

A Black Feminist Study of Emotional Performativity of Fat Bodies in Rene Watson's Skin and Bones

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ABSTRACT:

This paper offers a Black feminist reading of emotional performativity in Renée Watson's *Skin & Bones* (2024), arguing that the novel represents fat Black womanhood as an affective labor shaped by racialized fatphobia, respectability politics, and institutional care. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theorization of emotions as performative and circulating forces (affective economies), the study contends that Lena and her intimate circle are repeatedly positioned to perform socially acceptable emotions, gratitude, pleasantness, self-blame, and happiness, in order to be treated as legible, deserving, and safe within medical, commercial, and romantic spaces. At the same time, Watson's narrative stages counter-performances of affect, anger, refusal, laughter, tenderness, and communal care, that reorient shame away from the body and toward the structures that stigmatize it. The study aims to map how emotions such as shame, disgust, fear attach to fat Black women's bodies in the novel. Guided by close textual analysis and an intersectional framework informed by Black feminist and fat studies, the paper addresses two research questions: How does the novel depict the emotional regulation demanded of fat Black women in everyday institutions? The paper concludes that Watson's novel reframes fat Black embodiment not as a personal problem to be corrected but as a politically charged site where emotions become both instruments of social control and resources for collective liberation.

Keywords: Black feminism, Emotional performativity, Sarah Ahmed, Rene Watson, Skin and Bones.

Introduction

In her work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) Sarah Ahmed argues for a radical intervention in affect theory by stating that emotions are not private psychological states within subjects but social, cultural forces affecting the surfaces of individual and collective bodies. Central to Ahmed's project is the idea of emotional performativity, a theory that extends Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity to affect. In it, Ahmed shows how emotions do not simply express something that is already the case.

Instead, emotions create the objects, subjects, and communities they name. Instead of asking 'What are emotions?' Ahmed provocatively queries, "What do emotions do?," a question which shifts the conception of affect from ontology to praxis, from being to becoming ⁽¹⁾.

Ahmed's interrogation of emotional performativity comes at a decisive juncture of contemporary theory between the intentionality of phenomenology and the discursive and power dynamics of poststructuralism. Her work challenges the two dominant models of emotion:

the psychological model of emotion “inside out,” which argues feelings rise within and move out to objects, and the sociological model of emotion “outside in,” which claims emotions exist in collectives before being absorbed by individuals. In her text, Ahmed ⁽²⁾ proposes a radical alternative in opposition to both frameworks. In her words, “emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place” (pg. 10). This formulation does not consider emotions to belong to subjects or objects but to be processes on relationships that create boundaries, surfaces and orientations through repetitions of encounters and citations of affects.

Ahmed’s perception of emotional performativity directly references Judith Butler’s theorizing of the performativity of gender. Butler states that performativity is “the process whereby a signifier, rather than simply identifying a referent that already exists, works to generate that which it apparently names.” According to Judith Butler, performativity refers to “the power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration”. Thus, what does happen via ‘the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces’ (p. 20) the very thing which it references? According to Ahmed, the same dynamic applies to emotions. When we say “That’s disgusting! When we say, “I’m disgusted!” or “I’m afraid,” we do not merely describe a pre-existing affective state. Instead, we produce disgust or fear through the speech act ⁽³⁾. Emotions work to create performative objects and subjects that they seemingly reference. The act of speaking does not simply notify a state of affairs, the effect of the speech act. Would thus be a state of disgust, which is then adhered to as a disgusting object ⁽⁴⁾.

The notion of ‘iterability’ is central to performativity: “A performative utterance can only ‘succeed’ if it repeats a coded or iterable utterance: it works precisely by citing a norm or convention that already exists” ⁽⁵⁾. This indicates that emotional performatives deploy and augment existing economies of feeling, rather than emerging from individual intention. When white supremacist rhetoric refers to immigrants

as ‘disgusting’, this does not produce disgust but instead cites and reactivates long histories of affect and racist disgust, colonial disgust reactions and nationalist resignations. The success of the speech act or its generation of effects occurs precisely through the citational practice. It is thus a repetition with a difference that reaffirms and further displaces already-existing affective formations ⁽⁶⁾.

A distinguishing aspect of Ahmed's work is her insistence that “it is the object of emotion that circulates, rather than emotion as such”. This formulation challenges the dominant “affective contagion” model, which suggests emotions pass seamlessly from body to body like a virus or electric current. Although Ahmed accepts the idea of affect travelling between bodies, they do not pass “rather smoothly”, she warns. The contagion model, Ahmed argues, tends to underestimate the extent to which affects are contingent (involving the hap of a happening): to be affected by another does not mean that an affect passes from you to me (p. 10).

Instead, Ahmed proposes that objects become saturated with affect through histories of circulation and accumulate what she calls “affective value” as they are passed around social fields. Objects become “sticky,” they accumulate associations, meanings, and feelings that adhere to their surfaces through repeated encounters. As Ahmed explains, “Objects are sticky because they are already attributed as being good or bad, as being the cause of happiness or unhappiness”. This stickiness is “an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs”, not an inherent property of the objects themselves ⁽⁴⁾. Drawing on the etymology of “impression,” which contains within it the “press” of one surface upon another, Ahmed theorizes emotions as involving an “affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace”. Stickiness describes “an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs,” whereby certain associations accumulate and intensify over time. As Ahmed writes, disgust “sticks to that which is near it; it clings.” Crucially, this stickiness is not random but follows racialized and gendered patterns: “Some

bodies are assumed to be the origin of bad feeling... fear sticks to these bodies”⁽²⁾.

This circulation creates “affective economies”, borrowing from Marx's critique of capital to describe “how emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field”. Just as commodities accumulate surplus value through circulation in capitalist economies, signs and bodies accumulate affective value through circulation in emotional economies. Central to Ahmed's theory is the concept that “emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs... The more signs circulate, the more affective value they accumulate”⁽⁴⁾. The power of these economies lies in their capacity to align individuals with collectives: “emotions work by aligning 'individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments”⁽²⁾.

Ahmed's account of emotional performativity is heavily reliant on the concept of impression, which she adopts from David Hume but reconfigures. Ahmed points out that the term “impression” can refer to many different things all at once. For example: an effect on the feelings of a subject (“she made an impression”); a belief (“to be under an impression”); an imitation or image (“to create an impression”); or a mark made on a surface (“to leave an impression”) among other uses. Ahmed suggests that “we need to remember the press in an impression.” By that, she means that forming an impression is not simply an act of perception and cognition. Instead, it also involves the material affect of one surface on another. This is a two-way encounter. And it is that encounter that leaves a mark or trace⁽⁴⁾.

Ahmed's phenomenology is therefore based on this emphasis on impression as ‘contact’. Using Descartes's *The Passions of the Soul*, Ahmed argues that various objects do not excite various passions because they are various but because of the various ways they may do us harm or good. This formulation puts into question the idea that objects are presumed to have affective properties.

In other words, we do not love and hate because objects are good or bad. Rather, they are judged to be ‘beneficial’ or ‘harmful’. Ahmed synthesizes Descartes's emphasis on contact with phenomenology's concept of intentionality: “Emotions are intentional in the sense that they are 'about' something: they involve a direction or orientation towards an object”. But emotions are not merely about objects; they are also shaped by contact with objects. “Emotions are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects”⁽⁴⁾. Neither model, aboutness or contact, presumes that objects have material existence; “objects in which I am involved can also be imagined” (p. 7). A memory can serve as the object of feeling; the texture of a remembered touch can generate present disgust or longing.

The speech act “That's disgusting!” functions, Ahmed suggests, as a form of vomiting, “an attempt to expel something whose proximity is felt to be threatening and contaminating”. To name something as disgusting “is to transfer the stickiness of the word ‘disgust’ to an object, which henceforth becomes generated as the very thing that is spoken”. The word “disgust” itself becomes sticky, adhering to certain bodies and objects while sliding off others. This sticking is never innocent; it relies on and reiterates hierarchies of power that determine which bodies are marked as clean or contaminated, civilized or primitive, proper or abject⁽⁴⁾.

Crucially, disgust reactions require shared witnessing to generate their effects. “The speech act is always spoken to others, whose shared witnessing of the disgusting thing is required for the affect to have an effect” (p. 94). As⁽⁷⁾ argues, “Through public statements, we want to distance ourselves from this uncomfortable proximity. In uttering the phrase, we call upon others to witness our pulling away” (p. 131). The demand for witnesses reveals that disgust is never simply individual expression but always already social performance. The speech act ‘That's disgusting!’ generates “a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event”, creating what Ahmed

calls “collective feelings” that align individual bodies with social collectives.

Ahmed demonstrates how disgust maintains hierarchies through its spatialization of value. Drawing on ⁽⁸⁾ work, she notes that “disgust reactions are not only about objects that seem to threaten the boundary lines of subjects, they are also about objects that seem lower than or below the subject, or even beneath the subject” (p. 9). The spatial metaphor of above and below becomes materialized through disgust reactions that designate certain bodies, practices, and spaces as lower. This verticality structures colonial and racist disgust, as in Darwin's account of his “utter disgust” at the proximity of a “naked savage” whose hands touched his food. The native body stands for dirt, for lowness, not because it is inherently dirty but because dirt has been constructed as the border object through which the civilized white body maintains its elevation, its apartness.

Ahmed writes that disgust involves “a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects,” such that “contact is felt as an unpleasant intensity.” Crucially, disgust requires getting close: “The object must have got close enough to make us feel disgusted.” This proximity then triggers recoil, “the body pulls away with an intense movement that registers in the pit of the stomach,” (p. 85) creating distance from that which has contaminated. Yet paradoxically, as Ahmed notes, pulling away from the object keeps the object at the centre of attention, such that the disgusted subject remains fixated on that which repels.

The stickiness of disgust operates through what Ahmed identifies as metonymic and metaphoric operations. Through metonymy, “anything which has had contact with disgusting things itself becomes disgusting.” Thus, spaces occupied by marginalized bodies, foods associated with particular cultural traditions, and practices linked to specific communities can all become sites of disgust through proximity. Through metaphor, disgust moves through resemblance: objects that “look like” other

disgusting objects accumulate similar affective charges.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986) provides a phenomenological account of how Black subjectivity is constituted under the white gaze, an analysis that profoundly shapes Ahmed's understanding of how emotions work on and through racialized bodies. Fanon's famous encounter with a white child on a train crystallizes the affective production of racial difference: “Look, a Negro!” It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by... “Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!” Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me” (pp. 111-112). This passage reveals how fear operates as an affective economy that produces both the white child's body and the Black man's body through their encounter. The fear does not originate in either body; rather, it circulates between them, accruing intensity as it moves. The white child's declaration transforms the Black man into an object of fear, someone whose very presence threatens the white child's safety. Yet this fear is not a natural or inevitable response to the Black man's appearance. Instead, it emerges from a long history of racist narratives that have already positioned Blackness as dangerous, threatening, and phobogenic (fear-producing).

Fanon describes how the Black body is “given back” through this fearful encounter: “My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning” (pp. 113-114). The phrase “given back” is crucial; it suggests that the Black body is taken from the Black subject through the violence of the white gaze and then returned, but in a degraded, objectified form. Ahmed explains that this process involves what Fanon calls the epidermal racial schema; the skin becomes the site where racial meanings are inscribed and where the Black subject experiences profound self-alienation. Unlike Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema (the pre-reflective sense of one's body in space), the epidermal schema describes how the Black subject is overdetermined from without: “I am not given a second chance. I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to

the 'idea' others have of me but to my appearance" (9).

The performativity of emotion is evident here in how fear does specific work: it establishes corporeal distance between the white child and the Black man, it positions the Black body as the cause of fear (even though the fear precedes and exceeds this particular encounter), and it authorizes the white child's flight into the mother's arms, which represents a protective enclosure that confirms white familial bonds against the threatening racial other. As Ahmed notes, fear "reestablishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface, as a reading that produces the surface (shivering, recoloring)". The emotions do not simply respond to pre-existing racial differences; they actively produce those differences by making certain bodies feel dangerous and other bodies feel endangered.

The stickiness of racial epithets is not intrinsic to their phonetic properties; rather, it emerges from "histories that have stayed open". Each utterance of a racial slur opens up, makes present and visceral, the long history of racism, slavery, colonialism, and violence that the word carries. The word sticks to the body it names, transforming that body into an object of hate, and the body cannot simply refuse or reject this naming. As Judith Butler argues in *Excitable Speech*, the one who is named by hate speech is "initiated into temporal life within language... by being called a name". The violent interpellation of the racial slur creates the racialized subject as always-already marked, always-already available for racist violence.

When applied to Black female fat bodies, Ahmed's theory of emotional performativity illuminates a profound intersection of oppressions where race, gender, and body size converge in what Kimberlé Crenshaw terms "a single, synthesized experience" rather than "the sum of racism and sexism." The Black fat female body exists at what Crenshaw describes as a "traffic intersection" where multiple systems of subordination collide, becoming a site where

disgust, shame, fear, and anger accumulate with particular intensity.

In order to understand how emotional performativity 'works' specifically on Black female bodies, we must grapple with what Patricia Hill Collins calls, "controlling images." These are derogatory stereotypes, which "provide the basis for the dehumanization of Black women and the exploitation of their labor". Collins notes five major controlling images: the Mammy, the Matriarch, the Welfare Mother, the Black Lady and the Jezebel. Each image does particular ideological work, thus defining Black womanhood against the "cult of true womanhood" which positioned middle-class white women as the embodiment of purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity (8).

These images exert control over the body. Collins describes the Mammy, for example, as having "functions [that] are magnificently physical. The body is involved, sensuous, funky in the image, the part of women that white southern America was deeply fearful of." With denouncing sexiness of Black women and hyper-embodying them, the image marks them as 'bodies whose only function was to serve' while simultaneously ensuring their exclusion from the categories of femininity, desirability. In contrast, the Jezebel image ascribing 'the sexually aggressive Black woman' originated under slavery to ascribe all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive woman, thus providing a powerful warrant for sexual violence ⁽¹⁰⁾.

These images illustrate what Hortense Spillers theorizes as the difference between body and flesh. In her seminal essay *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Spillers argues that the brutality of the Middle Passage and slavery produced what she calls the "hieroglyphics of the flesh." She defines this term as the marks inscribed through "the calculated work of iron, whips, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet," which transfer from generation to generation. For Spillers, flesh names the condition of Black people rendered as property, as speaking commodities outside the realm of human subjectivity. The white body, by contrast, is constituted through its violation and

domination of Black flesh, constructing itself as the sovereign subject against the objectified other⁽¹¹⁾.

bell hooks extends this analysis through her concept of the “oppositional gaze,” describing how Black women have historically been positioned as objects of a white supremacist, patriarchal gaze that either renders them invisible or hyper-visible in stereotyped ways. As hooks writes, “Bombarded with images representing black female bodies as expendable, black women have either passively absorbed this thinking or vehemently resisted it.” This double bind, of hypervisibility (as stereotype) and invisibility (as subject), creates what Rasul A. Mowatt et al. describe as Black women's experience of simultaneous “hypervisibility in body politics” and “systemic invisibility” as full human beings⁽¹²⁾.

When we layer fatness onto this racialized and gendered corporeal schema, the emotional work of disgust intensifies exponentially. The Black, fat body is perhaps the ultimate “sticky object” in the Western visual field. It is the surface upon which the history of scientific racism and the imperative of slenderness have congealed. Sociologist Sabrina Strings, in *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019), provides the historical genealogy for this stickiness. Strings demonstrates that fatphobia did not arise purely from medical concerns but as a tool of racial differentiation. In the Renaissance, “plumpness” was celebrated in European art through images of voluptuous white Venuses. However, with the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and increased presence of enslaved Africans in European cities, aesthetic preferences began to shift: Black women were depicted as “thin, sickly servants, seen as lowly and inferior,” while fatness itself became increasingly associated with racial otherness⁽¹³⁾.

The association between fatness and Blackness served multiple ideological functions within emerging racial capitalism. As Strings demonstrates, Protestant morality combined with Enlightenment scientific racism to construct fat bodies, and especially Black female bodies, as

signs of moral debasement, lack of self-control, and primitive excess. Ahmed explains that disgust functions as a contact zone: “To be disgusted is to be affected by what one has rejected” (p. 86). When a white-centric society reacts with concern (a mask for disgust) toward Black fatness, it is performing a boundary-making ritual. The fat Black woman is read as a failure of neoliberal self-governance. The emotion sticks to her skin, making her appear as the physical embodiment of the out of control, a stranger who threatens the social order simply by taking up space.

This racialized construction of fatness persists into the present. Rachel Sanders argues that contemporary obesity discourse disproportionately targets Black women, perpetuating stereotypes of them as “indulgent, undisciplined bad mothers who exploit state funds and deplete the economy.” The “cumulative effect of their excess weight coupled with their skin colour means that Black women are more likely than white women to be classified as heavy by police officers.” In this affective economy, fat becomes a sign that sticks to Blackness, and Blackness becomes a sign that sticks to fat, in a mutually reinforcing circuit of devaluation⁽¹⁴⁾.

Applied to Black fat female bodies, this dynamic reveals how these bodies are constructed as always-already too close, as invasive presences that threaten to contaminate white, thin bodily space. The fat Black woman's body is read as taking up too much space, as refusing the demand to minimize and disappear that governs acceptable femininity. The association of fatness with animality, excess, and uncontrolled appetite, itself a racialized trope, means that fat Black bodies are read through accumulated histories of anti-Black dehumanization. The Black fat body thus becomes what Ahmed calls a “fetish object,” an entity onto which bad feelings stick so intensely that it comes to embody badness itself.

While disgust marks Black fat bodies as objects to be expelled, shame operates through a different affective register, one centered on exposure and the painful intensification of self-consciousness. Ahmed defines shame as “an

intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body" (p. 103). Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre, she notes that shame involves "an intimate relation of myself to myself" that is nevertheless dependent on "how the subject appears before and to others." The shamed subject is "visible and not ready to be visible," caught in an exposure they cannot control ⁽¹⁵⁾.

For Black fat women, this dynamic of shame operates at the intersection of multiple systems of surveillance and judgment. The "Strong Black Woman" (SBW) stereotype, as analyzed by Diana Godbolt et al., creates expectations that Black women should be emotionally immune to stress, never showing vulnerability or need. When Black fat women fail to embody this impossible standard, when their bodies themselves are read as evidence of failure to control appetite or maintain discipline—shame becomes a means of disciplining both body and psyche ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Ahmed's analysis of shame helps illuminate why this dynamic is so psychically devastating. She writes that in shame, "the badness of an action is transferred to me, such that I feel myself to be bad." Unlike guilt, which can be resolved through reparation or apology, shame "consumes the subject and burns on the surface of bodies" ⁽⁴⁾. For Black fat women, shame operates as what Ahmed calls a "double play of concealment and exposure": the desire to hide the shameful body coincides with the impossibility of hiding, given that fat Black bodies are hyper-visible in white supremacist, fatphobic culture.

For Black fat women, this silencing operates with particular force. Shaw Nevins ⁽¹⁷⁾ writes about fat Black women in public space:

The fat Black woman's body poses a dual challenge to the colonially inspired dominant aesthetic norms... Her fat black body resists both imperatives of whiteness and slenderness as an ideal state of embodiment. Her large size also insists that her presence be acknowledged. (p. 10)

This insistence on presence, on being seen rather than remaining invisible, is read as aggressive, as

a violation of the unspoken rule that marginalized bodies should minimize themselves.

In bringing together Ahmed's theorization of emotional performativity with Black feminist analyses of race, gender, and fatness, the foregoing discussion has shown how affects such as disgust, fear, and shame do more than register individual feelings: they organize worlds, produce racialized and gendered surfaces, and render Black fat female bodies as paradigmatic "sticky objects" onto which entire histories of violence and devaluation adhere as analyzed in Rene Watson's novel *Skin and Bones*

Discussion

Rene Watson's *Skin and Bones* (2024) constructs the Black fat female body as a dense affective archive where historical trauma, institutional violence, and social shame accumulate through everyday encounters. Engaging Sara Ahmed's theories of emotional performativity and affective economies, this analysis demonstrates how emotions function not as private psychological states but as performative social scripts that produce, regulate, and police bodies at the intersection of anti-Blackness and fatphobia. Through its protagonist Lena Baker, a forty-year-old Black librarian navigating medical clinics, bridal boutiques, restaurants, and community spaces, Watson's novel reveals how disgust, shame, and conditional love "stick" to Black fat bodies while simultaneously charting modes of refusal through which such bodies disrupt and reorient oppressive affective regimes.

Ahmed argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* that bodies "take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others," (p. 10) with emotions functioning as "orientations of towardness and awayness to such objects" (p. 8) that leave material and psychic "impressions." (p. 25). Fear turns bodies away, disgust recoils, love pulls toward, and shame folds subjects back into themselves under real or imagined scrutiny. Emotions are not merely felt; they circulate between bodies and institutions, accruing value and organizing social hierarchies. Certain bodies become "sticky" surfaces where negative affects accumulate, transforming them into repositories

of collective anxiety, while other bodies remain unmarked, neutral, and universal. Watson's opening clinic scene literalizes this stickiness: Lena's body presses into tissue paper that "rip[s] under" her weight, an architectural failure that materializes how institutional spaces are oriented away from bodies like hers. "It's all here with me. Heavy. It's all here sitting on this table, a layer of the thinnest tissue paper under me, holding all this Blackness, holding all this bigness. I feel the tissue paper rip under me." ⁽¹⁸⁾ The too-small gown, undersized blood pressure cuff, and insufficient furniture constitute an affective environment that produces Lena's body as "too much," rendering visible how supposedly neutral medical protocols encode normative assumptions about whose bodies deserve accommodation.

The nurse's chart notation "Morbidly obese but seems happy. Dressed well, good hygiene" condenses an entire affective regime into clinical shorthand ⁽¹⁸⁾. The term "morbidly obese" (p. 20) functions as a performative utterance that binds death and pathology to living flesh before any actual disease manifests. Lena recognizes this semantic violence, noting that "morbid" means:

Disturbing, weird, unpleasant, abnormal, unhealthy. Might as well call my body gruesome, hideous, abhorrent, offensive, dreadful, unwholesome, ghastly. Might as well call me unnatural, shocking. Call my body macabre and look away. Judge me, fear me. Tell me to be afraid of what I am, tell me to fear what has become of my body. Tell me it's a disease but treat me like it's a choice. Comment on my appearance. But tell yourself it's about my health ⁽¹⁸⁾

Ahmed's analysis of disgust clarifies how such clinical language operates: to declare something "disgusting" is not to describe a pre-existing property but to performatively create an object of abjection. Over time, repeated utterances of disgust congeal into an intrinsic quality of certain bodies, naturalizing their exclusion from the category of the fully human. The medical chart does not neutrally document; it produces Lena's body as a problem requiring intervention, a site

of mortality that threatens to contaminate the healthy social body ⁽⁴⁾.

Yet the phrase "but seems happy" performs equally consequential affective work. Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* traces how happiness functions as a regulatory ideal attached to specific life choices and bodily forms, with subjects compelled to orient themselves toward prescribed objects, marriage, respectability, and self-discipline under the promise that such orientation will yield contentment. ⁽³⁾ A powerful apparatus of positive psychology and wellness culture translates correlations into moral imperatives: if thin people report higher happiness scores, individuals must pursue thinness; if married people appear more satisfied, subjects must marry. The nurse's qualification "but seems happy" signals that Lena has successfully performed the emotional labor required of Black fat women: she has compensated for her body's alleged failure by enacting cheerful grooming, appropriate affect, and visible self-care. The addendum of dressing well reassures future clinicians that this patient is not that kind of fat Black woman, the lazy, dirty, uncontrolled figure of racist imagination, but a respectable exception who demonstrates moral worthiness through aesthetic presentation.

This emotional economy becomes legible through historical context. Sabrina Strings' *Fearing the Black Body* (2019) demonstrates that modern fatphobia cannot be reduced to health discourse but emerges from Protestant moralism, scientific racism, and transatlantic slavery, with 'fat' made to adhere to Black women's bodies as evidence of savagery, barbarism, and moral inferiority while slenderness signifies white Protestant self-control. By the early twentieth century, fat Black women were degraded as diseased and barbarous in medical and philosophical discourse, an image weaponized to discipline white femininity while stigmatizing actual fat Black women. Research on early twentieth-century Black women's exercise culture reveals that Black communities themselves became "co-architects of fat stigma," with professional Black women viscerally rejecting "big, fat colored woman" mammy imagery in an

effort to counter racist stereotypes, thereby further marginalizing fat Black women's bodies⁽¹⁹⁾. Contemporary research on “thick sistahs” and “heavy disprivilege” shows how fat Black women navigate toxic intersections of hypervisibility as scapegoats and mummies alongside invisibility as legitimate subjects of care or desire, expected to “happily care for others” while denied resources, support, and respect. Rene Watson's novel emerges from and contributes to this intellectual genealogy, offering an attempt to make fat people visible by centering three plus-size Black women and refusing to relegate the fat Black woman to comic sidekick status.

The doctor's concluding remark, “you are a beautiful woman. I hope you know that. Your skin, your hair. Just gorgeous”⁽¹⁸⁾ intensifies rather than resolves the affective contradiction. This compliment follows the physician's dismissal of Lena's clearly articulated bladder infection symptoms, insistence on diabetes testing despite normal blood sugar, and prescription of weight loss absent any pathological findings. Ahmed's framework reveals how love and happiness discourses can bind subjects more tightly to injurious norms: the doctor offers affirmation on the condition that Lena accept the moral injunction to transform her body, deploying beauty as a “happiness script” that promises future belonging if only she will comply with normative demands (Ahmed, 2010, p. 55). Lena registers the violence beneath this ostensible kindness:

I smile, kind of, I think. Yes, this is a smile, a thank-you. I open my mouth to say something. To correct her? Scold her? To ask why she felt the need to tell me that she thinks I am pretty. But my words do not come. Only her words are here. They are hanging in the stale, sanitized room. When I leave, they come with me. Words are like that. They follow, linger, stay a while. Here I am, carrying what is not mine. Heavy.⁽¹⁸⁾ Ahmed's conception of stickiness finds narrative echo in this observation. The chart's clinical terminology and the doctor's compliment adhere to Lena's body as another form of weight, an emotional burden distinct from but related to

physical mass. She leaves with antibiotics and with knowledge that continued access to care depends on reproducing the performance of a role that requires constant vigilance and self-monitoring.

Public and commercial spaces similarly enact affective choreographies that produce fat Black bodies as obstacles, blockages, and problems requiring management. The bridal boutique scene explicitly titled “shopping while fat” demonstrates how service economies orient toward thin bodies with friendliness while treating fat bodies as inconceivable subjects of romance and celebration. When Lena enters with her bridesmaids, the saleswoman greets only Aspen, “Here to try on a dress?”⁽¹⁸⁾ as if a fat woman could not possibly be the bride. Lena immediately recognizes this as a “Shopping While Fat moment” (p. 69) naming the structural pattern that renders her invisible at the threshold of her own wedding preparations. Though the usual attendant eventually recognizes Lena and the expected ritual proceeds, the initial misrecognition persists as what the novel calls an “emotional hand-me-down,” another instance of exclusion to be catalogued and carried. Lena's memory of touring six stores with no dresses in her size, crying in fitting rooms, and receiving suggestions to shop online rather than stock appropriate sizes extends this logic: the architecture of retail fantasy excludes her body by design, then individualizes that structural failure as a personal problem of being fit.

Ahmed's phenomenological work on space and orientation clarifies the violence embedded in such encounters. Certain spaces welcome particular bodies by extending them into visions of possible futures; others exhaust and constrain through the constant labor of negotiating environments built for different proportions⁽⁴⁾. The restaurant booth scene literalizes this spatial politics. The hostess leads Lena and Malcolm “through the maze of tables” to a back booth where another large man already sits with his belly pressed against the table, a seating arrangement that presumes fat bodies will accept discomfort rather than require accommodation. When Malcolm requests a table instead, the

hostess protests that the section “isn’t open yet” (Watson, 2024, p. 51) despite visibly empty tables, a refusal that registers fat bodies as inconvenient disruptions to smooth service flow rather than customers entitled to comfort. The fat body that cannot fit the booth becomes a “blockage,” an obstacle that clogs spatial circulation and threatens the restaurant’s aesthetic of minimal spacing and slender silhouettes ⁽⁴⁾

Lena’s emotional response reveals the ambivalence Ahmed identifies as central to shame:

Most days, I look in the mirror and I like what I see. But then I go to a doctor’s appointment and the gown won’t fit, or I go to a restaurant and this happens. these are the moments I loathe my body. Loathe myself for losing and gaining, losing and gaining. ⁽¹⁸⁾

she reflects, indicating that her self-regard is not simply capitulation to fatphobia. Ahmed ⁽⁴⁾ argues that shame exposes both a failure to meet an ideal and the violence of that ideal itself, a doubled structure that can produce either conformity or critique. In this scene, Lena’s shame emerges not from internal inadequacy but from an environment that refuses accommodation unless she accepts confinement. Malcolm’s decision to leave and take her to a downtown food truck pod temporarily reorients the encounter: on the steps of Pioneer Square, her “hips are free to take up as much space as they need” and public space becomes a site of Black fat love rather than discipline. Yet Watson refuses to romanticize this resolution. Lena’s access to joy depends on Malcolm’s willingness to perform killjoy work calling out discrimination, abandoning the establishment, seeking alternative spaces a burden that falls on them rather than on institutions required to change.

The novel insists that contemporary fat shame is historically sedimented, transmitted across generations. Ahmed emphasizes that emotions are “historically mediated,” ⁽⁴⁾ carrying traces of prior attachments, losses, and structural violences. Lena’s announcement, “I always leave the house casket-ready” ⁽¹⁸⁾ condenses this

intergenerational inheritance into a survival practice. Her grandmother Honey’s constant question, “You got on clean clothes?” refers not to outerwear but underwear: “She was asking about my bra and panties. If you get in a car accident, you don’t want to be unladylike when the paramedics come.” (p. 21) Respectability politics and anticipated death converge in this teaching, yoking the Black woman’s body to perpetual anxiety about how it will be read, judged, and remembered even in disaster. Lena’s pre-clinic pedicure “Glad I got that pedicure yesterday. My toes are painted a bright cantaloupe color, my heels smooth and silky” (p. 21) is less frivolous vanity than ritual pre-emptive defense against contempt, an attempt to control how her body signifies when subjected to medical scrutiny.

Her grandmother’s commentary, “said I needed to lose this baby fat so a man would want me,” (p. 20) condenses the entanglement of fat stigma, heteronormativity, and economic survival that Strings and others historicize. For generations of Black women whose security depended on marriage, qualifying as desirable within a racist, fatphobic marriage market constituted a survival strategy rather than a mere personal preference. Weight loss was framed as a prerequisite to love and respect, a pathway to stability in a world that offered limited options. Watson refuses to vilify Honey and Grandma for transmitting these lessons; their insistence that Lena be “ready” and thin enough for male desire emerges from love and fear born of experience. Nonetheless, emotional performativity functions both ways; love is precisely what facilitates the transfer of shame. Ahmed notes that shame reveals “the failure of love, as a failure that in turn reveals or shows our love” ⁽⁴⁾. Lena loves her elders and knows they love her, but recognizes that the love they offer her is conditional upon her living up to their ideals. Their ideals mark her current body as an inadequate object. Lena is caught in this tension, one that she must negotiate without resolution.

The relationship Lena has with her daughter Aaliyah is intergenerational in nature. “From a distance, Aaliyah looks older than she is because

her chubby body is already developing and blossoming, and already she is taller than most of her friends”⁽¹⁴⁾. Lena expresses her wishes that are shaped by how the bodies of Black girls are de-sexualized she: “want[s] older boys not to look at her with wanton gazes, want[s] White teachers to hear the tenor of her voice and not mistake it for attitude or sass, want[s] her girlhood preserved” (p. 30). Research on adultification bias, black girls are seen as less innocent, more sexually knowledgeable, and more culpable than their white peers. The authors state that “these perceptions are especially likely to happen for ‘thick’ bodies, making associations to racist and sexist stereotypes”⁽²⁰⁾. Lena’s playful promise “I won’t call you Baby Girl once you turn ten But, Aaliyah, you’ll always be my baby girl”⁽¹⁸⁾ rings both as an affirmation and a lament; an attempt to freeze her daughter’s childhood against a world that will withdraw that presumption too early. Yet the novel also shows how Lena risks transferring her traumas to her child, teaching Aaliyah the same defensive emotional habits that once kept her own pain contained⁽²¹⁾. Ahmed’s insight that emotions can “attach us to the very conditions of our subordination as well as our dominance” (p. 182) becomes relevant that protective caution can harden into constriction, with healing requiring conscious re-performance of care that does not simply pass shame forward.

Despite its unflinching treatment of anti-fat racism, *Skin and Bones* persistently stages scenes where Lena and her friends enact feminist killjoy work, creating affective counter-spaces where Black fat joy refuses both medical disgust and sanitized white body positivity. Lena’s professional role as director of diversity, equity, and inclusion at Multnomah County Libraries positions her as institutional killjoy, describing her project as “trying to get everyone to rethink what it means to curate spaces for the public to feel welcomed, seen, and validated” while insisting “They keep trying to erase us, but I’m not letting that happen”⁽¹⁸⁾. Her initiative “Portland: Black” receives criticism from white colleagues as “exclusive,” a predictable response Ahmed identifies as characteristic: to point out racism and exclusion is to be cast as the one who

spoils institutional comfort. Lena must field white anxieties about “inclusion” while holding knowledge that inclusivity discourses often function to recenter whiteness. Yet in curating Black histories Vanport, Williams Avenue, Beatrice Morrow Cannady she opens an affective archive where Black Portlanders can experience pride and belonging rather than only injury.

Aspen’s community space Starshine & Clay functions as material counter-architecture, “a sanctuary of self-love, art, and healing” offering yoga and dance classes that don’t make Black girls or big girls feel out of place. Created by knocking down walls between two houses purchased with inheritance money, the space literalizes Ahmed’s argument that emotions can be reoriented through creating alternative environments where fat Black bodies are normative inhabitants rather than blockages to be managed. Kendra’s “whine & wine” tradition foregrounds yet another mode of affective re-performance. After recounting disastrous dates and fetishizing objectification, “I love a BBW,” she concludes, “I might be single forever. I’m just accepting that,” then immediately analyzes the gendered asymmetry in fat stigma: “Big men are called teddy bears. We’re called pigs.” She notes that “no one ever tells a man that he’d have a woman if he just lost weight”⁽¹⁸⁾ exposing how fat stigma disproportionately burdens women. Ahmed⁽⁴⁾ argues that anger, though pathologized when expressed by Black women, can be politically productive affect that exposes injustice. Kendra’s blend of outrage and humor constitutes such practice: the trio’s laughter at Derek’s absurd phone-sex overture “how you gonna call already started?”⁽¹⁸⁾ refuses to internalize his dehumanizing fetish, repositioning them as critics rather than grateful recipients of male attention.

Watson inscribes critique of mainstream body positivity directly into the novel by reproducing Kelsey Miller’s essay “how whiteness killed the body positive movement”⁽¹⁸⁾. Miller and others document how fat activism pioneered largely by queer women and women of color has been colonized by white women who center their own marginalization while ignoring how fatphobia functions as an index of anti-Blackness. By

embedding this essay in a novel about a fat Black woman in Portland, Watson performs a double intervention: she refuses to allow Lena's story to be read as generic body-positive narrative of individual self-acceptance, instead situating it within explicitly racialized analysis of how whiteness appropriates and sanitizes radical fat politics. The dance class scene dramatizes this critique. When a thin white woman uses the supposedly safe space to perform fragility about her "chubby tummy" (p. 137) crying and receiving validation "People actually cheer" (p. 134). Kendra and Lena recognize the affective inequality at play. The white woman's "complaint" is heard and comforted, while their structural exclusion from retail, medical care, and public space goes unacknowledged. ⁽¹⁸⁾, p. Kendra disrupts this economy:

She talks about big bodies like it's the worst thing she wants to have. It's a little inconsiderate, given she's in a room full of women with big bodies... Society accepts her. And a bad hair day or a bloated belly is not the same as literally not being able to shop in stores. ⁽¹⁸⁾

By naming this disparity, Kendra becomes the problem, with Aspen attempting to smooth over the disruption and restore happiness. Yet this killjoy work is precisely what Ahmed identifies as necessary: the willingness to spoil comfort in order to insist on structural truth.

The novel's treatment of romantic betrayal further complicates affective economies of desire and racial value. When Malcolm cheats on Lena with Constance a fat white woman the betrayal registers along multiple axes.

The feeling of relief that Constance is fat like me... The feeling of anger, jealousy that Constance is White. A reminder that White women are seen as a prize... All the work I did to love my body, my Blackness, torn apart ⁽¹⁹⁾.

This scene reveals that size alone does not determine erotic value within anti-Black culture; even a fat white body holds more affective and erotic capital than a fat Black body. Malcolm's choice exposes the limits of "Black Love" as political project when undercut by the seductive promise of happiness that proximity to whiteness

offers. Lena recognizes her body as burdened by double accumulation: the weight of fat and the weight of history, an intersectional positioning that cannot be resolved through self-acceptance alone.

Watson's formal choices mirror Ahmed's insistence that emotions are historically layered and politically saturated. The novel's structure, short, lyric chapters; interspersed historical vignettes on Black Portland; embedded essays refuses linear resolution, instead accumulating multiple temporalities and discourses. Each scene of present-day fat shame is haunted by past floods, expulsions, and mammy caricatures; each moment of Black fat joy gestures toward futures in which thickness is not a problem requiring solution but a way of inhabiting the world. The historical interludes on Vanport and Williams Avenue situate Lena's personal struggles within longer trajectories of Black spatial exclusion and community-building, demonstrating how anti-fat racism in contemporary Portland is continuous with historical patterns of white supremacist urban planning and displacement.

Skin and Bones ultimately offers a theory of thick affect, an account of how affect gathers densely around Black fat female bodies and how, through killjoy work and collective care, those bodies can begin to redistribute that affect, creating room for alternative ways of feeling, moving, and living. Ahmed's central question of what do emotions do? finds complex answer here: emotions perform the work of both oppression and liberation, disciplining bodies into conformity while also enabling those same bodies to imagine and enact lives that exceed given scripts. Lena neither achieves a simple success nor therapeutic closure. She remains deeply entrenched in structures that deem her body as excessive, risky, and problematic. She still willfully refuses to accept the terms of her abjection and insists on taking up space, even when that space is not designed for her. Her declaration "Every bit of me hard to contain... holding all this Blackness, holding all this bigness" ⁽¹⁸⁾ takes back the language of excess that has been used to pathologize her, and recasts spilling over as not evidence of failure but a glorious refusal. Her act

of unfitting reveals the injustice of the mold, forcing the world to deal with its own violent narrowness. Watson's narrativization of Black fat embodiment as Lenas acquainted herself with medical clinics, bridal stores, dance studios, and intimate relationships shows up in a refusal of both victimization and individualized redemption. Rather, Lenas navigation plots a collective practice of joy, anger, critique, and care as a way of live in a world structured for anti-Black and fat abjection ⁽²⁰⁾.

Conclusion

The study shows that fat Black womanhood is not simply a personal experience or a single social problem, but rather a site where racialized fatphobia, institutional violence, and historical trauma come together through everyday performative encounters. Findings have shown that emotions such as disgust, shame, and fear do not simply describe a preexisting condition of the fat Black body. Rather, they configure and regulate Black fat female subjects through the articulatory repetition of citational practices embedded within medical discourse, commercial architecture, and intimate intimacies. Drawing on Ahmed's theorization of emotions as

performative forces that generate the very objects they purport to describe, this study has traced how Watson's protagonist Lena Baker and her intimate circle are compelled to perform socially acceptable emotions, gratitude, pleasantness, self-blame, and compensatory happiness, in order to secure recognition, care, and safety within institutional spaces that fundamentally refuse accommodation to bodies like theirs. Through Lena's navigation of clinic examination rooms, bridal boutiques, restaurant booths, and body positivity spaces, Skin and Bones constructs what can be termed a thick affect, an account of how negative feelings accumulate with particular density around Black fat female bodies while also charting feminist killjoy practices that refuse both medical pathologization and the whitewashed appropriation of body positivity discourse. Ultimately, Watson's narrative insists that until institutions, discourses, and social spaces fundamentally reorient themselves to accommodate rather than exclude fat Black bodies, the emotional labor of managing stigma, performing respectability, and negotiating perpetual surveillance will remain an unjust burden carried by those whose bodies have been rendered socially and affectively too much.

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