

## **“Our Bodies Are More Than Our Bodies”: Expanding Social Work Understandings of Race and Fat**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, we want to explore the ways that racism and fat hatred are intrinsically connected. These connections occur in both individual experiences of body shame and empowerment, but also within bigger systemic inequalities that have historically connected hatred of size and colour, and in contemporary realities in which rhetoric of “obesity” is used to justify surveillance and policing of bigger, darker bodies. In other words, there is no justice with regard to race without a close examination of fat hatred. This article takes up nine such experiences that were gathered as part of a digital-storytelling project. The project allowed nine makers to create micro-documentaries: multimedia stories that range from 1 to 5 minutes in length. These stories complicate ideas around race and size, consider the ways in which we are given contradictory messages around pride and shame, family and community, health and belonging. The stories resist easy categorization, allowing for a supple, shape-shifting dialogue around race and fat to emerge, yielding more questions than answers. While the nine filmmakers span a range of diversities, all have a relationship to social work as students, educators, and practitioners. Their experiences suggest that a more robust engagement with the politics of fat studies and, specifically, the complications of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour’s experiences of fat hatred must critically inform social work knowledge. These stories thus provoke the need for a heightened understanding of fat and race while simultaneously providing content that allows for difficult and important conversations to emerge.

*Keywords:* fat and fat hatred, race and racism, intersectionality, arts-based methods, weight stigma

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### **Introduction**

Almost 10 years ago, we asked in this journal why social workers, especially critically oriented, justice-minded social workers, were notably quiet on the topic of fat hatred and fat activism (Friedman, 2012). While in the last decade the landscape has shifted somewhat (Abel, 2020; McCrindle, 2018; Thornton, 2017; Wood et al., 2020; Zerafa, 2020), overall the social work profession continues to maintain an embarrassed silence on the topic of weight, even as we aim to grow our critical and revolutionary capacity about other struggles.

Perhaps the reason that social work remains so cautious about naming size liberation as an essential part of its professional mandate is because this fight is seen as contradictory to other forms of justice? We have been told in many different settings that fat is a white girls' fight, that people of colour love their size, that restricted eating and other symptoms of fatphobia only occur among populations who are otherwise privileged. Indeed, as the virulence of anti-Black and other racisms are increasingly exposed, we have found it harder and harder to engage in conversations about size. We believe this to be a fundamental error.

In this paper, we want to explore the ways that racism and fat hatred are intrinsically connected (Harrison, 2021; Sanders, 2019; Strings, 2019). These connections occur in both individual experiences of body shame and empowerment and also within bigger systemic inequalities that have historically connected hatred of size and colour, and in contemporary realities in which rhetoric of "obesity" is used to justify surveillance and policing of bigger, darker bodies (Mollow, 2017; Usiekiewicz, 2016). In other words: there is no justice with regard to race without a close examination of fat hatred.

Of course, for so many of us, this is hardly new information: we know that our experiences of our bodies cannot easily be sorted into skin and flesh, into discrete experiences of racism and fat hatred. Rather, we know the feeling of being reviled for our ample brownness, our rich waterfalls of chocolate rolls. Despite being told that thinking about fat is a white problem, our lived experiences expose this as a lie: we know that the healthism deployed against our communities lives at the intersections of racism and fat phobia, that the rhetoric of "health" is frequently used to corral our unruly bodies, our beautifully messy lives (Daufin, 2020; Roberts, 2010).

This article takes nine such experiences that were gathered as part of a digital-storytelling project entitled *Rolls and Race*. This project, funded as part of the Bodies in Translation partnership grant and with guidance from the Revision Centre for Arts and Social Justice, allowed nine fat and racialized makers to create micro-documentaries, multimedia stories that range from 1 to 5 minutes in length. Digital stories are a potent form of arts-based research that allow for multi-sensory engagement with specific topics and identities (Rice & Mündel, 2018). The stories of this project, taken both singly and together, complicate ideas around race and size, and they consider the ways that we are given contradictory messages around pride and shame, family and community, and health and belonging. The stories resist easy categorization, allowing for a supple shape-shifting dialogue around race and fat to emerge, yielding more questions than answers.

While the nine filmmakers span a range of diversities (explored further below), all have a relationship to social work in the Canadian context as students, educators, and practitioners. Their experiences suggest that a more robust engagement with the politics of fat studies and, specifically, the complications of Black, Indigenous and people of colour's experiences of fat hatred must critically inform social work knowledge. These stories thus provoke the need for a heightened understanding of fat and race while simultaneously providing content that allows for difficult and important conversations to emerge.

## Setting the Stage

While the roots of fat studies and fat activism are borne in Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 2000; Shaw, 2005), alongside other liberation struggles, these roots have been co-opted and commercialized, repackaged for mainstream (white) interests (Farrell, 2020). The growing focus on “body positivity” distorts the revolutionary struggle of emancipatory body politics and replaces it instead with a focus on enhancing shopping choices and the type of feel-good, substance-free rhetoric of self-care (Harrison, 2021). This misappropriation, however, does not represent the robust and liberatory politic of substantive fat-activist settings, which are borne of, and contribute to, revolution.

Sabrina Strings traced this politic in her 2019 book, *Fearing the Black Body*, exploring the ways that racism and fatphobia have worked in tandem to aid the forces of colonialism and capitalism. The virulent hatred and exploitation of fat Black bodies were essential to the projects of colonial nation-building. In the present day, the veneration of scientific knowledge and the primacy of healthism are similarly used to shame, surveil, and police fat bodies, Black and other racialized bodies and, *specifically*, bodies that live at these intersections. In particular, as negative health outcomes are increasingly tagged to racialized populations, medical knowledges emerge that root these outcomes in poor self-regulation rather than in the structural impacts of racism and poverty. Sanders (2019) suggested that

dominant obesity discourses not only represent the “obesity epidemic” as most rampant among [B]lack and Latina/o women and (their) children; they also link poor health outcomes to poor personal choices, ... leaving uninterrogated the structural forces that constrain those choices. (p. 289)

In a neat switch, then, Black people, Indigenous Peoples, and other people of colour are once again held responsible for their own difficult experiences.

While there are unique struggles at the intersection of fatness and Blackness, other racialized and marginalized populations are by no means exempt. A special issue of the journal *Fat Studies* (2022) recently explored the intersections of Jews, race, and fatness (Gondek, 2022). Other intersections including a range of fat and ethnic/racial experiences were taken up in the collection *Thickening Fat* (Friedman et al. 2020). Samantha Kwan’s 2010 article, “Navigating Public Spaces: Gender, Race, and Body Privilege in Everyday Life,” is a key example of the ways that a range of different racializations may experience fat oppression. Likewise, Natalie Boero’s (2009) work on fat motherhood explored the specific impacts of racialized fat mothers. Parker et al. (2020) similarly considered the impact of responsabilization rhetorics on racialized mothers, especially Maori mothers in Aotearoa.

Robinson (2020) articulated related themes in the context of Canadian Indigenous populations. Like Strings (2019), Robinson explored art history to expose the ways that the bounty of colonized bodies and lands have been framed as an embarrassment of riches, ripe for the taking, but also suspiciously bounteous. Segueing into contemporary rhetoric, Robinson named the ways that seeming regard for health and wellness conceals a bigger commitment to self-regulation with regard to health, size, family composition, and other colonial conventions. Gillon (2019) extended this analysis in the Indigenous Maori context in exploring the need for a move away from body positivity toward body sovereignty.

On a personal level, Meerai (2020) considered the ways that health may be surveilled in the doctor's office in a parallel to the ways in which size is surveilled in the fitting room, drawing connections between conventions of fashion and fitness as applied to her fat Indo-Caribbean body. Sarkar (2020), writing from an Indian context, similarly detailed life in a middle space between traditional community knowledge and exported colonial expectations that may actually make living as a fat, brown South Asian person feel impossible. Senyonga (2017) extended these themes into the classroom, noting the microaggressions experienced by American Black fat women in academia. Importantly, Senyonga stated that "very few studies on fatness truly account for race as a moderating factor" (p. 55).

Of course, the violence done to Black, brown, and Indigenous bodies is not limited to the size of chairs in waiting rooms or inaccessible clothing. The documented health disparities experienced by BIPOC populations are aided and exacerbated by the taken-for-granted expectation that bigger bodies are inevitably at risk—this belief thus erases many structural inequalities. In the realm of police violence, as Mollow (2017) skilfully articulated, many different instances of brutality have been seemingly justified with recourse to racist and fatphobic tropes about frightening large, dark bodies and by ableist explanations of Black bodies as intrinsically flawed. Harrison (2021) echoed this idea, noting that "the Black fat is always already criminalized and engaged as something, and some Thing, that needs to be neutralized, euthanized, put down" (p. 58).

These connections, overlaps, and deepenings are ubiquitous, to the extent that it is difficult to even consider fat hatred and racism without understanding that they aid and abet one another in innumerable ways. This is the landscape in which our project took shape, one where we wanted to disrupt the sanitized terrain of "body positivity!" and instead give space to our own complicated and bifurcated experiences.

### **Method**

This project was completed in winter 2021 as COVID-19 lockdown restrictions raged in southern Ontario, where all the filmmakers reside. As a result, the entire project was undertaken online, beginning with an initial meeting of interested makers and culminating with a shared screening of all films in spring 2021. Filmmakers were sought through snowball sampling for folks who self-identified as fat and racialized. The final group of participants included people who self-identified as Black, Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean, Asian, Indigenous, Latinx, biracial, and Arab.

While *Rolls and Race* engaged with the methods undertaken by the Revision Centre for Art and Social Justice in other projects (Rice, 2020; Rice & Mündel, 2018), the specific techniques needed to be amended and refined in response to distancing requirements. After an information session, makers initially met online with a member of the research team to discuss a range of prompts relating to experiences of living in larger racialized bodies.

Some of these prompts included:<sup>1</sup>

- What objects tell the story of your experiences with weight and race?
- Tell the story of the most vivid exclusion or inclusion experience related to racism, fatphobia, or both.
- What do you want others to know about your body story?
- Write an unsent letter to someone in your life, or an institution you've encountered, that has impacted your body experiences with regard to weight and race.
- Write a journal entry to your younger self, telling yourself what you know now.
- Write a journal to your older self, writing about your hopes and dreams for your life.
- Write your eulogy. Praise yourself for the life you're living and the life you intend to live.

These prompts often led to lengthy and involved conversations with research-team members and culminated in makers homing in on a specific story or idea to share. Importantly, changes to the rhythms of digital-storytelling methods potentially altered connections between co-researchers; alongside other writing, this project stands as an interesting example of the impact of COVID on digital-storytelling methodologies (Rice et al., 2022).

Using WeVideo, an editing software, filmmakers were able to select a range of different multimedia artifacts, including open-source images, video, and sound, as well as personal photos and films. These different pieces were then edited together with a narrative voiceover. Makers, research-team members, and Revision support people worked together to ensure that the finished products provided meaningful and substantive responses to the prompts and the project's theme of intersections of race and fat. This project thus extends analyses into digital storytelling that explore the impacts and intimacies generated by this method and the way in which multimedia storytelling allows access to ineffable realities (LaMarre et al., 2022).

Embedded in the digital-storytelling method is an emphasis on substantive consent (Rice & Mündel, 2018). Throughout the process, makers were reminded of the options to keep their films anonymous—through selection of non-identifying materials such as photos and by keeping names and other information out of the film—or confidential—by choosing where and with whom to share the films. Makers were also given the option of sharing films in a range of settings, including educational settings such as classrooms and conferences, within publications, and more publicly through searchable YouTube links. Makers, who always retain copyright over their films, could also decide to keep the film entirely private. The films under discussion in this article have thus been shared with consent of the filmmakers.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these prompts were borrowed from earlier projects and are gratefully acknowledged with thanks to Dr. Julia Gruson-Wood.

While the bare bones of digital-storytelling techniques are detailed above, individual makers—in and beyond this project—have taken these techniques and used them in seemingly infinite ways. Some makers chose to embed soundscape or music in their stories. Others used found materials such as pre-existing footage, while still others shot video or images specifically for inclusion in this project. In both content and style, the films reflect an enormous diversity of techniques and materials. Indeed, the real benefit of digital storytelling, as with other arts-based techniques, is the extent to which complex experiences may be engaged with beyond stale notions of objectivity or accuracy (LaMarre et al., 2022; Loveless, 2019). The final result thus explores conversations about race and fat from a range of angles and experiences, resisting obvious conclusions and instead thickening our understandings.

### Discussion

Because the films resist easy categorization, any exploration of themes requires a supple and nuanced approach. The key ideas that are explored below thus engage with some of the ebbs and flows of the films. We invite readers to enter into a spirit of dialogue, considering which ideas resonate and recur and which divergent themes may float to the surface.

#### Theme 1: Embodiment – Our Bodies

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the films engage with the body and its functions. The bodies taken up in this project cannot be divorced from the twin impacts of pride and oppression. Images emerge across the screens—a brown hand, a Black thigh. Makers show their bodies being, but also doing—as in a film in which strong hands tease out curly hair, knead dough. Another film allows the maker’s voice to float through the narration as a hand provides ongoing illustration of the maker’s thoughts. Three films especially engage with the theme of embodiment.

*Bodies of Fluidity* was made by a Black non-binary person and explores the maker’s experience of embodiment as theoretically fluid but also as literally liquid. The body is seen in the bath; water pours out of a tap. The accompanying text considers the ways that bodies are both whole and in flux, of flesh and existing prior to flesh. This film does not explicitly engage with the body as a site of trauma or empowerment; rather, the messaging aims to more subtly trouble the idea of body as simultaneously object and message, a sturdy thing upon which ideas may be laid but, at the same time, a continuous participant in an ongoing conversation about race, size, gender, and many other discursive strands beyond. The filmmaker speaks to the body as fluid, noting, “I surrender to this bottomless body. I surrender to an everlasting depth and width. I surrender to the formlessness within its grip.” The film closes with an excerpt from an interview with Gina Breedlove that explores ideas of resistance and engagement. *Bodies of Fluidity* places the body at the centre of the narrative. While maintaining anonymity, the maker also invites the audience into the intimate setting of the bathtub, pushing and pulling between knowing and not-knowing the body’s secrets. This film thus troubles ideas of Black bodies as solely containers for either racism or celebration, rejecting the “constructed otherness” that BIPOC fat people experience so frequently (Senyonga, 2017, p. 60.) The film suggests that, in the first instance, Black bodies are the vessels for people’s experiences, without diminishing the

impact of the heavy discourses that are laid over top of Black skin. This film takes the poetry of words and body and allows it to pour out a rolling narrative in place of a singular limited story.

Drawing on some of the same strands as *Bodies of Fluidity, Cycling*, made by an Indo-Caribbean woman, focuses on the body's experience of engaging with reproductive labour. Using the analogy of riding a bicycle, the maker considers the ways in which the menstrual cycle, with its continuities and disruptions, reveals different secrets of the body. The intimate space of the maker's phone use is exposed, with navigation of various fertility sites rapidly displayed. Notably, the film shares a snippet of a smaller-bodied white woman explaining that fertility declines with age, situating reproductive capacity within specific embodiments. Given the huge disparity in reproductive outcomes for Black mothers (Cooper Owens & Fett, 2019), in particular, and the virulence aimed at fat bodies attempting reproduction (Boero, 2009; McPhail et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2020), the maker's emphasis on foregrounding fertility is apt. The film resists a linear narrative arc, instead using the loops of the cycle as a motif that recurs and withdraws throughout the voiceover. The maker reveals that

I am told to track my cycle. To judge it. To judge my body. To hold it to an unrealistic expectation. To all of a sudden morph my body into a thin body, to contour my body from the inside out.

This longing for reproduction is thus acknowledged as both personal and embedded in a bigger politic that aims to curtail the reproductive freedom of racialized women generally and bigger racialized women in particular. In this film, one person's individual experience is juxtaposed against a bigger structure that positions Black, brown, and Indigenous fat embodiment as potentially risky. As Parker et al. (2020) noted, "contemporary constructions of the problematized fat pregnant body, and the disciplinary technologies enacted to regulate them, do not target all fat pregnant bodies equally, but in fact are highly racialized" (p. 98). By contrast, the maker finds solace in their own continuity of cycling—through their body, through their phone, through their emotions—as a contrast to more racist and fatphobic messaging.

Finally, *S's Story* alludes to the body while keeping it entirely off the screen. The spare imagery of this film spans two train rides, one in Japan and one in Canada, narrating the maker's experiences of disjuncture, unbelonging, and movement drawing from their Japanese Canadian identity. The text explores the intergenerational impacts of fat phobia but resists the easy villainization of a mother giving dress advice to a child. Instead, the maker considers the ways that the differing mores of a transnational journey may have resulted in an inability to fit—literally and figuratively—in any setting. While finding pants to wear is put forth as the explicit example of fitting in or out, the film conveys a deep longing to find a "transnational sensibility" (Friedman & Schultersmandl, 2011) in which a hybrid biracial and transnational existence can be welcomed and contained. The maker noted that, perhaps as a result of their biracial and migratory body, "I was told that I was different, that my body was different." In this sense, the body is both metaphorical and all too real, defined by its shape and hue but also by its experience of being situated inside and outside space. Exemplified by the rapidly moving trains, which do not linger in any given space, this film explores a body outside belonging. This piece, in a scant 80 seconds of

film, thus explores issues that are taken up in theoretical materials around transnationalism, hybridity, and nationhood (Kaplan et al., 1999; Shohat, 2006).

## **Theme 2: Resistance – Our Bodies Are More Than Our Bodies**

While embodiment is central to the consideration of race and fat, dark skin and rolling flesh do not exist outside of the contexts within which we are produced. It is impossible to untangle our bodies from the history that brings us to the present—both our personal, familial history and the bigger political structures that inform and often undermine our existence. As Strings (2019) skilfully articulated, bigger Blackness has always been viewed with suspicion, which positions bigger, darker bodies as a threat to conventional mores, even as these bodies are instead being threatened. Indeed, the specific materiality that yields the body mass index (BMI) as a mechanism for the containment of flesh is grounded in racist and eugenic discourses (Harrison, 2021; Roberts, 2010). While BMI is thus viewed in many medical and fitness settings as an innocent and objective measure of bodily integrity, like our bodies, this measure is rhetorically constructed and bolstered by a range of discursive functions. Drawing from Campos' work, Strings noted that

while [B]lack women had higher BMIs than white women, they also had lower mortality rates at a given BMI. These and other findings have led some scholars to conclude that there is a racial bias in the BMI classification system. (p. 202)

Going even further, Strings (2019) noted that the architect of BMI, Adolphe Quetelet, and his quest for the “normal man”, grounded the purportedly “objective” measure in deeply eugenic tropes (p. 199).

In dialogue, the filmmakers discussed the ways our bodies are contextually derived: celebrated in specific spaces and reviled in others. The same ample rolls may delight a lover while filling a doctor with dismay; our racialized skin and features may represent kin and connection in some spaces while being exoticized or scrutinized in other (Other) spaces. Despite the difficult messaging overlaid on flesh, however, Black and brown bodies of size are nonetheless viewed as a site of empowerment and resistance. These themes are explored throughout the stories. Three films especially exemplify this theme.

*A Dedication to My Body* functions as a love letter to the maker's corporeal space. Detailing different punishing phrases that have been aimed at the filmmaker, an Indo-Caribbean woman, these phrases are dealt with summarily and replaced with affirmations that situate the maker within a positive understanding. Importantly, however, this film is not a rejection of the origin story of its protagonist. Beginning with the first notes of steelpan that orient the film, the maker connects to their Caribbean culture and sees their vibrant brown body as deeply rooted to culture and family. In focusing on the phrase “I am worthy of myself and my power,” the film thus leans into collective affirmation instead of foregrounding tropes of individual, independent empowerment. Both images and phrases reject mainstream messaging, for example, in replacing a common bathroom scale with one that is sparkly pink and that “measures” by providing affirmative phrases rather than numbers of pounds. Likewise, the focus on the Black power salute in several images ties this film back to bigger experiences of Black pride, reminding viewers that, for folks of colour, justice for one is intimately tied to justice for all. Drawing on the “radical self-love”



proposed by Sonya Renee Taylor (2018), the film thus works to use connection as a means of lifting up the maker, allowing them to be held by kin and community.

If *A Dedication to My Body* explores the impacts of Black joy, *Rooted*, made by a non-binary Black Caribbean person, takes up the deep resistance that can come from bold engagement with survival. *Rooted* is visually riveting, consisting of a single long shot of the maker's hand drawing on a sheet of paper while a spooling narrative is spoken overtop. The visual materials of this film draw on themes of roots and branches, illustrating deep relations between where we have been and where we are going. Importantly, the maker does not dodge complicity, suggesting that every person is participating in systems that privilege certain bodies and conditions over others. By acknowledging these "conditions of perpetual repetition," the film considers the deep challenges that confront attempts to undermine systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and body tyranny when these structures are so ingrained in our own independent thinking. As Harrison (2021) noted, "whether or not you love on, show up for, and transform how you view *your* body, the structure of the World [*sic*] does not shift. This is the harm of 'body positivity.'" (p. 7). Instead, the film asks us to reject naivete and "cuteness" in favour of allowing ourselves to just be. This approach to resistance centres the revolution borne of simply surviving under conditions that continue to work toward the eradication of racialized and bigger bodies. Importantly, the film does not pander toward co-opted self-care models of body positivity by just providing mindless cheerleading. Instead, *Rooted* looks unflinchingly at the myriad violent structures that operate on body and mind and prescribes a relentless opposition—bodies holding strong in the face of waves crashing down.

In *This Is Me*, joy is centred, opening with the ringing song of Trinidadian singer Ella Andall, highlighting the maker's Black Caribbean identity. The maker's body is foregrounded and framed with reverence, with each shot resisting the narrative of the maker as merely "a pretty face." Following through a visual journey of the filmmaker getting dressed in a range of bold clothes and striking accessories, this film stands as a delicious love song to resistance. Like *Rooted*, this film does not shy away from acknowledging fat hatred and racism. The filmmaker notes that the opinions of others have been continuously directed toward them, with "health trolling" masking policing of aesthetic and life choices. The rejection of these beliefs is shown as not only empowered but also deeply vital, with the maker noting that "I started to get well when I got rid of the noise." Importantly, this film transcends a narrative of beauty or health *despite* fat, views which continue to uphold conformity as an idealized state. Rather, the film recontextualizes the unruly body, as put forth by Shaw (2005), as instead a body of lush abundance. The maker triumphantly speaks back to narratives that position them as too loud, too much. Instead, they deliberately use fashion as a way of ensuring that their clothes mean that "You knew that I wanted you to see me," demanding the gaze rather than avoiding it. The film culminates with the maker stating that "I am a 50-foot golden goddess. I gave myself that name with a few of my Black sisters." The positivity in this film is an inescapable act of resistance that uses joy to categorically reject stories of Black decrepitude and fat death.

### **Theme Three: Connection – Our Bodies and Other Bodies**

The final theme that ran throughout the series of films was around connection and continuity. Filmmakers referred to, or showed images of, family members. Bodies were

positioned in community—in connection. At the same time, the network of different beliefs and systems was exposed in their chaotic tangle. This theme showcases the ways that bodies are more than bodies in figurative discourses but are also in literal webs of belongings through kin and quasi-kin relationships. Exploring our roots and leaves allows us to situate ourselves within broader structures, detailing an ecology of belonging that is the antidote to the alienation that racism, fat hatred, and other oppressions may engender. Importantly, the films do not always evoke connection or family as easy: as one film suggests, “my body is ancestral, historical... my body is political, even when I have no desire for it to be.” We may also chafe against those closest to us, find that our bodies are exposed to scrutiny within kin networks and that, as *Cycling* conveys, different aspects of reproduction may be uneasily achieved and maintained. Nonetheless, an emphasis on our interconnectedness speaks back to the neo-liberal focus on autonomy and individualism, positioning struggles as complex, always embedded in webs of human relations as well as messy intersections between identities and embodiments. The final three films take up these themes of connection, autonomy, and empowerment.

*Sometimes My Body Is Too Much to Carry* considers the ways in which the body is explicitly held within networks of understanding. Drawing from the maker’s Black Caribbean identity, the film opens by considering the body as a repository for historical, political, and familial messaging, alluding to the many different communications that exist for any one story. In response to this range of messaging, the body’s power is exposed as resistance, with Black joy once again highlighted through dance, laughter, and music. Explicitly citing Strings’ (2019) work, the film aims to resist ideas of Black women’s bodies as “social dead weight.” Instead, the film centres autonomy and freedom, foregrounding connection through shared engagement. When the maker notes that “my body does not start and end with me,” they engage with a difficult semantic twist by simultaneously celebrating the need for autonomy while also situating the body within a bigger network of systems. The film thus suggests that revolution can only be found in the confusion between autonomy and connection. What is accomplished by sharing a film in which Black joy is given primacy? Without minimizing the gruelling impacts of fat hatred and racism, *Sometimes My Body Is Too Much to Carry* nonetheless refuses to allow this message to gain primacy. As the film states, this is a body that does not require perception, that is more concerned with looking out than being looked at, and in this agency locates both community and resistance.

*Fat Thumbs* traces a genealogy of family, situating the Arab Jewish filmmaker within stories of migration and movement. Like *S’s Story*, this film centres on a specific body part, in this case thumbs, as the focus of belonging and unbelonging. On the one hand, the film focuses on ways that the maker has been rejected and made fun of, with attention lobbed at hands, hair, and racialized features. In contrast, however, the film focuses on the connection across generations, examining both continuities and disruptions between experiences of grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren. Meaningfully, this film situates fat hatred as an extension to racism, suggesting that growing bigger only extends the feeling of unbelonging that a racialized body experiences, that fat cannot make uglier that which was already seen as intrinsically flawed. The film states, “Long before I ever heard the words ‘body positivity,’ I knew that pretty was for white girls.” As Shaw (2005) noted, “Eurocentric ideals of feminine beauty have caused fatness and [B]lackness to

display an uncanny coincidence of boundaries as they are both physical attributes that immediately displace some women from the Western beauty arena” (p. 143). In common with several other films, the maker draws on ethnically specific music to situate Arab identity, invoking both the heavy abayas worn by their grandmother as well as the lure of rich challah dough as connected and contradictory to contemporary existence. The film closes with an acknowledgement of the ways in which connection is conveyed to subsequent generations, noting the physical commonalities between the maker and their children as well as the power of story and action to bind people together across generations.

The final film in the series, *Wings*, explores the experience of its South American-born Indigenous maker through waves of assimilation and rejection, migration and connection. Aesthetically, the film allows the audience to see the maker in the act of creation, watching from behind as they execute a painting of themselves with enormous colourful wings. While viewers never see the filmmaker’s face directly, the focus is on their body in action while the narrative explores themes of family and connection. The film considers the ways that bodies may attempt to pass—through upward mobility, respectability politics, athleticism, and plastic surgery—while also acknowledging both the futility of trying to erase Indigenous aesthetics and the deep ways that such assimilation may enact thefts of soul and salvation. As Robinson (2020) noted, “Indigenous fatness—particularly that of women—is used to justify ongoing colonial domination and control by settlers and their governments.” (p. 15). The film, which once again uses music to anchor ethnicity, exposes grief at being cast out as well as pain at the cost of conformity. Like *Fat Thumbs*, the film eventually builds connection among family. The closing sequence is narrated in Spanish but references the maker’s grandmother, who spoke only the Indigenous Quechua language. The maker acknowledges their roots and expresses the hope that their children will maintain this pride in connection going forward.

### Conclusion

As a field, social work needs to stretch itself toward a more elastic understanding of embodiment, one which considers the myriad permutations of racism and the ways that an intentional intersectional analysis, drawn from the roots of Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 2000), can reveal the entwined tracks of body fascism and racist capitalism (Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019). To ignore the ways that healthist structures and fat hatred impact the lives of racialized clients and populations is an unforgivable omission on the part of social workers and social work educators (Abel, 2020; Friedman, 2012). The films under consideration here allow for a robust engagement with the lives of racialized fat people and help broaden understandings of the ways that fat hatred and racism are experienced personally and structurally.

The films provide substantive content, but they also provide important indications of the role of arts-based research in social work knowledge and education. Drawing on multimedia and arts-informed techniques, digital storytelling prioritizes story and experience to enhance understanding (Rice, 2020). Digital storytelling, in particular, allows for intimacy and complexity to emerge through multi-sensory engagement. The outcome of the project was a group of films, but also a sense of community among participants, suggesting that engagement with the arts allows for ongoing connection (LaMarre et al., 2022). In an area as complex and variegated as the discussion of fat and race, this technique

is an essential tool for increased knowledge. The fact that the filmmakers were themselves social work insiders only enriches the knowledge that the films have produced.

Going forward, these films live on as artifacts of understanding, provoking complex questions and difficult conversations, allowing for individuals, families, communities, and structures to be interrogated and assessed, and providing a rich and thick web of experience to stand against liberal and modernist notions of truth around health and bodies. This knowledge is essential in the face of an increasingly virulent hostility toward fat people that manifests in medical violence (Roberts, 2010), the withdrawal of children into child protection on the basis of racist assertions of medical neglect (Burke, 2021), and the continuous shaming and blaming of fat people of colour for violence and health outcomes that are symptoms of racism rather than personal failings. These films aim to respond to Harrison's assertion:

We have breath in our lungs, but existence, or who does and does not exist, is determined by people unlike us, for whom white supremacy—and more specifically anti-Blackness—and cisheterosexism remain at the helm... We can be physically touched, seen, and heard, and still so much about how we navigate through and experience life is so under researched, undervalued, and dismissed. (p. 86)

The wisdom of these stories foregrounds experiences of the body but also reminds us that the body is always more than a body, always a body in relation—to other bodies, to discourses and systems, and to the networks of understanding around us. As a result, these stories, while beginning to populate our understanding, can only be the beginning of a broader conversation about fat and race that situates Black, brown, and Indigenous fat people within a rhetoric of obesity that is simply another manifestation of racism and colonialism. Liberation can only occur in the midst of rallying for analyses of racism and fat hatred to be taken in tandem, to understand the complex alchemy of fat and racialized experiences and to begin to provide substantive, nourishing and anti-oppressive supports. These films allow for an enhanced understanding that is essential to that liberatory politic.

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### **Author Note**

Readers who wish to view the films may contact the corresponding author for details.

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