[103] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 40.
[104] Royce, "The Shape of Abuse," p. 154.

are victims of discrimination at much higher rates than fat men. They experience maltreatment at lower levels of excess weight than their male counterparts, and in the workplace they suffer a higher wage penalty than men.[105] In sum, fat women are held to higher standards than fat males, a grim reality that is yet another product of damaging patriarchal paradigms.

To understand the psychological toll of this systemic exclusion, feminist theorist Lesleigh Owen sheds light on spatial discrimination and three related behaviors–withdrawal, invisibility, and disembodiment–that fat people employ in order to cope with the plight of navigating public spaces that are not suited to their bodies and thus exclude them.[106] In particular, she emphasizes the idea that "[m]any fat Westerners display a tendency to live [their] lives above the neck."[107] Owen explores the various reasons why fat people often retreat into their mind and countenance rather than embracing their entire body. She proposes that fat people and people of color both feel a similar sense of estrangement from their physicality. In order to accommodate others around them, fat people must simultaneously monitor and emotionally detach from their bodies. Moreover, they are constrained to "simultaneously juggle [their] own and others' reactions along with scathing cultural messages regarding [their] fleshy bodies."[108] In essence, fat people are regarded as inferior in a society that does not create the space they need to live in it comfortably and respectably. As previously discussed, many fat people choose to stay at home, out of the public eye. Yet, although they may feel safer at home, their absence in the public sphere perpetuates their invisibility: "With our absence of lived/recognized experiences, we become lives unlived and voices unheard."[109] In addition to physically withdrawing from the public sphere, fat people feel invisible because their "needs, individuality, and legitimacy" are overlooked by society despite their obvious visibility.[110] Similarly, Gay expresses her difficulty navigating a society that resists adapting to her body: she does not fit into clothes, transportation, or crowded spaces. Yet, despite that basic spaces and resources have not been made with her body in mind, and she is at times forced to withstand the pain of squeezing into tight confines, she worries about the "normal-sized" people sitting next to her. In sum, fat people feel that their bodies matter less than smaller ones–the mainstream narrative they have been fed throughout their lives. As a result, they are ashamed of their own presence. They blame themselves for literally not fitting into a society that has overlooked their needs. Understandably, to cope with living in a culture that considers them second-class citizens, some fat people learn to survive by disassociating from the weight of their body.

Although Gay sets out to use her big body as a means to protect herself from male sexual abuse, paradoxically, Gay's weight discourages men from objectifying her, but it does not discourage them from demeaning her. Royce suggests that "some male strangers are not only more likely to become verbally aggressive with a fat woman, but also to physically threaten and intimidate her, perhaps because they regard her as lacking sexual utility."[111] Consequently, a simple walk down the street renders Gay an easy target of obscene fat-phobic cat calls, which she interprets as a symbol of men's inability to make sense of their masculinity when confronted with a body that does not pander to male desire. It is mainly women who bear the brunt of anti-fat prejudice and discrimination because women–

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[105] Kelly King and Rebecca Puhl, "Weight Bias: Does it Affect Men and Women Differently?", *Obesity Action Coalition*, Spring (2013), pp. 1-2. obesityaction.org/resources/weight-bias-does-it-affect-men-and-women-differently/ [accessed 8 January 2023].

[106] Lesleigh Owen, "Living Fat in a Thin-Centric World: Effects of Spatial Discrimination on Fat Bodies and Selves," *Feminism & Psychology*, 22.3 (2012), pp. 290-306. doi: 10.1177/0959353512445360.

[107] Ibid., 291.

[108] Ibid., 295.

[109] Ibid., 298.

[110] Ibid., 299.

[111] Royce, "The Shape of Abuse," p. 154.

not men–are expected to conform to narrow beauty standards.[112]

Gay's memoir illuminates the necessity for more research that examines the roots of violence against fat women because, as Royce points out, not only do overweight women suffer a different type of violence, but they may fall victim to violence specifically because of the size of their body.[113] Yet, in Gay's case her body renders her the target of emotional abuse not only from strangers, but also from the people one tends to trust the most. When she and her partner suffer "a loss," presumably a miscarriage, Gay blames herself and her "broken" body.[114] She expresses, "My doctor did not dissuade me from doing this, which was its own kind of hell–to have your worst fear about yourself affirmed by a medical professional who is credentialed to make such judgments."[115] Even health professionals who have a legal and moral obligation to provide effective care often treat fat patients with less respect. Marilyn Wann maintains that fatphobia is concealed under the guise of care, and the means that are used to diagnose bodies as "obese" are arbitrary: "The only thing that anyone can diagnose, with any certainty, by looking at a fat person, is their own level of stereotype and prejudice toward fat people."[116] Internalizing this judgement, Gay scours the internet and studies techniques used by seasoned bulimics in order to effectively throw up. In doing so, she simultaneously feels in control of her body while eschewing an overwhelming sense of guilt for indulging her appetite.[117] Her supportive partner, however, is devastated to discover her newfound love of vomiting, so Gay ultimately pushes him away. Following the dissolution of this healthy romantic relationship, she turns to a ruthless rebound boyfriend. When Gay's new partner discovers her vomiting in the bathroom, he does not question her motives. On the contrary, he expresses his satisfaction to see her working on her body. Gay recounts, "For him, the real problem was my body, and he never let me forget it. He punished me and I liked it. Finally, I thought. Finally. He made his cruel comments and gave me "advice," which only reminded me that everything wrong with my body was, indeed, my fault."[118] Gay's self-loathing is etched so deeply inside of her that she feels unworthy of a supportive partner–and so she falls into the trappings of an abusive one.

Beyond Self-Love: "Undestroying" the Body in a Hostile World

Gay's path to "undestroying" herself is greatly hindered by the emotional abuse she suffers at the hands of those closest to her.[119] The abuse of present or former partners is a primary cause of injury and death among women. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such partners do not hesitate to belittle the bodies of overweight women: "Fat women in relationships with abusers are subject to their partners' fatphobic

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[112] Ibid., p. 151.

[113] It is important to highlight that literature increasingly takes an intersectional approach to examining how various factors–e.g., race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality–influence both violence against women and society's response to it. However, research that sheds light on the link between anti-fat bias and violence against fat women is lacking and merits further exploration. (Royce, "The Shape of Abuse," p. 151).

[114] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 57.

[115] Ibid., ch. 57.

[116] Wann, "Foreword: Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution."

[117] It is interesting to note that sexual abuse is more common in patients with bulimia nervosa than patients with anorexia nervosa. However, both anorexia and bulimia affect sexual abuse survivors at higher rates than the general population. See American Psychiatric Association and Work Group on Eating Disorders, *Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Patients with Eating Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), p. 28.

[118] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 57.

[119] In the last chapter of *Hunger*, Gay asserts, "I no longer need the body fortress I built. I need to tear down some of the walls, and I need to tear down those walls for me and me alone, no matter what good may come of that demolition. I think of it as undestroying myself." (Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 88).

insults and verbal attacks on their desirability."[120] Significantly, even if a woman is not fat, an abusive partner who fears fat may nevertheless shame her body. As Royce delineates, "This abuse is perhaps only that most literal expression of the punishment our culture imposes on bodies that dare to transgress from the socially prescribed norms."[121] In condoning her partner's emotional abuse, Gay–a feminist–plays a hand in the patriarchal society in which she is forced to negotiate her being. However, as she emphasizes in *Bad Feminist* (2014), "I openly embrace the label of bad feminist. I do so because I am flawed and human."[122] Identifying as a feminist does not preclude normal human error and oversight. As such, some fat feminists who are abused by their partners believe they have no other chance at romance and remain in toxic relationships despite the harm they cause them. Gay had a loving partner, but she felt undeserving of a mutually respectful relationship. Consequently, she briefly settled for a callous man who disciplined her unruly body in line with mainstream white ideals.[123]

Yet not all spectators who seek to "better" Gay's body intend to demean her. Some well-intentioned bystanders believe they are positively influencing her lifestyle by offering their advice. Gay maintains that "those affirmations are rarely about genuine encouragement or kindness. They are an expression of the fear of unruly bodies. They are a misguided attempt to reward the behavior of a 'good fat person' who is, in their minds, trying to lose weight rather than simply engaging in healthful behavior."[124] Fat acceptance activists Solovay and Rothblum echo Gay's sentiments, underscoring that in addition to equipment and attire ill-suited to big bodies, fat people must contend with offensive comments from onlookers: "Ironically, fat people are urged to exercise but then hindered due to lack of available exercise clothing, exercise equipment, or degrading responses from exercise staff and others."[125] In addition to unsolicited advice from strangers, Gay's family incessantly bombards her with suggestions: "My family's concern became a constant chorus of nagging, always well intended, but mostly a reminder of how I was a failure in the most basic of my human responsibilities–maintaining my body."[126] And so, in the public sphere Gay is openly mocked because of her weight, and in the private sphere her parents preach to her under the pretext that her heaviness is a health risk. Her persistent father proposes every new diet and health book on the market, but he fails to perceive that the root of his daughter's big body is perhaps more complex than meets the eye. Instead, he considers it his duty to warn her that " 'all those degrees [she is] getting aren't going to do [her] any good, because no one is going to hire [her] at [her] size.'"[127] In particular, Gay senses her thin mother's disappointment that she has a fat daughter who is forced to try on clothes in a store made especially for fat people, a daughter she worries will eventually burden her with weight-induced health issues. As Gay remarks, "Fat daughters and their thin mothers have especially complicated relationships."[128] Perhaps unsurprisingly, mothers usually bear the blame for their children's obesity because the lion's share of food preparation and family care falls on their shoulders.[129] In essence, Gay's family seeks to discipline her body, albeit more subtly than others. Thus she feels like the family failure.

Decades following her rape in the woods, Gay brings her traumatic past to light and fleshes out

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[120] Royce, "The Shape of Abuse," p. 152.
[121] Ibid., p. 153.
[122] Roxane Gay, "Introduction," *Bad Feminist* (Harper Perennial, 2014), Kindle ed.
[123] Royce, "The Shape of Abuse," p. 152.
[124] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 46.
[125] Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum, "Introduction," *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, (New York University Press, 2009), pp. 5-6, Kindle ed.
[126] Gay, *Hunger*, ch. 30.
[127] Ibid., ch. 30.
[128] Gay, *Hunger,* ch. 52.
[129] Noortje van Amsterdam, "Big Fat Inequalities, Thin Privilege: An intersectional Perspective on 'Body Size,'" *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 20.2 (2013), pp. 155-169 (p. 159). doi.org/10.1177/1350506812456461.

her pain with family, a cathartic act that sets her on the path towards self-acceptance. More importantly, however, she confronts the haunting voice in her head that convinced her some rape stories are *not that bad*.[130] It is around this time that she completes her graduate studies and secures a fulfilling academic job while simultaneously doing the hard work to demolish "the body fortress [she] built": "I need to tear down some of the walls, and I need to tear down those walls for me and me alone, no matter what good may come of that demolition. I think of it as undestroying myself."[131] By the close of *Hunger*, Gay is no longer afraid of her body and she perceives its immense potential: "My body offers me the power of presence. My body is powerful."[132] She resolves to cast off her shackles of shame and to step out into the world, actively working toward "abandoning the damaging cultural messages that tell [her that her] worth is strictly tied up in [her] body."[133]

The journey of self-reclamation that Gay powerfully chronicled in her memoir laid the groundwork for the life she would go on to build. Since publishing *Hunger* in 2017, on the cusp of the "Me Too" movement, she has learned to live beyond the socially imposed limits that once oppressed her; she is inspired to practice Lorde's idea that "[d]ifference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic."[134] Yet, while Gay's evolution is deeply inspiring, her text resists the simplistic "love yourself" narrative often demanded by the mainstream body positivity movement. As queer and trans theorist Da'Shaun L. Harrison points out, self-love alone cannot dismantle anti-fat sentiment. The idea that simply accepting yourself will somehow end the structural violence of anti-fatness–which affects everything from housing to employment–is a dangerous misconception. Harrison emphasizes that "body positivity" is flawed precisely because it often functions as a form of altruistic anti-fatness, appearing to offer acceptance while actually allowing "thinness" to reassert its control over fat people's collective liberation.[135]

Viewed through this critical lens, *Hunger* transcends the genre of the confessional memoir to become a rigorous critique of structural anti-fatness. By denying the reader a comfortable resolution–a "happily ever after" of uncomplicated self-love–Gay insists on a more difficult truth: personal acceptance cannot dismantle systemic violence. Her narrative ultimately reframes "hunger" not as a pathology to be cured, but as a response to a culture that disables Black, fat, and queer bodies. In refusing to tidy up her trauma for public consumption, Gay confronts the "normate" ideal, demanding visibility for bodies that society is determined to erase.

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[130] See Roxane Gay, "Introduction," *Not that Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, ed. Roxane Gay, (Harper Perennial, 2018), Kindle ed.
[131] Gay, *Hunger,* ch. 88.
[132] Ibid., ch. 86.
[133] Ibid., ch. 87.
[134] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider*: *Essays and Speeches* (1984; repr., Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 103-105 (p.104), Kindle ed.
[135] Da'Shaun L. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, foreword by Kiese Laymon, (North Atlantic Books, 2021), p. 4.