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## Making the Connection Between Anti-Fat Bias and Racism: A Discourse Analysis of Contemporary Fat Activism

Lien Vandael



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Studentennummer: 02004441

Promotor: Katrien De Graeve

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*“Our beliefs about bodies disproportionately impact those whose race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age deviate from our default notions. The further from the default, the greater the impact. We are all affected — but not equally.”*

Sonya Renee Taylor, 2021, p. 56

*“There are no prerequisites for human dignity. For that reason, there can be no caveats in body justice or fat justice.”*

Aubrey Gordon, 2020, p. 166

## Abstract

While the emerging field of fat studies has typically focused on ‘white’ bodies, race studies has often neglected to take into account fat bodies. Recent research, however, shows that anti-fat bias is rooted in racism and intersectional approaches are valuable, in particular as a tool for empowerment and resistance against normative ideas about fatness. This thesis asks how current fat activism uses intersectionality and engages with anti-racism by analyzing two books written by American fat activists with a significant online presence and international outreach, notably Gordon’s *What We Don’t Talk About and We Talk about Fat* (2020) and Taylor’s *The Body Is Not an Apology* (2021). My analysis shows that both authors use an intersectional approach to the analysis of fatness and anti-fat bias and are aware of the relevance of race in this discussion, yet use different strategies. While Gordon focuses on the analysis of anti-fat bias specifically, Taylor’s use of a broader framework of body oppression makes that she more distinctly highlights the interconnections of different oppressions.

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## Introduction

Today, being fat is still seen as something bad. Words related to fatness are used as slurs to demean people and negative ideas about fatness are normalized. For example, while former U.S. president Donald Trump has many faults, it is often his fatness that is called out. During the 2020 U.S. elections, Anderson Cooper called Trump an “obese turtle”, which led to backlash from people saying that while Trump is a “despicable human being [...] that has absolutely *nothing* to do with his body size” (James, 2020, para. 3). Cooper later apologized for his remark, but this is still a good example of a common rhetoric in Western society (Colton, 2020; Dellatto, 2020). Insulting Trump’s weight instead of calling out his actions and behavior, is not only anti-fat but also minimizes the pain he has caused minority groups in the U.S.

Another example of anti-fat bias, which also shows its interconnectedness with race and racism, is how people discuss Lizzo, a popular Black, fat American artist. In December 2020, Lizzo received backlash, particularly from people within the fat community, for sharing that she had been doing a juice cleanse (Yeboah, 2020). This quickly led to a more expansive discussion of the way Lizzo is treated as an outspoken, fat, Black woman, who never asked to be a role model for body positivity (Yeboah, 2020). Yeboah (2020) acknowledges that apart from Lizzo’s fatness, her blackness is also relevant since it is Black women who “have historically been held to higher standards” and that it seems that most of the online backlash came from white women (para. 8). This is one example of the way fatness and race can and should be discussed together.

In this thesis, I will look at the connection between fatness and race and how fat activism incorporates anti-racism. The topic is introduced by giving an overview of the state of the art of fat studies and race studies by means of a literature review.



First, the research question of this thesis is elaborated on in *Chapter 1*. Then, prior to the literature review, there is a brief chapter on terminology. I find it important to critically examine terms such as *race*, *fatness* and *anti-fat bias* and explain what terminology I use in this research.

*Chapter 3* provides a review of the state of the art of fat studies and race studies, and I describe how they have and have not been linked. Historically, studies of fatness have been limited and mainly focused on interrogating fatness as a medical issue (Harjunen, 2009). It is only more recently that fatness is being considered as a “multifaceted, gendered, and socially constructed phenomenon” and a social justice issue (Harjunen, 2009, p. 11). At the same time, the focus has mostly been on white bodies. Race studies generally did not pay much attention to body size. It is only more recently that the connection between anti-fat bias and white supremacy is being considered. For example, in 2019, sociologist Sabrina Strings published *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. Strings (2019) describes the history of anti-fat bias and how it became a way to deem Black women racially inferior. Strings (2019) claims anti-fat bias has little to do with health concerns, but more with race, class and gender prejudice. Strings (2019) produces a historical analysis tracing back from the Renaissance up until today, which provides us with many useful ideas for the current discussion about fatness.

After establishing the state of the art, in the following chapters, this thesis examines how in current activist discourse intersectionality and the issue of race is taken into account, and more particularly, whether or not it considers discussions of race and shows understanding of the historical links between anti-fat bias and white supremacy. I do so by analyzing two books by two different American fat activists and by describing common discourses in the books. Before delving into the analysis, *Chapter 4* discusses the methodology used in this research. The use of a discourse analysis is explained, the

researcher's positionality is clarified and the two activists whose work are being studied are introduced. Subsequently, *Chapter 5* includes the results of the research, and finally, *Chapter 6* includes the conclusion of this thesis and a discussion with some questions for further research.

## 1 Research Question

The main research question of this thesis is: how does a selection of modern-day fat activist texts take discussions of race into account and show understanding of the historical links between anti-fat bias and white supremacy? Research shows that anti-fat bias is historically linked to white supremacy (Strings, 2019). However, making the connection between anti-fat bias and racism is a recent phenomenon. Moreover, research studying fat activism is limited and there do not appear to be many studies that center race and racism specifically. Fat scholar Charlotte Cooper discusses fat activism in *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (2021) and various research papers, but she does not center race and focuses more on the description of the movement and its history. Other studies have focused on resistance against normative ideas about fatness (Meleo-Erwin, 2012), the 'obesity epidemic' (Lee, 2012), giving fat people a voice (Manokaran et al., 2020), the queering of fatness (Chalkin, 2016; Otis, 2020; White, 2013), advocacy for fat activism (Matacin & Simone, 2019), different forms of activism (Cameron, 2020; Gurrieri, 2013; Gurrieri et al., 2018; Mobley, 2019), and the analysis of fat activism in different countries (Casadó-Marín & Gracia-Arnaiz, 2020; Ellison, 2013). Studies that discuss fatness and intersectionality exist, but usually in the context of fatness and queerness, such as Schoppelrei's (2018) article on fat-positive activism. An example that does make the connection between fat and race is Williams (2017) who states that fat women of color have often been left out of fat activism and who analyzed the Tumblr page 'Fat People of Color'. Meanwhile, Daufin (2019) writes about the disprivileges of fat Black women and calls for an intersectional approach to fat studies and activism. It appears that studies of fat activism are limited and a recent phenomenon. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies of fat activism that engage with the intersection of fatness and race, and the interconnected roots of anti-fat bias and racism. This thesis aims to address this gap.

In the empirical part of this thesis, I am doing a discourse analysis of the writings of two activists whose work mainly revolves around fatness to analyze how their work is intersectional and critical of white supremacy. The activists I have chosen for this research have large online followings, spanning across different platforms, and have written a book about being fat. The books they published are a culmination of the online work they have been doing. I chose these particular people because I have previously come across their online platforms and either know their activism tends to be intersectional, or I presume it is. Both activists are American and their activist work is in English. My limitation to these two activists is due to time and language constraints. That I am analyzing the work of two American activists, instead of for example Dutch-speaking activists, shows both the limitations of this thesis, as the limitations of this field of study, as Cooper (2009) highlighted that fat studies and fat activism is mostly based in and focused on the United States. Moreover, the books written about fatness are already limited, even more so in the Dutch-speaking context.

While my analysis focuses on the books the activists have published, it is not insignificant that both authors gained popularity online and use their online platform for their activism. Social justice issues are frequently discussed on social media which can be beneficial because social media is generally quite accessible and Crepax (2020) argues that research has shown that digital culture can “offer interesting new spaces for the negotiation of marginalized identities and of topics which are often avoided in dominant contexts” (p. 79). Fat activists Cath Pausé (2014) argues for the positive benefits of online fat activism as a way to “connect, engage, and change the larger discourse” (p. 1). Moreover, the internet can be a safe space and allow “individuals from minority groups to present an opposing picture of their identity, pushing back against the normative discourse” (Pausé, 2016, p. 76). It is therefore unsurprising that the activists in this thesis

use their online platform to share messages about fatness, have found recognition there, which then lead them to publish their respective books and allowed them to further spread their activist messages.

My aim is to compare the messages about fatness and race the activists share in their respective books, look at common discourses that exist in their work and how they engage with intersectionality and race.

## **2 Terminology discussion**

Language constantly evolves and when talking about sensitive topics, different people may prefer to use different terminology. This chapter aims to explain the meaning of certain terminology, give some background and explain why certain terms may be preferred over others. The various terms have been combined into two main categories: (1) 'Race', and (2) 'Fat'. The goal of this thesis is to be as inclusive as possible and I aim to do this by making careful considerations about language use.

### **2.1 'Race'**

When the term 'race' is used or discussed, it is vital to understand its origins and how its meaning is understood today. 'Race' can be defined as "a categorization that is based mainly on physical attributes or traits, assigning people to a specific race simply by having similar appearances or skin colour", but this definition and categorization came about as a white supremacist effort to maintain hierarchies between groups of people (The Law Society, 2020, para. 5). It used to be said that race was based on "apparent" differences among groups of people, but it was later understood that these distinctions have "no empirical substance" (Dallal, 2002, p. 10). Nowadays, it is therefore understood that race as a category is a social construct, not ignoring that this categorization has led to the oppression of certain groups and can be used by people to embrace a common support system and identity (The Law Society, 2020). Scholars such as Farhad Dalal and Norbert Elias have also argued that race is used to distinguish between "haves" and "must-not-haves" and is therefore a cognitive, emotional and political tool and category (Dalal, 2002, p. i). Heng (2011b) also emphasized the way race is used as a mechanism of power:

'Race' is one of the primary names we have – a name we retain precisely for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes – attached to a

repeating tendency (...) to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups” (p. 332)

At the same time, race designations are not historically fixed but have changed over time and the way they have been enforced have also changed (Racial Equality Tools, n.d.).

The term ‘racialization’ is used to emphasize the active process of distinguishing between different groups of people, acknowledging that race is constructed. Dalal (2002) defines racialization as: “the process of manufacturing and utilizing the notion of race in any capacity” (p. 27). The concept of racialization emphasizes and critiques how race historically tends to be used only to refer to non-white people and how white people tend to be seen as ‘raceless’ or ‘unmarked’ (ACLRC, n.d.). Using ‘racialized people’ instead of ‘people of different races’ is therefore sometimes preferred. ‘Ethnicity’ is different from ‘race’ in that it usually refers to a shared cultural history, such as cultural experiences, traditions, language, values, political and economic interests or group membership (The Law Society, 2020, Racial Equity Tools, n.d.).

Note that these interpretations of ‘race’ are limited to the American context. How ‘race’ is understood and used in the European context is different. For example, Boulila (2019) explains how in some feminist circles ‘race’ is considered to be unfit for the European context, ‘race’ is replaced by terms such as ‘ethnicity’ or ‘culture’ and this attitude leads to the promotion of color-blindness and resistance against intersectional approaches. The conceptualization of ‘race’ differs among European countries, depending on their history and ethnic groups in that country, which makes some countries more color-conscious and others more color-blind (Bleich, 2002). While ideas about race are sometimes copied from the American framework to Europe, it is important to understand that its history with and understanding of race is different which leads to a different

context and different interpretations. Simultaneously, while some scholars warn against the importing of American concepts, Beaman & Fredette (2020) argue that American ideas of race have historically been influenced by Europe and while ideologies such as anti-Blackness, Islamophobia and orientalism differ depending on the country, they are all rooted in the same ideas of dehumanization and exploitation.

The terminology used, therefore depends on the country, context and language and for this thesis, the focus is on the United States. In the United States, POC (people of color) and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) are commonly used (Garcia, 2020). While POC has been used for centuries, BIPOC is a more recent invention (Garcia, 2020). The first two letters were added to highlight “the erasure of Black people with darker skin and Native American people” and to improve inclusivity (Garcia, 2020, para. 3). The BIPOC Project (n.d.) explains that BIPOC “highlight[s] the unique relationship to whiteness that Indigenous and Black (African Americans) people have, which shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color within a U.S. context” (para. 2). Because of this specification, BIPOC cannot easily be copied globally. It is furthermore important to be specific with your language: “If you’re talking about black people, don’t say BIPOC” (Garcia, 2020, para 20).

Especially in American contexts, it has become popular to capitalize ‘Black’ to refer to Black people and culture to emphasize “an essential and shared sense of history, identity and community among people who identify as Black, including those in the African diaspora and within Africa” (The Associated Press, 2020, para. 1). Since the Associated Press came out with this statement, other news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *NBC News*, *the Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*, have adopted the same strategy (Coleman, 2020; Carswell, 2020). With this change comes a topic of contention: whether



or not to capitalize 'white' as well (Appiah, 2020; Wong, 2020). The Associated Press (2020) currently does not advise to do so.

When considering race as socially constructed, it is important to consider its real-life effects, and, understanding this, critically examine the concept of 'whiteness' and the power it holds (Frankenberg, 2001). Whiteness "refers to the specific dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of color", explains DiAngelo (2011, p. 56). Using this terminology emphasizes the privilege of a specific group and also the accountability of this group when it comes to racist practices (McIntosh, 1988, DiAngelo, 2011). Terms such as 'white' and 'Whiteness', similar to the other terms discussed in this chapter, are not neutral but backed up by theory and used to "describe a social process" and analyze "dynamic relations of domination" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56). 'Whiteness' does not simply refer to unchanging characteristics such as skin color but refers to certain processes and practices such as "basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56). Whiteness is often said to be unmarked or invisible but Frankenberg (2001) says this is simply a mirage since whiteness has a long history of being made marked and unmarked and "whiteness is in a continual state of being dressed and undressed, of marking and cloaking" (p. 74).

In this research, I use 'Black', capitalized, to refer to Black people. When talking more generally, I sometimes use 'people of color', even though I am aware of the recent backlash against this terminology. I do not capitalize 'white'.

## **2.2 'Fat'**

'Fat' has a history of having both positive and negative connotations. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century 'fat' meant "fertile" or "abundant" and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century 'fat' referred to someone "wealthy" or "affluent" (Austrew, n.d., para. 4). However, the negative connotations of the

word 'fat' have existed for a long time as well, already in Old English and more rampantly during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (Austrew, n.d.). It is well known that 'fat' has long been used against fat people to incite negative feelings, but now it is being reclaimed by fat people and activists to be used as a descriptor of body size (Shackelford, 2019). Something that activists emphasize is the idea that you do not 'feel fat' you 'are fat' and when you say "I feel fat" you usually mean "I feel insecure, I feel bad...", which perpetuates bias against fat people (Your Fat Friend & Nozari, 2020). Similarly, saying "people have fat" instead of "people are fat" can also perpetuate fat bias (Your Fat Friend, 2020a). Being mindful when it comes to language use is always important, especially concerning sensitive topics such as body size. The words someone prefers to use depend on context and there is a variety in individual preferences across different demographic groups (Puhl, 2020). This research focusses on activism and therefore looks into language use and preferences in this specific domain. Generally, fat activists and scholars argue against the use of 'obese' and 'overweight', because of the negative connotations with these terms and the harmful, clinical and dehumanizing manner in which they are used, even though they are normalized in the medical field (Wann, 2009; Brown, 2015). 'Fat' is therefore preferred (Harjunen, 2009, Van Amsterdam, 2013). In this thesis, I use 'fat' to refer to fat people and avoid terms such as 'overweight' or 'obese'.

Initially, I wanted to use 'fat phobia'<sup>1</sup> in this thesis to refer to the behaviors, attitudes and systems that oppress fat people. Mainly, because this is the term I have always known in this context. It is also the term Sabrina Strings (2019) uses in her work and it appears to be the most commonly used term online, in fat studies and fat activism. However, the use of the suffix '-phobia' in words referring to forms of prejudice, oppression and hate

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes written as 'fatphobia'.

has been problematized. For example, calling hate and prejudice against gay people 'homophobia' makes this hatred sound like a clinical condition, explains Harrington (2015). Similarly, Aubrey Gordon (2021), the activist whose work I analyze in this thesis states that 'fat phobia' is not radical enough so she uses 'anti-fat bias' or 'anti-fatness' to refer to this form of systemic oppression based on body size. After some consideration I decided to change the terminology I use in this thesis to 'anti-fat bias' and 'anti-fatness'.

In this thesis, I often talk about fat women specifically, mainly because a lot of research has focused on fat women and because historically, fat women have often been the target of structural anti-fat bias, exemplified by modern beauty standards. However, fat men also encounter different forms of discrimination and the way transgender and non-binary people encounter body oppression sometimes intersects with the same structures that oppress fat people.

### 3 Literature review: Where Fat Studies and Race Studies Meet

In this chapter, I introduce common themes and researches in the fields of fat and race studies that are relevant to this thesis subject. The field of race studies has a long history, studying various aspects of race and its history, while fat studies is a somewhat newer field of scholarship.

#### 3.1 Common Themes in Fat Studies

Fat studies is a recent critical interdisciplinary field of scholarship, which comes from radical feminism and draws on work from disability studies and queer theory, and studies the discourses around the fat body and the negative stereotypes and stigmas fat people are confronted with (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). Some leading works include *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (2001) by Braziel and LeBesco, *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009) by Rothblum and Solovay, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (2011) by Farrell, *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life* (2019) by Forth, *Thickening Fat* by Friedman et al., and most recently *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* (2021) by Pausé and Taylor. Furthermore, in 2012, the first volume of the Journal *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* was published.

There are two main lines of discourse about fatness: (1) the medical paradigm where fatness is studied as a health risk, and (2) social acceptability, which considers the social consequences fat people encounter, power differences, and how society deals with fatness (Harjunen, 2009). These discourses, as LeBesco (2004) explains are inherently political. For the purpose of this thesis, I am mostly concerned with social acceptability discourses since those include discourse about anti-fat bias and power. I also touch upon health and *healthism* as social instead of medical issues. With the expansion of the field of fat studies, the field is able to get messier, there is room for different approaches and

contrasting opinions (Cameron, 2020). Moreover, there is also room for self-critique in fat studies, which will also be addressed in *Section 3.1.3*. First, I discuss how fatness is commonly framed and considered socially and the normalization of anti-fat bias

### **3.1.1 Framing fatness**

Fat bodies have commonly been framed as “a threat to the health and well-being of individuals as well as the community, the nation, and even the global order” (Mackert, 2015, p. 13) Furthermore, LeBesco (2004) expresses how fat people are viewed “as revolting — they are agents of abhorrence and disgust” (p. 1). How LeBesco (2004) talks about the fat body, as being considered ‘unruly’ is later copied by scholars such as Merkin (2010), Bracke et al. (2017) and Murray (2020). Another recognizable expression is that of Grosz (1994), who talks of “volatile bodies”. Moreover, fatness has “become synonymous with concepts of hatred and self-hatred” explains Fahs (2019, p. 247). Therefore, being fat can have a serious impact on how someone sees themselves and how someone frames their own identity, states Rice (2007).

To oppose these negative notions a constructionist approach is often used in fat studies, as Sobal & Maurer (1999) explain this is useful because it sheds light on how certain problems are produced. Therefore, fat scholars and activists consider fatness a socially constructed issue — rooted in society, not the individual — that has grown and changed historically, and impacts individuals specifically (Farrell, 2011; Jutel, 2003; LeBesco, 2004). In this view, the term is not passive or ahistorical, but “the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles” (Grosz, 1994, p. 19). LeBesco (2004) also considers ‘fat’ to be a fluid construct since its meaning has changed so much over time and is different across cultures.

Because of the general negative connotations with fatness, there exists a trend where fatness is reframed away from these connotations to a reclaiming of the term, where fatness is a rejection of normative beauty and health standards (LeBesco, 2004). It is said that this reframing is necessary due to how, in recent decades, fatness has been constructed as a “disease of epidemic proportions (Rice, 2007, p. 2007). This ‘obesity epidemic’ discourse is common and furthers the negative framing of fatness. Boero (2012) considers this discourse to be a *black box*, a concept by Bruno Latour, meaning it “encase[s] issues that are considered to be accepted scientific wisdom and no longer open to debate” (p. 42). In other words, fatness is framed as a solely negative thing, supposedly based on evidence and facts, and critical voices are not accepted. This context leads to fat scholars and activists saying that resistance is crucial.

Studies of anti-fat bias point to how anti-fat bias is often framed in terms of ‘caring about fat people’s health’, which, scholars argue, in itself can lead to negative health consequences and is often linked to false ideas about health. Silversides (1999) provides an example of how an American life insurance company fabricated data about “desirable” weight that was not backed up by evidence. She argues that anti-fat bias and incorrect ideas about weight can cause people to obsess over weight loss (Silversides, 1999). Jutel (2003) traces back the history of the concept and meaning of ‘fat’, focusing primarily on its history connected to health discourses and states there is an overbearing focus on weight and fatness in discussions of health, which is a “misplaced preoccupation” (p. 35).

A lot of discourse about fatness and health happens in the context of the “obesity epidemic”. Issues with this concept are explored in Boero’s *Killer Fat* (2012) who argues that this ‘epidemic’ is not actually related to illness, but it can lead to social marginalization. Simpson (2020) also explores fatness, ‘obesity’ discourse and ‘health’ and concludes that this discourse impacts how fat people “construct their identities,

understand their health, and experience healthcare” (p. iii). This so-called ‘obesity epidemic’ led to the “war on obesity” and Bacon (2008) and Simpson (2020) argue political interests are involved in this discourse.

Furthermore, fat scholars point to the rampant anti-fat bias in health care (Fahs, 2019). Gordon emphasizes the existing anti-fat bias and discrimination in health care and how this bias is concealed with rhetoric expressing ‘concerns about someone’s health’ (Your Fat Friend, 2019). Gordon criticizes how ‘healthy’ is considered morally better than ‘unhealthy’ which leads to *healthism*, defined by Robert Crawford as “the preoccupation with personal health as a primary—often the primary—focus for the definition and achievement of well-being; a goal which is to be attained primarily through the modification of life styles” (Crawford, 1980, as cited in Your Fat Friend, 2020b, para. 5). Additionally, Crawford considered health to be political and healthism a systemic issue, and he makes the connection between the systems that perpetuate healthism and systems of oppression such as poverty, racism and misogyny (Your Fat Friend, 2020b). Gordon concludes that “healthism isn’t the root cause of transphobia, ableism, racism, anti-fatness, or misogyny — but it can be a tool to enforce all of them” (Your Fat Friend, 2020b, para. 10).

Because of the rampant anti-fat bias in health care, Fahs (2019) and Smith (2019) express that attention should be paid to fatness in psychotherapy and mental health care. Fahs (2019) mentions how activist interventions can have an impact on the medical world and gives examples:

“activist work that publicly protests or refuses to use the services of doctors with reputations for fat shaming; interventions for raising awareness about fat pregnancy and critical issues of risk; blogs that catalogue the lived experiences of fat phobia and the reactions people can have to those things; interventions for fat adolescents and

how to cultivate a positive body image; radical pedagogies of fat “disobedience”; anti-BMI protests; a satirical campaign that takes the “war on obesity” to new (absurdist) heights; subversive art that celebrates fat bodies; and many more” (p. 248).

This is an example of a resistance strategy that aims to combat these negative and false framings of fatness, here specifically in a medical context.

### **3.1.2 The Normalization of Anti-Fat Bias**

One of the key concerns of fat studies is anti-fat bias or fat phobia. Other terms used are ‘weight stigma’, ‘sizeism’ or ‘fat shaming’, although there are slight differences in meaning or nuance (Your Fat Friend, 2021). There is an ongoing debate on which term is most appropriate to foster empowerment. As Aubrey Gordon explains, while ‘fat phobia’ might be the most commonly used term to refer to discriminatory anti-fat behavior and policies, it may not create the change activists want to see (See *Chapter 1 Terminology Discussion*) (Your Fat Friend, 2021).

Fat shaming and anti-fat bias more broadly, are considered to be a form of systemic oppression (Your Fat Friend, 2020c). Fat scholars explain that the negative framings of fatness, as discussed in the previous section, can lead to serious consequences and are imbedded in structural processes of oppression and normalization. Tovar (2018) for example, relates these negative constructions of fat bodies to the idea that “fat people are used to scapegoat anxieties about excess, immorality, and an uncontained relationship to desire and consumption” (p. 22). Merkin (2010) discusses anti-fat bias, particularly in the fashion industry and the media, and how “our collective fear of fat and idealization of



thinness has resulted in a seriously askew notion of the physical self that has produced an epidemic of body-dysmorphic<sup>2</sup> illnesses like anorexia and bulimia” (para. 1).

Furthermore, Bacon et al. (2001) developed a shortened version of a previously existing ‘fat phobia scale’, consider it to be a useful tool for studying anti-fat bias and state that, at the time, anti-fat bias is “widely accepted” (p. 255). It is a common consensus that anti-fat bias is still considered to be ‘more acceptable’ than, for example, racism and sexism, because it is normalized in society and in discourses about health and fitness (Daufin, 1990; Bacon et al, 2001; LeBesco, 2004). This normalization is visible in the language we use, the way people feel little hesitation to express anti-fat ideas and how discourse about anti-fat bias is often criticized (Campbell, 2017; Araújo et al., 2018). This is exemplified in Murray’s (2020) analysis of literature by Anne Tyler where fatness is used as a “literary shorthand” to denigrate female characters. Because these types of representation are normalized, they are not criticized enough, while at the same time, these types of representation critically affect the shaping of “popular understandings of the fat body” (Murray, 2020, p. 1).

It is this normalization of anti-fat bias, both socially and in the health care sector, that makes anti-fat bias not an individual but a systemic issue. This systematic oppression is sometimes framed in discourse of ‘controlling bodies’. For example, Wright and Harwood (2009) explore how obesity discourses are used to govern bodies. These discourses have little scientific backing but are tools of power that keep bodies, i.e. people, in check. The authors argue that the obesity discourse does not promote better health but instead promotes negative judgements about people’s weight, lifestyle and appearance based on

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<sup>2</sup> The NHS defines ‘body dysmorphia’ or ‘body dysmorphic disorder’ as “a mental health condition where a person spends a lot of time worrying about flaws in their appearance” (NHS, n.d., para. 1).

morals, and promotes normative ideas about an ideal body that does not account for diversity (Wright & Harwood, 2009). Subsequently, Wright and Harwood (2009) argue that the obesity discourses shapes how people are governed and that it can lead to body image issues, particularly in young people.

A similar argument is made by Moran (2020). Using a historical approach and drawing on the concepts of the advisory state, she shows the political interest of the United States in the public's body, the different ways in which 'fitness' is sold, and the issue of hunger politics and racial politics in the sixties and seventies in "what became a debate over how body politics apply to different Americans" (p. 112). In short, Moran (2020) discusses how, throughout history, ideas about controlling the body were a way of governing people, in different ways across gender and racial lines. According to the author, the body projects focused on body aesthetics over function and impacted how we talk about bodies and size today (Moran, 2020). Moran (2020) therefore shows that body oppression is an active, structural, political project.

### **3.1.3 The Limits of Fat Studies**

Work in the field of fat studies often uses an intersectional approach and some work therefore critically engages with race. However, that is not to say that there are no gaps or limitations. Different scholars show that there is room for self-critique in fat studies (and activism). One commonly expressed critique is that fat studies is too centered on the United States, as mentioned by, for example, Cooper (2009), which removes the opportunity for critical engagement with fatness in other parts of the world.

Additionally, the centering of whiteness and lack of engagement with race in fat studies is critiqued. This critique exists of feminism and academia at large as well. Bilge (2014) wrote about the pervasive whiteness of academia, specifically sociology, how discourses about intersectionality are being appropriated by white feminists and how

there is not enough genuine engagement with postcolonial and decolonial knowledge production. Regarding fat studies, Bracke et al. (2017) talk about the historical absence of race in fat studies and also refer to Ahmed's (2012) work about the institutionalization and deradicalization of diversity work. Cooper (2021) argues that "white supremacy and cultural erasure [...] operate through present day fat activism" and that white voices are still listened and heard to the most (p. 181). Moreover, Lind (2019) states that in queering strategies of fatness, where fatness resists normativity, whiteness implicitly structures the conversation, and she argues for an anti-racist approach that recognizes how fatness and racialization intersect. Furthermore, Zerafa (2019) states that through the obscuring of racialized voices whiteness is made invisible in fat studies, which marginalizes and erases racialized people. Zerafa (2019) argues that to achieve fat liberation fat studies must challenge this whiteness and white supremacy, take up race from the beginning, and consider the nuanced way in which anti-fat bias is experienced by racialized people. Zerafa (2019) also argues that resistance from racialized people to this whiteness in the field, has made room for the analysis of the connections between anti-fat bias and white supremacy. This is exemplified by works such as Strings' book, which is discussed in *Section 3.3*.

### **3.2 Common Themes in Race Studies**

Because race studies is such an elaborate field, for the purpose of this thesis, I am looking specifically at the role of 'the body' in race studies and how race studies has or has not engaged with ideas of fatness. *Section 3.2.1* discusses the study of how racialized bodies have been dehumanized and how violence is perpetuated against these bodies. *Section 3.2.2* introduces studies on whiteness and power.

### 3.2.1 Framing the Racialized Body: Dehumanization and Violence

Race studies often concerns itself with discussing the construction of race (and racism), its origins, what it has looked like over time and in different regions, and how it is framed. Many race scholars, including Dalal (2002) agree that race is constructed as a power mechanism. Ideas about bodies or biological factors have often been used as excuses for discourse about race and racism. However, a current consensus is that while biological factors have influenced ideas about race and race-making, racism is more than that, it is institutional: “Racism is knotted into these identifications, sedimented institutionally even as the categories representing race — cultural or religious, phenotypical or biological — are made mute” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 349).

When ‘the body’ is considered in race studies, it is often in the context of the dehumanization of racialized bodies and the violence that is enacted upon these bodies. The oppression of the racial body is considered to be part of a larger racial project that creates power differences and furthers white supremacy. The following studies show views on the construction of the racialized body, dehumanization, violence and the power of this racial project. In these examples, fatness as a racial issue, is not particularly examined.

There is a common theme in how racialized people’s bodies are constructed and described, namely: dehumanization. Heng (2011a, 2011b) who discusses the construction of race in the context of Medieval Europe highlights some examples of how negative images of racialized bodies and visual descriptors of bodies in illustrations, maps, literature and more were constructed at the time. Heng (2011a, 2011b) shows how in certain cases moral value judgements were based on skin color or blackness versus whiteness, how Jews were depicted with physical markers such as horns and specific facial features, and how “monstrous” peoples were depicted on *mapamundi* in an effort

for Europeans to distinguish themselves from peoples across the world. Heng's (2011a, 2011b) analysis illustrates that negative and dehumanizing descriptions of the bodies of racialized people were part of race construction, but also shows that these visualizations were part of a much larger project of racism, that aimed to subdue the Jewish and Muslim population at the time and aimed to present Europeans as a 'superior race'.

The discussion of dehumanization therefore involves the discussion of power. In Critical Race Studies, Omi and Winant's (2014) work is pivotal when it comes to theories about racialization. They talk about racial projects and explain that "a racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, in an effort to redistribute resources", meaning it is a project based on power that creates hierarchy (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 125). They put emphasis on the racial body and the corporeal dimensions of racialization in their racial formation theory.

Maria Lugones (2008, 2010), one of the leading researchers in the study of colonialism and decoloniality notices this tendency of dehumanization in how racialized bodies are perceived and constructed and makes this connection with power as well. Lugones (2008, 2010) uses an intersectional approach to gender, race, sexuality and coloniality to analyze the gender system we know today and to criticize limited 'universalizing' feminisms. In her analysis, she notices differences in the way femininity was constructed for white women compared to Black women. Lugones (2008) refers to conceptualizations of femininity and how Black enslaved women were considered to be sexually aggressive compared to white European women who were fragile and passive. She refers to McClintock (1995) who explains how the "uncertain continents" were eroticized by Europeans: "These sexualized differences between groups of people led to hierarchies, where sexual purity became a "controlling metaphor for racial, economic and political power" (pp. 22, 47). In these examples, McClintock (1995) explains that colonial

discourses often explicitly or implicitly referred to the body as a location of power. Lugones (2008) refers to Yen Le Espiritu (1997) who states that “representations of gender and sexuality figure strongly in the articulation of racism” (p. 135). This all fits into the discourse of power and the dehumanization of the racialized body.

Another aspect that is widely studied, and which is often related to the dehumanization of racialized bodies, is the violence that is enacted upon them. In his work on ‘racial europeanization’ Goldberg (2006) makes the connection between death, racialization and dehumanization: “Does death not occur when there is no recognition of the bodies that have died? When the bodies are brutes or bare statistics? Bodies are killed, no one dies, corpses are produced” (p. 341). He explains that racialization is a process of dehumanization, which makes it ‘easier’ to enact violence on the racialized body, thus connection dehumanization with violence.

In *Black bodies, white gazes*, Yancy (2016) provides a theoretical framework on violence against the Black body and describes the Black experience in America based on personal experience and accounts of famous scholars and writers such as Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, Frederick Douglas and Ossie Davis. Yancy (2016) analyzes “the Black body within the context of whiteness”, the discourses and power tools that produced hatred and fear, the resulting self-alienation Black people experience and the normativity and invisibility that whiteness uses in its advantage” (p. xv). Fanon’s theories are used to discuss how Black bodies are perceived by the white gaze, and the Black body as a site of resistance is explored as well.

Weissinger et al. (2017) also analyze this violence and state that there are many different forms of violence against the Black body and police violence, the form that is most present in the media, is not the only form. The authors say that “violent deaths (while in police custody) are just one tentacle of the racial order—a hierarchy which is

designed to produce trauma and discrimination”, aiming to expand the limits of how people have been considering violence against Black people (Weissinger et al., 2017, p. 1).

Bledsoe & Wright (2019) further analyze violence against Black people and communities, including police violence, gentrification, capital disinvestment and urban renewal, and use Robinson’s (2000) theory of racial capitalism to make the connection between violence and capitalism. Furthermore, Bledsoe & Wright (2019) specifically argue that dehumanization of Black people is required for this violence to occur. Building on the idea of anti-Blackness, which says that society is inherently anti-Black because of its roots in chattel slavery, they explain that Black people have been construed as ‘un-geographic’ which makes that the locations that are being inhabited by Black communities are treated as open spaces that can be occupied. Furthermore, the authors argue that this attitude and the idea that capital accumulation is more important than a group of people “leads to the disenfranchisement and premature ending of Black lives” (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019, p. 14).

### **3.2.2 Whiteness and Power**

In race studies, a lot of attention is paid to the role of whiteness and the system of white supremacy. A seminal text on whiteness is Wekker’s *White Innocence* (2016). Wekker (2016) focuses on the Netherlands and the innocence white Dutch people feel concerning issues about race and the paradoxes of color-blind approaches versus lived realities and the Netherlands’ colonial history. Wekker (2016) points to the danger of making race and racism invisible or normalized and ignoring the effects history has on contemporary issues, inequalities and realities.

Doane and Bonilla-Silva’s criticize and rethink ‘whiteness studies’ and frame racism and white privilege as a continuing practice and structure. Mills’ (2003) chapter in the

book frames white supremacy, instead of simply 'whiteness' as a "multidimensional system of domination" involving various spheres: juridico-political, cognitive-evaluative cultural, economic, somatic, metaphysical emphasizing, as does Anderson in the same book, that racism is also structural and not just social or cultural, therefore, the state and economy play a role in creating political and material advantages for white people (p. 42). This conclusion confirms that racism can take up many different forms. Finally, in the concluding chapter of the book, Bonilla-Silva (2003) considers the future of whiteness in America, discusses whiteness as the "foundational character of 'white supremacy'" and an "embodied racial power" and talks about color-blind racism as 'new racism' and the idea that "racialized social systems are not static" (p. 271–272). Similarly, Byrne's *White Lives* (2006) explores whiteness and whiteness studies, but more in the context of the United Kingdom, and a gendered and class approach to whiteness is used. Using empirical data, Byrne (2006) criticizes the idea of color-blindness by showing the dividing effects of race. One of Byrne's interesting approaches to race is how she sees 'race' as somewhat of a performance, similar to Judith Butler's gender theory, where 'race' "is produced through the reiteration and recitation of racialised and racialising discourses" (p. 13). Here, visual aspects and discourses of respectability are of great importance. A study on whiteness and racism by Unzueta and Lowery (2008) shows that white Americans consider racism an individual, instead of an institutional issue to maintain a positive self-image. They conclude that seeing racism as an individual conception is less ego-threatening for white people (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008).

While these studies show the relation between whiteness and power, they do not really talk about the place of the body in this power construction. Allen (2001) on the other hand, does consider this. Allen (2001) discusses white supremacy as that what has constructed global relations. Discussing the construction of white identity and nation



state building, where the white self is 'civilized' and the other is 'uncivilized', he mentions racialized body-centric ideas: "The nation-state system is a type of ecosystem for the survival of the white body and white mind. It is an ecosystem akin to a viral infection where Othered bodies are treated as host organisms whose essence is hijacked and burst asunder in order to ensure the proliferation and health of white bodies" (Allen, 2001, p. 479–480). This leads to a categorization and hierarchy of bodies.

### **3.3 Making Connections: Fatness and Race**

In this section, I highlight the call for an intersectional approach of fatness and race. I introduce intersectionality, discuss how it has not really engaged with fatness as much, and look at why an intersectional approach could be beneficial. This is illustrated by introducing different studies that made the connection between fatness and race.

#### **3.3.1 Intersectionality**

Some of the fundamental texts on intersectionality, a field of study and way of thinking with roots in Black feminist thought, does not engage much with anti-fat bias as a mode of oppression. Intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw as "a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color", but it is commonly used to engage with other intersectional identities and power structures as well (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241). Intersectionality problematizes one-dimensional approaches to social categories such as race, gender, disability, class and sexuality and examines systems of oppression and the institutionalization of privilege (Romero, 2018). Intersectionality is used as a metaphor, a heuristic device and a paradigm (Collins, 2019). While intersectionality aims to take into account all dimensions of identity and systems of oppression, a critique is that there is too much focus on "the big three", race, class and gender, while other categories remain left out.

Fatness, or body size, is considered one of the categories that has been ignored as an axis of signification in intersectionality, says Van Amsterdam (2013).

Fat studies should be concerned with the intersection of weight with other identities that impact fat people and fat studies can benefit from including intersectional scholarship (Pausé, 2014; Smith, 2019). At the same time, other intersectional analysis can also benefit from including fatness into the analysis. Van Amsterdam (2013) relates the significance of adding body size as an axis to the pervasiveness of discourse about the topic and “because dominant discourses about body size often obscure their discriminatory effects related to power differentials, normativities and identity formations by focusing on individual responsibility and medical ‘truths’” (p. 165).

Multiple scholars have pointed out that there is a link between anti-fat bias and racism, classism and other forms of oppression. LeBesco (2004) explains that negative associations with fatness are due to the association of fatness with specific stigmatized groups of people. Stoll (2019) states that it is known that anti-fat bias is linked with other forms of oppression such as sexism, racism and classism, but that, specifically in critical sociology, not enough attention is paid to the analysis of anti-fat bias. Anti-fat bias should therefore be considered a social justice issue and be analyzed in connection to other forms of oppression (Stoll, 2019). Murray (2020) also stresses the importance of an intersectional approach, since there is a serious gendered factor at play in these discussions of fatness as these negative representations and understandings are both “gendered and misogynist” (p. 1). Pausé (2014) poses that “within fat studies, most intersectional research explores issues of body size and gender and/ or sexual orientation”, meaning that less attention is paid to other intersections (p. 81). Pausé (2014) also emphasized the importance of continuing to “create spaces that allow for

intersectional scholarship” while “ensuring that we do not confuse the voice of one group [...] with the voice of all is also imperative” (p. 83).

The following sections highlight different studies that used an intersectional approach to the analysis of fatness and race. These examples illustrate the benefits of adding such an approach to analyses.

### **3.3.2 Fearing the Black Body: The History of Anti-Fat Bias and White Supremacy**

I want to spend significant time on String’s (2019) book since it was an eye-opener for many fat scholars and activists in how it highlighted the intersections between anti-fat bias and white supremacy and called for an intersectional approach to the study of anti-fat bias. By studying different visualizations of Black and white people in European art, analyzing major European historical events and cultural and scientific evolutions, Strings (2019) shows how Black people and fat people were perceived over time and how these, often negative, perceptions are connected.

Focusing first on Europe, Strings (2019) notices a shift from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, where Black women were sometimes presented as beautiful and voluptuous, to the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century, 17<sup>th</sup> Century and onward, where the inferior social position of Black women becomes apparent and a shift occurs where “whiteness stood not just for social supremacy, but general superiority” (Strings, 2019, p. 49). Simultaneously, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, fatness became judged as morally wrong “indicative of weak character and dullness of mind” (Strings, 2019, p. 59). What also occurred at the end of the seventeenth century, was the invention of a racial classification system by François Bernier and the development of the broader field of ‘race science’, which influenced ideas about blackness and whiteness, and inspired the idea that rationality was reserved for white people only and the idea of European superiority (Strings, 2019).

Going into the eighteenth century, these evolutions would only worsen how Black people, especially women, and their bodies were perceived. Strings (2019) explains the importance of aesthetics in the discussion of race and how racial differences gained importance, while simultaneously, the beauty of Black African women was measured in “their adherence to [European] standards”, not their differences (p. 79). Another codification that occurred was the framing of Black people as lazy and gluttonous. This assertion developed “against the backdrop of the accelerating slave trade” but was also related to the ideal of “reasoned self-management” from the Enlightenment, which leads Strings (2019) to conclude that this “transformed the act of eating from personal to political” and that relating fatness to blackness and thinness to whiteness was “becoming part of the general zeitgeist” (p. 84, 97). It is important to highlight that many of these eighteenth century ‘intellectuals’ Strings (2019) mentions, who valorized different standards of beauty and worth, did not base their assertions on a lot of evidence or experience, as many barely left the European continent but based themselves of writings by others. She further describes the rising trend in Europe of women striving for slenderness and watching their diet, emphasizing how throughout history, beauty ideals were constructed and constantly reconstructed, generally by white men for women, to fit the times (and locations, as different standards were upheld in Europe versus the colonies), and they were often linked to national identity as well (Strings, 2019).

This idea that *svelteness* was ideal and temperance in eating and drinking must be upheld moved over to the United States, where these ideas easily spread around white Protestant women, who were influenced by protestant revivals and moral lessons about proper Christian behavior and appearance (Strings, 2019). Here, thinness and temperance had to be upheld not just because of health reasons but because overeating “could also destroy their beauty”, moreover, ideas about Anglo-Saxon racial superiority

(first expressed specifically in contrast to e.g. Irish people but later merged into more general ideas of white supremacy) influenced these women's ideas and behavior while giving them a purpose: "to serve as the flag bearers of a *new* standard of beauty", which turned into the idea of the 'American Beauty' (Strings, 2019, p. 125, 137). Throughout the book, Strings (2019) emphasizes how these beauty standards and moral standards never changed without contestation and that there were always critics, however: "the power of the slender aesthetic as an American beauty ideal lay in its repetition" and women's magazines play(ed) a significant role in the glorification and spreading of these perverse standards rooted in "Protestant asceticism, scientific racism, and the proto-science of health and beauty" (p. 139). Two other elements that impacted the spread of these white, thin ideals, and more generally the ideology of white supremacy, were immigration and eugenics; the latter is illustrated with the example of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg who criticized women's health and diet and believed they had to change as they "were a threat to the entire master race" (Strings, 2019, p. 176). Strings (2019) continues by describing contrasting positions on health, thinness and obesity in the medical field in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the strange obsession with health and personal responsibility at the time, and the dangers of implementing the use of the BMI. Talk about the 'obesity epidemic' emerged and amidst all of this, again, the emphasis lay on Black women as their size became seen as "evidence of disease" (Strings, 2019, p.203).

String (2019) goes into great detail explaining this historical evolution, but the main takeaway is that "fear of the black body was integral to the creation of the slenderness aesthetic" and it is therefore impossible to discuss contemporary health and beauty standards and fatness, without taking race into account (p. 212). Strings shows that the standards of thinness we recognize today did not originate in the medical field and are not based on empirical evidence but are rooted in a long history of white supremacy,

pseudoscience and religious constructions of morality (2019). She also shows how discourse about bodies and beauty have changed over time and how they hold great power and are political. Additionally, this book is considered to be a catalyst for the interest in an intersectional analysis of anti-fat bias and white supremacy.

### **3.3.3 Power, Beauty Ideals and Body Image**

While Strings' (2019) book has had a great impact on fat studies and activism, it is not the first or only work that takes up an intersectional approach and makes these connections between anti-fat bias and white supremacy. The impact of colonialism on body image and the power mechanics behind white norms have been studied before, and there is a general call for more intersectionality in the study of body differences and beauty.

First, power is a common theme here, as making the connection between anti-fat bias and racism includes analyzing the power structures that oppress fat people or racialized people, and also, the intersecting oppressions fat racialized people encounter. Dalal (2002) explains that the function of race is the "naturalization of power relations by retaining the divisions of humankind" (p. 13). In different context, other tools than the mentioning of race, such as class or gender, are used for differentiation, and racism can exist without specifically mentioning race (Dalal, 2002, p. 14). These ideas about power and hierarchy are not limited to the study of race. Gosz (1994), Jutel (2003), LeBesco (2004) and Farrell (2011) explain how fatness is a political construction which leads to social hierarchies and power differences.

Secondly, the experience of racialized people has not been very present in the study of body image, which is why there is a call for an intersectional approach, and this call is being heard, on the one hand, by the studying of differences in body image between people from various ethnicities and on the other hand, by analyzing the consequences of the white norm as a beauty standard. These studies noticed a gap in the research field,

specifically the white-centrism in previous research, and tried to address this gap. For example, the first qualitative sociological study about eating problems among white, Black and Latino women was by Thompson (1992). Thompson (1992) points to the lack of engagement with racism, classism, sexual oppression and trauma and heterosexism in white feminist scholarship about eating disorders. Thompson (1992) established eating disorders as survival strategies and not simply issues of appearance. Later, Miller et al. (2000) studied dimensions of body image, gender and race or ethnicity, focusing on a university population. The study concludes that the necessity for a “multidimensional assessment of body image in research of this type and for further exploration of interaction effects” (p. 314).

Furthermore, various scholars have pointed to the impact of colonialism and racial ideas on body image, and have identified racial ideas and ideas about bodies as tools of power and oppression, used to uphold a white norm. Gutierrez (2020) concludes that colonialism and structural racism have a negative impact on the body image of women of color and can encourage the development of disordered eating. A key concern here is the normalization of whiteness and white norms. Bonilla-Silva (2012) talks about a form of domination called ‘racial grammar’ which normalizes “the standards of white supremacy as the standards for all sorts of everyday transactions rendering domination almost invisible” and consists of ‘rules’ that are changeable through social interaction and communication (p. 174). What is specifically interesting about Bonilla-Silva’s (2012) paper on the subject is that he uses a personal story about considerations of his weight and whether he is fat to introduce the topic. Bonilla-Silva (2012) questions the role of his African ancestry in the discussion of his weight, mentions the racism of the BMI, discusses the bias inherent to the word ‘beautiful’ and talks about the overrepresentation of whiteness in media and culture. Bonilla-Silva (2012) concludes by explaining the dangers

of racial grammar: it affects the way people of color see themselves and what they do with their bodies, in addition, it makes it harder for white people to empathize with people of color.

Likewise, Shaw (2005) considers the impact of the colonial imposition of “Eurocentric values on subaltern populations” on how fatness and blackness “displaces some women from the Western beauty arena” (p. 143). Shaw (2005) discusses the defeminization or masculinization of Black women rooted in slavery which furthers their dehumanization and oppression. This framing of Black women stands opposite the norm, as Smith (2019) explains that “The dominant Western beauty standard is thin, White, young, able-bodied, and assumed to be heterosexual, Christian, and wealthy enough to access the products necessary to maintain her beauty”, meaning that everyone who does not fit these categories is automatically left out, showing the classist aspect of ‘beauty’ and seeing ‘beauty’ as an intersectional issue. The construction of ‘beauty ideals’ is therefore an issue that is studied both in fat and race studies (but also disability studies and gender studies, for example). Shaw (2005) analyzes different notions on beauty and concludes that constructions of ‘beauty’ are not only part of a patriarchal agenda but because the idealized form of femininity focuses on whiteness, it sustains racialized hierarchies. Using the specific case of policing in South Africa where personal perceptions of beauty are used against sex workers, Thusi (2020) explains that: “This act of assigning value to different bodies, through the subjective language of aesthetics and beauty, reinforced existing racial and sexual hierarchies. Beauty was a proxy for race” (p. 1335). While beauty is not limited to (lack of) fatness, I do think this assertion is relevant here, since (lack of) fatness is an aspect of normative beauty ideals. These studies highlight the racial aspect of the normative conceptualization of beauty.



Sanders (2017) and Usiekniewicz (2016) also look at norms and both consider that the obesity discourse is an intersectional issue. Sanders (2017) states that obesity discourse functions as a racial project by fortifying white normativity and by encouraging negative tropes about black womanhood. Sanders (2017) sees obesity as an “embodiment of structural racism” and pleads for structural transformation (p. 1). Usiekniewicz (2016) also states that current discourses about obesity encourage racism and classism and the stigmatization of mostly poor people of color disguised as issues of “care”. Usiekniewicz (2016) specifically focused on the intersection of fatness, race and masculinity and also criticizes the limitations of fat studies.

The intersectionality of fatness, blackness, gender and queerness is also more and more becoming a topic in less academic popular non-fiction such as *Hunger* (2017) by Roxane Gay, *Fat Girls in Black Bodies* (2020) by Joy Arlene Renee Cox and *Hood Feminism* (2020) by Mikki Kendall.

Considering that Black women cannot adhere to white beauty standards and are simultaneously used to further the oppressive obesity discourse, some scholars also argue that this makes fat Black women as actors of resistance and transgression in a world where whiteness and skinniness are the standard (Shaw, 2006). For example, Lovejoy (2001) specifically compared body image in Black and white women and concluded that Black women generally experience more positive feelings towards their body image than white women. This conclusion is based on three arguments: (1) Black women see their beauty aesthetic as a place of resistance, (2) different cultural ideas about femininity may have an impact and (3) positive body image may be used as a defensive tool.

### **3.4 Fat Activism**

In this section, I introduce fat activism by looking at its history and radical roots and what fat activism can look like today. An additional focus is put on online activism, since the activists whose books are being analyzed for this thesis do a lot of work online and have built extensive online communities.

#### ***3.4.1 From Radical Fat Liberation to Body Positivity***

It is difficult to condense the history of fat activism. For the purpose of this thesis, I am focusing on fat activism in the United States. The founding of the National Association to Aid Fat Americans which later became the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) is a key point in the movement<sup>3</sup>. The NAAFA was founded in 1969 and was revolutionary because of how it addressed anti-fat bias and made it into a civil rights issue (Dionne, 2019; Gerhardt, n.d.). The start of the movement can however be traced back to two years earlier, in 1967, when a *fat-in* was held at Central Park to protest anti-fat bias (Dionne, 2019; Gerhardt, n.d.). Tigress Osborn (n.d.), current chair of the NAAFA, explains that while the NAAFA was striving for *fat acceptance*, at the same time, a group called ‘the Fat Underground’ was striving for *fat liberation*, and stated in their *Fat Liberation Manifesto* their demand for “equal rights for fat people in all areas of life”.

The fat rights movement arose at a time when much attention was paid to the civil rights movement and other social movements, which meant fat liberation did not receive as much attention as was necessary (Dionne, 2019). However, being inspired by the civil rights movement meant these fat activists considered fat liberation to be connected to

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<sup>3</sup> Please note that when I refer to ‘the fat activist movement’, ‘the fat liberation movement’, ‘the fat acceptance movement’ or any other similar term in this chapter, for the purpose of this thesis, I am referring specifically to the movement that originated in the U.S.

other fights for oppression (Osborn, n.d.). Nevertheless, mainstream fat activism, including the NAAFA, had not always considered the voices of people of color and even actively shut them out (Osborn, n.d.). The movement continued to grow throughout the eighties, nineties and 2000s into the movement we recognize today; a movement that is highly visible on social media and a movement using the terminology of *body positivity*.

In short, the idea of body positivity is said to have originated from women of color and queer people, yet nowadays, it seems as if these roots have been forgotten, body positivity (or #BOPO) has become a “social media buzzphrase” and, while celebrities and influencers are gaining popularity from the movement, actual fat people are being left out (Osborn, n.d.). This is why activists are saying the body positivity movement should return to its fat liberation roots, which were much more radical and intersectional. As Osborn (n.d.) states: “Body Positivity is nothing without its Fat Activist grandparents of all genders. It’s also nothing without the Black women and femmes who amplified the message at the beginning of the trend” (para. 20). Johansson (2021) comes to the same conclusion. Considering the commodification of the body positivity movement and how this is linked to neoliberalism and its lack of intersectionality, she argues that the movement should be expanded, redefined and repoliticized (Johansson, 2021). Fat activist and scholar Charlotte Cooper (2021) states that fat activism should be about the “political imaginations of fat community” and that it is not just a reactionary movement to the obesity epidemic discourse. For Cooper (2021) fat activism is limitless and the roots of the movement are radical. She agrees that this radical power cannot be lost in the current neoliberal climate and that the movement requires being radical to combat the fact that fat activism has previously often centered white, middle class, Western women where other perspectives have been left out (Cooper, 2021).

This depolitication of the fat movement that is being fought against by the reclaiming of a radical energy is part of a larger issue of the neoliberal appropriation of self-care discourse, as described by Rahbari (2021). Rahbari (2021) explains how this discourse makes self-care an individual responsibility, which can be dangerous as it stands in opposition with approaches of solidarity, it masks inequalities and undermines social change. These considerations can be applied to body positivity, as it considers liberation to be a personal self-love issue, and not a structural social justice issue.

### ***3.4.2 Fat Activist Strategies***

There appears to be a strong engagement between academic fat studies and fat activism. Snider and Whitesel (2021) state that while there is a divide between the two, but “activism is an integral part of what animates us daily, shaping the choices one makes in research, writing, and teaching to offer grounded resistance to oppression” and this relationship between fat activism and fat studies is necessary (p. 1). Academia is often criticized by activists for being discriminatory, but at the same time it can be used to circulate activist projects (Snider & Whitesel, 2021). Furthermore, fat studies is rooted in political activism in a way that it objects to political projects such as ‘the war on obesity’ (Burgard et al., 2009).

As was stated in the previous subsection, according to Cooper (2021) fat activism should be limitless, which makes room for many different forms of activism. Cooper (2021) divides the movement into five categories of fat activism: (1) political process fat activism, (2) activist communities, (3) fat activism as cultural work, (4) micro fat activism, and (5) ambiguous fat activism. She explains that each of these categories exemplifies a different activist strategy but the categories can be combined, and strategies can be used together. Cooper (2021) sees *political process activism* as using public engagement to argue for rights and influence policy, which can happen within legal frameworks, through

consumer advocacy, protest or debate (Cooper, 2021). This is the type of activism a lot of people think about when they consider the term and it usually occurs in specialist organizations (Cooper, 2021). Furthermore, political process activism requires mass mobilization to gain influence, explains Cooper (2021). The second category, *community-building*, can be part of the first since it helps with mobilizing people, while it also “enables fat people to develop social capital”, states Cooper (2021). Cooper (2021) describes *fat activism as cultural work* as “the act of making things: art objects, events, still and moving images, digital artefacts, texts, spaces, places and so on. *Micro fat activism* tends to not be recognized as activism but Cooper (2021) explains that she considers individual actions that happen in everyday spaces and moments as activism too, even though it deviates from the understanding of activism as a collective endeavor. Micro activism can be as simple as wearing something you are comfortable into a public event. While these are individual acts, Cooper (2021) considers examples of micro activism that are “embedded in community” and “a form of minority influence” which can be “the beginnings of community-building” (p. 81). Finally, Cooper (2021) adds the category of *ambiguous fat activism* to reflect that activism should not be a restricted phenomenon and that “notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy in fat activism marginalise some forms of action and elevate others” (p. 93).

Dionne (2019) shows how these different strategies can work by giving examples of the importance of the fat acceptance movement for the implementation of legal change, but also for encouraging better representation in media, for example. She explains that the goal of the fat acceptance movement is to create “a different world where fat people can work, have relationships, be on screen, grow up safely, and simply exist without facing discrimination” (Dionne, 2019, p. 295). Dionne (2019) believes that awareness raising and using your voice are imperative to this cause.

A common strategy in fat activism is the challenging of bodily norms and the contestation the social construction of obesity. As shown by Ronti (2017), fat activists contest common discourse about the fat body and 'obesity', dismantle power relationships that oppress fat bodies and the end goal is to redefine fat identity. In the research of Ronti (2017) specifically, this contestation, reframing and reclaiming occurs through the use of art and performance. Ronti (2017) explains how two artists, Scott and Brenda Oelbaum, use their bodies to reframe social fat identity by highlighting social codes of representation or by rejecting society, and uses the example of Sins Invalid to further discuss the combination of art and activism. Emphasizing the fact that identity is constructed socially, Ronti (2017) concludes that these strategies are counter-hegemonic, opposing normative discourses and that "activist artists dismantle power dynamics and give other meanings to fatness and to their identity: a viable, positive, fat identity" (p. 47).

Saguy and Ward (2011) researched a specific phenomenon in fat activism where women would "come out as fat", and looked at overlapping membership in and networks between queer and fat activist groups. They conclude that the stigma associated with a social group influences this idea and process of 'coming out' (Saguy & Ward, 2011). 'Coming out' is used as a destigmatizing strategy, a way of challenging social norms to achieve social inclusion and to reshape fat identity.

In conclusion, fat activism can take many forms, both individual and collective, through changing public opinion, using legal frameworks, through community building or through art, for example, but a common goal is to rethink stigma, oppose normative discourse, which often centers the constructed issue of 'obesity', and to redefine fat identity to be more positive. Common themes in fat activism were introduced in *Chapter 1 Research Question* and showed that there is a lack of studies that analyze the place of race in fat activism. This is where this thesis comes in.

### **3.4.3 Online Activism and a New Type of Self Help**

Contemporary social activism takes place a lot online. The activists whose work are being analyzed in this thesis are recognized in the movement because of their online work. Osborn (n.d) states that *fat visibility* online in itself has become a brand of activism. However, the online mainstreaming of body positivity possibly also led to its deradicalization. When it comes to online activism a lot of mixed opinions exist, and I expect that more research will be produced on this topic in the future. Research on this is fairly limited but because of its relevance, it can be valuable. Different studies have analyzed online activism, its benefits and pitfalls. A lot of these studies focus on popular feminism and I would argue that, because fat studies and fat activism are related to queer and feminist studies, the contemplations in these works about online activism and popular feminism are relevant for the study of online fat activism as well.

A critique of online activism is that it is either performative or simply not enough to create any meaningful change. Silvia Federici (2018) considered the place of the internet when it comes to creating change and states that:

“the internet can be a facilitator, but transformative activity is not triggered by the information passed online; it is by camping in the same space, solving problems together, cooking together, organizing a cleaning team, or confronting the police, all revelatory experiences for thousands of young people raised in front of computer screens” (p. 193).

I already mentioned that Johansson (2021) warned for the commodification of mainstream fat activism and Shadijanova (2020) agrees that *aesthetic activism* can be commodified, for example when brands appropriate activist messages without encouraging actual change. They conclude that: “digital activism shouldn’t be seen as the solution or end goal, but a first step to take the learning offline” (Shadijanova, 2020, para.

12). Crepax (2020) who studied the *aestheticization* of feminism, agrees that the mainstreaming of feminism is making it lose its radical touch. It is important to acknowledge what part of the movement is being mainstreamed though, both considering the fat movement and the feminist movement as Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) say that while feminism is becoming mainstream “some feminisms are more visible than others” (p. 884). Both the feminist and fat movement are diverse, and the part of the movement that is more mainstream and less radical, does not necessarily represent the entire movement.

Additionally, Matthews (2019) argues that Black feminists are specifically turning to digital media platforms, and Crepax (2020) agrees that it is often marginalized people that use digital platforms to their benefit as digital culture provides a space away from the dominant culture and discourse. The authors discussed in this thesis, a white fat queer woman and a fat Black woman, can both be considered to be part of marginalized groups. According to Matthews (2019) and Crepax (2020) it is then unsurprising that the authors use digital platforms for their activism. Moreover, it is a good way to build a community, which both authors have been able to do and which lead them to be able to publish their books, which became culminations of their online activism.

This type of online activism, that focuses on the highlighting of social justice issues, and the books that are written with the same goal, can be considered forms self-help content. However, not a form of mainstream self-help, which is individualistic, but self-help approached from a critical social psychology perspective, as described by Meg-John Barker (2017). Barker (2017) explains that this new type of self-help “draws on theories and research from across disciplines psychology, sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, and psychotherapy and tries to make that accessible and engaging” and this approach to self-help says: “this is what’s wrong with wider cultural assumptions, systems and



structures, and here are some ways in which you might navigate them differently”. The self-help Barker (2017) describes and produces is based in thorough research, but also personal reflection. It aims to highlight structural issues instead of individual ones, which is why I would relate it to the online activism of marginalized communities. Furthermore, Barker (2017) encourages the use of different formats to share this content such as books, blogs, videos, podcasts. This increases accessibility which can then increase awareness, something which, as expressed in the discussion of the fat activist strategies, fat activists encourage. Furthermore, using different formats can help you reach different audiences (Barker, 2017).

## **4 Methodology**

The goal of this research was to make the connection between fatness and race and look at how a selection of modern-day fat activist texts takes discussions of race into account and shows understanding of the historical links between anti-fat bias and white supremacy. In my analysis, I look at the work of two fat activist to see what discourses they present in their texts and whether these texts are intersectional and engage with race. First, in this chapter, I describe my methodology.

### **4.1 Theoretical framework: Feminist Methodology and Discourse Analysis**

In this section, I consider what influenced the research methods I chose, and I elaborate on the theory behind feminist methodology, discourse analysis and feminist discourse analysis.

I draw on feminist methodology to inspire the research methods of this thesis. Feminist methodology looks at existing power imbalances in research and tries to find new ways to negotiate these imbalances. Self-reflection is key here, as Naples (2003) explains: “if researchers fail to explore how their personal, professional, and structural positions frame social scientific investigations, researchers inevitably reproduce dominant gender, race and class biases” (p. 3). Feminist theories and methods therefore aim to “challenge sexism, racism, colonialism, class, and other forms of inequalities in the research process” (Naples, 2003, p. 13).

Sandra Harding made the distinction between feminist epistemology, methodology and method (Naples, 2003). In accordance with Harding, it is understood that “the specific methods we choose and how we employ those methods are profoundly shaped by our epistemological stance” (Naples, 2003, p. 3). Naples (2003) also explains that a researcher does not always have complete power over their research subjects and that “power is situated and contextualized within particular intersubjective relationships”

(Friedman, 1995, p. 18 as cited in Naples, 2003). What distinguishes feminist scholars' methods from traditional approaches includes the following: "a feminist approach 'aims to create social change,' 'strives to represent human diversity,' and 'attempts to develop special relations with the people studied (in interactive research)'" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 240 as cited in Naples, 2003).

Some theories that Naples (2003) draws on in her research and are also relevant for this thesis are racialization theories developed by critical race theorists, Foucault's theory of discourse and Nancy Fraser's *politics of need interpretation*. Furthermore, standpoint epistemology, that focuses on "the everyday lives of women" is also of relevance (Naples, 2003, p. 7).

It does not seem necessary to introduce racialization theories more in depth, since they have already been introduced in Chapter 2 and 3 of this thesis. In short, it is important to remember that these theories focus on the way hierarchies of 'race' and racialization were historically constructed as tools of white supremacy. Critical Race Theorists such as Omi & Winant (2014) further emphasize how 'race' is unstable and how we cannot understand contemporary racial politics without looking at history.

Foucault's theories about discourse are some of the most influential, which is exemplified by the existence of Foucauldian discourse analysis. He used the term discourse to "denote a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning" (Adams, 2017, para. 2). Discourse is considered to be material in effect, it organizes knowledge that structure the social because of the "acceptance of the discourse as a social fact" (Adams, 2017, para. 2). One of Foucault's key understandings about discourse is that they "are produced by effects of power within a social order" and that the discursive process reduces other meanings of text "in order to eliminate the

differences which could challenge or destabilise the meaning and power of the discourse” (Adams, 2017, para. 2–3). Furthermore:

“By fixing the meaning of text, and by pre-determining the categories of reason by which statements are accepted as knowledge, a discourse creates an epistemic reality and becomes a technique of control and discipline. That which does not conform to the enunciated truth of discourse is rendered deviant, that is, outside of discourse, and outside of society, sociality or the ‘sociable’” (Foucault, 1981, paraphrased in Adams, 2017).

In short, what Foucauldian discourse analysis aims to do is to analyze power effects and relations in language and discourse.

Fraser (1989) explains that “in late-capitalist, welfare-state societies, talk about people’s needs is an important species of political discourse” and “needs-talk functions as a medium for the making and contesting of political claims”. Needs discourses often occur in conjunction with discourses about rights and interests, explains Fraser (1989). Fraser’s (1989) *politics of need interpretation* highlights the relational nature and contested character of needs claims. She makes the distinction between *thin* needs, that do not encounter much contestation, and *thick* needs. Fraser (1989) further explains how “some ways of talking about needs are institutionalized in the central discursive arenas of late-capitalist societies: parliaments, academies, courts, and mass circulation media. Other ways of talking about needs are enslaved as subcultural sociolects and are normally excluded from the central discursive arenas. [...] From this perspective, needs-talk appears as a site of struggle where groups with unequal discursive (and nondiscursive) resources compete to establish as hegemonic their respective interpretations of legitimate social needs” (p. 296).

She uses an example of the discourse about AIDS, but this can also be applied to discourses of fatness.

Standpoint epistemology has been elaborated on by various scholars such as Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins. Starting from these different standpoint theories, Naples (2003) developed a multidimensional standpoint methodology that sees the standpoint:

“first, as embodied in experiences of both the researcher and the researched; second, as located and constructed in ongoing relationships in communities; and third, as a methodological strategy, namely, a site through which to begin inquiry” (Naples, 2003, p. 8).

The authors whose books I am analyzing use their own position and experience as fat women to talk about anti-fat bias and body oppression. These types of personal narratives can be valuable for the research of fatness. Moreover, apart from reflecting on their own experiences, they also reflect on the discourses about fatness more broadly.

I have presented different theories that talk about discourse and would like to now further delve into discourse analysis. Graham (2005) expresses that “discourse analysis is a flexible term” since how someone approaches discourse analysis greatly depends on their epistemological framework and researchers do not always declare their discourse analysis method (p. 2). One type of discourse analysis is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Sandra Taylor (2004) explains that “it allows a detailed investigation of the relationship of language to other social processes, and of how language works within power relations” (p. 436). Blommaert (2005) adds that “CDA was founded on the premises that linguistic analysis could provide a valuable additional perspective for existing approaches to social critique” (p. 22). Moreover, the integration of linguistic analysis and social theory makes that many CDA scholars show “an explicit commitment to social action” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 24). The goal of CDA is to lay bare power structures and analyze, as Wodak (1995)

explains: “opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (p. 204). Discourse is considered to be “an instrument of power”, “socially constitutive” and “socially conditioned” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 25).

Naples (2003) uses “a materialist feminist discourse analysis to reveal how the shifting patterns of gender, race, class, region, among other social structural forces, shape whose voices are represented and heard within the process of social movement framing of ‘community control’” (p. 9). Lazar (2007) further explains that feminist critical discourse analysis “aims to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements” and “to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (p. 141–142). Both Naples (2003) and Lazar (2007) emphasize the material consequences these power differences and structural forces can have for people in different communities. Furthermore, Lazar (2007) explains how feminist academic research has the opportunity to be emancipatory, is anything but neutral, and can be considered “academic activism”, while both feminist studies and CDA tend to be open to interdisciplinary research. Nartey (2020) explains that while feminist CDA tends to focus on deconstructing oppression, attention should also be paid to the reconstruction of resistance.

#### **4.2 Researcher’s Positionality**

When you are doing research, positionality is an important factor to reflect on. The position a researcher adopts, both a researcher’s personal experience and their theoretical background, can influence how the research is performed and how results are

interpreted (Holmes, 2020). Holmes (2020) explains that research in the social field is rarely value-free which is why researchers acknowledge their values, views and beliefs through the means of self-reflection and reflexivity, which informs their positionality. Therefore, in this section I attempt to shed some light on my identity, personal world view and the position I adopt regarding the issues and theories presented in this research.

As a white, fat person, the way I look at and analyze sources and perform my research is different than as someone with a different identity would. Furthermore, while me identifying as fat, can have a positive impact on how I am studying fatness, as a white person, the way I engage with the topic of 'race' will inevitably be limited compared to how a person of color might approach and understand the topic. Cooper (2021) states that an auto-ethnographic component is important for any work that aims to advance the lives of fat people. While my personal experiences as a white fat person are not directly explored in this thesis, it is inevitable that they have influenced my choosing of this research topic and the way I have engaged with the material. Because in this thesis I am exploring the connection between fatness and race, my experience as a white person is only valuable to a certain extent. Studying the experience and expertise of different fat activist, opens up the conversation and makes room for a variety of voices.

I write this thesis to procure a master's degree in Gender and Diversity and the courses I have followed have greatly influenced my ideas about sociopolitical issues. Theories that have influenced my critical thinking and research skills include intersectionality, queer theory, and the social model of disability studies. Furthermore, both personally and academically, I adhere to the notion of intersectional feminism, which influenced the choosing of my thesis topic and the way I approached this research. I previously studied linguistics, which means I adhere great value to the way language is used, as I believe

language can be incredibly powerful. My position on the language choices in this thesis have already been explored in *Chapter 2 Terminology Discussion*.

By centering the books of Sonya Renee Taylor and Aubrey Gordon, which both combine personal stories with research, I acknowledge that not only their academic knowledge but also their personal experiences are valuable to the research of fatness and race, and I align myself with the ideas in standpoint epistemology that encourages the multifaceted way that knowledge can be acquired, and that our social and political background can and may influence our perspectives in research.

Based on the literature presented in Chapter 3, I understand that race and racism are constructed and they are tools used to oppress bodies to further white supremacy. Similarly, I consider anti-fat bias to be a constructed phenomenon that is rooted in the oppression of Black people and used to control people of all identities. By considering race as embodied, meaning, it is people with bodies that experience racism and their bodies are often impacted by the way they are oppressed, it is easier to make the connection between racial oppression and oppression based on fatness. Both are tools to suppress movement and individual and collective power. However, I understand that racial oppression and anti-fatness are very different systems of power, but they can also converge, for example, in the way that fat Black women tend to be marginalized the most.

I believe that research that makes the connection between race and anti-fat bias, such as Strings' (2019) book, highlights the importance of intersectionality in race and fat studies. This belief that intersectionality is important in fat studies, which is supported by Pausé (2014), Smith (2019) and Van Amsterdam (2013), greatly influenced this thesis.

### **4.3 Analyzing Fat Activism**

The goal of this research is to see how two fat activists engage with the topic of racism and anti-racism and more broadly, how they approach intersectionality. As explained in



the literature review, in fat studies, attention is paid to intersectional approaches. The publication of String's (2019) book marks a shift where the importance of connecting the study of race and fatness is highlighted. So, the question is whether this shift is visible in current fat activism as well. By analyzing different texts written by fat activists, the goal is to get an idea of what discourses are important in contemporary fat activism. By means of a discourse analysis the following elements are studied: (1) What common discourses exist in these texts? and (2) How do these fat activists engage with 'race'?

Feminist CDA scholars agree that it is important to center marginalized voices, especially Black voices (Lazar, 2007; Nartey, 2020). Because of the limitations of time and resources of this research, I am analyzing the work of two fat activists. They both identify as fat, one is a white woman and the other is a Black woman. Because of the main subject of this thesis, it made sense to include a Black person in the research, but at the same time, a lot of space in fat activism is occupied by white women, so it seemed relevant to include this point of view as well to specifically analyze how a white activist engages with the topic of race in her work.

#### **4.3.1 Introducing the Authors**

The two books that are being analyzed are *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (2020) by Audrey Gordon and *The Body Is Not an Apology* (2021) by Sonya Renee Taylor. Both authors have written various online articles and blog posts and are active on social media, which is why I decided to also include an introduction to their Instagram accounts in *Section 4.3.3*. As Barker (2017) explained, using different formats to share messages can increase accessibility and reach a wide diverse audience. For the purpose of this thesis, it made most sense to analyze the books in depth and look at their Instagram accounts only in addition as I would argue that the books they have written are a culmination of their online work.

Aubrey Gordon originally gained popularity online when she shared stories of being fat using the pseudonym ‘Your Fat Friend’, until she revealed her identity around the time when *What We Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (2020) came out (Your Fat Friend, 2020d). On Instagram, Gordon describes herself as a writer and “fat white queer cis lady”. The book is marketed as being “an explosive indictment of the systemic and cultural bias facing plus-size people that will move us toward creating an agenda for fat justice” (What we don’t talk about when we talk about fat, n.d., para. 1). Gordon has written many articles for online publications such as *Self*, *Teen Vogue* and *The New York Times*. Her essays can be found on her website: <https://www.yourfatfriend.com/>. Gordon has a podcast together with Michael Hobbes called *Maintenance Phase* where they “debunk the junk science behind health & wellness fads, and decode their cultural meaning” (Maintenance Phase, n.d., para. 2).

Sonya Renee Taylor is the founder and Radical Executive Officer of *The Body is Not an Apology*, a digital media and educational company and international movement that promotes “self-love and body empowerment as the foundational tool for social justice and global transformation” (Taylor, n.d., para. 1). Taylor is a Black poet and intersectional activist who believes art is “a vehicle for social change” (Taylor, n.d., para. 2). She has written for, among others, *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine* and *Huffington Post*. She has worked alongside organizations such as *Planned Parenthood*, *Advocates for Youth 1in3 Campaign* and *Binge Eating Disorders Association*. She has given many speeches and made various tv appearances. Her book *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* was originally published in 2018. In my analysis, I am using the revised and expanded 2021 edition.

### 4.3.2 Critical Reviews

Both books have been well received by the public. At the time of writing this thesis, on Goodreads, an online book reviewing platform, *The Body Is Not an Apology* has a 4.23 star rating out of five stars. This is based on 10,553 reviews. *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* has a 4.47 star rating, which is based on 2,563 reviews. On Goodreads, Gordon's book was reviewed by Roxane Gay, a fellow author who has previously talked and written about her struggles with body issues. Gay (2020) says: "The wisdom Gordon offers in these pages is going to irrevocably change fat discourse and it comes not a moment too soon" (para. 1).

Taylor's (2021) book is endorsed by, among others, Brené Brown, Tess Holliday and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Critical reviews highlight the empathic way in which Taylor addresses her audience and praise her message of self-love. One reviewer writes:

"Taylor wisely casts a wide net and addresses different genders in the book. The author's sensible and empathetic tone will lend comfort to readers and help them to see that no matter what their body type, they are beautiful" (*The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*, 2017).

Chrisler (2018), another reviewer, remarks that her book is both a good introduction to her work, while also going more in depth into the topics covered on her website and social media. She praises Taylor's writing and highlights the personability of the book. Analyzing the book's content, Chrisler (2018) recognizes the attention Taylor pays to intersectionality. Finally, Foster (2017) calls the book "life altering" (para. 1).

In her review of Gordon's book, Owens (2020) highlights similar elements as I highlight in my analysis. She recognizes the extent of Gordon's book, combining personal stories with research, highlights the racial dimension of anti-fat bias that Gordon talks about and concludes that: "Everyone who has a fat family member, friend, acquaintance,

or coworker should read this insightful book” (Owens, 2020, p. 90). Furthermore, for the Manhattan Book Review, McGorray (2021) calls Gordon’s writing “authentic, smart, and critical, informed by both research and her own experience”.

The perception of these books seems to be overwhelmingly positive and it seems that the authors have achieved the goal of raising awareness and opening up room for discussion about fatness, anti-fat bias and self-love.

### **4.3.3 Instagram Activism**

Aubrey Gordon’s Instagram handle is @YrFatFriend (<https://www.instagram.com/yrfatfriend/>). Initially, she was only recognized under this name. It was with the publication of her book that she revealed her name and what she looked like. At this moment, in May 2021, Gordon has 192.000 Instagram followers. She uses her platform to share her writing, promote her podcast, communicate with her followers, for example, through the answering of questions on Instagram Stories, and to share the occasional lighthearted content.

Sonya Renee Taylor personal account can be found @SonyaReneeTaylor (<https://www.instagram.com/sonyareneetaylor/>). At the time of writing, she has 335.000 followers. There also exists an account for the movement @TheBodyIsNotAnApology, which has 224.000 followers (<https://www.instagram.com/thebodyisnotanapology/>). While Taylor founded the movement, it is uncertain whether she personally manages the account, so here, I am only looking at her personal page.

Both pages align with the discourses expressed in their books and also in the way the discourses are expressed. As will become clear from my analysis of the books, both authors use a personal approach to address their audience, but Gordon’s (2020) work is a bit more analytical. This comes across online as well. Gordon never shares any pictures,

but limits herself to resharing tweets she has made that include information and opinions on fatness and sharing colorfully designed text posts of quotes that promote the articles she has written, as illustrated below:



Figure 1: Screenshot of @YrFatFriend on Instagram (blurred) Three posts that were published at the end of March. Screenshot taken on May 15.

Taylor's Instagram looks more personable. She shares images and videos of herself, alongside text posts to promote her work. She also includes other people on her page to promote causes she cares about. Her page appears to be less structured in this way. Below is an example:



Figure 2: Screenshot of @SonyaReneeTaylor on Instagram (blurred). Three posts that were published in May. From left to right: a video from a CNN interview about Palestine, a text post announcing an event hosted by Taylor, and a video of Taylor talking titled 'On Reciprocity and Right Relationship'.

What stands out on Taylor's page is how she pays great attention to increasing the accessibility of her posts, by adding captions to videos and by adding image descriptions.

Regarding content, what is shared on the author's Instagram pages aligns with what they share in their books. For Gordon, the emphasis lies on spreading information about fatness. However, on her Instagram Stories, which disappear after 24 hours unless they are saved in Highlights, she occasionally shares information about other causes or less serious topics, including jokes. She has a Highlight called 'TAKE ACTION' including posts about anti-racism and the Black Lives Matter movement. Because Taylor's page is less structured, she also has the freedom to discuss a variety of topics. Her activism is not limited to fighting anti-fat bias, but she also, for example, centers anti-racism on her page, which is illustrated by her icon being a poster from the Movement for Black Lives. Many of her posts center the general message of her movement, that is, the call for radical self-love. Both authors' Instagram pages reflect an intersectional awareness and they both talk about anti-racism. While Gordon's main focus is to talk about anti-fat bias, Taylor talks about a variety of issues and the central theme in all her work is radical self-love.

In *Section 3.4.3*, I explained that opposing ideas about the benefits of online activism exist and that more research is required. Looking at how both authors use their platform to share information and spread awareness, I would argue that the use of online activism is beneficial for their work and activism. After all, both authors gained recognition because of their online presence. Furthermore, as Barker (2017) explained, by publishing a book, the authors are able to extend their reach and share their messages with a different audience.

## 5 Results

Initially, I wanted to look for three strands of discourses in these works that I categorized as (1) health, (2) power, (3) history. The first category would include any discussion about the medical industry and, for example, assumptions about fat people's health. The second category would include discussions of beauty standards and norms, and the othering of people based on how they look, since both can also be linked to power. The last category would include any discussion of how fat people have been perceived throughout history and how, for example, anti-fat bias has been constructed over time. The goal of this discourse analysis was then to look for discourse that fits these categories, analyze how 'race' is, or is not, discussed in these discourses, and make connections with the theories discussed in Chapter 3. However, I noticed that focusing on these three categories, which would include the reiteration and summarization of facts, data and personal stories, would not be the most meaningful approach to analyzing this work. These themes are still included in the analysis though, since discourses about these themes show how fatness is approached in society and how these discourses can or should change to improve fat people's life experience. Instead, I looked for (1) Fatness: discourse about fatness and anti-fat bias that the authors recognize and discuss, (2) Race: the way the authors include race into their discussion, (3) Resistance: an analysis of the resistance strategies the authors explore to resist body oppression and negative discourses about fatness.

### 5.1 Initial Thoughts

My expectations for the books relied upon what I already knew about the authors based on following them on social media, hearing their names come up in online discussions of fat activism and, in the case of Gordon, having read some online articles by her. I expected them to approach the topic of fatness and fat liberation in various ways, and based on the

titles and blurbs, reasonably assumed that *The Body is Not an Apology* would focus more on personal development and self-love while *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* would focus more on critical analysis of cultural ideas about fatness. Nevertheless, I expected *both* books to include structural and intersectional critiques into their analysis. These expectations were met.

While Taylor's main focus is encouraging a positive attitude towards various bodies, using a very personal approach, Gordon combines personal stories of the author with a lot of research and data showing in what way and how much fat people are discriminated against. This made *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* while incredibly informational, also quite hard to read as a fat person. Both books engage with the topic of race by highlighting the intersectional discrimination fat Black people (especially women) encounter and by calling attention to how different forms of oppression are connected.

It should be considered that both authors are American and many of the research referenced in the books also refers to the situation in the United States. That being said, I would argue that many of the concerns, critiques, theories and stories in these books are also relatable for people of other parts of the world. Still, critiques on how the medical industry works, the intensity of diet culture, and the role of capitalism and consumerism regarding anti-fat bias can differ across the world. Furthermore, as expressed in *Chapter 2 Terminology Discussion*, the conceptualization of 'race' also differs across countries. While there are many shared experiences and oppression based on white supremacy and anti-fat bias can be experienced the same across countries, the discussion and categorization of 'race', who is white or not, differs across the world.

In the following sections I analyze different discourses in the books, illustrated with some excerpts. In *Section 5.2 Fatness*, I analyze discourses about fatness, including how



the authors talk about bodies and how anti-fat bias is considered to be a structural and constructed issue according to the authors. *Section 5.3 Race*, looks at mentions of race in the book to argue whether or not the authors are intersectional in their analysis of fatness, body oppression and anti-fat bias and whether they engage with the interconnected history of anti-fat bias and race. *Section 5.4 Resistance* looks at how the authors present their messages and how they resist negative discourses about bodies. This section concludes with an analysis of the authors' vision for the future.

Based on Foucault's theory of discourse, I argue that Gordon (2020) and Taylor (2021) both resist and criticize common discourse about fatness, while simultaneously creating a new type of discourse that celebrates fatness, or at least encourages an environment where fatness is not villainized. This is in accordance with the fat activist strategies described by Ronti (2017) in *Section 3.4.2*. Furthermore, comparing the activists' work with Cooper's (2016) categories of fat activism, I argue they combine different forms of activism, since they encourage public engagement and radical change, have built communities of like-minded people, and encourage individual change.

## **5.2 Fatness**

Regarding fatness, both authors describe the context, i.e. what it is like being fat, and the elements, systems and attitudes that influence how fat people experience living in society. This includes, for example, personal and societal ideas about bodies, ideas about health and the construction of anti-fat bias.

A theme in both books is what I call 'body talk'. Body talk includes how the authors, and fat people more generally, describe their bodies, but also how the world or society at large perceives and talks about bodies. Throughout the books, the way bodies are talked about is sometimes neutral, sometimes positive and sometimes negative. This shows the experience that many fat people may encounter of wanting to love their body, having

experience with hating their body and having to reconcile with the fact that their body is there, and it is fat. For example, Taylor (2021) at one point describes the body neutrally, simply as something we all have, perhaps in an attempt to make the reader reconcile with the body they have:

(1) “You, my dear, have a body. [...] Everything else we think we know is up for debate” (Taylor, 2021, p. 5).

This type of rhetoric, where the body is considered to be neutral and the focus lies on what your body does rather than what it looks like, is typical for the body neutrality movement (Naftulin, 2020). Positive feelings about bodies are also expressed, although this is usual in the context of ‘how it should be’, something I will elaborate on further in this chapter. However, in the following excerpt where Gordon (2020) looks back at her childhood, she remembers when she felt strong and positive:

(2) “I would find a secret sisterhood of other fat-kid swimmers, all of whom swam the fearsome butterfly. We would reminisce about the feeling of our bodies rising above the surface, then crashing down beneath it, the ache of our arms from half-swimming, half-flying through the water. [...] Our fat made us remarkable, though many of us only realized that in adulthood” (Gordon, 2020, p. 42).

What stands out here is that Gordon (2020) relates these positive feelings about her body with her finding a community of like-minded individuals. This is unsurprising, since Cooper (2016) considered community building to be a form of fat activism and thus, empowerment. Both authors also express negative attitudes towards their own bodies, for example, in this excerpt from Gordon:

(3) “I dreamed of laying on my belly on a cold, metal table (a laboratory or coroner’s office?) and slicing it off with a fish knife in one smooth stroke, bloodied but finally free” (Gordon, 2020, p. 34).

This excerpt viscerally expresses the agony that living in a fat body has caused Gordon as she imagines what it would be like to rid of her fat. While throughout the book, Gordon (2020) emphasizes that losing weight, getting rid of fat, is not easy, if not impossible for many people, this excerpt shows that even people such as Gordon herself sometimes dream of this reality. By claiming that losing weight is not easy, or even possible, Gordon (2020) resists the discourse that fat people should lose weight to become worthy citizens. It relates to the discourse of *controlling bodies* that Wright and Harwood (2009) talk about and which Moran (2020) added a political dimension to. Taylor and Gordon agree that it is societal pressure that makes being fat so hard for fat people and the following excerpts show how the authors notice the way society looks at fat bodies:

(4) “Living in a female body, a Black body, an aging body, a fat body, a body with mental illness is to awaken daily to a planet that expects a certain set of apologies to already live on our tongue [...] For so many of us, *sorry* has become how we translate the word *body*” (Taylor, 2021, p. 13).

(5) “The nearness of my body was too much for him to bear. [...] having to tolerate a body like mine. [...] A stranger telling me, in no uncertain terms, that my body entitled him to treat me however he saw fit” (Gordon, 2020, p. 14–15).

(6) “My strengths and passions didn’t define my path in life — others’ responses to my body did. And over time, those responses built me a cage” (Gordon, 2020, p. 43).

Taylor (2021) states that how these bodies are marginalized by society becomes internalized by the marginalized people in question. Similarly, Gordon (2020) relates negative self-image of fat people with how other people (outsiders, people that are not fat) project their negative notions of fatness onto the fat person. Again, this goes against the idea that fat people *are* bad which makes them feel bad, but argues that fat people are *made* to feel bad.

These negative feelings that are expressed about bodies are often related to shame. The authors believe that fatness should not inherently lead to shame, but shame is enacted upon fat people by society. In the excerpt below, Taylor (2021) argues that the internalization of negative messages leads to shame:

(7) “Toxic messages become our internal outside voice. After we’ve ingested enough body shame, these declarations become the narrative through which we speak about our own bodies, often without even noticing” (Taylor, 2021, p. 74).

When talking about fat shame, the language of ‘taking up space’ is used by both authors, visible in the excerpts below:

(8) “The notion of ‘taking too much space’ is born out of a framework of scarcity upon we have built a world where some people are allowed to build skyscrapers and stadiums or run countries and make laws for the masses, while others are told to stay small” (Taylor, 2021, p. 15–16).

(9) “I planned carefully, working diligently to avoid taking any more space or time than I needed. I couldn’t afford to give my fellow passengers more reasons to take aim at my body” (Gordon, 2020, p. 13).

The use of the rhetoric of bodies taking up too much space is problematized and resisted by the authors and is considered to be an illogical power device. Furthermore, the authors state that how fat people are constructed in the media and society leads to the dehumanization of fat people, as exemplified in the following excerpts. The critical analysis of this dehumanization rhetoric is not uncommon in both race and fat studies.

(10) “We weren’t people — we were just bodies. Disgusting bodies, funny bodies, pitiable bodies, fearful bodies, and sometimes magical bodies, defiant in the confidence we were never supposed to have. But never whole people” (Gordon, 2020, p. 119).

(11) “When we reduce fat people to their bodies, to ‘before and after,’ or to bellies and rolls, we come to think of fat people as bodies without personhood” (Gordon, 2020, p. 137).

The authors highlight how ideas about fatness, shame and anti-fat bias are constructed. Both authors engage with the many layers of anti-fat bias, as something constructed, something relational, something that can be individual, something that can be internalized, something that can be burdened upon others, and something that harms many people, fat, thin or anywhere in between. The authors use data to back up why anti-fat bias is dangerous, how it was constructed, how it is used against people and how fatness and thinness are linked to morality. Some examples of what the authors conclude:

(12) “At a time where overt bias is frowned upon, fat people continue to bear the brunt of a proud and righteous kind of prejudice, whether it be under the banner of healthism, ableism, racism, or classism” (Gordon, 2020, p. 54).

(13) “Ultimately, anti-fatness isn’t based in science or health, *concern* or *choice*. Anti-fatness is a way for thinner people to remind themselves of their perceived virtue” (Gordon, 2020, p. 80).

(14) “This is among the greatest triumphs of anti-fatness: it stops us before we start. Its greatest victory isn’t diet industry sales or lives postponed *just until I lose a few more pounds*. It’s the belief that our bodies make us so worthless that we aren’t deserving of love, or even touch” (Gordon, 2020, p. 113).

In excerpt 12, Gordon (2020) states that these different types of oppression are linked and one is often used as an excuse for the further oppression of the other. She argues against the idea that bias is taboo, as both her experience and research show anti-fat bias still very much exists and is even normalized. In Excerpt 13, she resists the idea that anti-fatness is based on anything ‘real’ other than as a form of oppression. The common

discourse in society is that science and theories about health prove that fatness is bad, but Gordon (2020) and Taylor (2021) argue against this. Wright and Harwood (2009) came to the same conclusion in their discussion of obesity discourse. Excerpt 13 and 14 also show that Gordon (2020) believes this oppression benefits thin people, which broadens the scope of how this oppression against bodies that are different can be analyzed.

The authors both use an idea of *relationality* to explain how anti-fatness not only impacts fat people but other people as well. The following excerpts are examples of the authors talking about this relationality and the comparing of bodies:

(15) “How we value and honor our own bodies impacts how we value and honor the bodies of others” (Taylor, 2021, p. 5).

(16) “We have ranked our bodies against the bodies of others, deciding they are greater or lesser than our own based on the prejudices and biases we inherited (Taylor, 2021, p. 15).

(17) “This cultural obsession with weight loss doesn’t just impact our physical and mental health; it also impacts our sense of self and, consequently, our relationships with others of different sizes” (Gordon, 2020, p. 66).

The authors explain that this relationality prescribes that hating your body and hating the idea of having a body that does not conform the norm, an idea that is forced upon us by society, will reflect on how you see other people’s bodies. Similarly, they say loving your body will result in being able to love and appreciate other bodies better as well, an idea that is especially present in *The Body Is Not an Apology*. The authors use the idea of a ‘standard’ body which we compare our bodies to. Taylor (2021) calls this the ‘default body’ while Gordon (2020) talks about ‘straight sized’ bodies being the norm. By claiming

that hating your body is relational, they move away from the discourse that being fat or having negative self-image is an individual problem, but rather, it is structural.

Moreover, both authors believe that our world simply was not made for people that do not fit particular norms, in this case by being fat, but the authors also consider how being trans, disabled or not white can result to similar forms of exclusion. This theory aligns with the social model of disability in disability studies, that states that it is society that is the problem and should adapt, not disabled people (Adams et al., 2015). The following examples show how the authors talk about this world that is not made for everyone:

(18) “societies have defined what is considered a normal body and have assigned greater value, resources, and opportunities to the bodies most closely aligned with those ideas of normal” (Taylor, 2021, p. 25).

(19) “The world around me rejects my body as if it were an organ transplant. [...] our physical environments cater to thinner bodies, seemingly in aspiration, while the realities of our bodies are intently ignored. [...] Wherever I go, the message is clear: my body is too much for this world to bear. And it’s reinforced by the people around me” (Gordon, 2020, p. 16).

(20) “no one will protect bodies like ours. As long as we’re fat, we might as well be dead” (Gordon, 2020, p. 20).

(21) “I am expected to absorb the discomfort and outright bias against my body in a world built for thin people. The responsibility is mine and mine alone” (Gordon, 2020, p. 29).

The message is strong and clear in these excerpts. The authors believe that the world we live in (particularly the United States from the authors’ points of view) was not made for fat people, which makes fat people uncomfortable and fearful. The strong language that

is used indicates how pertinent the authors think that this needs to change. Excerpt 19 highlights how while the author, and other fat activists and scholars, consider anti-fat bias to be a structural issue, currently, it is still considered by many to be an individual issue that only the fat individual themselves can, and should, solve.

Another theme that is elaborately discussed in both books is health, or how false and negative ideas about health exist and how they perpetuate anti-fat bias. In the introduction, Gordon (2020) reiterates what *healthism* is, both authors discuss medical discrimination, talk about *concern trolling* and acknowledge how, both implicitly and explicitly, 'health' is used to harass or discriminate against fat people. Moreover, they criticize the anti-fat bias that occurs in the healthcare system itself, something Fahs (2019) also criticized. Furthermore, the idea that discrimination can negatively influence people's health is something that is often ignored but highlighted by the authors. Here are some examples of both authors approaching this topic in their books:

(22) "she conflates weight and healing, offering a world view that proposes weight loss as evidence of spiritual healing and alignment and weight gain as evidence of the contrary. [...] her indoctrinated ideas about weight and size have demanded fat bodies apologize by pathologizing them and demanding they shrink" (Taylor, 2021, p. xvii).

(23) "conflated weight with health. Thin people 'looked healthy'; fat people were met with concern for our health" (Gordon, 2020, p. 37).

(24) "'The Danger of Poodle Science' to explain body diversity and the perils of assessing health and wellness based on assumptions about size. [...] we treat larger bodies with poodle science and then pathologize those bodies by using the rhetoric of health. [...] This is called health trolling or concern trolling" (Taylor, 2021, p. 23-24).

(25) "Despite a mountain of evidence linking physical and mental health to social discrimination, the conversation about fat and health stubbornly refuses to



acknowledge the possible influences of stigma in determining fat people's health" (Gordon, 2020, p. 52).

These excerpts show a common critique by fat activists and scholars that limited definitions of 'health' and presumptuous understandings of 'health' based on how someone looks is counterproductive, dangerous and stigmatizing. This goes against the idea that health is a goal to be achieved and can increase someone's worth, a discourse that is common in contemporary discussions about health, fitness and wellness.

The authors engage with the context of living as a fat person in what they see as a world that is not designed for fat people, a world full of negative body talk, discrimination and concern trolling to the resist this context. Through analyzing and engaging with this context, they then attempt to find a way that is worth living for fat people, a typical fat activist strategy.

### **5.3 Race**

Both authors take up a clear intersectional approach to their writing, illustrating facts with stories from people with varying identities, Black, white, queer, disabled... They also consider how different oppressions are connected. This is in contrast with how historically, race studies and fat studies have not always concerned themselves with issues outside of their scope, since, for example, fat studies and fat activism have been criticized of centering whiteness.

In *The Body Is Not an Apology* this was especially clear in how Taylor (2021) did not limit her discussion of the body to the fat body, but consistently mentioned how the same systems of oppression oppress trans and disabled bodies and bodies of color. Gordon (2020) did this as well, but her main focus remained the discussion of the fat body, it's oppression and future liberation. Still, she also paid attention to the different oppression fat people of color encounter. Because Taylor is a Black women, she often considered the

impact of this racial identity in how she experiences and talks about fatness. Similarly, as a queer person, Gordon (2020) paid particular attention to the intersection of fatness and queerness.

Both authors critique the systems that perpetuate anti-fat bias, such as capitalism, ableism, classism, and of course racism. For example, they reference Strings' (2019) work that highlighted the roots of anti-fat bias in white supremacy. Furthermore, Gordon (2020) talks about the BMI and how it is not just a harmful and useless measure of health, it is also rooted in racism. In the following excerpts, the authors acknowledge how historically many groups of people were disenfranchised, which impacts how they are perceived and abused today:

(26) White scientists in Europe and America focused significant energy on establishing and popularizing diagnoses that specifically marginalized women, people of color, queer people, trans people, poor people, and disabled people, and that underscored what they believed was the inherent supremacy of class-privileged, able-bodied, heterosexual white men" (Gordon, 2020, p. 48).

(27) "This country is not an anomaly in its history of centralizing political power toward a specific body; most nations have a default body in their government structures. Although social and cultural realities may shift what those bodies look like, using default bodies to establish a social hierarchy and distribute power and resources is a global phenomenon" (Taylor, 2021, p. 54).

(28) "Gross inequality and disenfranchisement across social experiences, poor public-health outcomes, and unjust legislation are systemic representations of centuries of infusing body shame into every sector of public and private life" (Taylor, 2021, p. 55).

In these excerpts, the authors state that body oppression is a political act, one that was constructed throughout history. They consider this type of oppression to not be limited

to fat people, but also other marginalized groups, such as people of color or poor people. They see body oppression as clear tools of power. Accounting for history in the analysis of contemporary oppression, aligns with Omi and Winant (2014) who explained that racial politics cannot be understood separated from its history. I would argue that this applies to fat politics as well.

The specific impact anti-fat bias has on Black people and other people of color is also illustrated by both authors by sharing personal stories and stories about representation. For Taylor (2021) this includes her own experience as a fat Black woman, while Gordon (2020) shares stories of people of color and analyzes various negative representations of fat Black people in media. Gordon (2020) notices that while a lot of representation of fatness in general is bad, “the lion’s share of fat stories stubbornly center whiteness”, acknowledging that people of color are once again disadvantaged and left behind (p. 127).

Another way in which attention is paid to the role of race in fat discrimination and liberation is the acknowledgement of the movement’s roots. Both authors acknowledge that body positivity, fat acceptance and fat liberation as movements were originated by women of color. They also critique how the current body positivity movement has lost much of its critical potential and has been taken over by white women who are not fat. In *Section 3.4 The Origins of Fat Activism*, I established that this seems to be a common critique among contemporary radical fat activists, a critique the authors seem to agree with.

Both authors clearly understand the importance of a critical intersectional approach to the study of fatness and to the achievement of fat liberation. This intersectional approach is recognizable in both books, yet because Taylor’s (2021) book is more actionable while Gordon’s (2020) is more analytical, in *The Body Is Not an Apology*, the radical intersectional approach and the engagement with anti-racism is more obvious.

Because Taylor (2021) uses a broad conceptualization of body oppression, not just limited to fatness, the book includes methods for liberation not just for anti-fat bias, but also anti-queer and anti-trans bias, racial inequality and all forms of body terrorism in general. She analyzes particular oppressions that Black people encounter, for example through mass incarceration, that is not always linked to fat oppression but is related to the abuse of bodies.

Again, this is not to say that Gordon's (2020) book ignores race or does not use an intersectional approach. Gordon's (2020) book is generally more focused on the discussion of fatness, referring to other forms of oppression, acknowledging the racist roots of anti-fatness, and using examples of how anti-fat bias impacts people with different intersectional identities, while Taylor's (2021) focus on body oppression and body terrorism in general consistently mentions how all these systems are interrelated.

#### **5.4 Resistance**

In this section I look at the resistance strategies the authors use to go against the oppressions they describe, the way the readers are addressed and the language that is used. These strategies and approaches are visible throughout the entire books.

Both books are partly autobiographical, which increases their personability. Apart from the authors' own experiences, experiences by other fat people are also shared, experience that are likely relatable to many readers. Taylor (2021) takes this personability even further. The main theme of the book is radical self-love and the book aims to inspire fat people to love themselves unconditionally, in spite of existing structural anti-fat bias. Therefore, Taylor (2021) talks directly to the reader and uses a lot of positive, inspirational and hopeful language. She also refers to inspirational figures and activists such as Angela Davis, Audre Lorde and bell hooks, which can further inspire the reader. On the other hand, Gordon's (2020) work appears to be less inspirational and

more analytical, giving an overview of different oppressions fat people encounter and how different people experience these oppressions. She resists this context of discrimination by critically analyzing and describing it and acknowledging the need for change.

Apart from using inspirational and analytical language, both authors use particular types of strong language to get their message across. Gordon (2020) for example, adds a list of terminology, explaining how and why she uses it, in the introductory chapter. Gordon (2020) makes clear that she prefers the word *anti-fat bias* instead of *fat phobia* because of its radical potential. She also uses *fat justice* instead of, for example, *fat acceptance* or *body positivity*. By objecting to body positivity discourses, Gordon (2020) —and Taylor (2021) does this too — acknowledges and rejects the depolitization of the movement in the neoliberal context, as discussed by Johansson (2021) and Rahbari (2021), and demands a return to the radical energy of the movement. Rahbari (2021) expresses a need for a turn from individual responsibility to solidarity, something that also comes across in the activists' books.

The language Taylor (2021) uses is centered in love, but is nonetheless strong and explicit. Taylor (2021) specifically makes this connection, similar to Rahbari (2021) between individual self-love and solidarity and love for others, which can lead to structural change. The main theme of the book is *radical self-love*, which Taylor (2021) considers a useful resistance strategy against body oppression that can lead to positive effects on both an individual and a systemic level. The use of the word 'radical', a word Gordon (2020) also uses in her book, is intentional to both highlight the urgency for change but also the idea that self-love "is our inherent state" (p. 12). Furthermore, this journey to self-love should be *unapologetic* and Taylor (2021) even refers to self-love as an "act of revolution" (p. 27). Later in the book, Taylor (2020) talks about *body terrorism*,

acknowledging how this term could be controversial while reinforcing the accuracy of the term. Regarding the word 'fat', throughout the course of both books it is used in different context with different connotations. Fat still has many negative connotations because of how fatness is perceived in society, but in the end, the author's both want to reclaim the word and make it into something neutral or positive. The language both authors chose to use impacts how their stories are told and understood. The use of radical, strong language highlights the urgency of the subject matter, while the use of inspirational language can make readers hope for a better world.

A key resistance strategy both authors preach is awareness. This is obvious by the simple fact that they wrote educational books to raise awareness of a topic that is still commonly misunderstood, but also expressed in the strategies they describe in their books. Gordon (2020) pleads for an expanding of the framework, that for example feminist activists use, and Taylor's (2021) strategy to combat different types of oppression includes steps of *Thinking*, *Doing* and *Being*. The authors say that being aware of discrimination can lead to mindset changes and action which can lead to structural changes, the authors believe.

Both authors understand that anti-fat bias is a structural issue and therefore the solution should also be structural. Taylor (2020) considers radical self-love to be the starting point of systematic change. It is a step that an individual undertakes that can have serious consequences on other people and society as a whole. Both authors believe that different oppressions are connected and should be analyzed and resisted together. Below are some excerpts that show how the authors acknowledge and resist systemic oppression:

(29) "Using the term *radical* elevates the reality that our society requires a drastic political, economic, and social reformation in the ways in which we deal with bodies

and body difference. [...] Creating a world of justice for all bodies demands that we be radical and intersectional” (Taylor, 2021, p. 8–9).

(30) “From LGBTQIAA+ bodies to fat bodies, to disabled bodies and women’s bodies, we live under systems that force us to judge, devalue, and discriminate against the bodies of others. [...] we must look at the central currency of government: power” (Taylor, 2021, p. 52).

These excerpts show that the structural change the authors plead for is not solely focused on challenging anti-fat bias but takes other oppression into account and understands that the way different groups of people are oppressed based on their bodies are linked. I therefore believe the authors understand that an intersectional approach is important when you want to understand and resist oppression.

Both authors have a clear vision of a better world, a world after fat liberation, one where everyone is valued and respected, regardless of size, race or anything else. For Taylor (2021) liberation is rooted in radical self-love which stretches out far beyond the individual and also impacts the structural. Gordon (2020) looks at the necessary paradigm shift that will remove the current oppressive system. Taylor’s (2021) dream and agenda are sprinkled throughout the book, while Gordon’s (2020) vision is mostly elaborated on in the final chapter. The following excerpts summarize these visions and show what a better world through the eyes of a fat activists could look like:

(31) “Let there be double seats for every fat body, and may every boardroom and decision-making entity be brimming with young and old, Black, Brown, and transgender bodies. Taking up space we have previously been denied is a step toward bringing a just balance of power and resources (i.e., space) in the world. It is an act of radical love” (Taylor, 2021, p. 16).

(32) “If our collective focus becomes love and the notion that every human being in every imaginable form deserves a world where they can love and be loved in the bodies they have today... and if the definition of love is one that includes resource, care, compassion, justice, and safety for all bodies, just imagine what we might grow together!” (Taylor, 2021, p. 105).

(33) “Liberation is the opportunity for every human, no matter their body, to have unobstructed access to their highest self, for every human to live in radical self-love” (Taylor, 2021, p. 130).

(34) “We deserve a new paradigm of health: one that acknowledges its multifaceted nature and holds t-cell counts and blood pressure alongside mental health and chronic illness management. We deserve a paradigm of personhood that does not make size *or* health a prerequisite for dignity or respect. [...] We deserve more spaces to think and talk critically about our bodies *as they are*, not as we wish they were, or as an unforgiving and unrealistic culture pressures them to change” (Gordon, 2020, p. 69).

(34) “There is a world beyond this one. In that world, diversity in size and shape are understood to be part of the natural variance of human bodies, from very fat people to very thin ones. [...] In that world, each of us is judged based on our actions, not our bodies. [...] it is honest about power and privilege, and it is thoughtful and diligent in dismantling the systems of oppression that keep our bodies out of our own control. [...] Human experiences deserving of empathy are no longer restricted to a single size or body type” (Gordon, 2020, p. 154–156).

These excerpts show that for the authors, the end goal is one where society has moved beyond the oppressive context of now, where people are discriminated against based on their bodies. The authors believe that this oppressive context, that includes unrealistic paradigms about health and expectations of shame and lack of self-worth, for example,



should be resisted until every body is liberated. The bodies the author refer to in this future image are not limited to fat bodies, but include LGBTQ+ bodies, disabled bodies, Black bodies and so on. Again, showing that while the books' main focus is fatness, the authors believe that liberating the world from anti-fat bias includes liberating the world from other types of body oppression. This demand for an alternative to thinness as the norm which oppresses all bodies, aligns with Gentles-Peart's (2018) demand for the queering of body politics. Rhabari's (2021) view of feminist solidarity and care in neoliberal times, which involves the investing in care and social security for communities, is also visible in Gordon's (2020) and Taylor's (2021) vision for the future, for example in excerpt 31 and 32.

Because the authors express what it required for society to be more livable for fat people and other oppressed people, these visions of the future can be considered 'needs talk', which Fraser (1989) considers to be a type of political discourse. I would argue that the needs expressed by the authors, through their resistance strategies, are what Fraser (1989) calls *thick* needs, since they go against the common ideas and discourses about fatness and the authors demand radical structural change to meet these needs.

In conclusion, the authors resist common discourse about fatness and the body oppression that impacts people differently, and create a new discourse based on fat positive research and personal experiences, which gives them a way of fighting back and a strategy to work towards a better future. Foucault stated that discourse is created "by effects of power within a social order" (Adams, 2017, para. 2). When the authors, or marginalized people in general, resist this common discourse, they are thus resisting the powers in the social order that created these negative, oppressive and arguably wrong discourses about bodies; discourses that, according to the authors, can seriously impact people's physical and mental health. In their resistance of these common discourses, the

authors use an intersectional approach by acknowledging how different oppressions are linked, considering how different groups of people experience oppression and striving for a future of intersectional social justice.

## 6 Conclusion and Discussion

This thesis aimed to answer the question: How does a selection of modern-day fat activist texts take discussions of race into account and show an understanding of the historical links between anti-fat bias and white supremacy? This question was based on Strings' (2019) pivotal work which showed that anti-fat bias is rooted in white supremacy and used as a tool of power. Strings' (2019) work furthermore highlighted the importance of an intersectional approach in the discussion of fatness and anti-fat bias. It is understood that an intersectional approach can be valuable in fat studies and fat activism (Pausé, 2014; Smith, 2019; Van Amsterdam, 2013). However, little research has been done that analyzes the place of race in fat activism. This thesis aimed to address this gap.

The research question was answered through the means of a discourse analysis of two books by fat activists: *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (2020) by Aubrey Gordon and *The Body Is Not an Apology* (2021) by Sonya Renee Taylor. The methodology was inspired by feminist methodology and feminist discourse analysis. Furthermore, the analysis was influenced by research methods and theories such as Foucault's theory of discourse, Fraser's politics of need interpretation, critical race theories and standpoint epistemology.

In the analysis, I looked specifically for the discourses the authors use and resist in their books, and how they engage with intersectionality and race. The analysis of these books showed that both authors relate to discourses put forth in fat studies. They criticize and resist common discourses about fatness and create alternative discourses for the future. This alternative discourse involves the destigmatization of fatness, which is a common fat activist strategy.

The way the authors talk about bodies and fat bodies in particular acknowledges the negative framing of fatness by society, while at the same time, this framing is resisted and

a new way of living with and looking at fatness is put forth. This is a common discourse in fat studies and activism, where societal structures that oppress fatness are critiqued and fatness is reimagined. Sometimes the authors describe the body as being neutral, which aligns with discourse of body neutrality. When positive feelings are described, this tends to be related to feelings of community, which is another important theme in fat activism. Another discourse that is explored is the discourse of shame. Here, the authors emphasize that feeling negative about your body is not an individual issue but brought about by structural oppression. Furthermore, the discourse that certain people 'take up too much space' is also problematized and linked to ideas of power and control. They also discuss the dehumanization of fat people, a common rhetoric in both fat and race studies. Fatness and anti-fat bias are considered to be relational issues, as the authors consider negative self-image to be a structural issue that impacts everyone and should be solved through structural changes, not just individual ones. Furthermore, the authors resist dangerous discourse about health and fatness, and actually claim that it is anti-fat bias that is harming fat people's health, not being fat itself.

The main discourse that is resisted by both authors is the idea that fatness is a dangerous individual problem that can and should be fixed. Instead, the authors argue that anti-fat bias is a structural problem and that it is society that normalizes anti-fat rhetoric. They go as far as arguing that the world simply is not made for fat people, again, an argument that is not uncommon in fat studies and fat activism. By resisting common discourses, they also resist the social order that creates these discourses. This is further resisted by arguing for a new imagination of fatness and society, which is expressed through the explication of needs, or what is required to change in society for people to no longer be oppressed based on their bodies.

Both authors engage with race in different and similar ways and both authors understand the importance of intersectionality in the analysis of oppression. The intersectionality of both authors is not limited to race, but includes and engagement with oppression rooted in ableism, anti-queer bias, anti-trans bias and classism. They make the connection between body oppression and power and analyze this in its historical context. For Taylor (2021), as a Black woman, being Black is part of her identity so it influences her lived experience. Furthermore, she discusses body oppression which includes the discussion of racial inequality and trans oppression, for example, in addition to anti-fat bias, which means discussions of racism and anti-racism are more directly visible in her work. Gordon's (2020) approach is more analytical and focuses more on anti-fat bias in particular. However, she discusses race in its historical context, highlights research that connects racism and anti-fatness, and shares experiences of other people. Both authors also refer to Strings (2019) which highlights their understanding of the history of anti-fat bias and white supremacy.

The authors both use strong language to get their message across, while at the same time, the books are very personal. The terminology they use, including *fat justice* and *radical self-love* is chosen specifically to further the fat activist movements goal of fat liberation, while adding their own perspective and view of the movement. They use the word 'radical' in the context of liberation to emphasize the urgency of the issue and to demand comprehensive structural change. This aligns with discourse that criticizes the neoliberalization and deradicalization of modern activist movements. Taylor (2021) preaches radical self-love and personally addresses the reader, which increases the personability of her work. Gordon's (2020) work is more analytical, but includes inspirational messages as well.

As a resistance strategy, both authors emphasize the importance of awareness. This is a common activist strategy. By publishing their books, the authors increase and diversify their audience, which can increase awareness for the activist messages they are sharing. Furthermore, by resisting common discourses about fatness and sharing alternative discourses, they are raising awareness for a new way of thinking about these issues.

Both author's resistance strategies include a vision of a liberated future. A future where no one is discriminated against based on their bodies, and a future where the oppressive context of today has been drastically overturned. Here again, this liberation is not limited to fat people, but the authors demand social justice for all oppressed groups of people and strive for a world where everyone is liberated.

Both books were well-received and have seemingly had a positive impact on the discussion of fatness. The author's Instagram accounts reflect the same sentiments that occur in their books and this thesis argues that their use of Instagram as a platform works well to share their activist messages and build a community.

The scope of this master's thesis, which is limited in time and resources, allowed me to only analyze the work of two fat activists. It would be interesting to broaden the scope of this research in the future and more elaborately analyze the place of anti-racism in fat activism. Furthermore, I understand that the study of fatness tends to be limited to the discussion of fatness in the United States and I understand that this thesis continues this trend. I would still argue that the information in this thesis and similar research is relevant beyond the scope of the United States but researching fatness in other parts of the world is also valuable. Regarding the analysis of online activism, I am of the opinion that this type of research is valuable in the current context and more research needs to be done to truly grasp the benefits and limits of online activism.

Research of fat activism is limited. The analysis of this movement should be elaborated and include research that looks at online activism and the place of activist texts, such as the ones used in this thesis, in the movement. Something that this thesis did not address in depth was how valuable these types of texts are and what their actual impact can be on raising awareness for the movement or inspiring actual change.

This thesis concludes that Aubrey Gordon and Sonya Renee Taylor both understand the value of intersectionality in their analysis of fatness and anti-fat bias. They make the connections between anti-fat bias and racism and recognize how different oppressions are linked. More research is required, so hopefully, this thesis will be one of many that engages with these subjects and makes these connections.

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