


ARTICLE

Beauty Labor as a Tool to Resist Antifatness

Cheryl Frazier 

Department of Philosophy, University of Oklahoma, 6080 Haley Center, Alabama 36849 USA
Corresponding author. Email: cherylfrazier@auburn.edu

(Received 18 August 2020; revised 31 August 2021; accepted 14 September 2021)

Abstract

In this article I defend an account of beauty labor as a form of resistance that can enable individuals and communities to combat body oppression. Focusing on the “Fuck Flattering!” movement, a social-media-driven movement in which fat people purposefully wear unflattering clothing to resist antifat fashion and oppressive body standards, I first set three criteria necessary for an act of beauty labor to count as one of resistance. I argue that (1) the agent in question must be situated as a less ideal candidate for attributions of beauty, (2) the agent must have some level of knowledge or awareness of the norms (defined in light of dominant groups) and their harms, and (3) that knowledge or awareness of the harms of said norms must inform the agent’s act of beauty labor. Based on this account of beauty labor as resistance, I argue that beauty labor can combat larger systems of oppression and incite meaningful change insofar as it enables individuals to claim and reclaim space (both digital and physical) from which fat people have been historically excluded, while affording an opportunity for education and unpacking of oppression and bias, and expanding the fashion industry.

Fat people are plagued with oppressive standards that dictate everything from the way they eat in public to the way they dress. These norms are a discriminatory reminder that fat people need to take up as little space as possible, conforming to others’ ideals of beauty while simultaneously remembering that they are not the kind of people who get to count as beautiful (Bartky 1990, 73). As Kathleen LeBesco explains, “fat is the antithesis of the beauty ideal of the day: tight, lean, and toned” (LeBesco 2004, 1). Fashion has been a longstanding means of controlling bodies, forcing individuals to conform to narrow beauty ideals and to make this conformity (or inability to conform) undeniably visible. Jeannine Gailey notes, for example, that “social control over bodies is nothing new, especially women’s bodies. . . . Today the most coveted womanly form is thin and toned. . . . Thinness confers social status and privilege” (Gailey 2014, 2).

One of the rules often used to control people in contemporary fashion is that women ought to dress in figure-flattering clothing that both emphasizes their curves and hides any “flaws” of their bodies. In a list of the fifty best fashion tips of all time, *InStyle* magazine says women should “embrace your shape,” “know which silhouettes flatter you” (InStyle Staff 2018), and choose clothing that is both on-trend and the “right” cut of

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Hypatia, a Nonprofit Corporation. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

clothing for that body type. For fat women, the “right” cut is one that minimizes the appearance of fat. Clothing that smooths over rolls, lumps, and bumps, or that makes someone appear smaller, is accepted. Meanwhile, clothing that makes someone appear their actual size (or, heaven forbid, makes them look larger) is taboo. These beauty norms help maintain an oppressive societal structure that disadvantages fat people. I follow G. M. Eller in categorizing antifatness as *oppressive*, as opposed to merely harmful or as justified discrimination, given the extent to which antifatness does cause myriad interconnected harms that severely limit fat people’s freedom and autonomy (Eller 2014). Understanding and examining beauty standards within this context of antifat oppression, we are more readily able to investigate and understand the moral gravity of their control.¹

Beauty standards serve as a tool to control and limit people’s expression and ability to navigate the world freely in their own bodies. A similar phenomenon occurs with cases involving gender, race, and disability, wherein people are forced to present themselves in ways that approximate idealized forms of beauty. These harmful, idealized beauty standards then reinforce or bolster other oppressive structures. For instance, norms of gendered dress often dictate that one is more or less of a candidate for being judged beautiful depending on whether the clothes one wears “match” their gender identity. These norms then help reinforce the gender binary, reinforcing the idea that there are “right” or “wrong” ways to be a man or a woman and that there is no “right” way to present oneself outside of these categories. Those who challenge these oppressive ideals can do so on many levels: through political protest, rejecting idealized beauty norms, challenging the larger oppressive structures, advocating for fair legal treatment, and so on.

Although control of bodies through fashion is nothing new, it is of particular concern for fat people, whose bodies are simultaneously hypervisible and hyperinvisible, an apparent paradox identified by Gailey. As Gailey argues (following Monica Casper and Lisa Moore), “some bodies are highly public, visually inspected, and made into a spectacle, while others are subject to discrimination or erasure because of societal stratification along the lines of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and so on” (Gailey 2014, 7; see Casper and Moore 2009). The perception of one’s body as visible or invisible affects the opportunities and privileges afforded to them, as well as their ability to help shape narratives surrounding their own identities. Being perceived as visible or made invisible are fluid states, and one may occupy different states depending on the situation. Gailey raises the example of thin white women, who may be visible as they experience “immediate catering in clothing stores but also [enjoy] an invisible status when [moving] through customs while traveling” (Gailey 2014, 11). Privileged bodies are able to be visible or invisible when it is convenient. In contrast, fatness presents an “*apparent* paradox because it is visible and dissected publicly; in this respect, it is *hypervisible*. Fat is also marginalized and erased; in this respect, it is *hyperinvisible*” (7).

Despite occupying space as simultaneously hypervisible and hyperinvisible, fat people have historically challenged widespread perceptions of their bodies and embraced their bodies as an opportunity for resistance against body-based oppression. This resistance has taken the forms of political/legal advocacy, creation of safe community spaces for fat people (on and offline), and protests, among others. Recently, fat people have connected through an online movement known as the “Fuck Flattering!” movement to use engagement with fashion and beauty norms as a meaningful method of resistance.

In this article, I argue that people can use acts of beauty labor as a form of resistance against oppressive beauty norms, but also against larger oppressive structures. By

exploring how fat people shape their own identities and experiences through this movement using beauty labor, I will argue that fat people are able to challenge their status as hyper(in)visible, demanding visibility in ways that force others to address and consider their own antifatness. Beauty labor, a concept borrowed from Shirley Anne Tate, consists of acts “involved in producing this surface [of beauty on the body],” which can then be visible to and assessed by others (Tate 2009, 17). On her view, acts of beauty labor are used to respond to (and sometimes challenge) beauty norms. There are numerous instances of beauty labor, including (but not limited to) doing makeup, dressing in certain ways, styling body hair, and more permanent or long-lasting choices like piercings or tattoos.

Beauty labor is situated in a context in which beauty is racialized, unfairly and unequally removed as a possibility for people of color. As Tate explains, this racialization is such that “there is an inscription of beauty on some bodies and not others so that beauty is always embodied *as white*” (18). This idea of candidacy for beauty can be extended to account for size, disability, gender expression, and other visible facets of embodiment. In other words, whether one is a candidate for beauty depends on the degree to which their body approximates or resembles the type of body (accounting for race, disability, size, gender expression, and so on) in virtue of which beauty is defined. Acts of beauty labor can be used to increase apparent proximity to idealized beauty, but can also be used as a tool for resistance against those same conceptions of beauty. Through the “Fuck Flattering!” movement, fat people reject society’s tendency to perceive fatness only when convenient. Using acts of beauty labor, participants in the movement force society to perceive their bodies *on their own terms*, confronting their fatness even when it is unwanted or inconvenient. This forced perception is a means of controlling and reclaiming one’s own visibility, and offers a meaningful site of resistance against antifatness.

I focus this project on the ways that beauty labor can be used to resist antifatness, as antifatness is an underexplored topic in philosophy, especially in the field of aesthetics. Although there is a growing literature about how to use or attend to aesthetics to combat body oppression, much of this literature focuses on sites of oppression and marginalized identities other than fatness, such as race and gender.² In light of this gap, this article seeks to motivate an account of the ways that fat people redefine and reimagine beauty, creating space for themselves and other fat people to be seen as candidates for beauty. Through this reconstruction of beauty, fat people can combat antifatness more broadly as their beauty labor becomes a tool for resistance. This project also follows previous explorations of fatness as a site of identity and resistance in other fields outside of philosophical aesthetics (see LeBesco 2004; Gailey 2014; Blank 2020).

By exploring the ways that fat people use their bodies as aesthetic tools for resistance, I hope to expand the understanding of the rich interplays between body size, beauty standards, and collective action and activism.

In section I, I present the case of the “Fuck Flattering!” movement, a social-media-driven movement aimed at challenging an antifat fashion industry. Analyzing the myriad actions involved in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement will help motivate an account of beauty labor as a tool for resistance. In section II, I identify criteria necessary for an act of beauty labor to count as resistance, using the “Fuck Flattering!” movement to highlight the different degrees of epistemic awareness of and engagement with norms possible in acts of beauty labor as resistance. I present these criteria alongside Gailey’s analysis of fatness as hyper(in)visible (Gailey 2014), and borrowing from LeBesco’s analysis of redefining fat identity as a form of group

resistance (LeBesco 2004). After motivating this account of beauty labor as resistance, in section III, I discuss how those acts of beauty labor help people resist broader systems of antifatness, highlighting the ways that the movement enables individuals to claim and reclaim space, both digital and physical, from which fat people have been historically excluded.

I. Antifatness and the “Fuck Flattering!” Movement

In November 2015, designer and plus-size fashion blogger Alysse Dalessandro released the controversial Convertible Cupcake Dress through her clothing line Ready to Stare (Dalessandro n.d.1). This dress, inspired by singer Rihanna’s 2015 Grammy Awards gown, has an oversized silhouette that balloons out from the body.³ Rihanna’s dress was overall considered fashionable and beautiful. Despite the strikingly similar silhouettes, the Convertible Cupcake Dress was not as well received.⁴ Its poor reception was due largely to the fact that the dress violates one of the most basic and widely held rules of fat fashion, wherein fat women are expected to wear curve-hugging, “figure-friendly” clothing like empire waist tops or A-line silhouettes. Dalessandro remarked that “this dress represented freedom. Although this dress didn’t sit tightly on my body, it showed my arms which are one of my largest body parts. I still have a double chin in this dress. I wasn’t trying to hide my fat; I wasn’t trying not to ‘embrace my curves,’ I was trying to wear whatever the fuck I wanted” (Dalessandro n.d.2).

Despite her goal of helping expand the number of options of clothing available to fat women, her dress was heavily criticized. Upon its initial release, people said things like “[the] designer should be fired” and “why why why do this to these girls? . . . [This is] terrible for these girls who are beautiful.” Dalessandro has responded to these comments, noting that since she is in fact a fat woman it should not be surprising or disturbing for her to wear clothing that makes her look fat. Others have followed suit, praising the dress for opening the doors to a movement that could change the face of fat fashion. On the blog “Flight of the Fat Girl,” for example, one owner of the dress exclaimed:

I saw it on Facebook first, back around the time [her collection] launched—the nasty comments, all because a designer dared to challenge society’s idea of what plus size fashion should be. . . . What Alysse has done, is go up against the standard . . . and say, it’s time to forge further and conquer new territory in plus size fashion! It’s time to step out of these stagnant waters and allow ourselves to accept that we have a right to wear any style a thin person can, whether society deems it “flattering” or not! (Don’t Flatter Yourself, Cupcake 2015)

This dress has played a large role in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement, a social-media-driven movement wherein fat people insist that “flattering” clothing need not be the only acceptable type of clothing, and that fashion should allow people to wear what they want. The movement represents an attitude endorsed by fat people—especially within the fat fashion (or “fatshion”) community—to reject the notion of “flattering” as a necessary feature of clothing. Moreover, the movement strives to unpack the antifatness implicit in norms that recommend “flattering” clothing. As queer fat fashion blogger and art historian Shannon (of the blog “With a Rare Device”) explains:

when those of us in the fat activism community say we want to “fuck flattering,” we don’t just mean that we want to wear things that go against flattering norms.



Figure 1. Dalessandro's Convertible Cupcake Dress (Red dress, on right model)

That part's great—horizontal stripes and sack dresses and things that emphasize our volume forever and ever—but there's more. It's a recognition of the fact that “flattering” has not been used as a compliment for many of us; it's been used as a weapon. It's been used to diminish us, to reward us for shrinking ourselves, to deny us the full range of color and expression and joy, to assume our bodies are unruly and forcefully tame them. (Shannon 2019)

Popular fat bloggers like Bethany Rutter (Rutter 2012), Alysse Dalessandro, and Caroline Dooner (author of *The F*CK It Diet*) endorse the movement, and its participants also engage in the movement on social-media platforms such as Instagram. The “Fuck Flattering!” movement represents a cluster of actions, many of which constitute beauty labor as resistance. At its most basic, this beauty labor includes dressing in

clothing that is not traditionally deemed flattering for a fat person's body. Some participants in the movement expand these acts of beauty labor, sharing their outfits on social media, being seen at public fashion events (for example, New York Fashion Week) in "unflattering" clothing, and creating their own "unflattering" clothing to wear when it is not available commercially. These varied actions have in common that they aim to celebrate and validate fat bodies, rejecting oppressive norms that dictate that said bodies should not exist as they are.

As one of the founders of the movement, Dalessandro noted that there is a lot of internal and external policing and beauty standards that limit which silhouettes are deemed "acceptable" to wear. External forces—the fashion industry, media, informal social pressure, and so on—unfairly limit which clothing options are available and acceptable for certain types of bodies to purchase and wear, helping to construct and maintain problematic beauty standards that then gain uptake in society more broadly. Meanwhile, people (including those subject to and marginalized by oppressive norms) internalize those standards, self-policing and monitoring others' bodies and choice of clothing.

The "Fuck Flattering!" movement helps challenge these ideals, criticizing "the idea that the point of fashion should be to look as thin as possible because that's the 'enhancing' that flattering is used to signify" (Dalessandro n.d.1). Following LeBesco, I leave room for nuanced and varied meanings of and motivations for acts of resistance (LeBesco 2004, 16). Although it is impossible to speak for every individual act of beauty labor performed within the "Fuck Flattering!" movement, we can draw general conclusions about the choice to wear unflattering clothing as a fat person.

LeBesco situates language as a "means for positioning an inhabitable subjectivity for fat people" (3), enabling those communities to resist oppressive and limited understandings of what it means to exist as a fat person, but it is just one of many ways of resisting antifatness. LeBesco argues that this resistance is powerful insofar as "by exuberantly saying what they do, affinity groups use rhetoric to enter themselves into discourse in significant ways that demonstrate that even small collective actions can make important differences" (13). This aspiration is echoed in acts of beauty labor as a form of resistance. When participants of the "Fuck Flattering!" movement engage in acts of beauty labor, they are asserting their right to participate in collective discourse surrounding beauty, demanding to be taken seriously as aesthetic agents with a right to contribute to societal understandings of their own bodies.

II. Beauty Labor as Resistance

When an agent's act of beauty labor challenges dominant beauty norms, it is potentially an act of beauty labor as resistance. Three key elements often contribute to an act of beauty labor counting *as resistance*: (1) the agent's being situated as a less ideal candidate for attributions of beauty, (2) the agent's having some level of knowledge or awareness of the norms (defined in light of dominant groups) and their harms, and (3) knowledge or awareness of the harms informing the agent's act of beauty labor. In what follows, I will consider each of these in turn, using the "Fuck Flattering!" movement to demonstrate the varying degrees to which one might have awareness of and intentions to disrupt or reject a beauty norm. Some acts of beauty labor as resistance involve a conscious, principled decision to dismantle oppressive beauty norms, whereas others will involve a more nebulous or vague feeling that the norms to which one is subject are somehow unjust.

Candidates for Beauty

I suspect that beauty labor as resistance is often (if not most regularly) performed by those outside of dominant groups—by individuals who have been deemed less suitable candidates for beauty. Thin or straight-sized individuals within the United States benefit from body privilege, “an invisible package of unearned assets that thin or normal-sized individuals can take for granted on a daily basis. These ‘normal’ bodies, because of size, shape, or appearance, unwittingly avert various forms of social stigma, while simultaneously eliciting social benefits” (Kwan 2010, 147). Within this body hierarchy, thin people are seen as stronger candidates for beauty, whereas fat people are not afforded this same privilege and agency. Thus, fat folks “must negotiate daily interactions, sometimes feeling shame, guilt, and anger because of their body” (147). They must engage in heightened body management, physical or emotional adjustment in light of their awareness that their bodies do not conform to beauty ideals (150). Oftentimes this body management takes the form of reducing one’s body—wearing flattering clothing, wrapping your limbs tight into your torso to take up less space in public transit, or taking fewer leadership roles so your body is not as often in the public eye. But as we have seen with beauty labor as a form of resistance, fat people are refusing to engage in this body management. Instead, they are forcing others to acknowledge and reflect on their lack of body privilege due to narrow beauty standards, asserting their right to take up space and be treated as legitimate aesthetic agents worthy of dignity and fair treatment.

Being deemed a less ideal candidate for attributions of beauty can give rise to myriad attitudes. Some grow frustrated with dominant beauty contexts and thus abandon or ignore beauty norms as a result of their exclusion. This decision not to attend (let alone conform) to dominant beauty standards—or any standards of beauty whatsoever—in one’s self-representation is one way that one may participate in an act of resistance against beauty standards. However, one may also choose to attend to, broaden, or reconstruct notions of beauty by performing acts of beauty labor as a form of resistance. One may pick and choose *which* dominant beauty norms they respond to and which they ignore, or may redefine beauty for themselves or their community, pulling from any number of sources or understandings of beauty to inform a new conception. This means of playing with and selectively attending to beauty standards pushes back at the expectation that those with deviant or nonideal bodies must perform body management to atone for their “problematic” bodies.

Although beauty labor as resistance seems to be performed most often by those deemed not candidates for beauty, it is important to acknowledge the burden this places on those people. Being able to resist beauty norms in outwardly visible ways—especially when those norms are used to uphold broader systems of oppression—is often the result of privilege. Similarly, ignoring beauty norms altogether or refusing to participate in beauty labor are options most readily available to those in positions of relative privilege. There are real consequences to performing (or choosing not to perform) acts of beauty labor in ways that defy what is expected of an individual, including physical threats and concerns for safety, social ostracization, or the loss of one’s employment or ability to participate in education settings.

For instance, in many contexts, beauty-related norms involving dress, makeup, and body hair help inform a rigid gender dichotomy. In this dichotomy, there is a limited range of accepted ways to present oneself as a man or a woman, and failures to comply with this dichotomy (or attempts to present as outside of the binary, for example, as gender-nonconforming) are (at best) frowned upon, or (at worst) jeopardize people’s

safety as others try to reinforce and police the binary. People like Alok Vaid-Menon, a self-described “gender-nonconforming performance artist, writer, educator, and entertainer” (Vaid-Menon *n.d.*), may have to choose when to perform acts of beauty labor as resistance. Vaid-Menon dresses in a mix of traditionally feminine and masculine clothing and accessories, often combining heavy facial hair with handbags and bold lipstick, and they have been harassed and threatened for doing so both on- and offline (Vaid-Menon 2019a).

Similarly, beauty standards are used to police race, size, and disability. This is glaringly clear in the policing of hairstyles in schools, workplaces, and the military. At Mystic Valley Regional Charter School in Massachusetts, two black teenage girls were cited for infractions for their braided hair extensions, which were deemed “distracting” and a violation of dress code (Lattimore 2017). Mya and Deanna Cook were made to miss class due to this “violation,” and were removed from extracurricular activities and prom. The choice to reinforce the dress code regarding hair disproportionately disadvantages people of color, as white students are not similarly singled out in dress codes for hairstyles specific to their culture. In this case, beauty norms are used to maintain a racial hierarchy that threatens and harms students who are people of color, making it difficult for them to participate fully in getting an education. Similar bans have been enforced historically in the workplace and in the military (Cooper 2014), demonstrating a troubling history and tendency for beauty norms to reinforce oppressive structures in society.

Given the amount of privilege and bravery often required to perform acts of beauty labor as resistance, I want to leave open the possibility that one may perform an act of beauty labor as resistance in solidarity with those in marginalized groups from within a dominant group. For instance, one could imagine a cisgender, heterosexual woman who chooses to dress in a butch fashion, defying typical norms of femininity to help make that mode of dress more acceptable and normalized for people outside of those groups.⁵ This act of resistance in solidarity could be an invaluable form of allyship, if done in consultation with and while respecting members of the marginalized community in question. Such an act of solidarity plausibly appears to be a case of beauty labor as resistance, but more work needs to be done to develop an account of how this serves as a mode of resistance from within the group traditionally deemed eligible for attributions of beauty.

The case of the “Fuck Flattering!” movement easily meets the first criterion insofar as fat people (at least in dominant US contexts) are deemed unfit candidates for attributions of beauty. In this context, thinness is treated as essential to beauty. There is clear evidence that our society structures beauty norms in relation to thin people. It is well documented that society has a distaste for fat bodies that results in fat bodies being “rarely represented in mainstream forms of entertainment and advertising” lest they be depicted as “unattractive, ridiculous, contemptible, and even gross and disgusting” (Eaton 2016, 38). This distaste for fat bodies, as Anne Eaton argues, “is an important constitutive element of the oppression of fat people” (38). Similarly, Sherri Irvin notes that “obesity” results in oppressive social sanctions including unfair medical treatment, discriminatory hiring practices, and inadequate assistance following accidents (Irvin 2017, 4). These positions of privilege inform dominant beauty standards, helping construct unfair criteria that exclude certain groups of people from being candidates for beauty.

Awareness of Beauty Norms

For beauty labor to count as resistance, it also seems necessary that the agent have some degree of epistemic awareness or knowledge of the norms to which they are responding,

and of the harmfulness of those norms (to individuals and insofar as the norms uphold systems of oppression). The degree of awareness varies depending on the case in question. Some cases, such as that of Vaid-Menon, involve individuals who are activists for their communities, whose careers consist of critically engaging with the norms that they oppose. Vaid-Menon, for instance, gives lectures worldwide on the importance of dismantling a rigid gender dichotomy, regularly reflecting on the harms caused by or resulting from norms of behavior, dress, and expression that perpetuate that dichotomy. Vaid-Menon's work informs their actions of beauty labor as resistance, which reflect a high degree of awareness or knowledge of the oppressive norms in question.

Not all cases of beauty labor as resistance involve this acute awareness of oppressive norms and their subsequent harms, however. An agent may instead have a more implicit level of awareness informed by their lived experiences. Given that beauty norms often uphold and function in conjunction with other oppressive norms, an individual may have experienced related oppression without being able to articulate how that oppression functions or is supported by beauty norms.

As a person who has been fat since childhood, I grew up aware that there was *something* different about me from my peers. Although I couldn't always articulate it, I noticed the whispers when I walked into a straight-sized clothing store with my friends, where employees kept a close eye on me and treated me as though I didn't belong. Although I was never directly told I was unwelcome, I was never offered help locating an item in a different size, accessing a fitting room, or any of the other services offered to my thin friends. This sort of experience resulted in an implicit, unconscious understanding that I was being othered, kept out of a world in which I could only dream of participating. As I've grown up and sought out others with similar experiences, I've gained a deeper understanding of the power structures that uphold fatphobia. However, many acts of beauty labor as resistance performed in my youth (such as wearing garments that demanded attention from others and maximized the amount of space I took up, like long, sequined dresses or voluminous tutus) were done with a less developed understanding of the norms to which I was subject.

In the case of Dalessandro's dress, and the "Fuck Flattering!" movement more broadly, the agents involved are acutely aware of how their bodies are perceived and detested. This reflects a level of knowledge or awareness of norms of beauty that privilege thin bodies and harm fat bodies, the second criterion necessary for beauty labor to count as resistance. Beyond affecting medical care, health practices, and more general social interactions, fat oppression pervasively infects fashion standards as well.

For example, as Eaton notes, clothing company Abercrombie & Fitch deliberately excludes women over a size 10 (which precludes a significant percentage of female American consumers from shopping there). Company CEO Mike Jeffries justifies this by saying his stores intentionally represent and market themselves towards sexually attractive and cool (and, by implication, thin) women (Eaton 2016, 37). As Jeffries commented in a 2006 interview, "We [at Abercrombie & Fitch] go after the cool kids. . . . A lot of people don't belong [in our clothes] and they can't belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely. Those companies that are in trouble are trying to target everybody: young, old, fat, skinny" (Denizet-Lewis 2006).

Moreover, as Dina Giovannelli and Stephen Ostertag argue, there is a norm or construction

of being "appropriately" female [that] transgresses the physical body and incorporates other markers such as personality and movement. Accordingly, a woman

must be smaller than a man . . . and take up little space. Fat women are, then, the antithesis of what it means to be appropriately feminine . . . [they] are constantly reminded of “appropriate” looks and style, which are then expressed in self-evaluations, behavior, and self-control directed at diminishing size and restricting movement. (Giovannelli and Ostertag 2009, 290)

All of these expressions serve to keep women within the norms of what is appropriate.

Besides more hidden and overlooked instances of discrimination like those cited above, key figures in the movement such as Dalessandro received regular backlash for their choices (as demonstrated earlier) and still regularly receive criticism for having the audacity to exist (and even be happy) as fat women. As a fellow fat woman who once had an active blogging presence where I posted photos of my outfits and talked about difficulties of shopping while fat, I regularly received messages saying things like “hey, fata**, go eat a cookie,” or “you are disgusting. How dare you glorify your lifestyle? The world would be better off without people like you.” As most fat people with an internet presence will agree, this is a regular occurrence.

Fat people are often unable to escape the reality that most of society does not want us to exist, and thus are acutely aware of the fact that we are not “beautiful”—an awareness that is requisite in my account of beauty resistance. All these instances provide evidence that the first two criteria of my account of beauty resistance are met. Fat people who participate in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement fall outside of the dominant group in virtue of which beauty is defined, and they are aware, whether overtly or explicitly, of the harmfulness of the norms to which they are subject and the systems of oppression that said norms uphold.

Motivation Stemming from Epistemic Engagement with Beauty Norms

Relatedly, beauty labor as resistance seems to require that one’s awareness or knowledge of oppressive norms helps inform their goals or reasons for acting, and that this informs their desire to oppose those norms (often via questioning the set of beauty norms to which they are subject). Sometimes the act of beauty labor as resistance is a conscious act, accompanied by clear statements of intention to defy a norm or system of norms. In other cases, one may feel an overall sense of unease or have a more inarticulate, embodied reaction to oppressive norms that gives rise to a vague desire to act against them. For beauty labor to count as resistance, there needs to be some level of reflection on and motivation as a result of one’s awareness of the norms to which one is subject, but I leave open the degree to which one might consciously or deliberately choose to act with this motivation. I suspect that this kind of motivation to act can take many forms, including (but not limited to) propositional content, intuitions or “gut feelings,” or conscious, calculated motivation.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the awareness that participants in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement have, they choose to reject oppressive beauty standards through wearing unflattering clothing. This aesthetic choice reflects that they’ve acted as a result of engagement with and desire to oppose those norms due to the harm the norms in question cause, as participants in the movement reject limited clothing options and body standards that privilege thinness. In the “Fuck Flattering!” movement, then, participants’ acts of beauty labor count as resistance insofar as they have reflected (to varying extents) on the standards to which they are subject and the harms that result from those standards, and act in light of this reflection and awareness of those harms.

The case of the Convertible Cupcake Dress, and the subsequent “Fuck Flattering!” movement, is unique in that multiple, sometimes contradictory beauty norms are clearly functioning to limit the range of acceptable acts of beauty labor possible for fat people. There is the clear standard to wear flattering clothing, which is perhaps most pressing. Under this oppressive rule, the style of clothing available to fat people (and especially fat women) is more limited than for thin women. However, norms of fashion dictate the kind of clothing “beautiful” people wear. This makes it acceptable for women of a certain body type (namely, thin) to wear oversized, billowing silhouettes à la Rihanna and still be deemed beautiful and fashionable.

These competing standards are interesting, as they change the degree of epistemic engagement necessary for the person performing the act of beauty resistance. Although we may stereotypically think of resistance to norms as simply rejecting them, this case demonstrates that resistance can involve a much more complex interplay of competing norms to which one must attend. In the “Fuck Flattering!” movement, some fashion norms, informed by icons and styles of clothing (such as the aforementioned Rihanna gown), are deemed worthy of uptake by participants in the movement. The agent in question, however, is subject to a narrower and competing set of norms (for example, “if you are fat, wear only flattering clothing”) that they believe unfairly restrict their options of dress and cause undue harm, and as a result they intend to violate the narrower set of standards while acting as though they can meet the broader fashion norms. In other words, part of this case of beauty resistance involves “playing the game” of beauty, so to speak: acting in line with beauty standards and accepted practices despite the knowledge that those efforts to participate may fall short of actually achieving idealized beauty.

Part of what makes the “Fuck Flattering!” movement such a compelling case of beauty labor as resistance is that the agents involved acknowledge (rather than simply reject or ignore) beauty norms. However, through this acknowledgment the participants also assert their (previously denied) right to candidacy for beauty, insisting that beauty can take forms not readily recognized in mainstream discourse. Through this assertion, agents work to recognize and combat the harms caused by more narrow or idealized imaginings of beauty.

Part of what is so harmful about being a hyper(in)visible body, on Gailey’s view, is that “marginalized bodies are not just seen or acknowledged; they are dissected and overtly made into a spectacle” (Gailey 2014, 12). The “Fuck Flattering!” movement, then, is unique insofar as participants in the movement make *themselves* into a spectacle through wearing clothing that demands to be noticed. This taking up space is a means of refusing to be forced into a state of hyper(in)visibility, reasserting participants’ rights to dictate the way they are perceived. It forces people to notice and reckon with their fatness in a society in which fatness is strategically and inconsistently rendered hyper-invisible in order to dehumanize and ignore the agency and worth of fat people.

Competing standards of beauty are accepted and rejected in differing degrees by participants in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement. Some participants in the movement reject that their body size is something to be avoided, choosing to emphasize the size of their body through their fashion choices. This is sometimes an outright rejection of body oppression but is also sometimes inspired by people having a desire to simply experiment with fashion, wearing clothes like those their fashion icons/inspirations wear. In contrast, some participants in the movement engage in a more principled rejection of the competing and unfair standards that dictate and regulate their choices and available clothing options. People like Dalessandro have written extensively on the ways that

beauty norms are harmful and feed into broader systems of antifatness, reflecting more extensive epistemic engagement with those norms.

By dressing in clothing like a thin person would (or could), and refusing to conceal the fat of her arms or her double chin, Dalessandro simultaneously rejects the narrow and restrictive set of beauty norms that dictates “acceptable” clothing for fat women to wear and *acts as though* she can be beautiful according to prevailing norms of fashion more broadly (even though, as a fat woman, she is aware that society has already decided she is not a suitable candidate for attributions of beauty). Participants in the movement engage in beauty resistance by performing acts of beauty labor that, quite pointedly, say “fuck flattering” and oppose the restrictive norms according to which fat women are expected to dress. These acts of resistance help dismantle the broader fatphobic structures in society, reclaiming space in the fashion industry and in the public eye for a group of people that has historically been demonized and disenfranchised.

Although beauty labor as resistance is sometimes a conscious choice, we must recognize the countless individuals who have no choice but to resist if they are to live as their authentic selves. I may still maintain my identity as a fat cis-woman regardless of whether I perform (at least some) acts of beauty labor as resistance, but there are many people for whom resistance is a necessary path in order to affirm and respect their identities.

For example, nonbinary people living in societies with rigid gender binaries may constantly be *perceived* as performing acts of beauty labor as resistance if they choose to dress in accordance with their gender identity. In a context in which norms are structured in accordance with a rigid gender binary, dressing (and identifying as someone) outside of that binary makes one a less ideal candidate for attributions of beauty. By recognizing the harms and limitations of this binary, and choosing to present in ways that defy it, a nonbinary person may engage in acts of beauty labor as resistance simply in virtue of attending to their identity in a way that feels authentic and affirming. However, their motivation may be less centered on deconstructing and reimagining norms of beauty (as is the case with many acts of beauty labor as resistance involved in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement), and stemming more from a need (for their mental health) to live authentically in accordance with their identity.

Failure to be able to express one’s gender identity can have debilitating effects on one’s mental and physical health, creating and sustaining long-term trauma (Olson et al. 2016). Vaid-Menon highlights this point when reflecting on the need for bodily adornment, arguing that “adornment is not supplementary to the body, it is foundational to its constitution” (Vaid-Menon 2019b). Regarding clothing, they claim clothing “is not my costume, it is my being. . . the objects that I adorn myself with become myself” (Vaid-Menon 2019b). Vaid-Menon is one of many people who see acts of beauty labor as necessary, rather than one of many possible choices they could make. Their way of dressing, which happens to challenge a rigid gender dichotomy, is essential to their being. In this kind of case an individual may still have the degree of engagement with and desire to defy harmful norms necessary for an act to count as beauty labor as resistance, but they are also performing this act in order to survive and maintain their mental health—an inspiration or motivation to act that may not be present in every instance of beauty labor as resistance.

Similarly, people of a certain size or who are racialized in particular ways may be perceived as resisting, and may be choosing to resist, as they merely make the choice to continue existing. The reality that certain features of our bodies are inescapably visible to others may change the ways in which people think of their actions as beauty

resistance and may affect the acts of beauty labor that they perform *as* resistance.⁶ For example, certain sizes of fatness are impossible to hide, regardless of what clothing or poses an individual tries. For people on the furthest end of the fat spectrum, often referred to as “infinifat” (Nischuk 2016), their fatness is visible at all times such that merely existing at that size can be read as an act of resistance or defiance of thin-centric beauty norms. Someone who is infinifat may be resisting in every outfit choice they make, every photo they post online, or every space they engage with in public, because they exist and allow themselves to take up space without changing or minimizing their body. Given the complexities of our identities and the broad range of human experience and embodiment, it becomes even more crucial to consider how beauty labor can function as resistance, as it is a necessary, life-sustaining, and identity-affirming project for many individuals.

Additional Considerations for Beauty Labor as Resistance

One central aim of this article is to motivate a general account of beauty labor as a tool for resistance, which enables aesthetic agents to challenge beauty norms and broader systems of oppression. It is important to note that acts of beauty labor as resistance may manifest themselves differently depending on the standards relevant to a given act of beauty labor. As a result, what constitutes beauty labor as resistance will vary from culture to culture and change over time as our norms change. Moreover, I suspect that who is able to perform acts of beauty labor *as acts of resistance* will change depending on who is deemed a suitable candidate for beauty in a given context.

The possibility of beauty labor as a form of and tool for resistance is crucial given the overwhelming amount of social oppression that occurs in virtue of, and through the weaponization and policing of, our bodies. Irvin and Eaton, among others, highlight that perceived failure to satisfy beauty norms can result in real social and political harms, such as threats to employment, limited legal protections, and threats of physical violence when we deviate from what is conventionally considered “beautiful” or the norm (Eaton 2016; Irvin 2017). Thus, it is crucial to recognize that beauty labor has liberatory potential insofar as it enables us to challenge and dismantle oppressive norms (beauty-related or otherwise).

III. Resisting Antifatness Using Beauty Labor

Having established that many acts of beauty labor are genuine instances of resistance on my framework, we can now consider how this beauty labor as resistance helps combat body oppression and antifatness. Participants in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement take individual-scale actions, and at first glance one might not perceive their choices to wear certain dresses, tops, or pants to have any substantive impact on complex systems of oppression. However, in this section I will push back against this worry by highlighting the ways that beauty labor as resistance can be used as a tool to dismantle antifatness more generally.

For fat people, the ability to participate in norms surrounding beauty and fashion has been historically limited, narrowing the options for self-expression made available to fat individuals. Even as brands like Universal Standard aim to create more inclusive clothing lines, and more fashion magazines and advertisements resist photo retouching or feature a broader spectrum of body types, society acts as though “it is still morally and aesthetically questionable in mainstream culture to deign fatness appealing in

any way” (LeBesco 2004, 70). Some, like Ophira Edut, are suspicious of worrying about this lack of inclusivity given the broader contexts of antifat oppression. Edut asks, “Will equal access to haute couture lead to equal rights in the workplace, in health care, and everywhere else size discrimination runs rampant?” (Edut n.d.). In short, many worry that attending to fashion and beauty norms does little to meaningfully resist oppression.

These worries are understandable. Certainly, the ability alone to buy a dress at a popular store is not enough to stop antifatness. But we should not be so quick to dismiss the importance and value of fashion and beauty labor as meaningful opportunities for helping us shape our identities, form and sustain communities, and resist oppression. At its most basic, beauty labor is a crucial opportunity insofar as it enables us to express ourselves in ways that reinforce and help us make sense of our own identities (as Vaid-Menon does through experimentation with gender-fluid clothing). It also helps us sustain our communities, providing a touchstone to our cultural history and affording us the opportunity to express our participation or membership in those communities. Beauty labor offers us one opportunity (among many) for meaningful resistance, which can be used alongside other forms of resistance to instigate lasting change. As Erin Keating argues, as cited in LeBesco, “If the personal is political, then being able to find clothes that fit and make you feel good about yourself is a political plus. In my mind, we must take these successes whether they come through direct action like marches and rallies, or through market recognition of yet another way to make a buck” (in LeBesco 2004, 72). In a world that is so viciously antifat, the ability to find solace in one’s clothing and to utilize that kind of beauty labor to shape one’s life and identity is an importantly revolutionary act.

LeBesco highlights a difference between liberatory and assimilationist political action and resistance, tendencies that exist on different ends of a spectrum. Assimilationist work in fat communities “works to secure tolerance for fat rights and experiences and tries to raise consciousness about fat oppression but still possibly conceives of fat as a problem. . . . In contrast, a fat ‘liberationist’ celebrates fatness and tries to secure for the fat a positively valued experience of difference from the norm” (LeBesco 2004, 42). Participation in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement is significant insofar as it often aims at liberationist goals—in celebrating fat people’s bodies as different from dominant understandings of beauty, and in demanding that fat be allowed to take up space. Many acts in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement are focused not just (and sometimes not at all) on self-acceptance, but on challenging the very construction of beauty standards. Participants in the movement use beauty labor to critique the strategic exclusion of whole groups of people as candidates for beauty, questioning how exclusionary beauty norms have been constructed and perpetuated. The movement also enables members of fat communities to construct their own understandings of beauty, helping break down societal antifatness. By wearing clothing like the Convertible Cupcake Dress that makes fat bodies stand out, and refusing to blend in through the limited number of clothing options made available to fat people, fashion becomes revolutionary as “its newfound ability stymies fat oppression” (73).

Having situated beauty labor as a legitimate option for resistance against antifatness, I will now discuss how it is used as a tool for resistance. Although individuals (and groups) can use beauty labor as a tool for resistance in countless ways, my discussion will focus on three key features of the “Fuck Flattering!” movement: reclaiming digital and physical space, affording an opportunity for education and unpacking of oppression and bias, and expanding the fashion industry.

First, the acts of beauty labor involved in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement are a powerful tool for resistance against antifatness because they enable individuals to claim and reclaim space that they have been historically denied. This happens on two levels: physically, in everyday life; and digitally, through posts that increase visibility of fat people on social media. The acts of beauty labor as resistance in the movement resist harmful body standards that are used to uphold antifat and patriarchal standards. Participation in the movement involves fat people taking up more space, as they wear oversized clothing and resist the demand to minimize the appearance of their bodies. Wearing unflattering clothing as a part of this movement enables fat people to reclaim physical space in their environment, asserting their right to exist at their current size and to navigate space in ways they choose.

In a similar vein, participation in these acts of beauty labor often enables fat people to reclaim space digitally through posting about their outfits on social media. This digital reclamation of space results in more fat people taking up digital real estate, further increasing visibility of different ways of being embodied as a fat person. This digital visibility can help fat viewers, as they see people who look *like them* existing happily. This kind of narrative is crucial, given the real harms that negative representations (often *misrepresentations*) may perpetuate. Paul Taylor cites many types of harmful representation often used to depict Black people—ones that are informed by and perpetuate stereotypes (Taylor 2016, 52), fetishize or obscure the personhood of their subjects (54–55), or deny/ignore the perspectives of their subjects (58)—and similar forms of misrepresentation are employed to villainize and ostracize fat people. Thus, digital visibility that rewrites narratives about fat people is crucial as it helps reaffirm fat people’s identities, increasing self-esteem and showing fat people that they do not need to comply with standards that dictate that they must minimize their bodies. As I have previously emphasized, reclaiming space in these ways can help fat people resist their status as hyper(in)visible such that it meaningfully combats antifatness.

Moreover, digital visibility helps expand others’ understanding of what it means to be fat, challenging the notion that fat people must dress and act in a narrow set of ways in order to be accepted. Through presenting important and varied narratives (and counternarratives that challenge oppressive beauty norms that dominate US contexts), participants in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement are able to demonstrate the many possible understandings of beauty. Both this and the physical reclamation of space help legitimize the aesthetic and personal choices of fat people, especially when considered collectively. This broadening of space and creation of new understandings of beauty is what Tate refers to as a “cut and mix” approach to aesthetics, wherein participants in the movement draw on a variety of traditions and aesthetic ideals (for example, dominant fashion trends for thin people and the desire to experiment with fashion within the fat community) to develop their own concept of beauty (Tate 2009; see also Mercer 1994, 124–25).

Eaton echoes the importance of positive representations and counternarratives of fat people in combatting antifatness. She recommends “that we produce and widely promote vivid, imaginatively engaging, and artistically interesting representations that *celebrate* fat bodies and encourage us to see them as likeable and attractive” (Eaton 2016, 53). Through habituating ourselves to regularly see fat bodies aestheticized or represented positively, we can more readily celebrate, recognize, and seek out the good in fat people. Under this framework, the digital and physical reclamation of space entailed in acts of beauty labor in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement is crucial as it invites (and sometimes forces) viewers to recognize and acknowledge the self-celebratory nature of

said beauty labor. As participants in the movement take up (literal and digital) space, they assert their right to participate in and occupy beauty-related spaces, an act that presents a positive image of a fat person existing in the way they choose. Over time, as part of a collective movement, these acts combat antifatness and body oppression as they invite viewers to see fat bodies as attractive (or, at the very least, worthy of occupying space they were previously denied).

Second, beauty labor as resistance performed within the “Fuck Flattering!” movement enables us to push back against antifatness as it affords multiple opportunities for education about fatness. This kind of beauty labor enables fat people who participate in the movement to combat antifatness that results from ignorance and prejudice as they educate viewers about their lived experiences and identities as fat people. With increased visibility, there are increased opportunities to discuss the rich complexities of fatness—the varying ways of fat embodiment, relationships to oneself and the world around one, and connections between fatness and beauty. Although on the surface these acts of beauty labor seem to merely respond to beauty norms, they also serve to validate and normalize existing (and allowing oneself to be happy) while fat.

Images of fat people participating in acts of beauty labor as resistance under the “Fuck Flattering!” movement help reshape the narrative around fatness, showing that fat people can accept and celebrate themselves rather than centering their existence on trying to lose weight. On one level, antifatness involves conflating fatness with ugliness, but antifatness is also vicious insofar as it functions through treating fatness as bad in itself in a way that transcends the aesthetic, perpetuating the idea that fat people must be miserable *because of* their fatness.⁷ Antifatness centers the “need” for weight loss, and people who express these antifat attitudes often assume that fat people must hate their own bodies and want to change them. Moreover, antifat attitudes typically assume that fatness is *morally* wrong, associating fatness with laziness, lack of care for the self, and other negative moral judgments about the character of fat people. As Aubrey Gordon writes, when we look at fat bodies in our predominantly antifat society, we assume “a fat body must be the result of some tragedy. A fat body is deviant, aberrant, troubling” (Gordon 2020, 77). People with antifat attitudes criticize and undermine the humanity of fat people, treating fat people “as props, set pieces to prove thin people’s virtue by contrast” (87).

Thus, beyond being helpful for members within the fat community who are validated by increased visibility, the acts of beauty labor involved in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement function as a crucial instance of resistance as they push back against harmful narratives, enabling participants to show members outside of that community that their lives hold value *even while they are fat*. These actions help reshape our narratives surrounding body size and worth, asserting (as Gordon does) that “there are no prerequisites for human dignity” (166). Construction of this new narrative is a crucial way in which acts of beauty labor performed in the movement can resist antifatness more broadly, as fat people rewrite antifat narratives to enable one to be happy in—and even celebrate—their fat body.

Finally, the acts of resistance performed in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement combat antifatness through forcing expansion of the fashion industry. As fat individuals have become frustrated with the insistence that they wear a limited range of clothing and with their exclusion from mainstream fashion, participants in the movement have used this frustration to fuel change (and advocacy for change) in the fashion industry. Some individuals like Gabi Gregg and Nicolette Mason (founders of plus-size fashion company Premme) have gone as far as to create their own fashion lines that provide a

wider range of fashion options, enabling wearers to not feel limited by oppressive fashion norms. Similarly, Chastity Garner (garnerstyle) and CeCe Olisa (plus size princess) founded an annual event called TheCurvyCon, a three-day convention “that brings plus size Brands, Fashionistas, Shopaholics, Bloggers, and YouTubers into one space, to chat curvy, shop curvy, and embrace curvy” (TheCurvyCon 2020). The demand created by participants in the “Fuck Flattering!” movement for more accessible and extensive fashion options has enabled (or inspired) countless people such as Gregg, Mason, Garner, and Olisa to expand the world of fat fashion, showing concrete change and efforts to eliminate or mitigate antifatness in the fashion world.

Others work to increase education about the construction of clothing for fat people in fashion schools, hoping to expand the number of designers and retailers who are equipped to create clothing for fat people. For example, in 2018 plus-size retailer Dia&Co and the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) launched “a joint education initiative in which CFDA will provide funding for classes to teach tomorrow’s designers how to design for bodies beyond sample size” (Mondalek 2018). Thanks to the efforts of fat people, especially within the “Fuck Flattering!” movement, society is beginning to take notice of the ways in which fat people have been historically disenfranchised and excluded from opportunities afforded to thin people. Were it not for the demands of participants in the movement to have more options available and to regain autonomy over their bodies, the changes to the fashion world that are currently developing would have come much more slowly. The collective acts of beauty labor as resistance performed by members of the “Fuck Flattering!” movement help to actively combat antifatness, securing more rights for fat people and enabling fat people to redefine and reimagine beauty for their own communities.

IV. Beauty Labor as a Liberatory Tool

In this article I have proposed an account of beauty resistance that can be used as a liberatory tool against body-based oppression. My article focuses on fatness as a case study in order to help rectify its underrepresentation in academic philosophical literature. To that end, I have presented the “Fuck Flattering!” movement as an important instance of beauty labor as resistance, one that enables fat people to combat antifatness while reclaiming space as candidates for beauty. My goal in this project has not been to give a generalized account of beauty resistance that captures every instance of resistance, but to develop an account of one form of beauty labor as resistance. The unifying features that I argue are necessary in accounts of beauty resistance include an awareness of beauty norms (and the fact that they are harmful) that inform one’s behavior as one acts out of a desire to oppose the norms *because* they are harmful. However, the ways in which this manifests itself may differ greatly, giving rise to different additional accounts of beauty labor as resistance.

It is crucial that we examine beauty labor as a potential avenue for resistance. Given the prevalence of acts of beauty labor in our lives, beauty resistance serves as a meaningful and accessible way to combat oppression and champion a more just society. Groups like the followers of the “Fuck Flattering!” movement have made significant impacts on the fashion industry through their beauty resistance, broadening the fashion options available to fat people and raising awareness of one of many injustices they face. Moreover, they have challenged ignorant and harmful narratives surrounding fatness, demonstrating the complexities of fat identities and the potential to accept (and celebrate) existing as a fat person.

This case reflects that beauty resistance can affirm our identities, enabling us to live more authentic, enriched lives while expressing ourselves and the rich and varied norms of our communities. Moreover, it also demonstrates the ability of beauty resistance to challenge broader oppressive structures, empowering individuals to object to and push back against institutions and norms that prevent them from expressing their identities and participating fully in society. As Gailey argues, “visibility is linked to acknowledgement and recognition. To be seen by another person is an indication that we exist” (Gailey 2014, 167). Beauty labor can be used as a tool to echo this sentiment; it is a microphone with which fat people can remind the world that they exist, they matter, and that they need and deserve equal recognition and consideration.

Acknowledgments. Many thanks to Atabak Akhlaghi, Jeremy Fried, Stephanie Holt, Babak Khoshroo, and Sherri Irvin for their thoughtful critiques and feedback on countless drafts of this project. I also benefited greatly from the suggestions of two anonymous reviewers. Finally, I presented a short and early version of this article at the 2020 American Philosophical Association Eastern Division meeting, where I received helpful and insightful comments from Gertrude James González de Allen that helped shape later additions to the project (especially in discussions of how fashion helps mitigate antifatness).

Notes

I intentionally center the voices, experiences, and understandings of fat people and fat activists who are more actively involved in the communities relevant to this project. As such, in this article I have tried to carefully balance what are traditionally seen as “academic” sources with less traditional academic sources.

1 It is also important to acknowledge that antifatness has historically been a project of anti-Blackness as well. As Sabrina Strings and Da’Shaun L. Harrison have compellingly explored, antifatness can be traced to historical and ongoing efforts to suppress, marginalize, and otherwise harm Black people (Strings 2019; Harrison 2021). Thinness has evolved to be a marker of supposed superiority, a weapon utilized by white people who seek to police the bodies and behavior of Black people and other marginalized groups. Fat Black people have been at the forefront of fat activist efforts for centuries and have long paved the way for the much-needed kinds of beauty labor discussed in this project.

2 See Garland-Thomson 2009; Tate 2009; Al-Saji 2014; and Irvin 2017. A notable exception is Eaton 2016.

3 See figure 1.

4 One could argue that there is an important difference between the two dresses in that Rihanna’s dress was meant to be couture or high fashion whereas the Convertible Cupcake Dress was intended as streetwear or everyday fashion, which could explain the different reactions to the two dresses in relation to their intended categories. However, even if we grant this distinction, there is still a disparity in the responses to unflattering clothing in the case of the Convertible Cupcake Dress vs. similarly cut clothing for thin women. A quick glance at popular clothing stores like H & M, ASOS, or Urban Outfitters confirms that oversized silhouettes are currently accepted and in fashion for thin women, and do not receive the same amount of backlash as did the Convertible Cupcake Dress.

5 My sincere thanks to Sherri Irvin for suggesting this kind of case as another instance of beauty labor as resistance.

6 Special thanks to Stephanie Holt for discussions that informed this section of the article.

7 Cf. Nehamas 2017, in which Alexander Nehamas argues that happiness is a central facet of how beauty norms are enforced and become oppressive.

References

- Don’t flatter yourself, cupcake. 2015. *Flight of the Fat Girl* (blog), December 28. <https://flightofthefatgirl.wordpress.com/2015/12/28/dont-flatter-yourself-cupcake/>.
- Al-Saji, Alia. 2014. A phenomenology of hesitation: Interrupting racializing habits of seeing. In *Phenomenology, embodiment, and race*, ed. Emily S. Lee. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. 1990. *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York: Routledge.

- Blank, Hanne. 2020. *Fat*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Casper, Monica J., and Lisa Jean Moore. 2009. *Missing bodies: The politics of visibility*. New York: New York University Press.
- Cooper, Helene. 2014. Army's ban on some popular hairstyles raises ire of Black female soldiers. *The New York Times*, April 20. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/21/us/politics/armys-ban-on-some-popular-hairstyles-raises-ire-of-black-female-soldiers.html?module=inline>.
- Dalessandro, Alysse. n.d1. 20 reactions to the Convertible Cupcake Dress and why this discussion matters. *Ready to Stare*. <https://www.readytostare.com/20-reactions-to-the-convertible-cupcake-dress-and-why-this-discussion-matters/>.
- Dalessandro, Alysse. n.d2. F!CK flattering: Why I wear what I want & so should you. *The Body is Not an Apology*. <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/fck-flatteringwhy-i-wear-what-i-want-so-should-you/>.
- Denizet-Lewis, Benoit. 2006. The man behind Abercrombie & Fitch. *Salon*, January 24. <https://www.salon.com/2006/01/24/jeffries/>.
- Eaton, A. W. 2016. Taste in bodies and fat oppression. In *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherri Irvin. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Edut, Ophira. n.d.. Filling out fashion: The expanding plus-size fashion scene. *Adios Barbie*. <https://www.adiosbarbie.com/write-for-adios/filling-out-fashion-plus-size-modeling/>.
- Eller, G. M. 2014. On fat oppression. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 24 (3): 219–45. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2014.0026>.
- Gailey, Jeannine A. 2014. *The hyper(in)visible fat woman: Weight and gender discourse in contemporary society*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 2009. *Staring: How we look*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Giovanelli, Dina, and Stephen Ostertag. 2009. Controlling the body: Media representations, body size, and self-discipline. In *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther D. Rothblum and Sondra Solovay. New York: New York University Press.
- Gordon, Aubrey. 2020. *What we don't talk about when we talk about fat*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.
- Harrison, Da'Shaun. 2021. *Belly of the beast: The politics of anti-fatness as anti-Blackness*. Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books.
- Irvin, Sherri. 2017. Resisting body oppression: An aesthetic approach. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3 (4): 1–26.
- Kwan, Samantha. 2010. Navigating public spaces: Gender, race, and body privilege in everyday life. *Feminist Formations* 22 (2): 144–66.
- Lattimore, Kayla. 2017. When Black hair violates the dress code. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/07/17/534448313/when-black-hair-violates-the-dress-code>.
- LeBesco, Kathleen. 2004. *Revolting bodies? The struggle to redefine fat identity*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Mercer, Kobena. 1994. Black hair/style politics. In *Welcome to the jungle: New positions in Black cultural studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Mondalek, Alexandra. 2018. The CFDA and Dia&Co partner to fund plus-size fashion education programs. *Fashionista*. <https://fashionista.com/2018/09/the-curvey-con-2018-plus-size-fashion-education>.
- Nehamas, Alexander. 2017. *Only a promise of happiness: The place of beauty in a world of art*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Nischuk, Ash. 2016. Beyond superfat: Rethinking the farthest end of the fat spectrum. *The Fat Lip* (blog), December 20. <http://thefatlip.com/2016/12/20/beyond-superfat-rethinking-the-farthest-end-of-the-fat-spectrum/>.
- Olson, Kristina R., Lily Durwood, Madeline DeMeules, and Katie A. McLaughlin. 2016. Mental health of transgender children who are supported in their identities. *Pediatrics* 137 (3): e20153223. doi:10.1542/peds.2015-3223.
- Rutter, Bethany. 2012. Fuck flattering: Date edition. *Bethany Rutter (A Personal Website)*. <https://bethanyrutter.com/2012/04/06/fuck-flattering-date-edition/>.
- Shannon (Rare Device). 2019. Fuck flattering. *With a Rare Device* (blog), April 3. <https://withararedevice.wordpress.com/2019/04/03/fuck-flattering/>.
- InStyle Staff. 2018. The 50 best fashion tips of all time. *InStyle*. <https://www.instyle.com/fashion/50-best-fashion-tips-all-time>.

- Strings, Sabrina. 2019. *Fearing the Black body: The racial origins of fat phobia*. New York: New York University Press.
- Tate, Shirley Anne. 2009. *Black beauty: Aesthetics, stylization, politics*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Taylor, Paul C. 2016. *Black is beautiful: A philosophy of Black aesthetics*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley.
- TheCurvyCon. 2020. About. *TheCURVYcon*. <http://www.thecurvycon.com/about>.
- Vaid-Menon, Alok. 2019a. I am alive (It hurts). *ALOK*. February 21. <https://www.alokvmenon.com/blog/2019/7/4/i-am-alive-it-hurts>.
- Vaid-Menon, Alok. 2019b. Sex + gender beyond the body. *ALOK*. July 4. <https://www.alokvmenon.com/blog/2019/7/5/sex-gender-beyond-the-body>.
- Vaid-Menon, Alok. n.d. About. *ALOK*. <https://www.alokvmenon.com/about/>.

Cheryl Frazier is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Aesthetics at Auburn University. She is interested in the intersections of aesthetics, fat studies, and applied ethics. Her research focuses on (in)visibility and representations of fat people, especially in popular culture and social media.