



Book Review

Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness

Harrison, D. L. (2021). North Atlantic Books. ISBN 978-1623175979 (paper) CDN\$19.95. 144 pages.

JULIANNA KOWLESSAR
Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada

In his 2019 song, *Flaws and Sins*, late American rapper Juice WRLD sings, “I’m all, I’m really all in; In love with all your flaws and sins; Your scars are really gorgeous; Ain’t that a weird way to give compliments?” (Higgins, 2019). Throughout *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, Da’Shaun L. Harrison places a substantial emphasis on human flaws and delineates how the “flaws” of diverse groups, and in this case those of fat, Black, masc individuals, are used to further segregate and dehumanize them. The author implies that, on a broad scale, people must rethink their consideration of human “flaws,” acknowledging and appreciating them, instead of capitalizing on them to coerce individuals into doubting their worldly existence and self-presentation. Fundamentally, as Harrison posits, anti-fatness and anti-Blackness coexist and must be viewed together to understand how they work to oppress fat, Black individuals.

Da’Shaun L. Harrison is an American author who identifies as Black, fat, queer, and trans. In addition to writing, Harrison works at *Scalawag Magazine* as the Editor-at-Large and speaks on the topics of “Blackness, queerness, gender, fatness, disabilities, and their intersections” (Harrison, 2021, para. 1). They also serve as an abolitionist in Atlanta, Georgia. They believe in documenting the lived experiences of subjugated groups, which may eventually lead to a sense of freedom, grounded in understanding and empathy. In keeping with these themes, Harrison has written an array of online publications that have been incorporated in various magazines and websites.

Similarly, Harrison’s book provides an in-depth examination of the history of anti-fatness as anti-Blackness and the oppressive systems that have

Correspondence Address: Julianna Kowlessar, Graduate Program in Communications & Culture
Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, ON, M5B 2K3; email: jkowlessar@ryerson.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788



converged throughout history to incessantly catalyze the exploitation of fat, Black individuals. Fundamentally, the author examines how anti-fatness and anti-Blackness have been amalgamated by several systems of oppression. To do this, Harrison structures the book thematically, with chapters focussing on the inadequacy of self-love, “desire/ability,” healthcare, policing, the wars on drugs and obesity, gender identity, and abolitionism in relation to freeing fat, Black bodies. To understand how these converging systems of oppression have operated to exclude fat, Black bodies, Harrison discusses race as a manufactured concept instead of one that is innate, explaining that “[Africans] became objects to be subjugated, poked and prodded, and turned – at least through language and especially through the ways in which they were engaged – into Beasts” (p. 33).

In the first chapter, Harrison opens by expressing that self-love and body positivity are not sufficient to mitigate the harmful effects of anti-fatness and systemic violence (pp. 4-5). Although there has been a recent shift in social media trends toward encouraging individuals to engage in self-acceptance and body positivity, such acts of kindness towards oneself do not help dismantle ingrained systems of oppression that seek to marginalize fat, Black individuals. As Harrison implies, self-love solely seeks to solve conflicts with oneself on an individual level, as opposed to a societal one (p. 4). Therefore, notions of self-love and body positivity promote an excessive individual focus, which may create blind spots in identifying the myriad of other complex societal issues. Highlighting injustices that stem from physical appearances, the author goes on to explore and discuss identities that are privileged enough to experience Beauty, explaining that conjointly viewing “fatness *as* Blackness” is not desirable (pp. 12, 18). This categorization of groups who are entitled to advantages based on their outward appearance speaks to the superficiality of society, which continues to favour specific individuals who look a certain way over others.

To further outline systems of oppression, in Chapter Three Harrison explores dominant norms around race and health that have been imposed on fat, Black individuals. The author examines the negative framing around exercise as a means of discipline and restriction and, more critically, the only way to counteract fatness (p. 37). Similar rules apply to diet culture, where individuals are taught to view their relationship with food as foreign, as opposed to one that is innate, persuading them to eat in certain ways for the goals of weight loss, thinness and desirability (pp. 40-41). Specifically, Harrison posits that “anyone who still has a vested interest in diet culture, intentional weight loss, and/or these types of programs is making the active decision to invest in systemic anti-fatness, anti-Blackness, ableism, misogyny/-noir, and capitalism” (p. 44). However, this statement could be construed as a primary weakness of the book. In particular, while this framing challenges status quo equations of weight and health, readers who are engaged in intentional weight loss based on a sense that it enhances their quality of life, may not understand why Harrison brands diet and exercise as anti-fat or anti-Black. Consequently,

the author's firm position on the harmfulness of diet and fitness industries may be read as leaving little latitude for individual autonomy.

In Chapter Four, Harrison looks at how factors such as weight and size, coupled with racist tendencies, contribute to the conceptualization of Black individuals as Beasts (pp. 50, 58). In relation to this, the author states that "Black subjects are not denied humanity, or dehumanized through slavery, but rather are forced to become the Beast of humanity; the lowest on the scale of hegemonic humanity and placed among 'the animal'" (p. 57). This classification provides insight into the lived experiences of fat, Black individuals, which often include struggles to be accepted for who they are as well as misdirected fear that results in the ongoing exploitation of and violence towards such individuals.

In Chapter Seven, Harrison discusses ways for abolition to take shape, particularly in relation to the liberation of fat, Black individuals (p. 106). As an example of abolition, the author explains that "one reason for defunding police could be to allocate those additional funds to education programs, or to fund affordable housing and shelters for folks without homes" (p. 106). Serving as a strength of the book is the emphasis placed here on viewing abolition as an ongoing process, whereby fat, Black individuals, along with allies, strategize ways to achieve freedom by deconstructing the hegemonic norms ingrained in an array of social institutions including but not limited to those associated with education, healthcare, employment, and the law (pp. 106-109). Harrison's ability to unpack and fluidly discuss the intersections of anti-fatness as anti-Blackness, drawing on several oppressive systems, is fused in this final chapter with the introduction of abolition as a means of moving forward and healing. This allows readers to contemplate ideas around transformation as they approach the end of the text.

In conclusion, throughout *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, Harrison eloquently outlines many ways that anti-fatness converges with anti-Blackness, illustrating that for a complete understanding, they must be viewed in tandem (pp. 1-3). The attention Harrison places on human flaws, and specifically on how the perceived flaws of fat, Black masc individuals are used against them in the context of multiple interlocking systems of oppression, provides readers with a comprehensive overview of how societal structures and systems are implicated in the persistent discrimination of marginalized groups. Returning to Juice WRLD's lyrics in *Flaws and Sins*, this text points to the importance of critically analyzing the multiple ways and reasons why fat, Black individuals are deemed "flawed" and subsequently illuminating how accepting these not as flaws, but rather as deeply ingrained forms of discrimination, can lead to radical transformation and healing. In other words, readers who are interested in the application of intersectional theory to better understand the ways dominant societal structures are implicated in the oppression of subordinated individuals will appreciate and learn a lot from this text.

References

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