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"I like my girls BBW:" Desiring Queer Excess in "Only" and "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)"

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This paper plays with the "excessive" sexuality and consumptive practices of the Big Beautiful Woman (BBW), as represented in "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)" by MIKA and "Only" by Nicki Minaj. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I read BBW through a queer reparative lens that seeks amelioration while acknowledging the potential harms in fetishization. Fatness, womanhood, and queerness are posited as intersectional constituents that get normatively tied to excess under neoliberalism, building on Jack Halberstam and Cathy Cohen among others to explore the unexpected pleasures of failure in a hegemonic system. Using an intersectional lyrics-focused analysis to subvert visual objectification, I figure the BBW through a discursive analysis of the two songs as defying complex gendered norms around sexual and dietary practices.

In this piece, I aim to tease out the "excessive" sexuality of the Big Beautiful Woman (BBW) archetype, as represented in two songs: "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)" by Mika from 2007 and "Only" by Nicki Minaj featuring Drake, Lil Wayne, and Chris Brown from 2014. Excess anchors hegemonic perceptions of fat femininity, including as it pertains to sexuality, wherein "both fatness and femininity are characterized as excessive or 'too much,' as unruly and out of control" (Taylor and Hoskin 2023, 74). Popular media framings of big womanhood as sexy or beautiful are noteworthy, since "While in dominant discourses, woman is always already associated with characteristics such as excess and immoderation, the 'fat' woman allegedly embodies the worst of them" (Murray 2008, 129). Yet in queer theory, as I will explore, excess has been called quintessential to camp strategies (Sedgwick 1997).

The acronym BBW comes from what Jonathan Najarian and Katherine Nee critique as "the language of fetishism" (2022, 5), wherein "big" operates equivalently to "fat," glorifying excess. In a Western context, the existence of the BBW as a desirable archetype is an upheaval. Both physically and socially, women are culturally pressured to make themselves smaller and avoid taking up space (Gailey 2014; Taylor and Hoskin 2023). Connecting misogyny to fatphobia, Andrea Elizabeth Shaw has critiqued the multitude of "cultural expressions that situate fatness as undesirable" (2006, 1), bolstered by capitalist gains from diet industries. Women who are intersectionally marginalized face heightened pressure, and rhetorics of excess become mobilized to police their embodiments. Allison Taylor and Rhea Ashley Hoskin argue that "This regulation of both fatness and femininity is tied to historical and enduring structures of racism and colonization" (2023, 75). Racialized and queer femininities are often depicted as always already failing at ideal (white, straight, cis) thinness (Senyonga and Luna 2021; Taylor and Hoskin 2023). Notions of excess are also saturated with co-constituting social significations. Drawing on Sabrina Strings (2019), Mary Senyonga and Caleb Luna write how "The Black fat woman's body became a specter for racial and religious fears of 'excess'" (2021, 272), especially sexually (273). Myles W. Mason further observes that for those who are fat

and/or Black, it is this gendered "excess that marks them as disgusting or unbeautiful" (2022, 270). Critically analyzing representations of the BBW archetype through excess, I hold, can help unravel the imagined sexual (and non-sexual) possibilities for fat women and other excluded identities in neoliberal society.

Fat Reading, Queer Repairing

To explore excess, I employ a "fat reading" approach to find expansive meaning in these songs by non-fat artists, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) and broader queer reparative reading practices that seek pleasure, amelioration, and nourishment. By employing a fat reading, I am choosing to apply my own fat-focused lens to pop cultural works that may not have been ever created with a fat audience in mind, in order to "thicken" (Friedman et al. 2019) their possible interpretations when it comes to size and intersecting embodied factors. My fat reading method is personal and subjective, influenced by my own experience navigating the world and its media as a fat bisexual woman. Like many others who are frequently erased or diminished in mainstream pop culture, I have spent many years queering default interpretations of media texts, creatively scavenging for representations that remind me of myself, my body, and my desires. In doing so, I participate in a lineage of generative fat queer dialogue and exchange, like Kathleen LeBesco's (2001) innovation of "fat play" based on queer activist playfulness. As LeBesco notes, scholars like Michael Moon and Sedgwick have long signalled the historical kinship between fat and queer communities and liberation movements, which Moon and Sedgwick note share "a certain interface between abjection and defiance" (2001, 295). Fatness and queerness often cross paths at intersections of desirability, with Jackie Wykes stating that "even the most cursory analysis of contemporary Western media culture reveals that only slender bodies are presented as legitimate objects of heterosexual desire" (2014, 1). This messy entanglement of heteronormative desirability politics makes queer perspectives highly suited to analyzing musical representations of women who are depicted as simultaneously big *and* beautiful.

While neither "Only" nor "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)" are particularly new songs, both have had recent resurgences in popularity on social media. This resurgence is especially notable on TikTok, where both songs have trended and been re-purposed tens of thousands of times (Hartlep 2021; Mika 2023; Williams 2021). This exposed these songs to a new generation of listeners who feel celebrated and affirmed in their size by the songs' lyrics (Mika 2023). Moreover, with Lizzo's surge of popularity when she debuted as a fat Black female musical artist and the "increasing emphasis or awareness of body positivity" (Senyonga and Luna 2021), there is renewed value in re-examining past musical representations of BBWs through a reading that prioritizes intersectional fat liberation. In doing a fat reading of songs by non-fat artists, I take a low theoretical approach, pursuing a "detour" around "the tried-and-true paths of knowledge production" and embracing "the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant" (Halberstam 2011, 6) in order to locate novel interpretations in unexpected sources. By doing a reparative fat reading of two songs from my earlier years that made surplus size seem legitimately sexy, I am also nourishing my younger self: "extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain" (Sedgwick 1997, 35).

Fat women, and especially fat Black women, have re-shaped music history and representational possibilities for diverse bodies along with it. Senyonga and Luna have

discussed "how Lizzo has been taken up by primarily non-Black fat activists: as a figurehead and a metric to compare the behavior toward and treatment of other fat people" (2021, 271), with "calls for Lizzo to be a stand-in for all fat people" (270), often ignoring the significance of her Blackness and the nuances of how her work is taken up by audiences that are predominantly thin and white. To avoid replicating this stale dynamic and to find fresh pathways of fat meaning-making, I aim as a fat white scholar to coax a reparative reading out of musical sources that have not always been subject to as much size-related discourse in academia and beyond. Both Minaj and Mika's work in the popular music landscape exist alongside a lineage of trailblazing music by fat Black women and fat queer artists like Ma Rainey, Queen Latifah, Missy Elliott (Senyonga and Luna 2021; Shaw 2006), Beth Ditto (Nault 2009), and Sam Smith (Joyner 2023). As Mecca Jamilah Sullivan (2013) notes, many fat Black women in popular music are either queer themselves or have been the subject of widespread queer rumours, pointing to the cultural linkages between fatness, gender, queerness, and racialization. Like the songs I choose to analyze, all these artists have at times explored sexuality in their lyrics. My fat reading of these non-fat-originated songs emanates from this lineage in order "to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though not, and may I emphasize this, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole"* (Sedgwick 1997, 8).

To understand the BBW as a whole, it is key to foreground the archetype's frequent presence on fetish pornography websites as a pornographic niche, which can overshadow and limit the potential for more diverse representation (Berg and Penley 2016, 168). There are ongoing "Questions about whether BBW/fat pornography empowers fat women to claim and express their sexualities, or whether it objectifies them and perpetuates stereotypes" (Klumbyte and Smiet 2015, 133), with some authors decrying the acronym (Colls 2012). Still, BBW performers have been noted to "exploit anti-fat discourses in ways that challenge normative standards of embodiment" (Jones 2018, 280), finding pleasure and challenging anti-fatness through fetish. Charlotte Cooper described BBW subcultures as one of the "major sites for fat activism in the West" (2016, 53). There are also BBW-centric meet-ups and venues for dating, mirroring in some ways queer community spaces (Gailey 2014; Goddard 2007). By analyzing the BBW through popular music instead of explicitly sexualized content, there is an opportunity to "explore alternatives and to look for a way out of the usual traps" (Halberstam 2011, 10) that reproduce the hyper-(hetero)sexualization of the BBW archetype.

In reading the BBW through queerness and fatness, I aim to locate what Cathy Cohen calls "the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to a liberatory politics" (1997, 440). Fatness and queerness have been subject to enmeshed systemic oppressions, like compulsory thinness and compulsory heterosexuality, that Wykes has described as being "mutually constitutive" (2014, 1), highlighting "the ways in which non-normative bodies challenge and disrupt—that is to say, queer—the disciplinary power of normative categories" (5). Like Elena Levy-Navarro, my conception "embraces a more expansive definition of 'queer' that is more expressly inclusive of all who challenge normativity, including fat people" (2009, 15), both aligning and misaligning with traditional definitions of queerness.

Interpreting the BBW through queerness is potentially controversial, due to the BBW's complex ties to heteronormativity. However, for decades, researchers and community alike have identified the queer potential of the BBW (and fatness generally). Among them, Michael Goddard writes that "BBW is not merely a variant of normative sexuality but a range of practices that potentially submit the foundation of heterosexual normativity to a profound

questioning from within" (2007, 193). Drawing on Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam, Francis Ray White (2016) cites "queer failure" in arguing that fat sex is inherently queer: both socially failing within a heteronormative model and frequently pathologized as non-reproductive (971). Situating White's (2016) and Levy-Navarro's (2009) analyses within a critique of neoliberalism, the BBW is then not only considered *non-reproductive* but also *non-productive*.

Idealizing fatness, especially in women, resists the neoliberal imperative to produce and maintain heteronormative biocitizenship. Neoliberal rhetoric repeatedly frames fat bodies as unproductive economic drains on capitalist society (Guthman and DuPuis 2006; Kotow 2020). Drawing on scholars like Julie Guthman and Michel Foucault, Susan Greenhalgh identified the imperatives of neoliberal governmentality to lose weight and perform shame as cornerstones of optimal biocitizenship in a Western context, with fatness being figured not just as a danger to the self but a danger to the nation-state as a whole. She writes about how the "thin, fit biocitizen" (2015, 19) represents an evolution of social responsibility beginning around 1900, wherein a citizen is no longer simply a subject with a certain legal status and rights but rather embedded in a politicized social system predicated on regulating body weight as part of national belonging. These socially contracted duties then shape idealized desirability, producing thinness as "a worthy, desirable, and necessary state" (21) at a national scale. The BBW archetype queerly and spectacularly fails at neoliberal desire politics through eroticized refusal to engage in expected forms of governmentality. It does this by visibly celebrating fatness as attractive rather than suppressing and surveilling fatness as an unwanted trait.

In a neoliberal context, both "big" and "queer" are normatively seen as excessive, and BBW pornography often involves "playing with excess and power dynamics and their intertwinings" (Klumbyte and Smiet 2015, 140). It is this "erotic too muchness" (Goddard 2007, 193) that makes the figure of the BBW so challenging to dominant norms. Read reparatively, the BBW's excess makes her an uncomfortable vision of the "worst" of neoliberalism. In much of popular media, fat women embody excess: "her desires have run wild, and she stands as a symbol of moral and ethical decay. She does not fulfill feminine expectations of beauty and submission: she takes up too much space, she is uncontained and excessive" (Murray 2008, 129). The BBW then becomes representative of "a kind of freakish excess which is then associated with too much freedom" (Halberstam 2011, 78). Representations of the BBW produce discomfort around the capitalist consumptive/consumerist nature of neoliberalism by exaggerating it to an uneasy, fetishized, hyper-visible degree.

Margitte Kristjansson describes how within capitalist logics, the fat body represents the worst of consumerism, with "'an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire,' an idea that is rooted in the consumer-culture construction of desire as overwhelming and overtaking the self" (2014, 131). The fat body is therefore both desiring and undesired, making "beautiful" a fraught descriptor. Anomalously, the BBW's beauty is derived from her fat. I argue, as Goddard (2007) did, that it is this eroticization of girth that produces much of the BBW's queerness and friction with heteronormative standards of attractiveness. Samantha Murray describes fat feminine embodiment in Western society as "always already read in terms of its associations with gluttony, lack of self-control and excess [...] she does not, and cannot (be seen to be) live(ing) a 'beautiful life'" (2008, 129). Therefore, to find beauty in fat womanhood constitutes a desiring that is non-normative or even queer. Writing on the subject of BBW community, Crystal Kotow describes how "a fat woman who is comfortable in her skin threatens neoliberal devotion to consistent bodily improvement, and to achieving/adhering to strict standards of feminine beauty (i.e. standards of whiteness and class)" (2020, 51–2). Representations of the BBW in

music and more broadly have the potential to be disruptive across multiple axes, with the capacity to unsettle a wider array of aesthetic hegemonies.

The BBW archetype exists despite the dominant Western perception of fat as a feminine flaw (Gailey 2014; Murray 2008; Shaw 2006). This produces what Sullivan (2013) refers to as the "freakishness" of fat desire, which I will reclaim within this analysis. Jeannine A. Gailey writes that "In popular culture, representations of fat women as sexual are rare. This is likely because body size is connected to the heteronormative system of meaning and value that establishes what it means to be masculine and feminine" (2014, 52). The archetype of the BBW therefore reshapes and expands dominant gendered expectations of women, which are underpinned by broader oppressive structures (Senyonga and Luna 2021; Taylor and Hoskin 2023; White 2016). Resisting normative gender ideology can be an affective boon: "gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures" (Halberstam 2011, 4). By transgressing norms of size and desirability, musical BBW representations can be interpreted through a reparative reading as using sexuality "to move toward a sustained *seeking of pleasure*" (Sedgwick 1997, 15) outside of cisgender heteronormative ideals for womanhood. Like Kotow, I hope to "acknowledge that 'woman' is a porous description and an unstable and open category containing many diversities and gender identifications" (2020, 4), and that the "use of the term woman as a gender category is inspired by queer and transgender theorists whose work rejects gender essentialism and the heteronormative gender binary" (5). The slipperiness of binaries, gendered and otherwise, is evident in both songs.

Chronicling Consumption

While Mika's "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)" is a fun, campy pop song, Nicki Minaj's "Only" is an icy hip-hop track. Despite these sonic differences, they both explore the BBW, tackling the figure in ways that are both similar and divergent. Their renewed traction takes on novel meaning in the context of the contemporary acceleration in fat acceptance's continual drift toward the mainstream of public discourse (Cooper 2016). I am interested primarily in the songs' lyrics, eschewing their various music videos and the much-discussed antisemitism in the "Only" lyric video, which featured imagery reminiscent of German Nazi aesthetics (Anti-Defamation League 2014a, 2014b). This is a deliberate choice to break with the visuality of and porn-centric framings of the BBW as "hypersexualized objects of visual consumption" (Najarian and Nee 2022, 5), moving toward "assembling a system of relations that values fat bodies beyond their visual and sexual novelty" (Najarian and Nee 2022, 6). Instead of focusing (as typical) on her visual appearance and status as a visual desire object, I aim to locate the BBW archetype lyrically instead, examining how she is narratively and discursively shaped. I am also forgoing a focus on the artists' individual lives and controversies—including a wide range of problematic and harmful behaviours impacting women and other marginalized groups—which are already well-documented (Dickson 2021; Kornhaber 2022; Wong 2020). I will concentrate specifically on the BBW's portrayal, which is why I hone in on Mika, Nicki Minaj, and Drake's lyrics—ignoring less relevant content from Chris Brown and Lil Wayne, whose verses do not contain much lyrical content about size, shape, or other topics that easily lend themselves to any kind of fat reading. By narrowing in on the most relevant lyrics rather than the often-overshadowing celebrity and visual components, this allows for an unconventional fat reading of the BBW's discursive, linguistic, and rhetorical possibilities in the space of the song. In

addition, this focused approach follows my own subjective and reparative fat reading method, since it is likely not a coincidence that these were the sections of the song I cared about the most in my youth as well.

My reading begins with Mika's "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)." The song is written and performed by Mika, a gay artist and "queer icon" (Hartlep 2021), impacting the way the BBW is presented in the song. His affirming take moves the BBW away (to some extent) from being an emblem of fetishization for the straight, male gaze and toward possible celebration. In recent TikToks spurred by the song's popularity on the app, Mika describes how the song was inspired by the beauty he saw in his big female relatives, especially his mother, as well as the size acceptance he witnessed in a documentary in a BBW night club (Mika 2023). Yet, although not inspired by male-female attraction, the song does still fall back on heteronormative framings at various moments.

Immediately, the lyrics focus on the BBW's size. It opens with the lines "Walks into the room / Feels like a big balloon / I said, 'Hey girl you are beautiful'" (Mika 2007). Feeling "big" and "balloon-like" seems to, in other words, mean feeling fat. Interestingly, she "feels" fat, figuring the fatness as not just physical but affective. This also adds slipperiness to the imagery, since a woman of any size could potentially "feel fat," especially in a culture that idealizes unrealistic gendered standards of thinness. According to Breanne Fahs, "It seems that fat people (fat women, in particular) are fundamentally not allowed even to identify as fat, let alone embrace, accept, or celebrate fatness. Even existing as fat poses a threat to the status quo" (2019, 247). The threatening undercurrent of feeling feminine fatness is encapsulated by the lyrical phrase "big balloon", which conjures up a body that is large but also possibly festive—like a party balloon. It is also a consumable and volatile object; balloons loudly pop, deflate, and are discarded after the party's over.

The song then moves to fixate on the BBW's eating habits. The lyrics describe a "freakish" over-consumptive mashup: a calorie-free carb-free Diet Coke and a generally calorie-heavy carb-heavy pizza, with the BBW ordering "'Diet Coke and a pizza please'" (Mika 2007). I will now employ Sullivan's (2013) use of queer freakishness to explain how food and fat are used both in "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)" and "Only." Sullivan writes how in music, "food is freakish, for better and for worse; it can function both as a celebrated symbol of sex beyond the pale of the sanctioned, and an icon of stigmatized gender and sexual identity" (203). Here Mika, as Sullivan would put it, "uses unusual food (combinations and potentially dissonant eating practices [...] to construct a queer fantasy" (2013, 209). This queering rests not only on the dissonant nature of the food but also its excessiveness. Her over-consumption and hyper-consumerism (pointed to by the brand Diet Coke instead of generic cola) combine to portray her as a figure that embodies and distorts a distinctly capitalist vision of excess, like a funhouse mirror. The use of a brand like Diet Coke also invokes strong associations of American cultural imperialism (McBride 2005), irreverently calling to mind specific histories of white and Western dominated capitalist consumer branding and advertisement in which non-normative bodies (like people who are fat or queer or racialized) are invisibilized or at best hollowly tokenized, figured as inconvenient or an accessory to the image of all-American biocitizenship being sold on the backs of often racialized workers whose labour is exploited by companies like Coke (Hulsether 2018).

Using the brand name of Diet Coke in these lyrics that exalt the BBW therefore recalibrates what consumer bodies are visible and praised in an uncommon way. Wykes writes that, "Given the dominant cultural logic which posits fat people as 'out of control' consumers who 'will eat or buy anything', the logics of taste and consumption work to naturalise not only

distaste for fatness, but the unequal social and cultural structures which produce the fat body" (2014, 10). For fat bodies, consumption and consumerism are therefore underpinned by a neoliberal matrix of abjection, wherein amidst unbridled access to free market goods, the individual biocitizen subject is responsibilized for surveilling and regulating their own consumption and consumerism choices—a responsibility which fat people are visibly considered to have failed at.

Food and sexuality are governed by similar moralizing, which Kristjansson queers as "an understanding of food as desirable, even sexually gratifying" (2014, 141). In Mika's (2007) song, the narrator cries out at the freakishness of her food, "Diet Coke, I'm on my knees!," following this up by proclaiming "Big girl you are beautiful." The freakish food therefore both produces the BBW's beauty in Mika's song and discursively ties the BBW to over-consumption and hyper-consumerism, leaning into her queer excessiveness. It is through the BBW's latently "freakish" queerness that she can be read as an aberration, as neoliberalism gone wrong: pushing far past the encouraged bounds of deregulated consumer choice. Neoliberalism in many ways redefines citizens as consumers (Vallier 2022), which is playfully destabilized when rendered in over-the-top lyrics about the BBW's chaotically captivating consumptive habits. This cheeky destabilization is a hallmark of fat and queer activist playfulness (LeBesco 2001), and queer people are also often represented as having gone beyond acceptable bounds (in terms of gender and sexuality).

The BBW, combining "the female, the queer, and the consumerist" (Schmidt 2014, 8), becomes an exaggerated embodiment of the neoliberal "push towards mindless consumerism" (Harvey 2005, 42). In becoming an embodiment of over-consumerism, the BBW therefore represents the "anticapitalist *nonutility* of [...] excess" (Schmidt 2014, 20)—why have a Diet Coke if you're pairing it with a pizza? Sedgwick describes attachment to nonutility—"the 'over'-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products"—as a hallmark of camp's reparative practices, the additive and accretive motive to help ourselves again and again (1997, 28). Reading these lyrics through the lens of camp, the BBW goes beyond the encouraged level of consumption to instead become a (literally) outsized fetishized warning against it through the associations of her fabulously fat frame and freakish food fixations.

The same can be said of Nicki Minaj's "Only." In Drake's verse, he positions Minaj, with her self-proclaimed "big titties, big butt too" (Minaj et al. 2014), as the BBW in question, referring to her directly early in his verse. He raps, "Yeah, that's right, I like my girls BBW / Yeah, type that wanna suck you dry and then eat some lunch with you" (Minaj et al. 2014), with "suck you dry" having connotations of both sexual and potentially monetary (over)consumption and resulting depletion. This leans into what Shaw describes as "the fat black woman's hypersexualization, which is doubly signified by both her size and her race and constructed as a form of sexual deviance" (2006, 12–13), premised on parallel and intertwining histories that encode women's fatness and Blackness as sexually unruly. According to Shaw, "cultural imaginings about female fleshiness result in the positioning of the fat female body in simultaneously opposing sexual spaces: first as the object of derision for that body's inability or unwillingness to conform to imperatives of slenderness and second as a site of intense desire—that body's own desire and the sexual desirability that it represents" (2006, 50), and this dichotomy is only amplified for Black women.

Much like in "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)," the BBW here is praised for having a voracious appetite, both for food and sex, with "eat some lunch" adding a gustatory aspect to the consumptive desire narrative. Food restriction discourse features prominently in representations of fat women to "render the subversive excessiveness of her body 'safe,'"

offering discursive "proof" that "she is at least trying to take 'control' of her body (and thus her sexuality)" (Kristjansson 2014, 141). The reverse then, like where Drake represents the BBW as being sexually attractive specifically because of her excessive appetites (for food and otherwise), revolts against safe (hetero)normative embodiment. At the same time, these lyrics also invoke common stereotypes of fat women as voracious (both for sex and food). Gailey notes how fat women manage to be depicted both as sexless and undesirable in some circumstances but fetishized as "sexually insatiable and desperate" (2014, 51) in others, creating a hyper(in)visibility paradox. Much like Mika's (2007) narrator, Drake praises the freakish appetite of his BBW crush. Her appetites, both sexual and gastronomical, abound and are in many ways combined.

Appetite is culturally gendered under capitalism. Kristjansson describes how "for women, the desire to eat—voraciously or otherwise—is conflated with inappropriate sexual desire" and therefore "the fat woman is figured as deviant not only for her 'obvious' overconsumption, but for the fact that she consumes at all" (2014, 131). In these songs, the sexy freakishness of the BBW's appetite lies in its insatiability (for Drake) and its strange combinations (for Mika). This fetishization of the BBW's appetite creates a non-normative, latently queer sexuality—eroticizing the breach of patriarchal sexual norms, which encourage women to diet and maintain thinness in order to maximize their desirability to men (Gailey 2014). This fetishization is apparent in the feedism dynamics found between some BBW admirers and BBWs, which involve encouraging consumption and weight gain for sexual gratification, often with an associated power imbalance (Swami and Tovée 2009, 90). Much research on feedism and sexuality comes from outside the fetish, and even generous academic framings tend to interpret it through a lens of deviance or corruption, depicting the admirer as the active feeder who encourages consumption and weight gain and the BBW as the (often submissive or passive) feedee (Najarian and Nee 2022; Prohaska 2013).

Fat women eating without shame is in many ways still freakish in the dominant Western imaginary. April Davidauskis (2015) observes how representations of women eating are only culturally sanctioned and uplifted if the woman in question is also intersectionally privileged: white, thin, beautiful, and class-privileged. She describes how "these women are in tension with neoliberal mandates for self-control, but their bodies do not display that which we are trained to identify as unhealthy" (Davidauskis 2015, 184); they are able to acceptably walk the ableist tightrope of consumption and constraint. This resonates with Strings' research into how scientific, religious, and medical literature in much of the West has for centuries enmeshed fatness, Blackness, and the "savage," writing that "the phobia about fat 'always already' had a racial element" (2019, 209). This encouraged the proliferation of cultural images and tropes that are limited/limiting across multiple marginalized axes. Within the context of structural historical anti-Black oppression, Vincent Woodard refers to "overlapping occurrences of consumption" (2014, 18), threading together homoerotic tastes and more literally consumptive tastes. He details the liberatory importance of Black people's homoerotic and queer strategies as "a means of resisting, accommodating, and transforming the discourse of black consumption," crossing heteronormative boundaries to combat systemic exploitation and sexual violence (2014, 9). In pairing queer eroticism with subversive narratives of consumption, representations of the BBW can potentially be a different example where "overlapping occurrences of consumption" merge to resist, accommodate, and transform objectifying discourse within a broader context of embodied social oppression.

Turning the Tables

Minaj, a Black female artist, is figured by Drake as the BBW in his lyrics. She raps in "Only" about how if her song collaborators were actually her lovers (a rumour she denies in the song's opening), then she would "let 'em eat my ass like a cupcake" (Minaj et al. 2014). She follows this up by asserting her account of her sexual relationships and stating that her "man full, he just ate" (Minaj et al. 2014). This bold use of consumption related language to negotiate feminine erotic agency once again pairs sexual appetite with gastronomical appetite in a way that contradicts established gendered and sexual norms, especially as they pertain to Black women. Importantly, she holds the power, contradicting research depictions of BBWs always being the disempowered passive feedee and never the assertive active feeder in sexual scenarios. Minaj repeatedly positions herself as dominant sexually, financially, and musically—and she uses consumption related language to communicate this. Her confident lyrics like "When I walk in, sit up straight / I don't give a fuck if I was late / Dinner with my man on a G5 / Is my idea of an update" (Minaj et al. 2014) reference eating again to convey her power and status, this time with the BBW as the consumer: refusing the notion of big (and racialized) women eating being undesirable. Her gastronomical lyrics become the foundation of her braggadocio as the sought-after BBW subject of her male guest artists' verses. This consumptive confidence is encapsulated by her closing lines: "I don't fuck with them chickens / Unless they last name is cutlet / Let it soak in / Like seasoning" (Minaj et al. 2014). Here, she again references the pleasure of eating, specifically chicken cutlet, and pauses to allow her rhymes time to marinate for the listener ("soak in") like the seasoning soaks into the chicken she so enjoys. This verse flips various established gendered and sexual scripts by having the BBW figure be desirable as both the sexual provider and the gastronomical consumer.

Minaj (2014) then insults her competition with the taunt of fellatio ("And tell them bitches, blow me / Lance Stephenson"), queerly re-framing herself in the masculine role by comparing herself to a male professional basketball player. Lines like these, and their exaggerated vocal delivery, build on Minaj's career-long deployment of gay-coded camp sensibilities (McMillan 2014; Smith 2013). She has been noted to use sapphic desire, alternative genital embodiments, and queer personas (like her gay male alter ego) repeatedly in order to explore "empowerment, self-objectification, and fantasy" (Smith 2013, 360). Empowerment, (self-)objectification, and fantasy are also common threads in many subversive representations of fat women throughout popular culture, especially among women of colour who are reclaiming the narrative power that they are often denied (Mason 2022; Moon and Sedgwick 2001; Senyonga and Luna 2021; Shaw 2006).

Uncomfortable Obsessions

The BBW, her consumption, and her sexuality are referenced throughout "Only" as distinctly non-normative. Drake raps that "she say I'm obsessed with thick women and I agree" (Minaj et al. 2014), with BBW appreciation shown as abnormal, obsessive. Furthermore, it is not only Drake who sees his attraction to BBWs as obsessive. His female interlocutor does as well ("she say"), introducing a same-gender perspective to the desire narrative and further likening the BBW obsession to queer attraction. Here, the "erotic desirability, sexual subjectivity, and sex appeal occur not in spite of, but because of the queer freakishness of fat" (Sullivan 2013, 203). This relative freakishness may be part of why Drake mentions the possibility to "do this shit

quietly" (Minaj et al. 2014), keeping the obsession comfortably out of the public eye. Fat women are often subject to secrecy and shaming from their partners due to their size, which relates to the imperative of neoliberal governmentality to perform weight-based shame (Greenhalgh 2015). Refusing the expectation to "do this shit quietly" connects to what Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward have theorized as "coming out" as fat, likening queer and fat modes of public identification. They write, "In proudly coming out as fat, one rejects cultural attitudes that fatness is unhealthy, immoral, ugly, or otherwise undesirable" (2011, 14) and note the possibility for this coming out to include those who are attracted to fatness as well (8). When the BBW is represented in mainstream culture, the uncomfortable process of coming out becomes center stage. Saguy and Ward describe how marginalized people often avoid making others uncomfortable with their differences by limiting their public visibility (5) and that claiming visibility as a fat woman especially can feel uncomfortably like being outed (13).

This explains why the BBW is inherently an *uncomfortable* subject, for the ways in which her existence violates basic ingrained ideas about who and what is desirable. For the thin-white-eating-woman in popular culture, a potential viewer "is *imagined* to find [eating a lot] endearing" (Davidauskis 2015, 176). Despite this, in both "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)" and "Only," this window of attractiveness is significantly *widened* in both songs' lyrics. This results in a certain level of useful discomfort, due to the BBW, especially when racialized, being *unimaginable* to a normative audience as a desirable subject. These representations are therefore at times able to expand the limits of erotic imaginaries in creative and often subversive ways. This is why when Drake later describes his BBW lover as "so thick that everybody else in the room is so uncomfortable," (Minaj et al. 2014) he is (possibly inadvertently) getting to the true nature of the BBW. Queerness can be deliberately uncomfortable, as it challenges established oppressive norms. Cohen writes that "Queer politics [...] is understood as an 'in your face' politics," (1997, 439) i.e., uncomfortable. Fat and queer movements have shared histories of radically discomforting opposition to assimilationism, with both having resistant relationships to embodied norms (Saguy and Ward 2011).

Murray points out how in the dominant culture's imaginary "The 'fat' woman [...] represents the worst of the woman—unmanaged, out of control" (2008, 55). Within a neoliberal context, this conjures up what Shaw calls "the association of the large body with capitalistic excess and greed" (2006, 92), especially when further marginalized by gender and race. Subversive representations of the BBW exploit this uncomfortable tension to carnally queer ends. This uncomfortableness disturbs dominant neoliberal images by making the BBW archetype's out-of-control desire (for food and sex) desirable, therefore not only revealing but sexualizing the over-consumption inherent to unbridled capitalism instead of dealing in the sanitized "utopian rhetoric" (Harvey 2005, 203).

Real Bodies, Real Women?

That said, while the BBW by her nature subverts many sexual and gendered norms, representations of the BBW, including in the songs I discuss, still often reinforce common tropes and narratives. An example of this can be found by Mika (2007), where he sings:

> You take your skinny girls
> I feel like I'm gonna die
> 'Cause a real woman

Needs a real man
Here's why;
You take your girl
And multiply her by four
That's a whole lot of woman
Who needs a whole lot more.

The language of "real woman" recalls phrases like "real women have curves" and the marketing of fat bodies as somehow more natural, more "real" than their thin counterparts. This is famously evident in Dove's Real Beauty campaign, which used capitalist marketing to push back against thin beauty standards (Johnston and Taylor 2008): in essence, the "skinny girls" (Mika 2007). Analyzed through Cohen's perspective, this framing is distinctly un-queer, reproducing existing categories instead of destabilizing them (Cohen 1997, 438). Realness in this context works to reinforce ideals of natural femininity as heteronormatively attractive in contrast to queerness, which is frequently figured as unnatural or "deviant and 'other'" (Cohen 1997, 439).

Painting BBWs and their admirers as more "real" therefore in some ways helps "legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and 'natural' within society" (Cohen 1997, 440), subsuming bigger bodies into the existing heteronormative beauty order. Interestingly, Minaj (2014) refuses this appeal to realness in her lyrics, chiding those who are "Worried about if my butt fake" and reminding them to mind their own business. This demonstrates a marked contrast in perspectives between the two songs and also possibly between the varying gendered narrative voices of the artists. Uri McMillan describes the refusal to engage with realness rhetoric as a performative reclamation of feminine power by Minaj, writing, "Minaj not only crashes hip-hop's proverbial boys club, but also refuses its constitutive element—a street-savvy authenticity, or 'realness'—in favor of girly artifice" (2014, 80). In doing so, this line pushes back against respectability politics that confer mainstream validation and legibility to a limited (and limiting) array of aesthetics that are deemed to embody "black 'natural' realness" (Hobson 2016). Owning being fake can therefore operate as a feminist discursive strategy to "denaturalise dominant ways of seeing, doing, and being" (Wykes 2014, 5), using camp playfulness to reclaim perceptions of femininity as inherently superficial (Taylor and Hoskin 2023).

Although Mika can seem to center a normative male-female desire narrative in the song, there is still queer potential in reading between the lyrical lines, like when he declares that the BBW "needs a real man" (Mika 2007). Reading this reparatively, the fact that there is a need to claim the BBW "needs a real man" (seeming to imply her current partner is either non-real and/or non-man), coupled with her needing to be told why she needs one ("Here's why"), seems to tacitly suggest the BBW's queerness. The lyrical attempts to enclose her within a heteronormative narrative then serve only to further reinforce her position outside of it.

Curves in All the Right Spaces

The BBW's positionality is tied to her spatiality: the spaces she is associated with and the spaces she creates. Drake raps about how the BBW's "ass on Houston, Texas" (Minaj et al. 2014), where everything is notoriously bigger. Discussion of the BBW as a queer figure then becomes a discussion of the BBW as a queer space. Her body becomes the geographical site where queerness occurs, consuming and ballooning to the point of being likened more to an area than to other people. The BBW is not only a queer space, but her presence also fosters queer spaces.

One of these is described in "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)," in the lines:

> Get yourself to the Butterfly Lounge
> Find yourself a big lady
> Big boy, come on round
> And they'll be calling you "baby"
> No need to fantasize
> Since I was in my braces
> Of a watering hole where the girls are round
> And curves in all the right places (Mika 2007)

The Butterfly Lounge is a real venue, featured in the documentary that inspired Mika to write this song (Mika 2023). It has billed itself as "The Original Size Acceptance BBW/ Big Girl Nightclub in Orange County" (The Butterfly Lounge 2021), operating for several years. Crucially, it is a space created by and for BBWs to experience pleasure without fear of the anti-fatness that can pervade typical nightlife venues. The BBW nightclub is in many ways an analogous space to queer bars and clubs. Both are spaces where marginal groups can find community, and both allow queer(-adjacent) desires to become reality. These venues produce new queer spatializations and sites of alternative attraction. These spaces work against hegemonic power structures by re-orienting desire towards that which is "failed" and uncomfortable: poor neoliberal biocitizenship (Greenhalgh 2015; White 2016). More than being a queered space, the BBW instead queers space.

Courtney J. Patterson-Faye describes how in resisting normative sexual scripts, fat women "create their own spaces where their respective aesthetics are celebrated, revered, and upheld against mainstream beauty ideals" (2016, 927). Subversive representations of the BBW therefore open the doors to imagining spatial liberation. This is significant considering the inaccessibility and exclusion many fat women face daily, whether physical (like inadequate seating) or psychic (like harassment). Musically, Mason has described how a joyful performance by Lizzo in a cramped venue "illustrates the pleasurable potential of transgressing hegemonic norms of embodiment and space" (2022, 269). This reflects "the ability of fat black women to create a space for their varied identities" (Patterson-Faye 2016, 934). Shaw notes fat Black women can play beyond "those borders of normativeness [...] into the realm of excess—blackness and hypersexuality" (2006, 104). The dimension of race is significant and worthy of further inquiry when considering the BBW, since spatial violence knits together multiple oppressions.

The BBW archetype not only openly fails at neoliberalism, but also invites others into her failure, thus creating queer desire. Through this she not only creates discomfort, but her discomfort is creative, shaping new possibilities for fat embodiment as not only acceptable but sexy. She queers consumptive, sexual, and spatial realms. This is not forgetting the BBW's position as a fetishized archetype mostly found in pornography, nor suggesting that this archetype is somehow universally liberatory for fat women. Rather it is to say that reparatively reading popular culture representations of the BBW can nuance neoliberal excess and point toward unexpected anti-capitalist pleasures.

By engaging in a fat reading that pays close attention to lyrical content, there is the potential to unlock new narratives for fatness and femininity that go beyond the limitations of visually-centered analyses. Even in media that most likely does not aim to offer any kind of emancipatory fat representation, a queerly personal perspective can still find unexpected rhetorical engagements with our dominant political, sociocultural, and economic systems that

are worthy of interrogation. People who are marginalized from mainstream media representations often have to carve out our own spaces for resistance and repair. In doing so, we craft ways to re-assemble, re-read, and re-imagine what our bodies can mean and what our bodies can do.

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