

FAT AND FABULOUS: THE POWER OF CONTEMPORARY
ROMANCE AS A SITE OF ANTI-OPPRESSION WORK

by

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Fat and Fabulous: The Power of Contemporary Romance as a Site of Anti-Oppression Work

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Contemporary Romance, while building on a foundation of traditional Romantic idealism, is often referring to novels that have been historically scoffed at by literary scholars. Because of the wide, sustained reach of these books (the genre currently occupies about 18% of all literary sales), it's not only worth studying them as literary works but also in terms of what they're doing in our current cultural landscape.

As an avid reader of Romance myself, I've found myself fascinated by which features are emphasized in these texts and the way women's bodies are written, particularly the bodies of fat women. My research for this project looks at two novels published in the last twenty years, each of which features a plus-sized heroine and chart the evolution of language and characterization of women's bodies as the genre has progressed. This project will serve to demonstrate the feasibility and value of doing academic research on Contemporary Romance and to situate close readings of these novels within the literary theories of Intersectional Feminism, Fat Studies, Cultural Studies, and Reader Response. My application of these theoretical frameworks to the understudied genre of Romance will help to fill in the gaps of existing research, build connections between disciplines, and propose a new facet of productive inquiry with radical cultural implications.

This project will look at the fantasies offered for fat women in Contemporary Romance novels (2004-2021). From the self-loathing and body dysmorphia of Jennifer Cruise's heroine in *Bet Me* to the inherent understanding of fat-as-sexy in Talia Hibbert's *Take a Hint Dani Brown*, my work will include an interrogation of how women's bodies are described; how the voice and perspective of these descriptions impact the one the reader receives; what role women's physical appearance plays in the way the central romance develops; the stakes of including heroines with 'untraditional' body types; and why fat representation is radical and revolutionary in and outside of the genre of Contemporary Romance.

This project works to illustrate the value of Contemporary Romance as a genre where cultural anti-oppressive work holds incredible weight (pun not intended) and potential because of its saturation in the market and guaranteed happily ever afters. To do so, I've chosen to look at two novels- *Bet Me* by Jennifer Crusie and *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* by Talia Hibbert. Throughout the last 20 years, Romance has seen the gradual introduction of fat women as romantic leads; while the language and tone used to characterize these women has already undergone dramatic shifts and have increasingly productive implications for contributing to both scholarly and popular understandings of fatness, the genre has powerful potential for changing how readers think about fat bodies in radical ways.

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To my sisters (you've already heard all my adjectives): thanks for letting me bombard you with Romance recommendations and theoretical questions about Romance hero's abs.

To my roommates: your thank you is about the same as the one for my sisters. But you also had to listen to me whine about writing this far more often. So, you get an extra line all to yourselves. Lucky you ☺

To my mom and dad, the best people in the world, etc., etc.: thank you for letting me gallivant about and think about Romance for three years. It means the world to me. And hopefully (maybe, someday), the work done here will start a conversation that will grow and build and evolve for years to come.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Once Upon a Time...	6
Definition of Romance	6
New Skool vs Old Skool	9
Importance of the HEA	12
Positionality	15
Intro to Fat Activism	16
Thesis of Fat Studies	16
Descriptive vs Prescriptive Diction	17
Historical Nod	18
Thesis (finally!)	19
Meet My Methods	20
Literature of Love Stories: Meet the Book Babes	22
Let's Get Physical	24
Food Without Fear	33
DTF (Desire, the Facts)	41
It's True Love	45
It's Not Just Me- the importance of Romance's legacy for liberation	48
What's next?	51
Bibliography	53

Introduction: Once Upon a Time...

Anecdote, Setting the Stage

Imagine my surprise, sitting in the back row of my first college English class (titled, might I add, “Genre: Romance”), hearing the professor state in no uncertain terms, “this is *not* a class about those trashy Harlequin novels.”

What on earth, my scrambling brain cried, could a Romance class possibly cover if not the dramatic pitfalls of falling in love?

I’ll tell you now, for those in the back of the class, freshly bamboozled by the world of academia and its apparent disassociation from the definitions of words outside its own hallowed halls, that Romance and Romanticism diverged in a wood long ago and have yet to come back together.

Romance vs Romanticism

Romanticism is the literary period of Percy Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron. The poets and the melancholy novelists from the 18th century wax lyric on the sublime and adventure and gothic tragedy. The canon of Romanticism, beloved by academic scholars (and valuable as it is as an aesthetic calling), includes very, very few women (as either writers or richly developed characters) and hosts a limited understanding of love as we consume it today in popular media.

Definition of Romance

Romance, as a genre, has taken up residence in the cultural and academic consciousness as an anti-intellectual indulgence in emotional porn for spinsters and young girls with “unrealistic” dreams of their own love affairs (Wendell, Tan 6). Commonly referred to as fluffy,

cheesy, formulaic “trash,” the cultural assumptions about Romance are tired and, frankly, untrue. It’s time to develop our own working definition.

Let’s start by challenging these regressive stereotypes: we’ll knock them out of the park one by one.

“It’s formulaic!”, the Hemingway purist cries. “What isn’t?” any person with common sense and a basic understanding of literature replies. While there is debate in the Narrative Theory community, one thesis circulates like wildfire as dinner party fodder: there are only seven plot lines. Developed by critic Christopher Booker, this theory asserts that every story is some variation of these seven conflicts: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, rebirth, comedy, tragedy (Kakutani “The Plot Thins, or Are No Stories New?”). I might argue that these categories are conveniently vague but there is an element of truth in this driving sentiment. With one of the largest public forums dedicated to the reading and discussing of Romance with their blog “The Smart Bitches”, Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan address the critique of formula by pointing to the foundational elements of any art form: “Each ballet is a written sequence of the same steps, but each performance is remarkably different depending on the dancer in the role, the costumes, the dressing of the stage, and the musicians playing the music” (Wendell, Tan 121). From ballet to film and all the way to our topic at hand- our favorite, Contemporary Romance- the familiarity with a specific structure paves the way for a more creative journey between steps and their execution.

With any study, there is a requisite understanding of foundational traditions, elements, and rules that, once understood, can then be broken. Let’s review the highlights of the typical Romance. Yes, the book often starts with a meet cute. Yes, there’s often a third act breakup. Yes, there’s always a happily ever after. As the trusty Smart Bitches so eloquently state: “There’s a

structure, a foundation of common elements to each novel, but the variation in how those elements are woven together into a delicious narrative is the art, not the product, of each author” (Wendell, Tan 122). Formula is often the deciding factor in genre—you can have any tone, any cast of characters, but the plot structure they funnel through is going to determine their characterization of Mystery vs Thriller vs Romance. Because of its intrinsic nature to every literary text, formula is essential rather than a mark against Romance.

“It’s unrealistic!” *The Lord of the Rings* lover insists. And to this, Historical Romance author Maya Rodale responds, “people tend to be quite vague about what, exactly, is unrealistic about a Romance novel- especially in comparison to a comic book or science-fiction work. But they “just know” that romance novels are fluffy fantasy books that delude women” (Rodale 82). The most vocal arbiters of this opinion tend to be men (or, women that haven’t addressed their own internalized misogyny yet). Funny then, because that would mean that they find their literary counterparts to be setting a ridiculously high bar. A bar that consists of basic respect, emotional growth, and romantic gestures. Honestly, this says more about our current cultural society (the patriarchy is shining through) than it does about the people who read or write Romance novels.

“But the writing is so bad!” says the James Patterson fanatic. One, that’s bold coming from you. And two, there is bad writing in every genre. Just like there are bad editors and bad agents and bad marketing. But let’s unpack this criticism for its frequency of application to the Romance genre. The Romance corner of the publishing industry is populated with an overwhelming majority of women. To denounce an entire genre for bad writing, one that is created, curated, and shared by women, reeks of misogyny. While, of course, there are

underdeveloped duds, there are also works of genius that are ignored by academia and critics alike because of the disbelief that this genre could produce one of those to begin with.

New Skool vs Old Skool

This dismissive attitude does have historical precedence. The genre of Romance has not always been what it has developed into today. Many of the current negative opinions on Romance are lingering from the earliest examples of the genre produced in the 1970s. Primarily Historical Romances, these are considered “Old Skool” Romances. Old Skool is a term described by Wendell and Tan in the context of the outdated Romance hero.

“These heroes aren’t just determined, assertive, and confident- they’re hard, arrogant, and harsh, and the heroine is often afraid of him. He’s a punisher as well as lover and protector, but he hurts her only because he loves her so much.” (13)

These novels followed the formula and centered the female protagonist, but their driving ideology was that submission from the woman merits a “happy” ending and the dominant hero was the only one that could force that happy ending upon her. The Smart Bitches go on to observe that “relationships were much more antagonistic in most of the Romance novels Back in the Day- they were, in many ways, Fight ‘em and Fuck ‘em Romances” (17). From the late 1970s to the early 90s, there was an intense power differential between the main characters in physical size, experience, and often wealth. Women were allowed to seek and enjoy sexual pleasure but only on the terms of the man and the societal rules she existed alongside (Wendell, Tan).

New Skool Romance is where the men had to start playing emotional catch-up. With increases in women’s rights, the increase in educated women, and the growing number of women that refused to adhere to the nuclear family model, fantasies for women started to change. Romance reflected those changes: “... the modern hero has to earn his happy ending as

well, and he has to earn it by growing with the heroine, and adapting and sharing her worldview” (Wendell, Tan,81). The new Romance novel is focused on dismantling toxic masculinity, illustrating the power of communication, and encompassing the myriad of experiences, backgrounds, and circumstances that women can bring to their own love stories.

Understanding what Romance is *not* leads us neatly into a definition of what the genre actually *is*. If its formulaic nature is a boon, the most unrealistic thing about them is high standards (heaven forbid)... what’s left? When I first started reading Romance, I fit them in the “love story” box in my brain. And yes, these stories necessitate and celebrate the many facets of that elusive, powerful, poetic force. But, more than that, Romance is a character driven genre. It’s a genre of emotional growth— growth that is nurtured and supported by another person. It’s a genre that explores trust, communication, boundaries, dreaming, and joy—necessary components in the search for love (both with another person and within an individual). It’s a genre that unapologetically honors physical intimacy, sex, pleasure, and desire as a means of building healthy romantic relationships.

In *Dangerous Books for Girls*, Rodale frames the importance of the genre in saying,

“these books promote a woman’s right to make choices about her own life (and body). They take longstanding notions of masculinity and turn them around. They promote a different image of what it means to be a happy, desirable woman... these books celebrate women who get out of the house and do all the things that, traditionally, young ladies and good girls don’t do.” (Rodale 12)

Rather than suggesting a woman needs a man or that the sexes are at war, “Romance novels demonstrate again and again that true happiness happens when two people find and prioritize love” (Rodale 12). This argument points, quite eloquently, to some of the most powerful aspects of the genre; centering a woman’s point of view (written by a woman), challenging traditional definitions of masculinity, and the power of centering love in relationships. However, I do want to emphasize that Contemporary Romance has moved beyond the strict gender binary in which it

began. Queer Romance is developing a market share of its own with big name authors like Casey McQuinston and Alexis Hall. Despite this ongoing shift, much of the language used to discuss Romance continues to ground itself in generalizations about men versus women—even as the genre works to rewrite those definitions.

For example, Rodale goes on to discuss the radical nature of centering a woman at all—

“By creating stories with an intense focus on a heroine- her choices, her pleasure, her independence, *and her rewards*- Romance novels promoted radical ideas of what a woman could do with her life and inspired women to try to make that dream a reality. Far more than ‘silly novels by ‘silly novelists,’ these books are perhaps some of the most subversive literatures ever written, distributed, and consumed.” (Rodale 19)

Like many anti-oppressive movements, baby steps are necessary (and cause for celebration) but we would be remiss to call this shift the conclusion of the feminist movement.

This project seeks to build on this foundation of centering women as potential heroines of their own lives and imagining radical possibilities of loving, living, and dreaming for the readers that follow their literary journeys. The next step, for me at least, is to look at *what kind* of women we’ve allowed to take up this literary mantle. What does she look like? What interests is she allowed to have? How does she approach the idea of love? Historically, the women frequenting the pages of both the “Fight ‘em and Fuck ‘em” Romances and New Skool takes have been wealthy, white, cisgendered, heterosexual, and *thin*. If, as Rodale suggests by quoting cultural critic Belinda Jack, “reading- and the novel in particular- was very much associated with the promotion of ideas which might lead to fundamental changes in the status quo, including the position of women...” (Rodale 17), then stories of individual transformation driven by love have the potential to affect both social change and illustrate how shifts in the social and cultural norm might lead to our own happily ever after. There could be no better stage for imagining an anti-oppressive world than on this stage.

Importance of the HEA

As we discussed earlier, reading a Romance novel, be it Contemporary, Historical, or Paranormal, is often dismissed on the principle of predictability. But the best thing about Romance is that every story must have a happily ever after- fondly referred to by the Romance community as the HEA.

The fact that every. *single*. novel. in this genre guarantees a happy ending is novel (pun intended) in and of itself. *And* this incredible feature is the determining factor in my assertion that the Romance novel is the quintessential genre for productive, radical anti-oppressive work on a literary, cultural, and academic scale. Knowing that there is a HEA waiting at the end of every story makes the issues in question approachable, accessible, and (ultimately) hopeful. Rodale put this in terms of the gender binary again, but the sentiment is applicable to conversations about Queer Romance, Disabled Romance, Interracial Romance, Romances about socio-economic disparities, etc., etc.; “Women create an idealized, hopeful vision for the future to inspire other women. Fiction and fantasy are the crucial first steps to changing the world” (Rodale 91).

Close Reading: Fantasy

At this point, we’ve done a lot of theoretical work to demonstrate that Romance has the potential, and often does, engage productively in anti-oppressive work. But we have yet to dive into examples from the genre itself. For those of you nervous, ashamed, or even excited but busy beyond belief- here’s a micro-dose of Romance for your consideration. This quote comes from the 2004 novel *Bet Me* by Jennifer Crusie, an author known for her Contemporary Romance and her tendency to sprinkle in some high stakes mysteries to her steamy love stories.

‘Look at the beautiful curve of you, how full you are... Look how *beautiful* you are... There’s not a man alive who could see you like this and not want to touch you... You’re a fantasy, Min. You’re my fantasy’. (Crusie 310)

First, just take a moment to let that sink in and revel in those giddy butterflies that might have taken up residence in your stomach.

swoon

... and now we can get to the unpacking of this quote (there’s a lot for us to think about).

Forget for a moment about the context of this quote- we’ll be spending more time with these characters throughout the rest of this project- and let’s think about the work it’s doing (beyond and in conjunction with the obvious seduction). To begin, let’s look at the word “fantasy” and its myriad of connotations in this passage.

There are a few angles to approach a fantasy. This quote being in reference to a woman, spoken by a man (the romantic hero), demands we think about what it means for a woman to be a fantasy. In the context of romantic relationships, there are a lot of common phrases that play on elements of fantasy: dream woman, sexual fantasies, lists of qualities to make up the “ideal man”. And most of these refer to or include physical elements of a partner. Does your “dream woman” have big eyes? Big breasts? A tiny waist? In your fantasy, does she dress up as Princess Leia in *The Return of the Jedi*? Is she a schoolgirl in a tiny skirt? Why are these the fantasies that saturate the cultural consciousness? From the cult classic television show *Friends* to Britney Spears’ early 2000s music videos, from fashion magazines like *Vogue*, to stereotypical porn- society’s ‘dream’ woman looks and acts in a very specific way... some might even go so far as to say *unrealistically*.

To fulfill the cultural expectation of what it looks like to be desirable (romantically and sexually), a woman must shrink herself literally and figuratively. She must be confident and demure. She must be tiny but have enough to hold under the sheets. She must eat

and drink like “one of the boys” and still never gain weight. She must be amiable but not an airhead.

This passage relies on the idea of a fantasy to both compliment and reassure the subject of her own “desirable-ness” saying “You’re a fantasy, Min. You’re my fantasy”. To be a fantasy means to be something unreal- to be so desired that the idea or thing itself resides in the ineffable space of the brain. And that’s certainly true for the narrow-minded fantasy of the patriarchal fantasy woman. But this passage is important for this thesis because it grounds this fantasy element in a subversive description of what this particular woman looks like.

Min is characterized by the “beautiful curve” of her fullness. Min is a fat woman. There are a *lot* of negative stereotypes about fat women (which we will think about throughout this project), but most important for this passage is that her fatness, her fullness, is being directly correlated with her status as a fantasy for the man speaking. Her curve is described with the adjective “beautiful”. The statement at the end- “there’s not a man alive that could see you like this and not want to touch you”- is rooted in a positive, passionate connection between looking at Min’s fatness and desire for physical connection.

In very early Contemporary Romance novels with fat women as the heroines, the HEA came as a seemingly direct result of the main character losing weight. Crusie’s novel builds a fantasy for fat women to live, fall in love, and have their happily ever after *without* having to change anything about their appearance. By making Min’s fatness a fantasy for Cal, the hero of the story, the novel offers a love story where his equation of fatness as desirable is both possible and true.

This is not to say that this scenario is a fantasy in the sense that it’s unrealistic. It’s a fantasy in that this experience is not (yet) universal for fat women who have to work to

undo society's fatphobia, internal fatphobia, etc. before they can consider, believe, or rest in a declaration like Cal's. The time and cinematic space dedicated to treating Min's disappointment in her own body with respect, tender care, and love is radical. *Bet Me*, as illustrated in this quote, redefines desire, fatness, and physicality to build an optimistic, powerful vision of how fat women can and do exist in romantic relationships.

Positionality

Fatness. Let's talk about it.

When I've told people that I'm doing my thesis on the evolution and representation of fat women as heroines in Contemporary Romance, I'm met with two questions. One being, "um... should you use the word fat? Isn't that offensive?" and the second being, "But, you're not fat."

The answer to the first question is, no, the word fat is not offensive unless you believe it to be inherently negative, bad, or derogatory. Fat is simply a description, not an insult.

The answer to the second question is more complicated. No, I am not a fat person. At most, I might be considered mid-sized. But I have spent every year of my life on this earth in the body of a female-presenting person- bombarded by oppressive ideas of what it means to be beautiful, worthy of love, desirable, and happy. Dismantling these ideas, rooted in the pervasive ideology of fatphobia, is essential for all people. I am a firm believer that the dismantling of fatphobia cannot and *should* not fall only onto the shoulders of fat people. The only way to change the system is for privileged groups to engage in the intellectual labor of changing their own worldviews and using their position to advocate for those that are engaged in daily fights for their rights, dignity, and joy. By participating in this project, I've learned that fat activism is not just about fatness but about bodily autonomy, body neutrality, and principles of accessibility.

This is not to say that my voice is any kind of replacement for centering the work of fat women and listening to their experiences, dreams, and calls for change. But because of my position within academia and the time, space, and resources I have to unlearn my own fatphobia, I'm able to share my research with others in the hope this project can successfully engage in the work of supporting fat activism.

Intro to Fat Activism

Thesis of Fat Studies

Before you have a chance to nod to yourself and find comfort in the fact you already know about body positivity, *stop right there*. Today is the day you will learn about fat activism- the cooler, more woke, politically active, counterpart to body positivity. Body positivity is motivated by assimilation- the desire to be accepted into society, to be treated the same as thin women. Fat activism is about *liberation*- about breaking down the systems that perpetrate fatphobia, changing the cultural attitude about fatness. Fat activist Virgie Tovar has participated in both movements and notes her reaction to the drastically different goals, describing “I was shocked to find that the scope of vision shifted drastically from a clearly articulated desire for human rights to an implied desire to primarily access privilege” (Tovar 97).

For this project, my analysis will be rooted in fat activism as practiced by activists like Tovar or Sonya Renee Taylor, where the theoretical foundation is building up in academia under the title “Fat Studies”. Still a rather small discipline, the field is populated by brilliant critical minds.

One such scholar, Marilyn Wann, introduces the driving thesis of fat studies in the foreword of *The Fat Studies Reader*;

“[it’s] a radical field, in the sense that it goes to the root of weight-related belief systems... Unlike traditional approaches to weight, a fat studies approach offers no opposition to the simple fact of human weight diversity, but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality.” (ix-x)

Fat studies is not trying to offer solutions to fatness. It’s not looking at bodies as something to be changed for one reason or another. The field doesn’t approach fatness as a disability, a result of laziness, or a manifestation of some moral default; “The field of fat studies requires skepticism about weight-related beliefs that are popular, powerful, and prejudicial” (x). (Wann).

In her memoir, fat activist Virgie Tovar speaks to this systemic failure by saying “My life wouldn’t be easier if I were thin. My life would be easier if this culture wasn’t obsessed with oppressing me because I’m fat. The solution to a problem like bigotry is not to do everything in our power to accommodate the bigotry. It is to get rid of the bigotry” (Tovar 103). Like Tovar points out- the problem is not fatness. The problem is how we view fatness, villainize it, and dehumanize it. *The Fat Studies Reader* argues that “the only thing that anyone can diagnose, with any certainty, by looking at a fat person, is their own level of stereotype and prejudice toward fat people” (Wann xiv). The evolution of the fat heroine in Contemporary Romance novels is an illustration of their cultural and political power as a site to change ideas about fatness and to embody a subversive attitude towards fat stereotypes.

Descriptive vs Prescriptive Diction

Words have power. As an English major, this is a given to me, but I realize that it bears repeating in a world rife with “fake news”, garbled rhetoric, and oppressive jargon baked into the systems that govern our lives.

People get uncomfortable when I use the word “fat” to describe the literary heroines in my project. But if I’ve done the research (which I have) and am respecting the most recent work of fat studies scholars and activists, then my use of the word fat is more respectful

than tiptoeing around its reality. It's naming an experience rather than condemning a human. As Wann explains; "In fat studies, there is respect for the political project of reclaiming the word *fat*, both as the preferred neutral adjective (i.e. short/tall, young/old, fat/thin) and also as a preferred term of political identity" (Wann xii). So, the word "fat" is not the problem, it's the way people use it.

Fat studies draws a clear line between descriptive and prescriptive language.

"[Prescriptive endeavors] assume that human weight is mutable and negotiable, assumptions that are informed by current social bias and stigma against fatness and fat people. On this point, fat studies is- in strong contrast- descriptive" (ix). An example of prescriptive vocabulary, beyond the implications of a prescriptively intended "fat", is the word "obese". Obesity is too often used as shorthand for making uninformed judgements on a person's health on the basis of their appearance. And beyond that, "calling fat people "obese" medicalizes human diversity. Medicalizing diversity inspires a misplaced search for a "cure" for naturally occurring difference" (xiii). Obesity is also often "diagnosed" as a result of someone's BMI (body-mass index). The BMI is not only scientifically unsound and outdated but constantly used as an excuse to refuse fat people medical help or accommodations that would otherwise be available to them. (Wann).

Historical Nod

Of course, standards of beauty and trend cycles are fickle things. Fatness used to be a sign of wealth, prosperity, and desirability. Especially because fatness was considered to be a sign of fertility (child-bearing hips, anyone?). The turn towards our current disdainful cultural attitude shifted in the 1920s. Fat studies scholar, Laura Fraser, argues that

“... a cultural obsession with weight became firmly established in the United States when several disparate factors that favored a desire for thinness- economic status symbols, morality, medicine, modernity, changing women’s roles, and consumerism- all collided at once.” (Fraser 12)

From the emaciated models of the ‘90s, to diet culture of the early 2000s, to “almond moms” and the horrors of shopping for jeans at chain stores... the glorification of thinness has been pervasive even as fat activists, celebrities, influencers, and scholars work to shift the tides.

Thesis (finally!)

This project works to illustrate the value of Contemporary Romance as a genre where cultural anti-oppressive work holds incredible weight (pun not intended) and potential because of its saturation in the market and guaranteed happily ever afters. To do so, I’ve chosen to look at two novels- *Bet Me* by Jennifer Crusie and *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* by Talia Hibbert.

Throughout the last 20 years, Romance has seen the gradual introduction of fat women as romantic leads; while the language and tone used to characterize these women has already undergone dramatic shifts and have increasingly productive implications for contributing to both scholarly and popular understandings of fatness, the genre itself has powerful potential for changing how readers think about fat bodies in radical ways.

Meet My Methods

The research questions motivating this project include: how are women's bodies described?; who's describing them and how does changing point of view affect the description?; what role do physical bodies play in the development of the central romance?; and, what are the stakes of including fat women in the Contemporary Romance genre? These questions get at the heart of how Contemporary Romance lends a unique, accessible space for participating in anti-oppression work.

In this project I'll be operating on three different levels of analysis. I will be close reading two novels, *Bet Me* and *Take a Hint, Dani Brown*, paying particular attention to the language, perspective, tone, and characterization used to describe women's bodies and their appearances' effect on the romantic plot. These texts span the years of 2004-2020 with the earliest publication being *Bet Me* by Jennifer Crusie, followed by *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* by Talia Hibbert published in 2020. The gap of time between these Romances is important because the texts, in conjunction, develop a picture of how language about fat people has evolved in the genre. Along with my secondary and tertiary sources, the close reading of these two novels will work to chart the different fantasies of how fat women are allowed to take up space in current Romance literature and the effect of including these women with positive representation in the genre. These fantasies will be charted in terms of the language used to characterize the heroines, the impact of their physicality on the plot, and characterization of the heroine as done by the love interest.

The close readings of these three levels of text are done in the context of four theoretical frameworks. Intersectional Feminism, because, when done authentically, works from the most marginalized groups in- working towards anti-oppression, liberation, and joy for all.

The main characters in my book are both cisgendered, fat women. And while Min, a white woman, enjoys a comfortable socioeconomic position as a statistician at her father's company, Dani fields a few more intersections as a Black, bisexual, college professor. Keeping these factors in mind while drawing conclusions about how these women occupy space in their own novels.

Fat Studies, I would hope, at this point, is obviously quintessential to my project. Without understanding the work being done to understand academic, cultural, and popular understandings of fatness, there's no beneficial way for me to contribute to this conversation. This theoretical perspective has informed my own diction, research questions, and arguments driving this project.

Cultural Studies is paramount for this project because there are so few critical analyses on Contemporary Romance, let alone fat women in Contemporary Romance. Therefore, a lot of my secondary and tertiary readings pull from memoirs, pop scholars, blogs, and other forms of popular media. And, because I'm interested in how Contemporary Romance affects social attitudes at a culturally conscious level, cultural studies, and its application to the reception of fat women in Romance, is essential.

Bear with me as I finish up this dry list of theoretical sources- I'm not sure how to spice this up. But the final theoretical lens I'm using, Reader Response, is a literary specific one. This is a lens that thinks about how readers make meaning by engaging with a text. Reader Response is vital for thinking about how the fantasy elements of these novels, used illustrate the possibilities for fat women both on the page and in the minds of Romance readers, are received by the reader.

Literature of Love Stories: Meet the Book Babes

All this being said, let me give you the 411 on the texts I'm talking about. Librarian and write Lara Frater contributed to *The Fat Studies Reader*, with their article "Fat Heroines in Chick-Lit" arguing that "...Bigger Girl Lit ultimately reinforces fat acceptance in the mainstream media by demonstrating how such an outlook brings joy into the lives of the protagonists" (Frater, 236). Both of the heroines of my primary novels exemplify this process through the construction of their Romances, their guaranteed HEA's, and the way they negotiate their space (mentally, emotionally, and physically).

Here's a SparkNotes version of *Bet Me* to orient you for the close readings coming your way. Minerva, Min for short, is an extremely practical, logical thirty-year-old woman working as a statistician for her father's company. Recently dumped and jaded about "true love", Min is well practiced in the art of self-denial at the risk of missing out on things. It's made abundantly clear that Min is not thin, though it's never specified what size she actually is (perhaps its an unnamed manifestation of body dysmorphia). Cal, our hero, is your classic Romance hero. Known for being a bit of a player, handsome, self-made man. Under his carefree attitude is a heart of gold, a learning disability, and intense daddy issues. He also gets roped into a bet with one of his clients, Min's ex-boyfriend, that he won't be able to get Min to go on a date with him. These are the circumstances of their meeting. (Long story, short).

Take a Hint, Dani Brown is a classic fake dating trope. Zaf and Dani are friends- him a security guard for her building on campus, her a professor and researcher. Dani is desperate for a new fuck buddy and Zaf is dreaming of falling in love. When Zaf rescues Dani from the building after an evacuation drill gone wrong, a video of their interaction goes viral. The publicity is exactly what Zaf needs to find sponsors for the Rugby business he's attempting to start, so Dani

agrees to keep up the ruse of their relationship if he can agree to some casual intimacy. Zaf is surly with a Romantic heart and a hard on (literally) for Dani. Dani is emotionally unavailable and magnetic- ambitious and cautious with her heart. The very definition of fat and fabulous, especially when she opens herself up to the emotional growth that Zaf offers.

Susan Stinson, a Romance novelist in her own right, also contributed to *The Fat Studies Reader* with her article “Fat Girls Need Fiction” with this assertion:

“When I say that fat girls need fiction, I mean that we need to read and encourage the writing of a wide range of fiction about subjects both close to our various hearts and past the edges of our far-reaching imaginations. Beyond the desire to see our own lives and experiences reflected in fiction, we need those habits of mind and heart that deepen empathy with others and broaden our sense of both the just and the possible.” (Stinson, 233)

The presence of Dani and Min as the heroines in their very own love stories widens the breadth of narratives available to us about fat women in optimistic, beautiful, healthy ways. Yes, Contemporary Romance emulates and celebrates our fantasies of love and representation, but it is also a speculative genre. The space these women are allowed to take up on the page and in the cultural conscious through the wide dispersal of Contemporary Romance allow readers to envision a future where dismantling fatphobia is possible and practiced.

It should be noted that both of these novel feature dual point of views (POVs). Most Contemporary Romances written in the last ten years or so follow this pattern—where you hear from both romantic leads throughout the course of the book. This makes sense given the definition of Romance we developed earlier. If Contemporary Romance is about growth in relationship with another person, it’s more satisfying to be privy to both sides of the equation.

Let's Get Physical

The heroine of Crusie's 2004 novel is introduced to the reader through the spiraling, self-deprecating loop of her own recently-dumped thoughts. In a tirade to which only the reader is privy to, Min rants that a "... lack of sex was no excuse for dumping her three weeks before she had to wear a maid-of-honor dress that made her look like a fat, demented shepherdess" (Crusie 2).

From this quote, *on page two*, Min has established a strong, negative correlation between how she looks or is perceived and the way other people treat her. Min sees her body—not just how it looks but what she chooses to do with it (to have sex or not to have sex, that is the question) as the deciding factor in the choices other people make about her. Because she had the "audacity" to "punish" her ex with a "lack of sex," he dumped her. And Min demonstrates her practicality and her knowledge of social injustice by allowing that the withholding of her body *is* "no excuse for dumping her". She *knows* that the world shouldn't be governed by the idea that fat women owe people their bodies as an apology for existing like fat activist Sonya Renee Taylor argues in her book *The Body is Not an Apology*. But knowing this doesn't discount the fact that it happened to Min. No, the world should not work like this. Yes, it still does and here's the proof.

Now, on top of this fundamentally disappointing worldview being compounded by her recent experience, Min is imagining herself as a "fat, demented shepherdess." In this short phrase alone, we have "fat" and "demented" connected by a comma. They are associated grammatically as belonging together in Min's mind—*particularly* when relating to her idea of herself. This word association game, in the wake of her outrage at the circumstance of her break-up illustrates the war that Min is waging in her own mind. The war of knowing that fatness is not

a crime, it doesn't strip her of bodily autonomy *and also* understanding that fatness is often treated that way regardless and hating it.

Maybe her description is so crude and harsh because it's in the context of talking about a maid-of-honor dress. Marriage, while the institution has shifted over history to include and compound upon ideas of love, is still very much rooted in patriarchal, western misogyny. Weddings come with wild, strict, often unexamined traditions. The bride is supposed to lose weight for her big day to "look her best". The bride wears white to signal her virginal purity (even if she's not a virgin) (are we still putting stock in the concept of virginity??). Your father gives you away. And on, and on. The institution of marriage magnifies the values of society ten fold, and in a fatphobic society like the one we live in, there's no room for a "fat, demented shepherdess" to be standing at the altar as a bride or a bridesmaid.

There's one tricky word in the middle of this quote: "like". This word deserves its own consideration because it confuses the reader's belief in the image that Min paints us. This simile refuses the notion that Min actually *is* a "fat, demented shepherdess" and begs the question: to what extent does the reality of Min's body match her internal idea of herself? Throughout the course of the book, readers are denied a concrete description of Min's body. And the descriptions we are offered are often contradictory, inconsistent, or misleading. Therefore, while her self-image takes up a lot of energy in the book, the work that she's doing isn't directly correlated to a specific size. Body dysmorphia (though it's not named as such in the book) allows the reader to imagine Min any way they want or relate to *and also* engages in the work of dismantling fatphobia for whatever size you may imagine her to be.

Cal, the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome, never bothers to describe himself to the reader. Everyone else waxes enough poetic about his cheekbones for him to move through

life without giving them a second thought. Because of this, we have to rely on descriptions from other characters rather than his own ruminations to pull together a picture of him.

Min describes him as having “dark eyes, strong cheekbones, classic chin, broad shoulders, chiseled everything, and all of it at ease as he sat and stared out over the bar...” (Crusie 7). Unlike Min’s description of herself, Cal is in possession of features that might be found under the *Urban Dictionary* definition of Classically Handsome. In fact, the actual definition they offer is not far off: “The type of guy who makes Calvin Klein models and Pretty Boys sob into a corner” (*Urban Dictionary*). Every feature is paired with an adjective of power; his eyes are “dark”, his cheekbones are “strong”, his shoulders are “broad”. And, of *course*, he has a “chiseled everything” because every man you happen upon in the bar is. Of course.

Have you ever heard of Fabio? The chiseled, blonde dream that graced so many Historical Romance covers? His physique of rippling pectorals, layered abs, and strong jaws has carried over from Old Skool Romance to be dressed up in business suits. And, as Min acknowledges in pointing out the “ease” with which he holds himself, all that beauty lends itself to power in our society- power carried literally in the strong lines of his body and in the figurative power of pretty privilege. There is an inherent perceived power differential between Cal’s classic, Herculean, male beauty, and Min’s fat body. A fact that Min actually contemplates before she even speaks to him: “The amount of damage somebody that beautiful could do to a woman like her was too much to contemplate” (Crusie 7). This is an example of deeply ingrained fatphobia- the idea that fatness is a target for destruction by those considered higher up in the hierarchy of beauty. The idea here being that there could never be an equal relationship between “someone like Cal” and “someone like Min” because Cal could never worship Min’s looks the way she is taught to glorify his.

Min even says this to herself in her endless negative feedback loop of societal fatphobic garbage like a statement of fact: “Of course, looking that beautiful, he probably never dated the terminally chubby. At least, not without sneering” (Crusie 9). By associating Cal with beauty, she draws a divide in her mind between beauty (him) and the “terminally chubby” (her), implying that chubbiness could never also be assigned the descriptor “beauty”. Because of this hard line in the sand- a line made thick and seemingly impenetrable by years of diet culture ads, models on the runway, and medical discrimination- Min makes the assumption that “he probably never dated the ‘terminally chubby’”. Not only would he “probably never” stoop that low (is the subtext) but she adds fuel to the fire by tacking on “at least, not without sneering”. This goes back to the ideas presented by Brown in *The Body is Not an Apology*. Min is exemplifying the cultural oppressive attitude that the only reason someone would date a fat person is out of pity and that (somehow) fat people owe this lack of self-respect to whomever is gracious enough to date them as punishment for not being “beautiful”.

It should be noted here that Cal, despite his appearance inciting these thoughts on Min’s end, is one of the primary vehicles used in the novel to subvert the very same fatphobic thoughts throughout the book. His beauty doesn’t lessen hers by comparison- in fact, as the quote from my introduction celebrates, he is *obsessed* with her fullness and her fatness as a beauty in and of itself.

In direct opposition to Cal’s love of Min’s fat body, Min’s mother is the stalwart (though physically tiny) voice making sure Min- and by extension, the reader- know exactly what is expected of fat women in a predominantly fatphobic society... thin. To be constantly working towards making themselves smaller. To fear food. To fear abundance. To deny themselves both

pleasures of the flesh and the mind because they haven't "earned" them yet. Min's mother feeds Min a steady diet of these toxic ideas through a distorted lens of love saying,

"I just don't want you hurt... I want you married to a good man who will appreciate you for how wonderful you are and not leave you because you're overweight... There are a million reasons for them to cheat and leave, so you have to work at it all the time. You have to look good all the time. Men are very visual. If they see something better..." (Crusie 116)

They will leave, is the implication. Unlike Min, who we see struggling with the idea that her experiences of being treated worse because of her physically bigger body is wrong or unjust, Min's mother has taken these fatphobic ideas as her doctrine.

The fantasy that Crusie's novel presents then is one where the fat heroine is painstakingly aware of her social position as a fat woman. For a reader that is fighting the same battles of feeling inadequate or shame internally, Min is on the front lines with them. She hasn't achieved "body positivity" or "self-love", but throughout the course of the book she finds "body neutrality" and joy in her form through conversations, growth, and positive romantic experiences with a partner that doesn't believe she needs to eat less or lose weight to deserve her HEA. That is the fantasy. That you can struggle- fatphobia, unfortunately, won't disappear overnight- but that you don't have to change, and you will be desired, loved, and cherished romantically without changing your physical size.

There is incredible value in this fantasy- it is an essential addition in arts pursuit to reflect or embody life because struggling with fatphobia is incredibly real. And fat women finding love is also incredibly real. But Hibbert's novel offers a different type of fantasy for the fat woman. Dani Brown doesn't seem to struggle with fatphobia at all. She is a very sexual being; she is not concerned about her appearance or how she's going to dress. She considers herself beautiful. Full stop. The growth that she and Zaf are able to experience throughout the

course of the novel doesn't hinge on working through body-image issues. They are physically attracted to each other almost immediately.

Beyond this radical fantasy (that you can shed the toxicity of fatphobia like a second skin and move onto other things), Hibbert offers us a subversive appearance for her male character. Rather than chiseled and brooding, Zaf is soft and looming... and okay, maybe he's still a bit brooding. But he certainly doesn't have abs. Dani describes him as

“... tall and broad and heavily built, his usual resting bitch face veering into furious territory, his warm, brown eyes gentle enough to negate the effect. For some reason, the contrast- the hard precision of his features versus that soft, liquid gaze- made her shiver. The light shone behind him like a halo, and he looked even larger than usual... His jaw, beneath its short black beard, was tight, his lush mouth was a hard line, and his thick hair was an outrageous mess... His belly was nice, too, both soft and solid.” (Hibbert 38-39)

This description takes place after Dani decides she wants to pursue a casual sexual relationship with Zaf. There are similar adjectives of power to those used to describe Cal- “broad”, “hard precision”, “thick”, “solid” (which make sense for him as a retired professional rugby player- but they aren't used in isolation. He's paired with adjectives that have historically been denied men for fear of seeming feminine. Words like “warm”, “gentle”, “lush”, and “soft”.

Zaf also takes the time to think about his body within his own mind, unlike Cal. He notes that he “... could do anything if he *had* to. Like wearing a uniform jacket that didn't come in a size big enough to cover his wrists” (Hibbert 32). Here, Zaf acknowledges that there is discomfort in being larger than the typical human. But, of course, there are different sets of rules for fat men. That could be a whole other thesis in and of itself. For now, let's mark the difference here, plan to return to it at the end of the paper, and return to our fat heroines.

Dani is confidence personified. The word fat is first used to describe her on page ten in a potentially incredibly triggering interaction. Only she isn't triggered at all. A man at a coffee shop has just asked her out only to be met with a decisive dismissal from Dani, prompting

him to spit in her direction, “Fat fucking slut...” (10). To which Dani turns conspiratorially to her friend, Sorcha- ““Oh dear,’ Dani sighed. ‘He thinks I’m a fat slut. I might die of a broken heart.’ Sorcha rolled her eyes” (10). As is evident from the overdrawn dramatics of this cheeky reply, Dani views this derogatory use of the word fat to hardly be worth her time, let alone determine her value as a person. In this way, Dani offers the fantasy to readers of total self-assuredness in your physicality. (Hibbert).

It is important to remember that Dani is a bisexual, Black woman. To think about her character through the lens of intersectional feminism challenges both the reader and the world of the narrative to refuse one dimensional thinking. Dani has one moment, after Zaf has called her pretty when she admits,

“The word *pretty* sent a childish thrill of pleasure through her, which was mortifying, because Dani wasn’t in the habit of caring about who called her pretty. If she did, she might also have to care about who called her ugly, and when you were a woman- especially a black woman on the chubbier side- that was never a good idea. The only opinions she valued on that score were her own.” (Hibbert 104)

While Dani does live her life mostly unaffected by the cruelties of strangers foisting their opinions about her appearance on her, she is aware that they would have the ability to hurt her if she put any of her energy into listening. In this moment, she acknowledges the reality of so many women, like Min, who are still figuring out who to listen to. This moment also saves Dani from the poison of regressive toxic positivity. Positivity without an understanding of reality is a useless and grating tool. This moment of vulnerability (in the midst of unapologetic self-love) allows Dani’s character to embody two sides of the same coin: believable and manifestable. It’s just close enough to reality that it seems possible to build our own levels of comparable confidence.

While their experiences and outlook on fatness may be at different places, there is one factor that remains the same for both Dani and Min. There are specific parts of the fat body that are considered “acceptable” for sexualizing. The general consensus in pop culture and media is that if you have large breasts or a “fat ass” you are, in a sense, “forgiven” for the rest of your fatness. Min is most obvious about this societal concession with her note that “that was one good thing about packing extra pounds, you got cleavage to burn” (Hibbert 22). And if you have cleavage, then you are sexually desirable. Similarly to Taylor’s thesis in *The Body is Not an Apology*, Tovar shares in her memoir: “I saw my body as the only commodity I had to trade for love” (Tovar 61). So even as Min contends with external and internal fatphobia, she finds “reassurance” in the fact that someone might be able to “forgive” the extra pounds in a trade for her extra cleavage.

Dani, of course, has a different approach to celebrating her tits because it’s in conjunction with celebrating the rest of her body. But the sentiment of sexualizing very specific types of fatness threads through on page one when Sorcha bemoans her own lack of breasts by imitating Dani saying, ““*Oh, pity me and my incredible rack, even though I selfishly refuse to share any of it... ’*” (Hibbert 1). This exchange highlights the fact that this specific aspect of Dani’s appearance is enviable by other women. I’m not sure we’re advanced enough as a society for soft, sweet tummies to be widely considered enviable yet.

Throughout the rest of the Hibbert’s novel we’re treated to passages from Zaf’s perspective like this: “She was all strong calves and heavy, dimpled thighs, half her arse exposed by those fucking shorts, her palm covering a tattoo that read BITE ME” (Hibbert 157). In this passage, it’s clear that Zaf considers all of Dani to be both desirable and beautiful from the more traditional arse to her strong calves.

Especially in the context of a Contemporary Romance novel, where sex and desire play a central role in the character development, understanding how the body is considered desirable or sexual is paramount to the story.

Food Without Fear

Understanding how physical bodies are talked about in Contemporary Romance novels is one piece of the puzzle to establishing anti-oppressive views of fat bodies culturally and academically. But this picture is far from complete.

One of the most common assumptions made about fat people is that they're unhealthy. That they're lazy, obsessed with junk food, and all their problems (being fat) could be solved with a different diet or a few trips to the gym. But the medical myths of marrying fatness and poor health are slowly being dismantled. Both from within the medical community with books like *Health at Any Size*, fat influencers or celebrities like Lizzo (who is a vegan that is in *much* better shape than almost anyone I know), and through the media we consume. Media like Contemporary Romance Novels.

Diet culture's drive to capitalize on an arbitrary connection between food and morality has informed the way brands market their food, how Western culture uses certain types of foods or diets as status symbols and enforced a culture of shame for liking other types of foods. This is *not* to discount the merit of disciplines like Nutrition or to shrug off the ways capitalism, particularly in America, has tampered with the quality of food available and accessible to people of all shapes and sizes. But to view all food in black and white- good foods and bad foods- *and* to associate "bad" foods with fatness is extremely small minded, enforcing fatphobia through the policing of sustenance.

Crusie's 2004 novel was written in the midst of the health food, diet culture wave that swept America. Everything from the reviews of the novel to Min's relationship with the food she eats is rooted from the toxic ideology of the early 2000s. One *Publisher's Weekly* Review reads, "Crusie's latest should delight Romance readers with a penchant for sinful foods" (Crusie ii).

Not only does this review explicitly tie decadent, rich foods to the idea of sin but connects the idea of food, indulgence, and romance to this particular Contemporary Romance couple featuring a fat heroine. The implications of even this well intentioned review strengthens the unspoken correlation between “bad” foods, “guilty” pleasures, and fat heroines having the gal to take center stage of a romance borne of both (whereas thin white women have been celebrated for the same plot devices in romances-come-before).

This cultural attitude towards Contemporary Romance as a guilty pleasure, compounded by the emphasis on “bad” food as a guilty pleasure in this novel about a fat woman finding love is reiterated within the rhetoric of the novel by Min herself. With her mother’s insistence that men are very visual and, therefore, every choice should be made with the intention of looking more visually appealing (a.k.a thin) ringing in Min’s mind, it’s no wonder that her relationship with food is tenuous. For the women that have been indoctrinated by diet culture to count calories, to starve themselves, or to feel crushing shame when they slip up, Min’s early belief that “What [she] want and what [she] can have are two different things” (Crusie 102). There is a pervasive belief that ‘beauty is pain’ or ‘no pain, no gain’ or just that sacrifice is necessary for... what? To be more “acceptable”? Or desired? Or desired?

While this philosophy of denial is seen most obviously when it comes to how Min feeds herself, it also bleeds into her sense of self-worth. She might *want* Cal but there’s a strong feeling that she *can’t* have him. Because he’s too beautiful. Or too dangerous (because he’s beautiful?). Or because he’d never want her back.

And she might *want* clothes that are colorful and fun but she feels like she *can’t* because they’d be too loud and she already takes up too much space. And, besides, her mother already reminded her that black is slimming.

And she might *want* beautiful furniture but she's trapped by the idea she *can't* because her grandmother already left her plenty furniture that, no, is not beautiful but very, very practical.

And she might desperately *want* the fresh, warm bread at the restaurant Cal takes her but she *can't* so "she shoved the bread basket back to him, determined to be virtuous in consumption if not in thought" (Crusie 124). Here, her desire is seen to be a destructive force. Something that needs to be tempered with virtue- making the want to eat bread unvirtuous by comparison.

Tovar talks about the tension that arises as a result of assigning food a moral value by saying,

"There are real cultural problems- like sexism, body shame, fatphobia, and myriad injustices many of us are dealing with all of the time- and yet we are told over and over again by mainstream narratives that these problems reside within us. The real problem is that women are angry, and we are trained to turn that anger inward and experience it as shame. And yet we are told- and we believe- that the problem is our body... The real problem is a culture that uses weight as a proxy for humanity and morality, and yet we are told- and we believe- that the problem is that we don't know how to eat correctly." (Tovar 57-58)

If Min left her relationship with food where it is at the beginning of the novel- blaming herself for her "weakness", fearing the consequences for her physical appearance (and, by extension, the way people treat her) if she indulges in "bad" foods... this novel would be participating in a fatphobic conversation. Min's fear of food reinforces the idea that it's the individual's responsibility to police themselves, shame themselves, rather than giving our energy to dismantling the culture that 'uses weight as a proxy for humanity and morality', as Tovar so eloquently points out.

But through Min's relationship with Cal, they work to redefine food in the context of romance and pleasure- working towards eradicating shame and celebrating the joy of feeding your body without fear. On one of their first nights out together, Min apologizes when she

realizes she's been recounting the dangers of food out loud. Cal responds with, "talking about food is great. Talking about not having food is boring... Eat" (Crusie 94). While this initially read as unnecessarily blunt to me, the way he delivers this line is actually radical. Let me explain. If we go back to thinking about Tovar's assertion that cultural problems- like fatphobia- are trapped inside us as a distraction from turning to system or cultural conscious reform, it's easy to talk yourself out of anti-oppression thinking. There are so many reasons, handed to us on the silver platter of mass media, policy decisions, and microaggressions, to suffer in silence or to dismiss deceptively simple concepts like the command to 'Eat.' By refusing to engage with the mental gymnastics it takes to maintain the myth of fatphobia, Cal redirects the focus of both Min and the reader to the beautiful ability we have to feed ourselves.

Like the fantasy offered to readers struggling with their body image that they can struggle and not have to change and still be loved, Crusie's novel also offers up the fantasy of a relationship where you can work through cultural problems with someone who cares to dismantle them with you. Without shame. Or judgment. But with the sole intention of helping you love yourself the way they do or will or are starting to. Cal and Min's conversations center their own humanity, finding beauty in staying alive and loving it rather than simply surviving it.

Have you ever seen Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs? You can Google it, but basically it's a pyramid that has human needs starting with the most basic at the bottom (food, shelter) and aesthetic beauty at the top. Maslow's argument is that you have to take care of each level sequentially to be able to give your energy to the next one. In a society that spends so much money, time, and energy making us hate ourselves- starve ourselves, consume new products, etc.- we're stuck at the bottom level, making it difficult to give energy to beauty, let alone dismantling oppressive systems. I don't know that each level is as isolated as Maslow's pyramid

suggests but I do think that there is merit to the idea that the more distracted we are with ourselves and how we (don't) measure up to impossible standards, the less we have to give to other issues. I'm going to let Tovar interject here one more time- she urges readers that

“What we must realize is that it's not thinness that is being eroticized. What is being eroticized is the submission thinness represents in our culture. Thinness is a secondary characteristic. The true commodity is the willingness of women to acquiesce to cultural control. Controlling women's body size is about controlling women's lives.” (Tovar 69)

When you say yes to something, even if it's an unintentional yes borne of habit, you're *always* saying no to something else.

When Min brings Cal to meet her family for dinner, he is so frustrated with the absurdity of her mother that he can't help but comment on the single-mindedness of her fatphobia. He says (very romantically, might I add), “Min is an amazing woman, and so far during this meal, you've either ignored her or hassled her about some dumb dress. For the record, she is not too big for the dress. The dress is too small for her. She's perfect... Eat” (Crusie 227). A different night, a different dinner but two things remain the same. One, his directive to Min to eat. And two, his unflinching belief that the problem at hand is how people are treating Min, not Min herself, and certainly not her size. When Cal states, in no uncertain terms, that ‘she is not too big for the dress. The dress is too small for her’, it can be read as a metaphor for the larger conversation at hand. Min's size is not the problem. It's the way society dehumanizes fatness that is the problem. With this declaration, Cal is basically quoting the thesis of fat activism work. Acknowledging fatness is not oppressive. Believing that being fat is a problem is oppression.

Towards the end of the novel, we see the culmination of Min and Cal's work to destigmatize food- to untether it from conversations of morality- with a visible mindset shift from Min. Whereas at the beginning of the novel, Min is well practiced in the art of self-denial,

by the end she's able to joke about the absurdity of fearing food. "You should have been feeding me cocaine... I understand that's slimming" (Crusie 378), she tells Cal with a laugh. Here she's able to acknowledge the oppressive views she's held (and will probably continue to struggle with, but to a lesser degree) with the words 'I understand that's slimming'. But the humor comes through in suggesting that cocaine, a much more destructive substance than donuts, would be more celebrated by society.

In stark contrast to Min, Dani's relationship with food is almost the exact opposite. Dani doesn't seem to prioritize food (she's much too busy teaching, researching to feed herself)- but she does love food. Especially "bad" foods like cupcakes. On page *three*, Dani will tell you herself, "I have a sweet tooth," (Hibbert 3).

You don't have to wonder about her relationship with food. Dani's not just dreaming about the things she wants. She knows herself. She knows what she wants. And she is *not* in the practice of self-denial. She's going to tell the reader she has a sweet tooth and then she's going to eat a cupcake- without thinking about how it will affect her body. It's a mental and sensational pleasure for her, divorced from consequences and treated instead like a gift.

At one point she describes how "time skipped ahead of her until the seminar was over, notebooks were being stuffed into bags, and the cupcakes at the union stall started calling her name" (Hibbert 26). Her mention of cupcakes is casual, untethered from hints at larger conversations like diet culture or morality. This isn't to say that her relationship with food doesn't change throughout the novel. Like I said before, her experience to Min is flipped. While Min is the queen of practicality- she knows the "healthiest", "best" foods for survival- Dani has almost no concept of what it means to take care of herself. She chases pleasure at the expense of other aspects of herself. This is where Zaf comes in. While Cal is there to help Min see that

pleasure isn't inherently dangerous, with food, sex, or interior decoration, Zaf's role is to make sure that Dani balances out her pleasure seeking with stability (emotional stability, nutritional stability, sexual stability).

When I started this paper on Contemporary Romance, I'm sure you expected more steam, more spice, more analysis of sex in general. Well, here's your lucky section. Believe it or not, this conversation about food is deeply related to character's experiences of physical intimacy in these novels. Particularly when it comes to talking about pleasure. Touch, taste, feel, smell... eating a decadent meal (insert innuendo here), it all has the ability to be incredible sensual, passionate, and overwhelming.

Bet Me establishes a strong connection between food, pleasure, sex from page 41: "...I'm not interested in sex.' Min tore off another piece of bread and bit into it, and Cal watched while the pleasure spread across her face. *You lie*, Cal thought" (Crusie 41). Here Min is once again exercising her instinct to deny herself things she isn't sure she deserves, in this case, sex. Even as she actively finds sensual pleasure by indulging in "bad" or "sinful" foods. There's a wild amount of morality layered onto discussions of sex and sexual pleasure- Romance novels didn't get their bad rap by celebrating emotional intimacy. The idea that shame around food and shame around sex is be connected is not a far reach. The primary novels in this project are, of course, working to remove or at least experiment with healthier ways to experience both.

In fact, Min and Cal's first kiss is actually indistinguishable from their experience with eating food. They're eating donuts on a picnic table (a feat that took lots of convincing on Cal's part) when

"... he leaned in and kissed her, tasting the chocolate and the heat of her mouth, and she froze for a moment and then kissed him back, sweet and insistent, blanking out all coherent thought. He let the taste and the scent and the warmth of her wash over him, drowning in her..." (Crusie 103)

They're tasting each other- she's "sweet", the experience of kissing her is like drowning in chocolate, drowning in pleasure. They're so tightly tied up that the joy of one magnifies the joy of the other until shame has no place in the interaction.

DTF (Desire, the Facts)

It's time to talk about sex, baby. Well, sex and food. And who better to kick off this conversation than Zaf himself with the sexy thought: "Holy fuck, she smelled like honey. He wanted to bite her?" (Hibbert 111). Dani is not just attractive to Zaf, he's *hungry* for her. To consume her, to be consumed by her. In the context of talking about a fat heroine, hearing a romantic partner talk about her body, her person, her smell with this level of worship is rewriting the script our society constructs about fat people. Stereotypes like they're unclean or ugly or disgusting. Zaf's line of thinking is so completely alien to these fatphobic concepts that they don't even seem to have a place in their romantic world.

And Dani reciprocates his physical, hungry attraction in kind. She describes kissing him like reveling in her favorite meal:

"Kissing Zaf was like drinking ice water in a heat wave: slow sips might work, but hungry, gasping gulps felt better. When Dani's lips brushed his, every pleasure center in her body flashed firework-bright. She slid her hands into his hair, pressed herself closer against him because she just couldn't stop, and explored that solemn mouth without restraint. He tasted of sweet, dark honey, of peace and quiet comfort, of fresh white sheets and dawn. He tasted of things no man should, as if he were something greater. Something more. Something she'd been searching for." (Hibbert 286)

Restraint and shame have no hold in their interactions. They're so far gone to pleasure, abundance, and decadence- stuffing themselves full of each other so that they don't have room for anything else. Unlike Tovar and Brown's reflections on how the fat body is too often viewed as an offering in sexual situations, lacking boundaries because fat people are taught they haven't earned them, Dani delights in the give and take of sex. She approaches it from a place of self-worth, confidence, and love for the pleasures her body gives her access to. Those pleasures include eating sweets, tasting Zaf's kisses, and (eventually) the intoxicating experience of true love. The fantasy Tibbert's novel is hedonism for the fat body without shame *and also* without

the self-destructive hedonism other literary characters dabble in (*cough* Dorian Gray *cough*).

For Min and Cal, the food metaphor is less figurative and more integral to their experiences of sexual desire. Food is the tool they use to explore sex- because Min is still so early on in her journey towards dismantling her internal fatphobia, food and sex are all tied up in an ideology that no longer serves her. Cal builds on the work they've done to have Min eat things with joy and pleasure by saying things like "My goal in life is to put that look on your face without chocolate" (Crusie 369). They start with finding pleasure in small things (eating chocolate) and then work up to the passion, intimacy, and vulnerability of sex by building on her relationship with foods she's been taught to deny herself. And Min and Cal do have great sex. But only after having conversations like the one Min brings up in her kitchen after she and Cal have agreed to be just friends.

Min asks, desperate for the classically handsome Fabio in her home to unlock the mysteries of mens' minds, "So what am I supposed to do about my weight?" To which Cal replies in his blunt fashion,

"You're never going to be thin. You're a round woman. You have wide hips and a round stomach and full breasts... Lush... Opulent... Soft and round and hot, and I'm turning myself on... You want to be sexy, be sexy. You have assets that skinny women will never have, and you should be enjoying them and dressing like you enjoy them. Or at least dressing so that others can enjoy them." (Crusie 147)

This conversation makes it abundantly clear that Min sees her weight as an obstacle to being perceived in a sexy, desirable, or romantic way. Which makes sense, having grown up with her tiny mother being the constant spokesperson for fatphobia smothered in motherly care.

Cal doesn't tell her that she needs to lose weight- he's not prescriptive in his analysis of her. Instead, he's descriptive of her fatness, fullness that paints an undeniably sexy picture. Of

course his description does use all the “acceptable” words for fatness we discussed earlier: full, lush, soft, hot. And her full breasts are close to the top of the list in terms of sexy attributes. But he also loves her wide hips and round stomach. Having a male character worship her physical attributes so explicitly is a fantasy for readers in and of itself. To be a woman in this patriarchal, capitalistic, fatphobic culture is to be constantly criticized, fixed, or shamed for how we look. To have someone desire us without necessitating change is radical, beautiful, and works towards a shift in how we think about fat bodies we see.

Instead of seeing her weight as subtracting from her desirability, Cal rewrites the script and shows Min that she is desirable *because* of what she looks like. (And, no, it’s not only her looks that he likes- you can read the book if you want to go beyond this analysis). Min and Cal are tied up in conversations about finding healthy body image, getting excited about pleasure, and luxuriating in delicious food.

Zaf and Dani are in the middle of having healthy, glorious sex and healthy relationships with food- accessing higher levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Because they aren’t in survival mode, their conflict comes from an emotional disconnect. Unlike the Old Skool Romances that leave the heroes out of touch with their emotions- Hibbert flips the script. Dani occupies the role of the Rake; for her, romance is a waste of time, emotions are superfluous, and she is sexually experienced in a way Historical Romance heroines rarely are. She sets these expectations early on in the novel saying “[she] couldn’t stand chivalry in a man. It frequently led them to make ill-advised decisions, like inviting her to have dinner before sex, or hanging around and talking *after* sex” (Hibbert 9). Heaven *forbid* a partner be romantically interested in her beyond sex. So food is not the issue for Dani. And sex is obviously taken care of. The fantasy that Hibbert’s novel presents to readers is one where the work being done is on an emotional

level. Dani's fatness isn't the central focus of the romance, it's just a fact. And she has the emotional time and energy to open herself up to the vulnerability of love. Her weight doesn't factor into her calculations of how much desire she can, or should, or does feel for Zaf. Her obstacle to desire is setting healthy boundaries, navigating mental health, and working through her trust issues.

It's True Love

What is love? (Baby, don't hurt me.) The poets, artists, and romantics have said it before, but I'm here to say it again: love is a powerful force. It's a muse, a many splendored thing, a vice, and a virtue. You know that every Romance ends in a HEA- you've known this from the beginning. The love celebrated in Romance novels is the expression of the radical dream (manifestation, culmination) of romance into the effusive, ethereal, raw joy of choosing a person to cherish.

I told you at the earlier, and hopefully you're starting to see, the guaranteed HEA is what makes all the conversations we've had so far productive for changing the cultural attitude towards fatness. While the novels offer two different illustrations of life as a fat person, the emotional growth tracked by each offers up a myriad of productive (and swoon-worthy) fantasies of how to engage with self-worth, romance, and trust in healthy ways. The heroines' fatness isn't the determining factor in whether or not they are worthy or able to fall in love. Not by a long shot. But in a fatphobic culture, centering these heroines in novels about love and securing them a HEA changes the way readers then think about fatness, their own bodies, and how they talk or think about other bodies in language framed by love.

The love that each of these heroines discover throughout the course of their own novels is all-encompassing. There are no ifs, buts, or ands. Their bodies, their minds, and their emotions are cherished equally, and these heroines learn to give all-encompassing love in return. Min describes her love for Cal in terms of how he makes her feel: "... he was *fun*... He was so much fun, Bonnie. And he made me feel wonderful. I was never fat when I was with Cal... He was exciting. I never knew what was coming next" (277). But she also thinks about how she affects him- the power she has to make him feel in a relationship based on reciprocal passion,

care, and respect. She continues gushing to her friend, Bonnie by saying, “and neither did he. We fed off each other” (277). This goes back to the idea of food with the diction of ‘fed’- this word implies that there’s something nourishing and vital about love and romance. Cal, of course, has a dramatic speech for Min, answering the question of why he loves her with the words “‘Because you’re smart and kind and funny, and my nephew is crazy about you, and you wear great shoes, and you look like a depraved angel.’ *Because I’m going to go crazy if I don’t touch you*” (210). Finding someone who loves every part of you without stipulations or conditions is life affirming. He loves her mind, he loves her personality, he loves her values, and he loves her body. They’re not separate boxes in the HEA, they’re rolled into one person. To give this life affirming space within Contemporary Romance to marginalized or traditionally oppressed groups asserts their worth, their value and celebrates them for more than just their identity. (Crusie).

In an attempt to meet Dani in a place of emotional vulnerability, Zaf addresses this need for all-encompassing love as the truest, most desirable force by telling Dani,

“‘Maybe you don’t think someone who looks at you the way I do should care about every part of you. Maybe, before, you stumbled across people who only wanted bits and pieces of you. Never the whole package. Never enough.” (Hibbert 261)

In this way, Zaf and Dani’s story ends in a very similar type of love to that of Min and Cal’s. The all-encompassing kind. And that makes sense, because while the journey (as discussed previously) has the freedom to take all kinds of twists and turns, Contemporary Romance’s big promise is the HEA. The fantasy of all-encompassing love is just a few chapters for anyone- for people of any race, any size, any identity.

All this to say, I’m adding Zaf’s moment-of-realization because not only is it useful in illustrating all the facets of loving completely but it is swoony and we all need more of that in our lives: “He just really wanted to sleep with her, and hold her hand, and keep her fed

and watered while she worked late into the night, and sometimes he wondered what shampoo she used and how he could make all his pillows smell just like it..." (138). And Dani, ever straight to the point, responds with "I want you. In every way I can have you. And I trust you to have me, too,' she said softly" (348). (Hibbert).

What these books do an excellent job of illustrating is that you can't piecemeal love. It's not picking the most 'desirable' trait and romanticizing it at the expense of other qualities. It's not about contingencies. Or idolization. Or power.

It's about growth. It's about communication. It's about connection. That's why these stories are powerful. Contemporary Romance envisions a world built on the values of all-encompassing love, romance, and optimism. Dani and Min are but two examples of how stories in this genre have the power to imagine this new world, work towards the liberation of marginalized groups, and break down stereotypes on a cultural and an academic level if we prioritize learning from the genre of Contemporary Romance.

It's Not Just Me- the importance of Romance's legacy for liberation

But here I am, getting ahead of myself. We've gone through the thematic elements in the two primary novels to think about how fatness shows up in Contemporary Romance and is informed by fatphobic ideas embedded in our culture. Each novel offered a different vision of how fat women could or do experience the four themes of this paper- physicality, food, desire, and love.

For Min, she battles throughout the book with messages and habits teaching her that to be the most happy and fulfilled, she needs to be thin. She's actively trying to hate herself into shrinking. But the relationship that develops throughout the novel gives her the foundation and support to build new habits and mindsets. By doing so, Min and Cal demonstrate what a romance might look like as a partnership that dismantles culturally ingrained ideas of fatphobia. If everything you consume is teaching you how to consume the next thing, this novel (as part of the most lucrative genre in publishing) is teaching everyone who reads it to imagine a world where it's safe and achievable to do the anti-oppression, liberation work Min and Cal do. It teaches people, no matter where they're coming from or what they look like, the power of *wanting* and being fulfilled instead of left hungry- whether it's wanting to eat the fresh bread, wanting to be looked at, wanting to be *worshiped*, wanting to be loved, wanting to explore your sexuality, wanting to believe you are beautiful...

The fantasy that Dani offers is both complimentary and unique. For her and the readers, the novel imagines a world where the active, grueling work to dismantle internal fatphobia has already been done. A world where it doesn't get thrown in your face or haunt your mind. Hibbert's novel presents a world where fatness is primarily a descriptive fact rather than a

prescriptive insult. The liberation is in occupying Dani's headspace and then translating the dream of her world into our own little by little.

Both of the heroines are tackling fear- Old Skool and New Skool heroines often are- but the extent to which their body occupies the center stage is skewed. It offers readers a myriad of ways to engage with similar fat activist work while swooning and dreaming and planning up a more love-oriented future for cultural associations with fatness or other oppressed groups.

As Susan Stinson wrote in her article "Fat Girls Need Fiction",

"Fat girls need stories of all kinds. We need to cultivate the ability to make skilled and daring imaginative leaps. We need empathy, emotional risk, and the evidence of the senses. Fat girls need fiction. Everyone else needs it, too." (Stinson 234)

This fat studies approach to the transformative power of literature gains increases its reach when partnered with Rodale's assertion about the value of Romance in particular: "talking about Romance as "trashy" and "commercial" reinforces the idea that the primary value of these books is the sales they generate, and not the ideals they champion, how the stories fit into larger cultural conversations, the thoughts the books provoke, or even the quality of writing" (Rodale 65). By discounting the genre and the platform it can offer to anti-oppression, radical liberation work, pervading negative stereotypes about Romance distract potential critical readers from the 'cultural conversations [they're starting], the thoughts the books provoke, [and] even the quality of writing'. Cultural critic bell hooks makes a compelling argument in her article "Choosing the Margin As a Space of Radical Openness" that the privileged center of systemic oppression can only truly be changed from the inside out. When you're part of a marginalized group or a true ally, you're able to look at the center with a critical eye and dream of ways to make it better. Hibbert and Crusie both operate on the margins looking into a future with HEAs for fat women- systems that respect them, support them, and celebrate them.

We're onto the zoom-out portion of this paper. From the nitty, gritty passages from the primary novels, into fat studies applications, back to the value of Contemporary Romance as a genre, there's one more step to be taken. Where can you take this conversation? Because I'll tell you right now, it would be a travesty to leave it here. D. Lacy Asbill, fat burlesque dancer, wrote an article titled "I'm Allowed to Be a Sexual Being". In this article, she asserts that the stage of burlesque functions in a similar capacity to Contemporary Romance for fat women;

“[Burlesque] also offers fat women the opportunity to invoke and respond to limiting cultural conceptions about their bodies and sexualities, re-framing, and re-working what it means to be fat. Because fat burlesque dancers present confident, persuasive, and shameless erotic performances, both audience members and dancers can revel in the successful display of fat sexuality.” (Asbill 304)

Though the study of dance or theater occupies a different theoretical space, the idea that the art is providing both a space of expression, reflection, and participation from readers feels a lot like Reader Response.

Asbill also goes on to comment that,

“in a culture that rarely associates fat bodies with sexuality, publicly claiming sexual agency, desire, and desirability allows fat women to take pleasure in their bodies... the explicit sexuality of the burlesque stage, as well as the public nature of the performance, function to support a new, positive vision of fat sexual embodiment.” (Asbill, 300)

The first half of this sentence could be directly applicable to the analysis done above of how Min and Dani's bodies experience pleasure throughout their novels and, by extension, how it can model for readers how to do the same. The second half of the sentence could replace the word 'burlesque' with 'Contemporary Romance' and basically be my thesis. “The explicit sexuality of [Contemporary Romance], as well as the public nature of the performance, function to support a new, positive vision of fat sexual embodiment...” which begs the question: in what other art forms or spaces is fatness explored as a liberation project from the cultural torrent of fatphobia?

What's next?

That hanging question is wildly open-ended (on purpose) but not necessarily immediately actionable. So let's work from the inside out one more time. Here are some aspects of the fat studies, Contemporary Romance intersection that need more interrogation.

One: fat women in Historical Romance. Assuming that most Historical Romances take place in the 1800s (they love a good Regency ball), the historically desirable body type would be a fatter woman. Men were looking for child-bearing hips- domestic women. However, this beauty standard is fiercely underrepresented in Historical Romances written from the late 1990s till now. To what extent does the current desirable body type impact Historical fiction descriptions? What are the stakes of including accurate body representation into Historical texts and how does the popularity of these misconceptions affect the cultural understanding of history as a discipline?

And if we start with women, this conversation could very well carry over into men in Historical Romance. Men in the Regency period were rarely chiseled- physical exertion was low on their list of priorities. So why the plethora of rippling pectorals in the hallowed halls of stuffy balls? And furthermore! The proportion of nobility floating around these balls is entirely out of whack. Not *every* virginal maid can snag a Duke. It's simply not mathematically possible. So, to what extent is this fantasy productive as an escape? And what does the fantasy presented say about our current cultural priorities?

That last paragraph was area of inquiry 1.5. Think of it as a bridge into an extensive interrogation of the static nature of the Romance hero. Zaf, our lovely, soft, strong man, is the exceptionally rare exception to the Fabio's gracing Romance novels. In a genre primarily written by women, for women, what does this static Ken doll say about our ideas of masculine beauty

and what would diverse bodily representation look like for male characters in the genre? We've seen men change from rapists to emotionally intelligent partners. We have neurodivergent men. Men from different socioeconomic situations, men with the most creative jobs you've never heard of. We've a racially diverse cast of men. But 9 times out of 10, he is traditionally handsome. Why can't he expand in this area as well? Where are the fat men?

At the risk of staying within the gender binary, it's important to turn this conversation (at last) to queer bodies in Contemporary Romance. How are queer bodies discussed within the genre? How does fatness affect the building Romance outside of the language of the gender binary?

I don't have answers for these questions, but I invite you to keep them on the back burner of your mind as you engage with Contemporary Romance and other popular media. Where do you see fat people? How are they characterized? How is the art teaching you to think about them and how can you engage with it critically and productively for a future that refuses fatphobia?

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