More Fats, More Femmes: A Critical Examination of Fatphobia and Femmephobia on Grindr

Matthew Thomas Conte

"More Fats, More Femmes: A Critical Examination of Fatphobia and Femmephobia on Grindr" is a personal narrative about the liminalities of being a fat and femme queer on Grindr, the largest and most-widely used social networking application geared specifically towards queer men. The piece deconstructs the now-ubiquitous phenomenon in queer male communities, “no fats, no femmes,” and examines the complex intersections and interactions that exist between queerness, fatness, and femininity. The narrative radically explores the intricate double marginalities that fat and femme queers must navigate when their bodies and identities are simultaneously eroticized and discriminated against.

Dedication

This personal narrative is dedicated to all the queers who have had to learn to play by a different set of rules on Grindr.

This personal narrative began when I was about 20 years old. It was the first time I downloaded Grindr, the largest online queer social networking (read: fucking) application geared specifically towards queer men. When I started engaging with the application, I immediately remember feeling like I did not belong. My fat hairy body existed amongst a plethora of abs and rib cages and the makeup on my face marked my queer identity as feminine, which was contrary to the profile descriptions declaring “masculine guys ONLY.” It was the first time in my life that I started to understand my queer body as fat and my queer identity as femme. It was the first time I felt like my queerness was something that could be “wrong”—my fatness was deemed as gross and unattractive and my femininity was devalued and degraded. I learned quickly that my queer identities existed behind a ubiquitous phrase that is used on the application: “No fats, no femmes.” In fact, this phrase has been popularized so much that for the low-price of $28.50, you can celebrate pride this year with your own Marek + Richard tank top that spells out in big, bold letters that you are not interested in fats or femmes (for the record, do not buy this shirt). The notion of “no fats, no femmes” has left me constantly questioning what it means to “belong” on Grindr and what bodies are afforded a “sense of belonging” in that space.

Hegemonic narratives surrounding the queer male body have constructed a queer space on Grindr that celebrates and welcomes whiteness, masculinity, and muscularity. Queer bodies that do not conform to these rigid boundaries of identity (read: fats, femmes, and/or racialized queers) are relegated to the margins of this social networking application. These queer bodies are confronted with a double marginality—they are rejected from straight society for who they fuck and fall in love with and then rejected from the corporate queer community for their non-whiteness, fatness, and/or femininity. The complex Othering and deviancy of femininity, fatness, and/or non-whiteness on Grindr is continuing to construct an online queer
space where a particular form of queerness is celebrated—that is a queerness that is white, masculine, and muscular. It is this queerness that is welcomed and invited into queer spaces without adversity; it is this queerness that is used in queer media and advertising; it is this queerness that is accepted at Pride events; it is this queerness that is sought out on Grindr; and, most importantly, it is this queerness that is represented as being the “right kind of queer.”

It is important to understand that “queer” is not a homogenous identity and requires a critical deconstruction of the ways social hierarchies (e.g., race, class, gender expression, body type) come to structure seemingly unitary categories of sexuality. We must be critical of the ways that multiple diversities form between those groups who identify as “queer.” I posit that Grindr is a space of pervasive homonormativity—that is, the queer body in this space is constructed within raced, gendered, and classed norms (Brown, Browne and Lim 2007, 12). Further, as Jon Binnie (2007) notes:

Heteronormativity has been a powerful concept in challenging the way society is structured along the two gender model—norms that enshrine heterosexuality as normal and therefore [queer] people as Other and marginal. However, I am not so sure about its usefulness now. The notion of heteronormativity tends to lump all heterosexuals [and queers] together in the same box, and can mask or obscure the differences between and within sexual dissident identities and communities. (33)

The notion of a “singular queer community” ignores the important oppressions and discriminations that are occurring within and between queer communities. The notion of homonormativity (Ferguson 2005; Nero 2005; Binnie 2004; Bell and Binnie 2004; Duggan 2014) refers to the mainstreaming of queer politics and the increasing visibility and power of affluent white gay men accompanied by the marginalization and exclusion of queer bodies on the basis of race, class, gender identity and expression, body size, and (dis)ability (Binnie 2007, 34). These queer bodies become what Binnie and Bell (2004) refer to as the “queer unwanted” (1810).

Homonormative formations in queer spaces have marked the fat, femme and/or racialized queer body as “unwanted” and “undesired.” To embody the “right kind of Queerness” on Grindr is to be what Rinaldo Walcott (2007) refers to as the “archetypal queer”—white, muscular, middle-class, able-bodied and masculine (237). Fat, femme, and/or racialized queer bodies have been excised from the “we are a family” discourse of the contemporary gay and lesbian movement (239). I argue that fat, femme and/or racialized queers are scripted as impostures on Grindr.

As a fat and femme queer, my Grindr experiences have become the same fatphobic and femmephobic routine:

**Random Grindr Guy One:** “Hey bro, what’s up?”
**Me:** “Not much, I should be working on my thesis but I am about to binge watch Netflix.”
**Random Grindr Guy One:** “Cool. Are you masculine acting? #masc4masc”
**Me:** “Only on Fridays”
**Random Grindr Guy One:** “Huh?”
**Me:** “Never mind.”
**Random Grindr Guy One:** “So… I think u r cute… Do you have any more pics? Like a body pic?”
**Me:** *reluctantly sends body pic*
Random Grindr Guy One: “Oh, srry I’m not really into big guys”
Me: “That’s fine, I’m not really into body-shaming and femmephobic assholes anyway! 😊”

Profile after profile on Grindr marks my fatness and femininity as Other. I have begun to learn that fatness, femininity, and queerness on Grindr are defined as mutually exclusive concepts. Interestingly, on Grindr, I am not even given the option to describe my body as fat. When prompted to select a “body type,” users can only choose to describe their bodies as toned, average, large, muscular, slim, or stocky. Fat users, such as myself, cannot even label themselves “fat.” Instead, Grindr provides a few ambiguous and relative terms, such as “large” and “stocky” that allude to fatness without actually naming a user’s body as “fat.” Grindr has successfully created an online queer space where one does not have the option to embody fatness, and thusly, fatness is scripted as exclusive to queerness. As Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael I. Loewy (2009) write in Double Stigma: Fat Men and Their Male Admirers, to deny fatness in queer communities is to ignore the existence of radical fat-positive queer identities and sexualities (149). Similarly, when user’s on Grindr are prompted to select their “community” identification (or to use Grindr’s problematic language, “tribe”), they do not have the option to select “femme” (see Appendix A). This process forces fat and/or femme queers to present online versions of themselves that do not match their real life queer subjectivities. It is important for me to note that my body is fat and my identity is femme. However, I am not given the option to embody these subjectivities on Grindr. When entering the application, I am unable to present my identities as fat or femme and I have to conform to constructions of queerness that do not truly represent my queer identities—that is, I am unable to be who I am as a human being. I am forced to grapple between identities such as a “stocky bear” or a “geek who is large” rather than being myself: A fat and femme queer.

As I write this narrative, I think about all the queers (myself included), who are afraid to embrace their beautiful, fabulous, and special femme identities, in fear of being an “inferior queer.” I think about all the queers who are told countless times by the corporate queer community that their bodies need to be fixed and corrected. Countless studies have confirmed that queer men are at a particular risk for developing patterns of body image disturbances and disordered eating (Siconolfi et al. 2005; Yelland and Tiggemann 2003; Duggan and McCreary 2004; Austin et al. 2004). Queer men are more likely than straight persons to have fasted, vomited, and taken laxatives or diet pills to control their weight within the last 30 days. Queer men are seven times more likely to report binging and twelve times more likely to report purging than straight men (National Eating Disorders Association 2012, 2).

As a fat and femme queer, I am left navigating Grindr as a complex paradoxical space. When my fat body and femme identity are not at the site of exclusion, they are at the site of hyperinclusion because of their “differences” from the image produced by corporate queer culture (read: white, masculine, and muscular). Fat, femme, and/or racialized queer bodies represent bodies that exist as sources of tension in corporate queer spaces because they represent that which could expect rejection but also fetishization (Winge 2012, 59). The “Otherness” of fat, femme, and/or racialized queer bodies becomes a form of pleasure—fatness, femininity, and/or nonwhiteness become what hooks (1992) refers to as “enjoyment” (21).

bell hooks (1992) argues that Otherness has become so successful “because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (21). For corporate (white) queer bodies, the “real fun” is to be had by bringing to the surface all their “nasty unconscious” longings and fantasies about sexual contact with the Other (21-2). The corporate (white) gay may contemplate: What is it like to fuck a fat person? What would it feel...
like to be pounded by a “big black cock”? How tight is a sissi boy’s asshole? How would it feel to have my cock blown by a “submissive” Asian boy? For many corporate (white) queer bodies, fucking is a way to confront the Other—to leave behind their corporate (white) queer “innocence” and enter the world of “experience” (23). Fatness, femininity, and/or nonwhiteness become embodiments that are fetishized on Grindr—bodies that are sought after for consumption.

I recently had a “social networking” (as I previously explained, these quotations mean fucking) experience with someone on Grindr who I will refer to as Random Grindr Guy Two. As I reluctantly took my clothes off for him, assuming he would be uncomfortable with the fat on my body, quite the opposite happened. He grabbed the fat on my thighs and stomach and told me he “loved the way my skin jiggled for him.” The whole encounter was unnerving—he repeatedly called my “fat ass beautiful” while yanking, grabbing, and pinching the fat all over my body. When we were done having sex, he looked me in the eyes and told me he had a type. When I asked what he meant, he explained to me that “he loved fat sissies.” I realized than that Random Grindr Guy Two did not care about my personhood. I was simply a fat and femme queer whose ass would jiggle for him when he fucked it.

The femme queer body, despite its subordinate positioning by corporate queer culture, is also “admired” and fetishized for its imagined sexual submissiveness. Femme embodiments are hypersexualized and are often sought after for their presumed sexual availability. As Julia Serano argues, femininity is seen as something to be taken control of and positioned as powerless (2007 254). Femmes on Grindr are scripted as sexual objects and commodities, rather than fully formed human beings. Their embodiments are hypersexualized in our culture because they are viewed as “enabling” their own sexual objectification by virtue of the fact that they are willingly embracing femininity (253-60). Moreover, I also want to acknowledge that fat itself is often a form of sexual interest. Fatness is often admired and eroticized in a body, particularly in queer male bodies (Richardson 2010, 101). As Richardson (2010) notes, “[G]ay culture has always been more openly fetishistic [about fat] than its heterosexual counterpart. Gay men have always been keen to identify (unashamedly) in terms of their fetish for physical features” (102). The fat body in queer communities often represents a supreme, erotic indicator (102).

As noted by Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael I. Loewy (2009), fat queers are continually pursued by queer men who often label themselves “fat admirers” or “chubby chasers.” Within gay culture, the terms “chubby chaser” or “fat admirer” are utilized to describe queer men whose sole attractions are towards “chubs.” Chubby chasers tend to have slim-built bodies and are devoted to the admiration of fatness (Whitesel 2010, 5-6). Fatness is fetishized, desired, and “admired” because of its bodily difference in a culture that tends to only represent and celebrate a slim and muscular queer body. Chubby chasers and fat admirers are exclusively attracted to fatness and see fat queer men as an “object of desire” (Pyle and Loewy 2009, 147).

My experiences with Random Grindr Guy Two also made me realize that there are complex intersections between my fatness and femininity. As Whitesel (2010) notes, fatness in the queer male body has been negatively associated with effeminacy, an association that has not historically been made with the straight, male body (216). Thus, the fat queer body lives in historically-constituted and highly-gendered communities where the physicality of hegemonic masculinity remains under constant surveillance (216). The embodiment of fatness within the queer male body produces stereotypical feminized features, such as breasts, hips, and the diminishment of visible genitals, all of which threaten images of masculinity and the archetype.
of the disciplined muscular body (216-7). Queer men adopt notions of a hegemonic masculine body to create a rigid border between themselves and the so-called “fats” and “femmes” (217).

This personal narrative has aimed to shift the dialogue away from the ways that heteronormative society is defining and oppressing queer persons and rather, begin deconstructing and troubling the ways that queer folks are discriminating and oppressing other queer folks within their own communities. This narrative is a reminder to continue challenging oppressive corporate (white) gay propaganda found on Grindr and work towards disrupting the notion that fatness is “abject” and “gross” and that femininity is “weak” and “lesser-than.” My narrative implores queer folks to radically reconsider the implications of their words on Grindr. I contend that words matter and words have important consequences. And to the queer folks who do not think so, you can stare at my glittery middle finger and kiss my big, fat, queer ass.

This personal narrative concludes with a poem I wrote entitled young queer kid:

young queer kid,
remember how you always wanted to dance on the rings of Saturn.
and you would picture your legs transforming into this sexy see-through lace.
and you would imagine the way your feet would burn in the best way possible from all of your carefree dance moves?
and you would smile.
a smile so radiant and infectious that it would be confused with the prettiest and brightest purple lilacs that ever bloomed.
and then you stopped smiling.
and you stopped dancing on Saturn’s rings.
because that straight parent told you to act like the boy you were supposed to be.
and that straight friend was too embarrassed to be around you because your voice was too high and too loud.
and the speed and the frequency at which you talked was too over-whelming.
and they marked you a sissy.
and questioned you.
turning your identity into an examination you had no way of ever studying for.
you failed them. and you thought you failed yourself.
because those straight institutions never told you that you could exist.
the hetero love that you learned was a prized display for the world.
it was 14 carat gold love.
and you were somehow wrong.
always changing the pronouns in your poems and pretending that your high school love letters didn’t exist because of him.
invalidating the ways you loved as if they ever existed in your embodiment.
but don’t worry. they will tell you it gets better.
you will be welcomed into a community of love and acceptance.
but then you do worry.
because you learn it doesn’t get better.
it only gets worse. meaner.
because you will finally be at an age where you will have the vocabulary to name your discriminations.
and this time.
it won’t be the straight system who tells you are wrong.
but rather your queer friend. your queer lover. your queer communities. they will tell you that you are the worst kind of fag. your femininity will be their joke. your gapless thighs will make them vomit corporate rainbows. you’ll plant your identities into the earth. equal parts soil. equal parts water. equal parts naivety. you’ll think that their love will nourish your roots. but no flowers will ever bloom. they will always forgot to tend to your garden. they will forgot about you. and you must learn young queer kid. that you can forget about them. the same way they forgot about the femmes who were throwing bricks at stonewall, while masc boys were fucking in parks moaning over the chants for revolutionary freedom. the same way they forgot to represent your body in any queer spaces making your identity the new “in” that prefaces “visible.” the same way they forget to tell you that you are beautiful while young queer boys starve themselves following an instructional manual that is written in a language they can’t read. young queer kid. it is okay to bloom on your own. to bloom as beautifully and dangerously as you have to for them to see you. let your radical self-love be your resistance. young queer kid. dance on the rings of Saturn until your feet are filled with big beautiful blisters. then bloom. bloom into the biggest and prettiest flower you can be. grow and grow and grow. until you have grown so tall that you can’t see or hear the people who told you that you are not valid. young queer kid. you are valid. you are special. and you are loved. if not by other people. then by you.

Notes

1. The popularized phrase “no fats, no femmes” that is used on Grindr is also often extended to include “no Asians” and “no Blacks.” The analyses I offer throughout this personal narrative are limited by my own positionalities and lived knowledges—that is, fatness and femininity. I want to stress the importance of noting that I benefit every day from corporate white queer discourses and systems that privilege the colour of my skin, and that my fatness and femininity are experienced through and within whiteness. Thus, this piece is bound by my own white subjectivities and I therefore, cannot make claims or speak to the lived experiences and realities of racialized folks who engage with Grindr.
Works Cited


MATTHEW CONTE is a PhD student in Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Toronto. His research interests include queer theory and methodologies, fat-positive feminisms, critical race theory, and pop culture. His master’s research explores the notion of “no fats, no femmes, no Asians and no Blacks” in queer male communities and examines the intersections that exist between racism, femmephobia and fatphobia.