

CORPULENCE AND BODY POLITICS IN FEMINIST THEORY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

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Abstract

Feminist theory has long aimed to be a theory that is inclusive of multiple issues and concerns impacting multiple groups and communities. While there have been great strides in feminist scholarship, examining intersectionality, or the ways that one's identity intersects to impact experience, is still a pressing matter because certain issues are still marginalized within such theories and pedagogy. The issue of body weight and its representation in visual and narrative cultures, especially as it relates to women of color; namely, Black women, is still an isolated subject in the fields of Women's and Gender Studies. This article uses an intersectional approach to examine how pertinent corpulence is to the construction of women's bodies in American visual and narrative cultures.

Keywords: Feminist Theory, Womanist Theory, Feminist Cultural Criticism, Corpulence, Body Politics, African American Women

For the most part, feminist and Womanist theories and cultural criticisms have strived to be inclusive of multiple issues and concerns that impact multiple groups and communities. While there have been great strides in feminist and Womanist scholarship, examining intersectionality, or the ways that one's identity intersects to impact experience, is still a pressing matter because certain issues are still marginalized within such theories and pedagogy. I propose that the issue of body weight and its representation in visual and narrative cultures, especially as it relates to women of color; namely, Black women, is still an isolated subject in the fields of Women's and Gender Studies. Both race and representation are issues that have been theorized together; however, the addition of body weight, which has been a long staple of the notorious Mammy stereotype, has yet to be realized. Therefore, in an effort to examine how society treats those who are considered corpulent, a truly intersectional approach is needed if feminist and Womanist theories are to truly possess an inclusive agenda.

Feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo have produced groundbreaking work that deal with the female body and western culture. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993), Bordo argues that women are held to unattainable expectations when it comes to body size, which impacts their own bodily perceptions. Kathleen LeBesco's scholarship also has been instrumental in merging body size with women's lived experiences. The anthology that LeBesco edits with Jana Evans Braziel, *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (2001), begins the examination of "fat in spaces between subjectivity and subjection" (8). In *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (2004), LeBesco suggests that we should redefine the way that we look at body size. Her work has been monumental in the struggle to bring gender, size, and corporeality to the forefront of feminist scholarship.

Conversely, many Black feminist and Critical Race scholars are invested in analyzing how *race* and gender are crucial to any engagement of corporeality. They have investigated the intersection of race and corporeality as it relates to areas such as history, hip-hop culture, reproductive rights, violence, hair politics, skin color politics, and sexuality. This scholarship varies in approaches, however, all of it seeks to understand how the Black female body is constructed and treated in American society and around the world. Answering the call for intersectional analyses of corporeality, scholars have focused on Black female body politics. Most of these scholars trace the devaluation of the Black female body to the European conquest of Africa and the economic exploitation of Black bodies in general. During the destructive institution that was European slavery, the Black female body was manipulated and suffered both a physical death and a social death. The literal death of Black bodies during the Slave trade, Middle Passage, and subsequent enslavement in the New World, was accompanied by a death in discourse and other spaces not generally associated with subjugation. The objectification and death of the Black female body in visual and narrative cultures has been a reality that actually continues to take place in contemporary society. The power that elite white males have held as owners and operators of media outlets throughout history has allowed them to continuously destroy *real* Black bodies for ideological purposes. This social death has caused damaged to real bodies. This death through objectification has been traced to the specific exploitation of the African Black female body, such as that of SaartjieBaartman, the South African woman whose body was constructed as pathological and deviant by 19th century scientific racism (Gilman, "Difference and Pathology" 88).

Janell Hobson's research, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (2005), extensively analyzes the construction of difference that took place using SaartjieBaartman's body. She argues, "The popularity of the Hottentot Venus Exhibition gave rise to the numerous cartoons featuring Baartman's prominent behind, grossly exaggerated for comical effect"(36). Hobson makes a very important point regarding the appropriation and adaptation of Baartman's body to visual culture. Her body was manipulated and distorted for comical effect. Moreover, the corpulence that was added to Baartman's body is indicative of the exaggerated and distorted *blackness* that has been added to the Black female body in general. What are needed are theories that contribute to this scholarship on race and corporeality and analyze how corpulence also has served historically as a signifier of race. Corpulence has certainly been a signifier of race in similar ways that skin color and hair texture have been studied as racial signifiers in the work of scholars such as Craig (2002) and Rooks (1996).

Many scholars have identified the complex ways that visual and narrative cultures are used as means of disseminating ideology regarding identity and racial signification. In *Black*

Feminist Thought (1990), Patricia Hill Collins identifies the use of “controlling images” to perpetuate the discrimination of Black female bodies (69). She argues that it is crucial to identify the ways that the media is used to construct and disseminate such imagery that controls the mobility of Black women. Collins states:

Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence...As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. (Collins 69)

In *From Mammies to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (1993), sociologist and cultural critic, K. Sue Jewell also analyzes the interplay of constructions of Black womanhood and visual culture and contends that the physical attributes afforded Black female bodies in popular culture are actually instrumental in articulating and disseminating the ideology of the dominant culture in an effort to maintain racial hierarchies and the unequal distribution of wealth in America. Both Collins and Jewell argue that the construction of Black female bodies as “Mammy” in visual culture is the most prominent of all the cultural images of Black bodies that are perpetuated by the mass media (Jewell 37).

Mammy is so entrenched in American culture that she is *the* visual symbol and emblem of Black womanhood. Moreover, her physical attributes function in her construction as “Other.” In *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (2003), Michael Harris explains that multiple forms of iconography of Black bodies such as the Mammy image, “...silenced the black voice and controlled the black body by the invention of an economic system and a white ethnicity built around a central blackness that benefits and helped define whites”(89). The dominant group, in visual and narrative cultures, has grotesquely distorted the care-taking responsibilities of Black enslaved and post-reconstruction domestic workers in an effort to define ideals of whiteness. According to this damaging construct, the Black female body exists as the difference on which other bodies are judged and revered. From post-reconstruction mammies to ‘Mama’ on contemporary television sitcoms and cinematic screens, one characteristic of this representational Black female body has been constant: its corpulence. Therefore, using only race and gender to analyze Black women is no longer viable due to the multitude of experiences, which intersections of race, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, age, ability, corpulence etc., create.

An intervention in existing discussions of body politics is needed to identify corpulence, and its representations, as another facet of women’s identities that drastically shapes their lived experiences. Thus, race, class, gender, sexuality, and corpulence intersect to create particular ideological and social meanings, specifically those surrounding identity and nationality. The *created* corpulent physical attribute of ‘Mammy’ contributes to Black female marginalization in constructions of American identity. For example, although the existing arguments of feminist theorists are beneficial to our understanding of gender and corporeality, they still rely heavily on a monolithic analysis of the female body that is centered more on the experiences and reality of middle to upper class European white women. On the other hand, Black feminist and Womanist theorists have yet to truly identify how corpulence has historically functioned in our understanding of Black female body constructions and representations. An analysis of both the

Jezebel and Mammy constructions provides a glimpse as to how corpulence has shadowed the Black female body's presence in visual and narrative cultures throughout history.

In remembrance of SaartjieBaartman, I must begin with the African female body in order to identify how important body weight is to any discussion of the Black female body and its marginality in American and world cultures. Because Baartman's body was deemed 'different' due to the size and stature of her genitalia, it was used to construct the supposed "normalcy" of European bodies. In *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (1985), Sander Gilman argues, "Sarah Bartman had been exhibited not to show her genitalia, but rather to present to the European audience a different anomaly, one that they (and pathologists such as de Blainville and Cuvier) found riveting: her steatopygia, or protruding buttocks, a physical characteristic of Hottentot females which captured the eye of early travelers"(85). To construct a body as abject is one thing; however, to construct it as abject *due* to the characteristics and attributes of other bodies is another. The binary ideology of scientific racism and Eurocentrism needs a variant in order to exist and survive. Historically, Black female bodies have served as this variant. Body weight is an instrumental aspect of this variant; this deviant "Other." The visuality of SaartjieBaartman's buttocks serves to distinguish Black female bodies from white European female bodies. Thus, even though Baartman was very small in stature, her buttocks, and other genitalia, were made the object of her difference from white European bodies. In scientific racism, this body weight was one of the foundations for which Black 'difference' and deviance rested. Thus, an analysis of the Black female body that lacks a concern with how weight has served to function in the construction of deviance is missing an important aspect of the historical identity formation of Black women and Blackness.

The African female body, as constructed through SaartjieBaartman and others, was the foundation of racial difference; however, the visual construction of the Black female body as enslaved domestic serves as the most prevalent and important variant for racial difference in world history. K Sue Jewell argues, "As a symbol of African American womanhood, the image of Mammy has been the most pervasive of all images constructed by the privileged and perpetuated by the Mass Media"(37). The main function of Mammy was to embody an antithesis to whiteness. This whiteness is defined by elite white males; however, it is scripted on white female bodies throughout visual and narrative cultures. Therefore, racialized gendered readings of identity are needed in order to fully assess the ways that white dominance, privilege, and power have historically operated. The construction of a Black female domestic that is devoted to a white household and family has been a constant icon in American visual and narrative cultures. Margaret Mitchell's popular 1936 novel and Academy Award winning 1939 film, *Gone with the Wind*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) are visual and literary examples of how Mammy's devotion to her white master and employer functions in the ideology of white superiority because Mammy would rather support whiteness than engage in and foster her own family. Thus, Mammy's characteristics and make-up foster a white dominant paradigm because she is the variant that the supposed "normalcy" of white bodies and identities are constructed on. Jewell further states, "When the physical and emotional make-up of mammy is examined it is clear that she is the antithesis of the American conception of womanhood"(39). Mammy's devotion and dark skin have been highlighted to argue that passivity and white skin are valued characteristics that define not only womanhood but normalcy. I would like to extend this analysis by emphasizing how pertinent body size is to this construction of normalcy. Even though mammy's size has always been noted to depart from European beauty ideals, it has not been analyzed in a way that truly identifies how body weight

has been used to suggest a pathological Black identity; one that departs from and constructs white European identity and supremacy. Further, a clear connection to how this historical construction has been a staple in current constructions of body weight has not been made. Therefore, an analysis of body weight as a signifier of deviance is desperately needed in order to foster an inclusive feminist pedagogical agenda.

Corpulent bodies are still marginalized in contemporary visual and narrative cultures. Sadly, there are many spaces where this body is overwhelmingly visible, female, and Black. Thinness is still an attribute that is defined as white European and “fatness” is still an attribute that is defined as African and Black; as deviant. Moreover, the intersection of race, gender, and *class* is definitely a contributing factor to the ways that body weight is constructed and visible in American society. Lee Daniels’ 2009 film, *Precious*, an adaptation of the novel *Push* (1996) by Sapphire, showcased the dark, corpulent female protagonist, Clarice “Precious” Jones, who was tragically the victim of multiple forms of abuse. The film, which was produced by Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry, received praise and won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for comedienne and actress Mo’Nique. However, the important subject matter of the film, Black female neglect and abuse, has been undermined by a comical backlash to the corpulent Black female body in visual and narrative cultures. Since historically this body has been treated as deviant and only a steppingstone to white humanity and normalcy, some American filmgoers seemingly found it hard to sympathize with it and perceive it as genuinely being subjected to trauma. Moreover, placing a corpulent Black female body in a highly visible narrative that is saturated with what has historically been deemed pathological and dysfunctional in American society marginalizes this corporeal identity even more in American culture. The intervention of *Precious* as pathological and dysfunctional in Hollywood’s traditional thin white or light-skinned female body narrative could have done even more damage to the corpulent Black female body. The invisibility of this body in visual and narrative cultures, except for in comic, subservient, and perceived deviant spaces, has allowed the identity of the main character in *Precious* to become a symbol of corpulent Black female bodies everywhere. However, this iconography has not been complimentary in any case. Thick dark skinned female bodies are still simply perceived as pathological and treated as abject in American society and culture. In 2013 during the highly visible murder trial of George Zimmerman, the man accused of profiling and killing unarmed African American teenager, Trayvon Martin, in Sanford, Florida in February of 2012, a particular witness apparently stroke a cord with many observers of the trial. Rachel Jeantel, Martin’s corpulent Black female friend (and the person he was speaking to on the telephone as he was followed by Zimmerman before being killed) was a key witness to the case. Her testimony was crucial in establishing and theorizing the thoughts and actions of Martin in those final minutes of his life. However, instead of focusing on Jeantel’s contribution to the case and her own possible trauma, many demonized her and stereotyped her based on her *corpulent* racialized gendered and classed identity. Not only was Jeantel denigrated by the forceful and condescending cross-examination of the defense attorneys, she was also demonized and caricatured in American society because many felt that her dialect, accent, mannerisms, and physical appearance did not adhere to an ‘appropriate’ American identity and ideal. Guest commentators on television news programs made reference to how she was more than likely not relatable to the mostly all white female jury and the American public in general, i.e. a constructed white European identity and norm. A white middle-to-upper class female juror identified only as “juror B-27,” who later voiced her opinion of Jeantel and her testimony on CNN’s *Anderson Cooper 360* on July 15, 2013, and which was transcribed on CNN.com, said

of Jeantel’s testimony, “I didn’t think it was very credible, but I felt very sorry for her...I think she felt inadequate toward everyone because of her education and her communication skills. I just felt sadness for her.” The juror made assumptions that were not communicated by Jeantel herself. Because Jeantel did not speak the way that she did, the juror dismissed her as being ignorant and “inadequate.” Anderson Cooper summed up the juror’s thoughts in his online blog. He states, “Juror B37 said Jeantel was not a good witness because the phrases used during her testimony were terms she had never heard before.” Interesting, the juror’s many references to the defendant, George Zimmerman, by his *first* name reflected an empathizing *and* sympathizing with him at the same time her objectifying and racially-charged language dehumanized Jeantel, one of the alleged victims in the case.

More disturbing were the many references to Jeantel as “Precious” in social media sites around the world. Comments visible on my personal Facebook newsfeed reflected a derogatory conflation with Jeantel to the character Precious. One person, obviously disgusted with Jeantel’s existence and testimony, wrote, “GET PRECIOUS OFF THE STAND!!” This seemingly angry correlation to the character Precious has not been the only time that a corpulent Black female body has been demeaned and negatively referred to as “Precious” simply because of its race, skin color, gender, size, and class. Both Precious (including GaboureySidible the actress and the original character in Sapphire’s novel) and Rachel Jeantel’s identities have been conflated to physical characteristics that are deemed repulsive and vile in American visual and narrative cultures and society. Therefore, Precious’ true legacy may simply be to correlate assumed pathology and repulsion with the corpulent Black female body and leave it there, thus, preventing the body from truly being viewed and treated as human in visual and narrative cultures and in the American psyche. Jeantel’s bodily construction as pathological and abject rests in its intersection of race, skin color, gender, class, and *size*. Jeantel and Precious are the variants through which white European bodies enter American visual and narrative cultures and remain “normal” and dominant. Whiteness is therefore depended on this particular body in order to perpetuate itself in a racist, sexist, and classist society. White supremacy has relegated corpulence to a location of pathology and one that is innately Black. A thorough intersectional approach to women’s lives that involves body weight is crucial in understanding the dehumanization and objectification of female bodies in visual and narrative cultures. Black female bodies have been constructed with extra weight for a reason. ‘Fatness’ is an undesirable physical characteristic that has been constructed as repulsive and unattractive. Weight has come to function as one signifier of the supposed ‘deviance’ that is Blackness in American society.

One of the most popular and powerful Black female figures in the world has not been immune to accusations of deviancy due to her body size. As the most visible Black woman in American visual culture during the height of her talk-show career, Oprah Winfrey has openly struggled with opinions and treatment regarding her body size. Winfrey graces every cover of her self-published magazine, *O, The Oprah Magazine*. Winfrey’s visibility every month of the publication has been interpreted by some as narcissistic; however, I propose that it can be liberating for not only Oprah but the Black female image as well. Moreover, her body is autonomous and her solo performance on the cover is perhaps the only instance where Oprah Winfrey is not ‘shared’ with her audience and the general public. The co-opting and appropriation of Winfrey’s persona and public identity is evident in the consumption of “Mammy” qualities and characterizations that America has loved for so long. In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2005) sociologist and cultural critic Patricia Hill Collins argues, “A good deal of Winfrey’s success lies in her ability to market

herself within the familiar realm of the mammy”(142). Part of Oprah Winfrey’s appeal can be attributed to her giving behavior and her talk show’s willingness to primarily take on the concerns, issues, and likes of American middle-class white women. Moreover, Winfrey has been apologetic in terms of her fluctuating weight, which allows her audience to move into spaces that many would deem personal.

On the January, 2009 edition of her magazine, an image of Winfrey from a 2005 edition is pasted alongside a current image of her in an effort to demonstrate her weight gain over the four year period. In the original image, Winfrey is clothed in a white, fashionable and torso-revealing sweat suit as she smiles to the camera; however, in the 2009 image, she is fully clothed in a less revealing lavender sweat suit as she looks to the right rather than straight into the camera and at the readers of the magazine. Further, she admits in the accompanying article, “So here I stand, 40 pounds heavier than I was in 2006. (Yes, you’re adding correctly; that means the dreaded 2-0-0.) I’m mad at myself. I’m embarrassed. I can’t believe that after all these years, all the things I know how to do, I’m still talking about my weight. I look at my thinner self and think, “How did I let this happen again?” The fact that Winfrey felt the need to apologize to her audience is revealing because it reflects that notion that she may not view her body as autonomous as one would think. The question must be asked, “For whom does Winfrey lose weight and fashion her body?” I am certainly not labeling Winfrey as a “Mammy” figure; however, one of the main components of the construction includes the ability to forego personal aspirations and desires for others: namely, white communities.

I view Oprah Winfrey’s body size “issue” as a central part of her celebrity persona and the fascination with her as a public figure. Moreover, as she herself insinuates that extra weight on her body is undesirable, many have appropriated and exaggerated this theory in narrative cultures. As a highly visible world figure, Winfrey has been the subject of extreme ridicule by many. At the same time that her characteristics and personality are deemed non-threatening by most, she nonetheless suffers criticism based on these same intersecting components of her identity. Conservative radio talk-show host, Rush Limbaugh, did not hesitate to weigh in on an incident that Winfrey was involved in while visiting Switzerland in July of 2013. Winfrey was denied the assessment and possible purchase of a \$40,000.00 handbag by a store clerk who, according to Winfrey, made assumptions based on Winfrey’s identity. *CBS News* reported that Winfrey told *Entertainment Tonight* that she asked to view the handbag, “One more time, I tried. I said, ‘But I really do just want to see that one,’ and the shopkeeper said, ‘Oh, I don’t want to hurt your feelings,’ and I said, ‘Okay, thank you so much. You’re probably right, I can’t afford it.’ And I walked out of the store.” Winfrey’s suggestion that race is still a factor in the world today, was met with criticism by Limbaugh, who argued that it was her size that served as the reason for her mistreatment. As reported in *The Huffington Post*, Limbaugh stated in August of 2013, “Oprah is a plus size woman...You don’t see a whole lot of really fashionable, wealthy, overweight women...unless you get into the frumpy 70s, 80s, but even then it’s an exception to see a very wealthy, overweight fat woman, so the Oprah could have suffered a double whammy when it comes to discrimination.” Limbaugh’s assumption that Winfrey’s size contributed to her treatment is saturated with assumptions about body size, class, and deviancy. His statement is not only a condemnation of Winfrey’s moderate body size, but it is also a reflection of his ideology regarding economic class. Limbaugh assumes that wealthy women are not, or should not be, ample in body size. As an overweight white man, his statements reflect a bias that is informed by intersectionality. The statements assume a racialized gendered, but also classed, construction of body size. Winfrey’s body is subject to assumptions that his is not.

Oprah Winfrey's experiences are examples of the ways that body size is a factor in how one is viewed and treated in the world. These experiences also allow one to detect what an intersectional approach to women's bodies in visual and narrative cultures can look like. It is imperative that we assess how corpulence has been used as a signifier of pathology. In feminist and Womanist theories and cultural criticisms, corpulence cannot be neglected as a factor in corporeal politics and ideology.

It is not the desire to hinder or undermine authentic feminist and Womanist discussions of Women's health. However, many articulated concerns about health are often veils for hatred and animosity toward corpulent bodies. Visually thin women who suffer from eating disorders are often viewed as victims of societal conditioning and influence and are rarely the target of feminist and Womanist debates regarding *health*. Thus, women who are visible in culture and who are extremely thin are not typically placed at the center of feminist and Womanist *physiological* health discourses. This population is most often the subject of debates regarding body image and its effects on women. The issue of body image and eating disorders is stagnant in feminist theory and cultural criticism because it is still primarily situated within a psychological and emotional health discourse rather than a physiological discourse. Of course, eating disorders are health crises and are treated as illnesses in feminist theory; however, not to the extent that an eating disorder that causes consistent *over* eating is. Moreover, the reality that women may respond to gender oppression, *including* the effects of media images, by overeating as a way to anesthetize the pain of not fitting into rigid cultural beauty and identity standards, is not recognized. Overeating by the corpulent body, outside of bulimia disorder, is often still viewed and treated as a pathological *choice* that one makes; a choice that can simply be prevented with smarter actions taken by the corpulent body. Laziness is something that is not looked upon as a rewarding trait in American society. Sadly, the problem is that laziness is still viewed as the *only* trigger of corpulence rather than other important factors that may stem from deep rooted issues that gender, or racial, oppression may create.

As discussed, feminist and Womanist theories and cultural criticisms have struggled to include many issues and worries that affect multiple groups and communities. Notwithstanding fruitful strides in feminist and Womanist scholarship, investigating intersectionality, or the ways that one's identity intersects to impact experience, is still a critical contemporary matter because certain issues are still sidelined in such theories and pedagogy. The issue of body weight and its representation in visual and narrative cultures, especially as it relates to women of color; namely, Black women, is still an isolated subject in the fields of Women's and Gender Studies. The intent of this project is not to encourage obesity or unhealthy eating patterns. The only intent is to discourage discrimination and hatred targeted to a certain segment of the population through the use of feminists and Womanist analyses that advocate human equality. It has been the aim of feminists and Womanists to fight discrimination and prejudices against all individuals, groups, and communities. Therefore, to show lack of concern for how corpulent bodies, and their intersection with race, gender, class, etc., are subject to discrimination is, as the late feminist theorist AudreLorde suggested, simply *using* the master's ideology and practices.

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