

“They Don’t Know I Do It for the Culture, Goddamn:” Lizzo’s “Rumors” and the Intersectionality of Fat Black Female Representation

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Introduction

In early September 2019, the single “Truth Hurts” topped the Billboard Hot 100.¹ Lizzo, the song’s artist, had spent years toiling in the music industry to achieve success. “Truth Hurts” entered the charts two years after its initial release, slowly climbing from its use in a Netflix film and a viral TikTok meme. The sleeper hit became massive — spending a historic seven weeks atop the charts, making it the longest No. 1 reign for any rap song by a Black woman.² Yet, it would be only one of the many victories Lizzo achieved that year, which included high-profile performances at Glastonbury and SNL, three Grammy

Awards, and the title of “Entertainer of the Year” by *Time* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Melissa Viviane Jefferson, known professionally as Lizzo, had finally found mainstream recognition.

She was not the first large, Black woman to achieve renown in the entertainment industry; yet, she was the first to embrace and flaunt her body and identify fully as fat. For this, Lizzo faced resurgent criticism for her diet, size, sexuality, and relationship to Blackness. Critics ranged from anonymous commenters to celebrities like Jillian Michaels and Azealia Banks, each attempting to delegitimize her identity and self-presentation. The turning point came on August 13, 2021 when she released the song “Rumors” to the world. “Rumors” is an openly defiant reclamation of all aspects of her identity: her Blackness, her fatness, and her sexuality. Her declarations upended three

¹ Gary Trust, “Lizzo’s ‘Truth Hurts’ Hits No. 1 on Billboard Hot 100, Taylor Swift’s ‘Lover’ Leaps to Top 10,” *Billboard*, Sept. 3, 2019.

² Gary Trust, “Lizzo’s ‘Truth Hurts’ Tops Hot 100 for 7th Week, Tying for Longest Reign Ever for a Rap Song by a Female Artist” *Billboard*, Oct. 21, 2019.

hundred years of attitudes confining fat Black women, including the controlling images of the “mammy” and the “Hottentot Venus.” “Rumors” affirms Lizzo’s identity as a Black fat woman against intersecting anti-Blackness, fatphobia, and misogyny within American culture and the controlling images of the Hottentot Venus and the mammy.

Historiography

Recent historiography has brought cultural analysis of race, gender, and size into intersectional consideration. Deep discussion of race or gender did not enter academia until the 1960s. Yet, as Black history and women’s history became legitimized by academia, Black women’s histories remained clouded. Some women’s historians, like Gerda Lerner, sought to include black women into a wider

feminist framework through ideas of contributionism and a trans-racial, universal sisterhood.³ In the late 1970s, the Combahee River Collective of radical Black feminists and lesbians organized to create a new understanding of Black women within feminism and American society at large. They recognized the multiplicity of Black female experience, declaring “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”⁴ The following decade, a stunning array of interdisciplinary Black academics and artists redefined Black feminism through sociology, philosophy, and poetry.⁵ Reckoning with white-dominated second-wave feminism,

³ Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

⁴ Quoted in Mary Senyonga and Caleb Luna, “‘If I’m Shinin’, Everybody Gonna Shine’: Centering Black Fat Women and Femmes Within Body and Fat Positivity.” *Fat Studies* 10, no. 3 (2021): 279.

⁵ Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman?*

Black Women and Feminism (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982); Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983); Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

these figures generated new language and theory to describe Black women's unique experience in American society, from Alice Walker's concept of womanism to the theory of intersectionality.⁶ From this space, a resurgence of Black women's history burst forth. Deborah Gray White's *'Ar'n't I a Woman?* and Darlene Clark Hine's *More Than Chattel* employed these frameworks to recount Black women's experience in enslavement.⁷ Scholarship highlighted two key racial images that have confined Black women within American society: the

"mammy" and the "Hottentot Venus." The former defines Black women as asexualized, maternal, and subservient to whites.⁸ The latter defines Black women as deviant, hypersexualized threats to white families.⁹ Black women's history has confronted these images, noting their influence over perceptions of Black female bodies, sexualities, and status. Additionally, female Black scholars were instrumental in developing fat studies, an academic movement that challenged dominant assumptions of the body and responded to

⁶ Leslie M. Alexander, "The Challenge of Race: Rethinking the Position of Black Women in the Field of Women's History," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (2004): 50; Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139-167.

⁷ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); Darlene Clark Hine and David Barry Gaspar, *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

⁸ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2003); K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (London: Routledge, 1993); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd

ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000); Christopher J. P. Sewell, "Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present," *Journal of African American Studies* 17 (2013): 308-326.

⁹ Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 204-242; Yvette Abrahams, "Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth Century Britain," in *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, ed. Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Deborah Willis, ed., *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, ed., *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018).

widespread fatphobia in society.¹⁰ Fat studies takes the body framework established by gender history — analyzing the ideologies and oppressions inscribed onto the body — and extends this to marginalized body types. Scholars such as Andrea Shaw, Sabrina Strings, and Christopher Forth have investigated the intersections of race, gender, and fatness, finding they are deeply interconnected within American society.¹¹

Controlling Images and Intersections of Race, Gender, and Embodiment

The normative body within American and European culture is the white man, with people of color and women categorized as inferior deviations. White masculinity is further codified within the muscular body, with corpulence identified as transgressive of

health, beauty, morality, and agency over the self. Fat Black women’s “unruly” bodies triply defy this fit, white, masculine ideal of Western culture.¹² The synthesis of physical softness, femininity, and exotic otherness originates in antiquity; ancient Greek and Roman authors characterized foreign peoples as effeminate, flabby, and backwards against their own hard, masculine culture.¹³ This current runs through to the Enlightenment, as British and French ethnographers utilized anti-fatness when designing racial hierarchy. In their view, Africans’ gluttony and “plump” bodies revealed their primitive nature: Denis Diderot in the *Encyclopedie* described them as “lazy, cowardly, and very fond of gluttony” while colonial administrator Edward Long believed they had “no moral

¹⁰ Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, eds. *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Sander L. Gilman, *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); Esthe Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, eds. *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Christopher E. Forth, *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life* (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2019).

¹¹ Andrea Elizabeth Shaw, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political*

Bodies (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006); Christopher E. Forth, “Race, Bodies and Beauty: Fat, Desire and Disgust in the Colonial Imagination,” *History Workshop Journal* 73, no. 1 (2012): 211-239; Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017); Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

¹² Shaw, *The Embodiment of Disobedience*, 26.

¹³ Forth, “Race, Bodies and Beauty,” 214.

sensations, no taste but for women, [only] gourmandizing and drinking to excess.”¹⁴

The fact that certain African communities viewed corpulence as beautiful shocked Europeans, such as Belgian geographer Adolphe Burdo who marveled that “any people, however barbarous, could find grace in this monstrous deformity...Some of the women weigh four hundred pounds! And these are the favourites of kings and potentates!”¹⁵ Historian Sabrina Strings argues these encounters forged linkages between Blackness to fatness and thinness to whiteness, shaping both racial and fatphobic discourse within Europe and America¹⁶

In the nineteenth century, representations of Black people as indolent and uncivilized worked to justify slavery in America. This racial framework depended on the notion that Black people could not govern their desires. Black men were caught between

a childlike dependency and predatory savagery. The former necessitated the paternal supervision of white masters. The latter necessitated captivity, surveillance, and punishment. This tension informed understandings of Black men into the twentieth century, leading to the stereotypes of the loyal “tom;” the stupid, indulgent “coon;” and the brutish, hypersexual Black rapist.¹⁷ Similarly, the ideas ascribed onto the Black, feminine body served to perpetuate simultaneous racial and gender oppression. Bound within the regimes of white supremacy and patriarchy, Black women “occupy a position whereby the inferior half of [these frameworks] converge.”¹⁸ Like Black men, Black women in representation are given durability, fortitude, and resistance to pain. An inversion of white femininity, this strength justifies the extraction of hard labor from the ‘weaker vessel.’¹⁹ Like white

¹⁴ Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*, 96; 98.

¹⁵ Forth, *Fat: A Cultural History*, 251.

¹⁶ Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*, 143.

¹⁷ Bogle, *Blacks in American Films*, 17.

¹⁸ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 71

¹⁹ Joanna Bourke, “Pain Sensitivity: an Unnatural History From 1800 to 1965,” *The Journal of Medical*

women, Black women in representation carry an intrinsic maternal nature, which relegates them to domestic and reproductive labor. Similar to its construction of Black masculinity, white supremacist patriarchy imagined Black womanhood along a polarity between hypersexual perversity and desexualized domestication. These oppressive ideologies became calcified within what Patricia Hill Collins calls “controlling images;” in particular, the “Hottentot Venus,” “Jezebel,” and “mammy.”²⁰

The first term was the title given to Sarah Baartman, a Khoekhoe woman enslaved, publicly displayed, and posthumously studied at the turn of the nineteenth century. In European capitals, she was exhibited in the nude as the “perfect

Specimen” of the “Hottentot” (a now-derogatory ethnonym for the Khoekhoe), bearing the “kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen.”²¹ Hence “Hottentot Venus,” a name that brought into sharp contrast the refined beauty of white civilization and the sexualized, backwards aesthetics of Africans. Her exhibitors touted her body as an ethnographic and anatomical oddity; viewers fixated on her large buttocks, pathologized as “putative steatopygia,” and her labial apron.²² White anthropologists theorized the “primitive genitalia” and “voluptuousness” of the Hottentot was the source of their insatiable, savage sensuality.²³ The aesthetic, medical, and sexual gaze of white patriarchy dehumanized and sexualized Baartman, reducing her to her corpulent body.²⁴ Contemporaneously to her

Humanities 35, no. 3 (2014): 301-319; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 31.

²⁰ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 72; Shaweta Nanda. “Re-Framing Hottentot: Liberating Black Female Sexuality from the Mammy/Hottentot Bind,” *Humanities* 8, no. 4 (2019): 162.

²¹ Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*, 107.

²² Hershini Bhana Young, ““Rude” Performances: Theorizing Agency,” in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, ed. Natasha Gordon-Chipember (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 48.

²³ Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” 212-213.

²⁴ Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 39.

exhibition, the vaudeville play *The Hottentot Venus, or Hatred of Frenchwomen* debuted in Paris, shaming white Frenchmen for their attraction to Baartman instead of fair white women.²⁵ The Hottentot Venus posed a direct threat to a white sexual order. Sander L. Gilman contends that the icon of the Hottentot Venus symbolizes the association between Black femininity and corrupting sexuality within both European and American discourse.²⁶

In the United States, an interrelated image of Black female hypersexuality rose in the context of enslavement: the “Jezebel.”²⁷ This image configured Black women as sexually aggressive temptresses of white men. Like the Hottentot Venus, the Jezebel inscribed lewdness and uncontrollable lust into the Black female body. This stereotype worked to recontextualize interracial rape:

hypersexual Black women became the perpetrators and instigators, not victims, of sexual assault.²⁸ White American such as Frederick Law Olmsted perceived enslaved Black women as “gross” and “elephantine” yet “sensual” and “shameless,” filtering their bodies through the racialized immodesties of fatness and indecency.²⁹ Both the Hottentot Venus and Jezebel images denigrate Black physicality as a corrupting force. The bigness of Black women’s bodies signified the excess of their voracious appetites, alimentary and sexual.

On the opposite end of this dynamic lies the image of mammy. Whereas the Venus/Jezebel personifies Black female deviance, the mammy is composed of traits desirable to white patriarchy — domestic ability, asexuality, and utter loyalty to her enslavers. The image of the “mammy” first

²⁵ Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 42-43.

²⁶ Gilman, “White Bodies, Black Bodies,” 237.

²⁷ Nanda. “Re-Framing Hottentot,” 168.

²⁸ K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US*

Social Policy (London: Routledge, 1993), 37; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 34.

²⁹ Quoted in White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 37.

appeared in memoirs and minstrel shows after the Civil War.³⁰ Minstrelsy became a dominant artform by the end of the century, selling a racist distortion of Blackness as a comedic spectacle to white audiences.³¹ The mammy is composed of several key physical characteristics: significant fatness, dark skin tone, and a headscarf with house servant wear. Whereas Hottentot Venus' copious flesh exudes sensuality, fatness defeminizes and desexualizes the mammy, indicating her humor, strength, and contentment with enslavement.³² Her dark skin tone brings into juxtaposition the pure whiteness of her enslavers' skin, making her "a shadow against which white women's beauty may be foregrounded."³³ In personality, she is devoted to her white enslavers, skilled in domestic tasks, religious, and good-natured. Mammy does not challenge the racial order

nor the sanctity of white marriage and appears as a nostalgic, comforting figure for white society.³⁴

Hottentot Venus, mammy, and the cultural entanglements of race, fatness, and sexuality persisted beyond the nineteenth century. Fat Black women struggled for significant, positive representation within the white-dominated American media. Despite significant transformations in Black female representation, these controlling images still haunt fat Black women, as seen in the case of Lizzo.

"Rumors" and the Reclamation of Fat Black Female Embodiment

The song and music video for "Rumors" directly counters dominant narratives about Blackness, fatness, and female sexuality. Initially, Lizzo did not engage in overt political or social activism

³⁰ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 50.

³¹ Shaw, *Embodiment of Disobedience*, 102.

³² Jewell, *Mammy to Miss America*, 39.

³³ Shaw, *The Embodiment of Disobedience*, 20.

³⁴ Michael D. Harris, "Mirror Sisters: Aunt Jemima as the Antonym/Extension of Saartjie Bartmann." In *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* ed. Deborah Willis (Temple University Press, 2010), 166; Shaw, *Embodiment of Disobedience*, 19-21.

beyond the scope of other mainstream artists.³⁵ Her visibility to many has marked a triumph in representation for fat Black women; yet, in terms of representing herself, she has not gone beyond what is standard for mainstream artists. Like Katy Perry, Beyoncé, or Ariana Grande, she flaunts her body, appears in revealing clothing, and projects complete confidence.³⁶ What has made Lizzo the site of controversy is that she does these things in a large, Black body. She interprets her own embodiment through the intersectionality between Blackness, fatness, and womanhood. Her celebrations and recognition of fat Black female experience range from irreverent social media posts of her celebrating being “BLACKITY BLACK BLACK BLACK AND FATTY FAT FAT FASHION AS FUCK.” to statements

positioning her music “from experience that is from a black woman...I’m making music that hopefully makes other people feel good and helps me discover self-love. That message I want to go directly to black women, big black women, black trans women. Period.”³⁷ Lizzo’s work directly aims to increase visibility of fat Black women, stating “I want to put women who look like me in the mainstream, I want that visibility and fairness...I want little girls to see me and my dancers and be like ‘Hey, I can do that too.’”³⁸ This endeavor is expressed throughout her career, from lyrics like in her 2019 single “Tempo” (“Slow songs, they for skinny hoes / Can’t move all of this here to one of those / I’m a thick bitch, I need tempo”) to her dancer troupe “The Big

³⁵ Terah J. Stewart and Roshaunda L. Breeden, “‘Feeling Good as Hell’: Black Women and the Nuances of Fat Resistance,” *Fat Studies* 10, no. 3 (2021): 221.

³⁶ Tressie McMillan Cottom, “Lizzo, ‘Body Positivity,’ and the Impossible Expectations for Black Women’s Bodies.” *Harper’s Bazaar*, December 17, 2020.

³⁷ Quoted in Niya Pickett Miller and Ghenni N. Platenburg, *Lizzo’s Black, Female, and Fat Resistance* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), 27; Brittany Spanos, “The Joy of Lizzo,” *Rolling Stone*, January 22, 2020.

³⁸ Janelle Okwodu, “Meet the Rising Musician Who’s Starting a Body-Confidence Revolution,” *Vogue*, Feb. 9, 2017.

Grrrls,” composed entirely of plus-size Black women.³⁹

Preceding the release of “Rumors,” Lizzo faced intense racial, body, and gendered scrutiny. These comments went beyond negative opinions on her music or persona; they actively delegitimized her identity as a fat Black woman. She was named a “millennial mammy” that makes a mockery of Blackness for white audiences, criticized for her diet and for “glorifying unhealthy bodies,” and called out for twerking and wearing “inappropriate” outfits.⁴⁰ “Rumors” is directly a response to these and other commentators, with Lizzo mocking the extensive bad-faith criticism she is subjected to.

In the first line of the song, Lizzo declares “They don't know I do it for the

culture, goddamn.”⁴¹ This powerful declaration counters a prolonged assault on her Blackness. Certain people within and outside the Black community perceived Lizzo’s mainstream appeal to cater to white audience, with claims “that she makes music for white people, that she’s merely shuckin’ and jivin’ for an audience of yas kween-era white feminists.”⁴² As “Truth Hurts” climbed the charts, Black female rapper Azealia Banks repeatedly attacked Lizzo as a mammy that “makes a fool of her black self for a white American public” to profit from society’s “simultaneous lust and disgust for the black female body.”⁴³ Knowing the history of fat Black female representation in America, Banks can only see Lizzo as only representative of a white gaze. The “mammy” accusation resurfaced in the wake

³⁹ Lizzo, “Tempo,” featuring Missy Elliot, Atlantic and Nice Life Records, 2019; Janelle Okwodu, “Meet the Rising Musician Who’s Starting a Body-Confidence Revolution,” *Vogue*, Feb. 9, 2017.

⁴⁰ Ben Kaye, “Azealia Banks calls Lizzo “millennial mammy” in unprompted Instagram tirade,” *Yahoo! News*, Sept. 4, 2019; Daniella Greenbaum Davis, “Lizzo and the politically incorrect obesity epidemic,” *Spectator World*, August 26, 2019; Faith Brar, “Lizzo

Addressed the Criticism About Her “Inappropriate” Outfit at the Lakers Game,” *Shape*, Dec. 10, 2019.

⁴¹ Lizzo, “Rumors,” featuring Cardi B, Atlantic and Nice Life Records, 2021.

⁴² Brittany Spanos, “The Joy of Lizzo,” *Rolling Stone*, January 22, 2020.

⁴³ Quoted in Ben Kaye, “Azealia Banks calls Lizzo “millennial mammy” in unprompted Instagram tirade,”

of the release of “Rumors,” when user @TheFineFeminine posted in a now deleted tweet “No shade but L**** is a mammy for the white gaze. Only reason her act is marketed and executed like that.”⁴⁴ Other contemporaneous Black female stars with interracial audiences, such as Beyoncé, Cardi B, and Nicki Minaj, have not been so widely named as a “mammy.” As commentators immediately pointed out, naming the only visible darker skinned fat Black woman on the national stage a “mammy” is fatphobic and colorist.⁴⁵ As a sexual and outspoken performer, Lizzo breaks with the personality assigned to the “mammy.”

Rather than deny her racial heritage to appeal to whiteness as is seen in the “mammy” archetype, Lizzo demonstrates that “she does it for the culture” — that her

artistry speaks from and for the Black experience. In the couplet “This shit from my soul, yeah / Black people made rock and roll, yeah,”⁴⁶ Lizzo pays homage to rock pioneer Sister Rosetta Sharpe, referenced in the music video as Lizzo raises her fist, while proclaiming her authenticity.⁴⁷ Lizzo relates herself to the lineage of fat Black female performers that innovated popular music in America, encompassing blues singers Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, jazz and soul icons like Ella Fitzgerald, Aretha Franklin and Jennifer Holliday, and hip hop and R&B titans like Queen Latifah, Missy Elliott, and Jill Scott.⁴⁸ “Rumors” itself is forerun by Missy Elliot’s 2002 single “Gossip Folks,” which calls out recurrent rumors on Elliot’s weight and sexuality.⁴⁹ Lizzo seeks, in her own words, “a stake in the reclamation of

⁴⁴ Quoted in Stacy Lee Kong, “The Backlash to Lizzo’s ‘Rumors’ is a Reminder that Visibility Isn’t the Same as Progress,” *Friday Things*, Aug. 20, 2021.

⁴⁵ Maryam Muhammad, “Lizzo Is Not A Mammy, You’re Just Fatphobic And Colorist,” *The Garnette Report*, Aug, 17, 2021.

⁴⁶ Lizzo, “Rumors.”

⁴⁷ Lizzo Music, “Rumors,” *Youtube*, Aug. 12, 2021, music video, 2:10.

⁴⁸ Shaw, *Embodiment of Disobedience*, 100; Senyonga and Luna, “Centering Black Fat Women,” 274.

⁴⁹ Missy Elliot, “Gossip Folks,” featuring Ludacris, Goldmind and Elektra Records, 2002.

Black things and Black culture,” including pop music.⁵⁰ Black music critic Craig Jenkins finds the mammy accusations imply “that pop and rock belong to white people” and contextualizes “Rumors” as a rebuttal against the notion “her art isn’t Black enough.”⁵¹ Blackness is a central, not secondary, aspect in her art.

This is not to say Lizzo is not subject to a racist cultural dynamic that commodifies her Blackness. In *The Embodiment of Disobedience*, Andrea Shaw argues that the sustained popularity of full-bodied Black women relates to “the transgressive qualities of [performative] spaces:”⁵²

Full-figured black women entertain America's collective yearning to free itself from imperatives of "appropriate" cultural conduct, and while their bodies may be aesthetically marginalized, they are at the center of American longing for release from inhibiting and restrictive cultural taboos, which are

representatively embedded in the site of their black skin and fat bodies.⁵³

Black fat women are commodified for their historically transgressive bodies and sexualities. Yet, this is a function of a white audience, not Black performers. Far from Banks' accusation that Lizzo plays into white America's image of “a fat black wide eyed mammy,” this process can more eloquently be described as a “Mammification.”⁵⁴ Lizzo does not present as a mammy. Rather, white audiences strip her Blackness from her identity by consuming her as a deracialized image. As Lizzo rose in prominence, she was crowned the leader of a “Body-Confidence Revolution;” coverage of her overwhelmingly recognized her as “a beacon of self-love demonstrated through body positivity, confidence, transparency, and authenticity.”⁵⁵ Yet, as Mary Senyonga and

⁵⁰ Lizzo, “The Black History of Twerking — and How It Taught Me Self-Love,” filmed August 2021 in Monterey, California, TED Video, 8:23

⁵¹ Craig Jenkins, “If Lizzo Still Makes You Uncomfortable, Oh Well.” *Vulture*. Aug. 13, 2021.

⁵² Shaw, *Embodiment of Disobedience*, 106.

⁵³ Shaw, *Embodiment of Disobedience*, 107.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Joe Price, Azealia Banks Thinks Lizzo Is ‘Making a Fool of Herself for a White American Public’,” *Complex*, Sept. 4, 2019; Senyonga and Luna, “Centering Black Fat Women,” 280.

⁵⁵ Janelle Okwodu, “Meet the Rising Musician Who’s Starting a Body-Confidence Revolution”; Miller and Platenburg, *Lizzo's Resistance*, 35.

Caleb Luna discuss, this overture within white media engages only in her fatness and ignores her Blackness.⁵⁶ The limitations of this white reception revealed itself in December 2020, when hundreds of “body positive” users condemned Lizzo for posting about a smoothie cleanse on her social media, which they perceived as perpetuating a fatphobic diet culture.⁵⁷ Lizzo addresses this in “Rumors” with frustration: “Last year, I thought I would lose it / Reading shit on the internet / My smoothie cleanse and my diet.”⁵⁸

The historical, intertwined discourses of racism and fatphobia enable the white public to scrutinize Lizzo’s body. From Sarah Baartman to Lizzo, fat Black female bodies are particularly exposed to the white gaze, whether from body positive commentators or fitness gurus like Jillian Michaels. In an

interview, Michaels opined that people should not celebrate Lizzo’s body, as “it isn’t going to be awesome if she gets diabetes.”⁵⁹ Utilizing a medical gaze, Michaels pathologizes Lizzo’s fat-identified embodiment as something that must not be positively engaged with — reflecting the treatment of Sarah Baartman. Facing backlash, Michaels clarified by utilizing body positive language:

we are all beautiful, worthy, and equally deserving. I also feel strongly that we love ourselves enough to acknowledge there are serious health consequences that come with obesity — heart disease, diabetes, cancer to name only a few...I would hope we prioritize our health because we LOVE ourselves and our bodies⁶⁰

Coded within medicalizing language, her statement constitutes “concern trolling,” or the practice of using concern to delegitimize another. Michaels implicitly maintains she, not Lizzo, has a greater understanding of

⁵⁶ Senyonga and Luna, “Centering Black Fat Women,” 274.

⁵⁷ Stefan Sykes, “Lizzo responds to backlash for sharing smoothie detox: ‘Big girls do whatever u want with your bodies,’” *NBC News*, Dec. 15, 2020.

⁵⁸ Lizzo, “Rumors.”

⁵⁹ Katelyn Esmonde, “What celeb trainer Jillian Michaels got wrong about Lizzo and body positivity,” *Vox*, Jan. 15, 2020.

⁶⁰ Katelyn Esmonde, “What celeb trainer Jillian Michaels got wrong about Lizzo and body positivity.”

Lizzo's body. Both fatphobic medicalization and the white body positivity movement divorce fat Black women from their bodies, the latter of which become icons of either disease or empowerment. Lizzo's body is under the purview of white culture, which retaliates when she departs from strict notions of what is acceptable. Tressie McMillan Cottom, in reviewing the smoothie backlash, posits that "Body positivity, like that which has been projected onto Lizzo, implies that there is a right and natural form for Black women's bodies...It is about "bodies" only insofar as it is about deciding that certain bodies exist to make other bodies feel good about their own existence."⁶¹ Like Sarah Baartman or the millions of enslaved Black women in the nineteenth century, Lizzo is subjected to a process of distillation — her bodily form and its meanings negotiated for her.

Lizzo is not silent in this. In "Rumors" and throughout her career, she asserts agency over her own representation. In her oeuvre, "Rumors" marks a shift from sly references to her fatness to overt, radical celebration. Visually, fat bodies dominate the music video for "Rumors." Corpulent bodies are cast in Classical statue form (Fig. 1); Greek vases are decorated with fat, Black women flaunting their bodies through twerking, pole-dancing, and other sexually evocative acts.⁶² As the Greek statuesque form became the marker for objective beauty, marginalizing fat and non-white bodies, the appropriation of Greco-Roman aesthetics by a fat, Black woman is a powerful refutation of the hegemonic white aesthetics.⁶³ Lizzo celebrates the fat body in her lyrics, proclaiming that "I am body goals" and referring to her positive influence on fat women's self-esteem: "[They] Say I'm

⁶¹ Cottom, "Lizzo, "Body Positivity," and the Impossible Expectations for Black Women's Bodies."

⁶² Lizzo Music, "Rumors," 0:01; 0:30; 2:03.

⁶³ Grace B. McGowan, "In 'Rumors,' Lizzo and Cardi B pull from the ancient Greeks, putting a new twist on an old tradition," *The Conversation*, Aug. 24, 2021.

turning big girls into hoes, oh goddamn.”⁶⁴ When commentators attempted to inscribe meanings onto her body, Lizzo countered by imbuing her own meaning, and encourages fellow fat Black women to do so: “Big girls do whatever u want with your bodies!!!”⁶⁵

This self-inscription is equally pivotal in Lizzo’s presentation of herself as a sexual being. When attempting to contain Black female sexuality, white supremacist patriarchy fashioned the sexual scripts of the hypersexual Hottentot Venus and asexual mammy.⁶⁶ Black feminine sexuality is still couched within the dynamic of respectable modesty and dangerous hypersexuality. Dance, art, or fashion that highlights the Black female body is termed “ghetto” or “inappropriate.”⁶⁷ In December 2019, Lizzo attended a Lakers game, which played her single “Juice” at half-time. Projected on the

jumbotron, she danced along with the cheerleaders, twerking in an outfit that revealed her thong.⁶⁸ For this, she received online backlash for her “inappropriate” behavior, with one Twitter user posting “Im over lizzo and its not even a weight thing.. you gotta know when to be ratchet and when to be classy .. pass.”⁶⁹ Black women are consistently castigated for any displays of physicality, with outrage often centered on their butts. Racism, fatness, and misogynist objectification compound into simultaneous disgust and fixation on Black women’s behinds — a new manifestation of the Hottentot Venus paradox. White and masculine discourses silences Black women’s sexual experiences so as to objectify, fetishize, and exploit them.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Lizzo, “Rumors.”

⁶⁵ Quoted in Sykes, “Lizzo responds to backlash for sharing smoothie detox: 'Big girls do whatever u want with your bodies'”

⁶⁶ Nanda, “Re-Framing Hottentot,” 182.

⁶⁷ Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 81.

⁶⁸ Senyonga and Luna, “Centering Black Fat Women,” 276.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Brar, “Lizzo Addressed the Criticism About Her 'Inappropriate' Outfit at the Lakers Game,”

⁷⁰ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 123-125.

To combat this, Black women have placed themselves as subjects, not objects, within sexuality. As bell hooks elucidates:

When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality, in ways that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects...We must make the oppositional space where our sexuality can be named...where we are sexual subjects—no longer bound and trapped.⁷¹

Lizzo takes this approach to her sexuality, defiantly celebrating Black feminine sensuality and beauty outside the context of an overriding male gaze. In “Rumors,” she taunts the moralists who condemned her Lakers Game appearance: “If you thought that I was ratchet with my ass hanging out / Just wait until the summer when they let me out the house, bitch.” With the lines “No, I ain't fuck Drake, *yet*” and “I fuck him and you, yeah / If you believe I do that,” she

subverts the Jezebel narrative by sarcastically confirming every rumored affair of hers, drawing attention to their absurdity.⁷² The visual motif of the ass reigns not only over the video for “Rumors,” but Lizzo’s artistic aesthetic. In her 2019 VMAs performance, perhaps her most celebrated and emblematic, she and The Big Grrrls dance joyously in front of a gigantic, inflatable booty (Fig. 2).

Lizzo’s use of the ass goes beyond style — it operates within a wider cultural project to reclaim the Black female body. In discussing Jamaican cultural depictions of the booty or “batty,” Jane Hobson articulates that “The batty can thus function as a site of resistance” for “a more liberatory and unashamed view of the body.”⁷³ In particular, Lizzo has endeavored to reclaim and recontextualize twerking, which originated from West African dance.⁷⁴ Appropriated by

⁷¹ bell hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 76-77.

⁷² Lizzo, “Rumors.”

⁷³ Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 89.

⁷⁴ Senyonga and Luna, “Centering Black Fat Women,” 275

white culture, twerking has been reduced to the erotic within a culture that “equate[s] black dance with sexual savagery.”⁷⁵ In a 2021 TED Talk, Lizzo spoke on the history and personal significance of twerking, which for her not only represents a medium of personal empowerment but a point of Black pride.⁷⁶ In twerking she sees the continuity of a positive, Black female cultural heritage — from West Africa through the slave trade, through icons like Ma Reiney and Josephine Baker, to her in the present day.⁷⁷ Lizzo offers a compelling thesis not only for her address, but for her conscious representation as a fat Black woman:

I do it for the culture, not the vulture. For me, twerking ain't a trend. My body is not a trend. I twerk for the strippers, for the video vixens, for the church ladies who shout -- for the sex workers...I twerk because it's unique to the Black experience. It's unique to my culture, and it means something real to me. I twerk because I'm talented. Because I'm sexual, but not to be sexualized. I twerk to own my power, to reclaim my Blackness, my culture. I twerk for fat Black women,

because being fat and Black is a beautiful thing.⁷⁸

Lizzo defies the ideologies that seek to ensnare her by proclaiming her Blackness, her fatness, and her womanhood as ultimately beautiful.

Conclusion: The Liberation of Lizzo

Defying the white gaze, fatphobic characterizations, and misogynist objectification, Lizzo in “Rumors” and throughout her career stands as a genuinely liberatory figure. She cannot be contended one-dimensionally — she inhabits Blackness, fatness, and womanhood fully and unapologetically, each identity informing each other. In centuries past, American culture constructed simplistic images to regulate Black women’s behavior, sexuality, and embodiment. The mammy and Hottentot Venus rose, and both images either explicitly or implicitly were applied to confine Lizzo’s representation. Lizzo denies the right of

⁷⁵ Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 92.

⁷⁶ Lizzo, “Black History of Twerking,” 8:23.

⁷⁷ Lizzo, “Black History of Twerking,” 3:43.

⁷⁸ Lizzo, “Black History of Twerking,” 10:52.

others to define her, as she proclaims in the chorus of “Rumors:” “Sick of rumors / But haters do what they do / Haters do what they do / All the rumors are true.”⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Lizzo, “Rumors.”

Figures

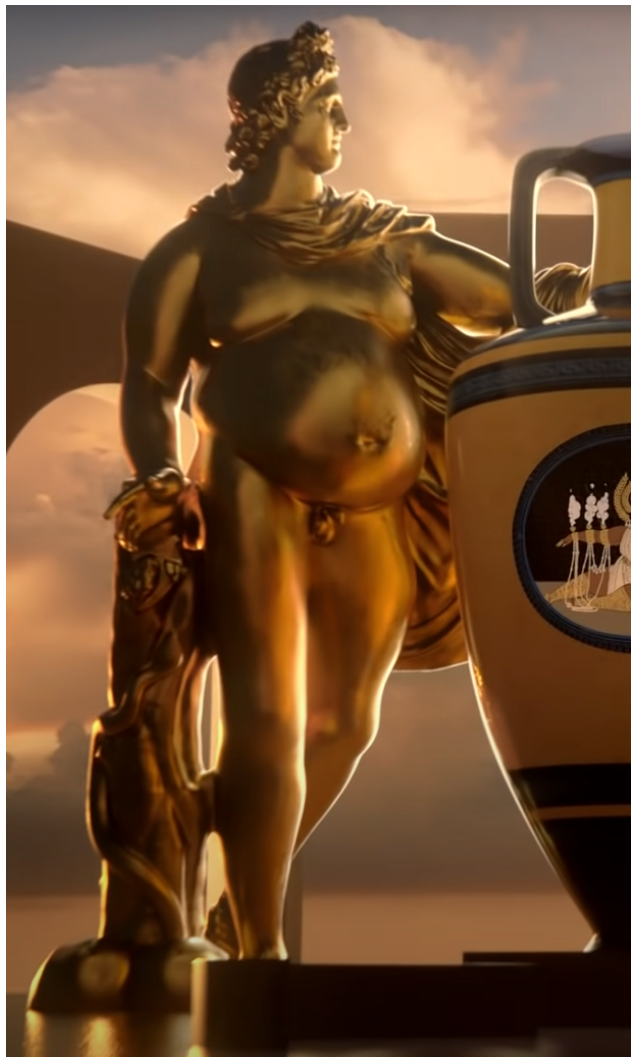


Figure 1: Corpulent statues in the “Rumors”
video.

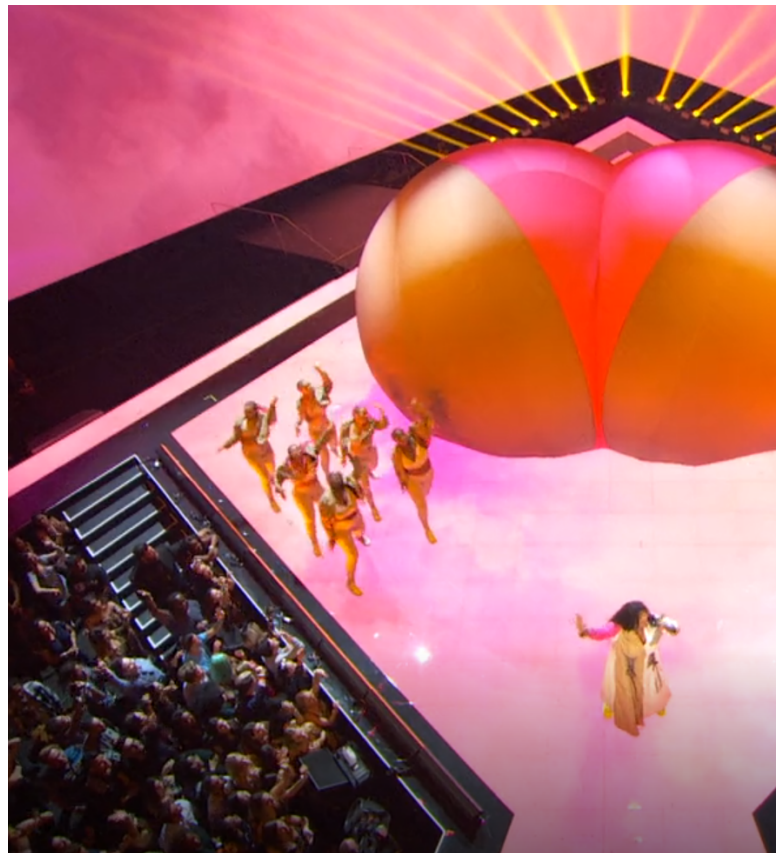


Figure 2: Lizzo’s 2019 VMA Performance.

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