From Shame to Celebration? Tracing Fat Body Politics in Lizzo's Watch Out for the Big Grrrls

Mona Rosenberg

Abstract

This article analyzes *Lizzo's Watch Out for the Big Grrrls* (2022) through fat studies, affect theory, and neoliberal critique. It explores how the show celebrates fat, Black, and queer bodies, staging joy, confidence, and fat-flaunting as modes of visibility, while simultaneously reinscribing participants within commodified, body-positive frameworks of empowerment. The article interrogates the tension between radical fat embodiment and marketable affect, arguing that fat liberation must move beyond representational visibility toward structural and collective resistance.

Fat Studies, Body Politics, Reality TV, Celebrity, Affect

"GIRLS THAT LOOK like me simply don't get representation." With this statement in the opening episode of *Lizzo's Watch Out for the Big Grrrls* (2022), Lizzo signals the show's ambition: to center and celebrate fat[1], Black, and queer bodies in a media landscape long policed by thinness, *whiteness*, and normativity. Rejecting weight-loss and makeover tropes, the show reclaims fat embodiment as joy. *LWOftBG* directly resists what Murray terms the framing of fatness as "un-becoming," a logic positioning fat bodies as requiring correction (qtd. in Kyrölä 2021, 108). Through *fat-flaunting*, an embodied practice that accentuates and celebrates fatness as both a visual and affective expression, the contestants perform agency through sensuality and joy.

Yet, this defiance operates within the economy of neoliberal body positivity. Fat bodies are celebrated not only as subjects of joy but as consumable signs of self-love and marketable success. As a reality-competition

[1] Reclaiming the term "fat" is a deliberate refusal of medicalized or euphemistic terms, transforming a word historically used to wound into one that names solidarity and resistance; yet this reclamation remains unsettled, as the term continues to carry the weight of stigma, shame, and regulation even as it circulates as an affirmative identity.

format, *LWOftBG* fuses intimacy, surveillance, and self-improvement with neoliberal imperatives of discipline and therapeutic labor. While the show unsettles entrenched anti-fat politics and broadens the affective field in which fatness can be *seen* and *felt*, it simultaneously reinscribes bodies into commodified frameworks of resilience and empowerment aligned with consumer culture. The show exemplifies the central ambivalence of representational politics: increasing visibility while reducing fat liberation to marketable body positivity.

Methodologically, I use qualitative textual analysis and affect-informed discourse analysis to trace how *LWOftBG* produces fat body politics through the intersecting logics of reality television and platform capitalism – specifically, how affect circulates as value within the show's economy of visibility. I treat the show as a televisual-affective dispositif in which representation is inseparable from techniques of feeling: dialogue, confessionals, editing, music, staging, and reward structures function as affective technologies that cue pride, gratitude, and inspirational uplift while containing anger, critique, and refusal. Through close readings of key episodes and scenes, I analyze how the show converts embodied difference into legible narratives of self-optimization and triumph, rewarding particular performances of confidence and vulnerability as "authentic." Drawing on Fat Studies and queer theory, I situate these representational and affective strategies within histories of racialized body governance and neoliberal selfhood, asking not only what is shown but how particular forms of confidence, vulnerability, and "self-love" become intelligible, desirable, and marketable.

So, what *is* a fat body? Defining Body Politics

Understanding the show's ambivalence requires situating the fat body as simultaneously material and political. LeBesco frames fatness as a "*political* situation" (LeBesco 2004, 1), where anxieties around discipline, value, and belonging converge. Foucault's account of bodies as always "directly involved in a political field" (Foucault 1977, 25) clarifies why. Where bodies are disciplined through surveillance, fatness becomes the site where control is both visible and resisted. LeBesco's "*political* situation" reframes Foucault's docile body: where docility fails, fatness emerges as problem and provocation.

Butler further shows that bodies are not merely subjected to norms but are constituted *through* them, their intelligibility shaped by reiteration and abjection (Butler 1993, 2-3). Fatness, marked as excess, is continually

produced as unintelligible and in need of correction. Affect theory demonstrates that unintelligibility is not only imposed but also felt: Ahmed's *affective economies* reveal how emotions "stick" to bodies (Ahmed 2014, 4), while Kyrölä shows how media teach audiences how to feel fat bodies (Kyrölä 2021, 106).

These dynamics are deeply racialized. Strings traces slenderness as a racialized ideal emerging during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, harnessing Protestant morality, where appetite regulation signified godly self-discipline, to embed *whiteness* as normative. Fatness became linked to greed, irrationality, and Blackness, while thinness came to signify moral discipline, beauty, and racial purity. By the nineteenth century, this positioned *white* women as "arbiters of taste and the purveyors of morals" (Strings 2019, 100). Institutionalized across social life, "the fear of the Black body was integral to the creation of the slender aesthetic among fashionable white Americans" (ibid. 212). Black women were reduced to "profitable labor-units" (Davis 1983, 3), stripped of gendered subjectivity, "socialized out of existence" at the bottom of a racial-gendered hierarchy (hooks 1982, 7), and constrained through controlling images like the mammy (Hill Collins 2000, 69-74). Black fatness is thus both hypervisible and abject, policed through representational regimes and material hierarchies. As Harrison observes: "One's body is their own, but how Bodies are collectively engaged – and where they exist in proximity to power – depends completely on what identities one embodies" (Harrison 2021, 9).

Governing Fat: Between Commodification, Resistance, and Abolition

Fatness exposes the limits of neoliberal governance by revealing where bodily docility fails. Harjunen describes the fat body as the "anti-neoliberal body" (Harjunen 2017, 6): a site of both economic and affective disqualification from social norms. Fat unsettles neoliberal ideals that valorize resilience, confidence, and joy as moral virtues, marking fatness as a threat to productivity. Manne observes that while implicit bias has decreased across many categories (race, skin tone, sexual orientation, age, disability), it has intensified regarding body weight (Manne 2024, 9), highlighting fatness's continued marginality. Farrell similarly argues that "within a Western context, fat is irreconcilable with personhood" (Farrell 2021, 47), casting fatness as the antithesis of the productive, self-disciplined neoliberal subject. Fatness, then, demands a radical rethinking of embodiment, value, and

belonging, aligning with queer and disability studies in disrupting health and desirability norms. The pressing question, then, is not what fat *is* but what fat *does*: how it structures affect, rights, and collective belonging.

Originally rooted in 1960s and 70s fat liberation and civil rights struggles, body positivity has been reconfigured into a "popfeminist," postfeminist and market-friendly discourse, "always at the brink of reappropriation" (Lechner 2020, 14). Within Banet-Weiser's concept of an economy of visibility, representation often substitutes for political action, rendering diversity a brandable asset. Fatness is celebrated only when palatable (reframed as "curves" or "plus size") and risks being subsumed into what Orgad and Gill call *confidence cult(ure)*: "the imperative of our time" to be self-confident (Orgad, Gill 2022, 1). This neoliberal formation reframes confidence as both a moral duty and a commodifiable affect. Body positivity thus becomes less a challenge to structural inequality than a demand for constant self-work and cheerfulness under oppression. Weight-loss drugs like Ozempic epitomize how eliminating fatness is recast as liberated personal choice (Oswald 2024). Harrison calls this a "post-body positive world" (Harrison 2021, 3), where mainstream body positivity no longer challenges systemic thinness mandates but coexists with and even enables new forms of body control. Fatness becomes acceptable only when beautified, optimized, or contained.

Radical fat activism provides a counterpoint. Sastre names the body's "affective truth" (Sastre 2014, 939-40) as messy, uncontainable resistance to neoliberal legibility. This abolitionist impulse is not new. Groups such as *The Fat Underground* were unapologetically "disobedient, unapologetic, and anti-assimilationist" (Cooper 2016, 124). Fat activism reclaims bodily autonomy: a refusal, as the *Fat Liberation Manifesto* declares a demand to "reclaim power over our bodies and our lives" (Freespirit and Aldebaran 1973), situating fat oppression within capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Contemporary theorists echo this structural critique: Manne identifies anti-fatness as "a material, structural, and institutional phenomenon" capable of "ruin[ing] lives and even end[ing] them" (Manne 2024, 33). Anti-fatness functions as a *straitjacket* that "restricts our freedom, our movement, and our capacity to take up space" (ibid. 10). Harrison critiques body positivity as "benevolent anti-fatness" (Harrison 2021, 4), rewarding only those fat people who desire thinness. Both scholars call for radical structural change: "Burn it down. Raze it" (Manne 2024, 206), dismantling the broader ideological frameworks that uphold anti-fatness. Harrison frames abolition as imagining life beyond "the World" founded on anti-Black, capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal violence (Harrison 2021, 107).

Seeing and *Feeling* Fatness: Reality TV and the Fat Body

Fatness in media is framed through alarmist and pathologizing discourses, casting fat individuals as simultaneously hypervisible moral failures and invisible subjects of exclusion (Kyrölä 2021). As Tovar observes, popular media constructs fat people as "failed thin persons," their value tethered to neoliberal ideals of self-control and productivity (Tovar 2021, 90). These representations operate affectively, shaping audience emotions – disgust, pity, or admiration for bodily transformation – which, as Kyrölä notes, determine "what kind of (fat) politics [the programs] call for" (Kyrölä 2021, 106). Dieting narratives particularly function as moral tales, naturalizing neoliberal imperatives of bodily self-governance by equating physical transformation with the revelation of an individual's "true" self (ibid. 109).

Reality TV, with its focus on self-surveillance and personal responsibility, remains a crucial cultural terrain for these dynamics. Its appeal lies in its contradiction between artifice and authenticity. As Lovelock argues, the genre is obsessed with presenting "real" selves amid an authenticity crisis in the digital age (Lovelock 2019, 7-8). Reality TV mediates identity through constructed narratives and heightened emotionality, even while claiming access to ordinary, unmediated lives. Murray and Ouellette situate reality TV within neoliberal governance: it commodifies intimacy and transformation while producing templates for moral citizenship (Murray, Ouellette 2004, 1-7). Lifestyle programs teach self-management under neoliberalism's guise of free choice, encouraging subjects to become entrepreneurially responsible, self-disciplining agents (Ouellette 2016, 5-6).

Building on Kavka, reality TV evolved from observational "Camcorder Era" formats through surveillance-driven competition shows to "celebreality," where fame becomes labor and identity functions as commodity (Kavka 2012, 146-167). The post-2010s, however, demand a new lens: what I term *lifestyle platformized celebreality*. This framework extends Kavka's "economies of celebrity" and Ouellette's analysis of lifestyle TV as neoliberal governance, capturing the convergence of reality TV and social media economies, where self-styling, digital visibility and self-commodification are deeply intertwined. Here, lifestyle denotes reality TV's disciplinary function, instructing audiences in self-optimization – how to live, consume, and perform identity in line with neoliberal ideals. Shows like *LWOftBG* operate within this matrix, blending genres and centering marginalized identities while remaining embedded in therapeutic and commercial-affective

economies. As Ouellette warns, such programming can suggest that collective movements are obsolete, framing systemic inequality as an individual problem solved through personal growth (Ouellette 2016, 6).

Media images may not transform bodies literally, but they recalibrate how bodies are felt and understood: emotions circulate between bodies, shaping how fatness becomes collectively sensed and policed. Fatness becomes "sticky" with moral failure through repeated medial circulation, teaching viewers to feel shame and disgust. Shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *Revenge Body* exemplify narratives of redemption through discipline, where fatness signals crisis and thinness salvation. These programs stage fat bodies as failed subjects requiring correction through pain, endurance, and submission (Weber 2009, 4-7). The affective labor of these shows disciplines both participants and viewers, instructing orientations of pity, fear, and aspiration that align with neoliberal health citizenship (Cameron 2022, 40-41).

Yet affective responses are not monolithic. As Kyrölä reminds us, "weighty images" can unsettle and complicate viewer emotions, creating moments of ambivalence and contradiction (Kyrölä 2014, 2). *LWOftBG* offers such an alternative affective economy, one organized around joy, pride, and collective embodiment. While still embedded in commodification and surveillance, the show reorients how fatness is felt and made visible, inviting complex, contradictory, affective responses that move beyond shame and aspiration toward communal affirmation.

LWOftBG – An Affective and Representational Counternarrative

Premiering on Amazon Prime Video on March 25, 2022, *Lizzo's Watch Out for the Big Grrrls* merges reality competition, lifestyle television, and documentary intimacy. Directed by Nneka Onuorah and hosted by Lizzo, the show follows thirteen fat dancers competing to join her touring crew. The series constructs an aspirational narrative of empowerment and self-love that centers fat, predominantly Black women within a high-production reality format. Its emphasis on fat bodies directly challenges the limited casting norms of commercial dance stages. As host, mentor, and employer, Lizzo shapes the show's emotional and aspirational tone, raising questions about labor, visibility, and celebrity branding.

LWOftBG opens with Lizzo performing "Better in Color" amidst vibrant colors and bold design. In the confessional, Lizzo confidently declares, "I'm

a hundred percent that bitch!" ("Becoming 100% That Bitch" 00:22). This establishes her as the show's emotional and political center, weaving her body, voice, and persona into a representational strategy foregrounding fat visibility through confidence and joy. The opening montage alternates media clips and performances, intercut with Lizzo's rebuttal of anti-fat assumptions: "because you don't believe I can do this […] Big girls are doing it, honey" (ibid. 01:03). This defiance positions Lizzo's fat body as proof rather than contradiction of dance excellence and culminates in a systemic critique: "Girls that look like me simply don't get representation" (ibid. 01:37). Visibility becomes both mission and method: fatness as proof of artistic excellence.

Lizzo's initial social media casting call to "big grrrls" features fat Black women dancing freely, twerking and laughing, reclaiming "jiggle" and "wiggle" as sites of power and belonging (ibid. 02:23). Joy, confidence, and collectivity emerge as affective strategies that reframe fatness from stigma to spectacle. This fat-flaunting embraces big bellies, cellulite, and thick thighs as visual markers of pride. Through personal storytelling, *LWOftBG* links embodiment to intersectional politics: Jayla, a *white* trans woman, gains affirmation of her gender identity; Isabel, a Korean-American contestant, confronts racialized fat-shaming; Asia, a Black contestant, narrates grief and resilience following her father's death due to police violence. These vignettes position fatness within intersecting systems of oppression, showing anti-fatness as inseparable from racism, cisnormativity, and anti-queer politics.

Although not centered on physical transformation, the show emphasizes emotional and psychological growth. Contestants begin with tentative confidence, face doubt, and emerge with emotional resilience, a therapeutic labor aligned with neoliberal self-improvement. In the episode "Curves and Confidence", Lizzo tells the dancers, "Because you're gonna need [confidence] when you're on stage representing. It's gonna inspire so many people, and it's gonna shut down so many fucking haters" ("Curves and Confidence" 09:41). Confidence thus functions not only as a virtue but also as a form of affective capital, a kind of emotional labor required for visibility. Representation, then, is not passive; it is affectively charged work. Stylistically, neon colors, playful editing, and social media formats situate *LWOftBG* within a digital body positivity ecosystem. A key emotional highlight occurs when Missy Elliott sends a video message: "Y'all gon' kill it […] 'Cause, ladies, we run this" (ibid. 32:57), eliciting tears and awe. Lizzo affirms Missy's role as a historic figure representing fat Black artists, marking a moment of collective recognition and representational lineage.

Another emblematic moment appears in "Mirror Mirror on the Wall", when Crystal, an early contestant who already secured a tour spot, returns as a mentor after a visual and psychological makeover. Her visit, framed with joyful instrumental music and laughter, carries representational weight: Crystal becomes part of the show's logic of transformation, she is proof of its concept. She embodies the aspirational logic of the show, like many of Lizzo's dancers who pose as experts. Visibility, authenticity, and emotional growth function as currencies of cultural legitimacy. Marginalized subjects thus become intelligible, celebrated, and ultimately incorporated into neoliberal regimes of recognition. Together, these moments articulate *LWOftBG*'s fat counternarrative: centering fat, Black femme bodies against hegemonic invisibility and anti-fat politics, even as it risks reabsorbing that visibility into marketable empowerment.

LWOftBG – Curves and Confidence

In *LWOftBG*, confidence functions not simply as virtue but as disciplinary demand. Across rehearsals and confessionals, contestants learn that emotional self-assurance is both a moral code and marketable skill. Contestant Sydney encapsulates this dynamic when she declares, "Self-love is taught. Remember that" ("Becoming 100% That Bitch" 16:47). Confidence becomes an obligation, a social contract of self-belief and self-branding. Lizzo and her coaches reinforce this affective imperative; when expert Charm asks, "Can you still have sass, can you be confident?" (ibid. 23:53), confidence becomes part of choreography itself. These moments stage *confidence cult(ure)* that presents itself as both innate and endlessly enacted, defining the neoliberal subject as simultaneously adequate and perpetually incomplete, compelled to sustain self-belief through relentless self-improvement. Confidence thus becomes a trap, always just out of reach.

Awards like the "Juice Award", given to the contestant who has "overcome something", institutionalize this logic, converting struggle into moral and symbolic capital. Emotional authenticity, exemplified in expert Gracie's call to "be your real, raw, true, embodied selves" ("HBCYOU Band" 23:45), becomes affective labor. Gracie's rhetoric illustrates Orgad and Gill's argument that vulnerability has become a neoliberal emotional style (Orgad, Gill 2022, 17). Authenticity operates as affective obligation, seamlessly aligned with neoliberal citizenship.

The episode "Curves and Confidence" dramatizes this logic through Lizzo's featured Instagram Live video. Responding to racist and anti-fat

comments, she declares, "I don't have time for your negativity […] your racism and fatphobia" ("Curves and Confidence", 10:13). While she directly names structural violence, empowerment is reframed as emotional self-management: "I have to remind myself of who I am, my joy" (ibid. 10:45). The scene culminates with Lizzo stripping to her underwear and twerking as the contestants cheer. This appears to reject shame yet hinges on hypervisible joy as resistance, a mode legible only within neoliberal affective economies where empowerment equals equality. This reflects Ahmed's conception of happiness as a disciplinary promise; under neoliberalism, happiness is no longer an end in itself but a technology of the self, achieved through affective regulation and personal responsibility, and thereby functioning as a marker of good citizenship (Ahmed, 2010, 10). In this context, fat joy becomes only legible when it is upbeat, productive, and inspirational – what Ahmed terms a "happiness-cause" (ibid. 19).

Figure 1: "The Dolls" dancing in a closet, posed like a Barbie Doll package titled "Trans Diva" ("Curves and Confidence" 45:42)

The concluding music video challenge encapsulates these tensions. The group "The Dolls" (Asia, Charity, and Jayla) reimagine Barbie as a fat, queer and trans-inclusive icon through embodied self-definition. Jayla articulates this explicitly: "It's about damn time to actually have that moment and prove that there's more than just one image of beauty" (28:35). Yet Asia's joking comment, "Buy us" (ibid. 30:28), crystallizes the episode's central contradiction: resistance is rendered legible through its marketability. Here, the non-normative is stylized and packaged: the contestants pose in a life-sized Barbie box titled "Trans Diva", and later Jayla writes "Trans Love" across a mirror. The episode's competitive reward structure then intensifies this affective economy: Jayla, Asia, and Charity receive the Juice Award for tenacity and overcoming adversity. Even as their performance momentarily

destabilizes hegemonic beauty norms, it remains commodified, translating resistance into a form of consumable empowerment.

Across *LWOftBG*, what becomes increasingly evident is not merely who is represented but how subjects are made legible within a televisual framework structured around transformation. Fat bodies are situated within a body-positive frame: fatness is no longer contested by the contestants or experts. Instead, it is presented as already assimilated into a confident, resilient self; one perpetually in the process of becoming more empowered, more styled, more polished. This produces a double bind: happiness is privatized as personal responsibility yet collectivized through the contestant's imperative to inspire others. Life becomes a project; happiness becomes "capital", a resource to "get what you want" (Ahmed 2010, 10). Emotional well-being and confidence thus function as both moral imperatives and affective currencies.

Jayla's narrative captures this reinvention of liberation. Reflecting on her journey, she says: "I started my transition, but my transition only worked so much. Here, I'm trans-forming" ("Mirror Mirror on the Wall" 25:26). The pun reframes gender transition through the show's transformation logic, suggesting that transition is rendered incomplete unless it is publicly aestheticized. Jayla describes her goal as "getting the outside to match the inside", reinforcing a neoliberal ideal of self-coherence: the "true self" becomes legible through curated embodiment. In this framing, queer and trans self-determination is absorbed into a capitalist logic of self-optimization, where liberation is recast less as a disruption of normative gender relations than as the production of an aesthetically legible and emotionally compelling success narrative.

LWOftBG thus exposes key limits of body positivity and popular feminism: empowerment without structural upheaval, visibility without justice, and resilience without resistance. While it rejects shame, it also demands affective labor, producing a body politic of affirmation without antagonism. Representation becomes less a route to structural analysis but an end in itself – circulated, consumed, and rewarded as feel-good empowerment. Fatness, Blackness, queerness, and transness are not merely included but mobilized as narrative resources for self-optimization and triumph, fitting neatly within reality TV's redemptive arc. The show does not ask what structures produce anti-fatness, transmisogyny, or anti-Black violence; it asks instead how marginalized subjects can overcome these conditions through confidence and resilience.

LWOftBG – Fat-Flaunting and (the Limits of) Liberation

LWOftBG stages fat embodiment through what Miller terms "strategic fat-flaunting" (Miller 2024, 49): a practice rooted in self-love, visibility and cultivated vulnerability. For Miller, Lizzo's mentorship invites contestants to perform fat pride through "emancipatory rhetoric" (ibid. 58), reframing bodies historically marked by hatred as powerful and desirable. Yet, as Taylor cautions, self-love risks becoming a stale political project when it functions as a substitute for collective dismantling of body hierarchies that sustain "body terrorism" (Taylor 2019, 7). In this sense, *LWOftBG*'s emancipatory register repeatedly oscillates between resistance and incorporation.

The episode "Curves and Confidence" foregrounds dance, twerking and sensual self-touch as practices of fat-flaunting that negotiate self-love and resistance to both desexualization and hypersexualization. Lizzo's declarations, "Big Grrrls are sexy" ("Curves and Confidence" 05:57) and "Big Black ass comin' at you!" (ibid. 12:19), operate as affective assertions of autonomy and defiance. Following Pääkkölä, such gestures push back against a historically racialized sexual double bind imposed on Black women (Pääkkölä 2019, 366); twerking, in particular, refuses respectability's disciplining gaze.

Figure 2: Jayla posing nude on a bed set in the garden of the house ("Naked" 22:40)

The episode "Naked" intensifies politics of exposure by framing nudity as liberation: "That feeling of freedom is what I really want you ladies to experience" ("Naked" 04:57). Yet the scene's curated and mediated authenticity – a sunlit garden, selectively draped bodies – renders freedom aesthetically

managed. Jayla articulates what is at stake: "Not only do I have a plus-size body, but I also am transgender. So, automatically, I just think that the world doesn't wanna see it" (ibid. 16:28). Her statement underscores that fat-flaunting is not a uniformly safe practice; for trans and larger fat bodies, exposure carries heightened risk. Those who set boundaries to nudity, like Arianna choosing to remain clothed, are granted narrative respect, expanding fat-flaunting to include refusal. The show thus broadens self-expression while resisting the singular narrative of empowerment through exposure.

Figure 3: . Isabel and Arianna posing while covering up during nude photoshoot ("Naked" 24:41-26:17)

Still, as Miller warns, fat women are made to perform vulnerability "as prerequisites for authentic self-love" (Miller 2024, 57). Harrison's notion of *Desire Capital* illuminates this logic: desirability operates as a form of social value that circulates unevenly, structured by anti-Blackness, anti-fatness, and cisheterosexism, and that systematically excludes bodies coded as "Ugly" or unworthy (Harrison 2021, 12-16). While *LWOftBG* celebrates fat beauty, it also reabsorbs contestants into beauty's affective order – softness, gratitude, serenity – whose legibility depends on emotional discipline. Rather than disrupting hierarchies, the show reorients desire within them, integrating fatness into a marketable regime of visibility compatible with platform logics.

Across scenes of dance, nudity, and sensual reclamation, *LWOftBG* embodies Miller's claim that "emancipatory rhetoric promotes self-articulation" (Miller 2024, 62), yet also echoes Ahmed's "happiness scripts", in which recognition becomes contingent on affective regulation. The show gestures towards Sastre's conception of "affective truth" only to repackage it into

aesthetically disciplined resilience. Fat-flaunting becomes both rebellion and capture: unruliness choreographed into empowerment for Amazon's streaming economy. The glass-shattering ritual in "Naked" makes this tension explicit. Contestants smash panes etched with slurs ("fat," "tranny," "ugly") under Lizzo's call, "Let's make a breakthrough" ("Naked" 02:44). Collective rage is immediately channeled into sanitized healing.

Figure 4: The contestants shattering glass during the dance challenge of the week ("Naked" 37:06)

Jayla's story deepens this tension. As one of the fattest contestants and the only openly trans woman, she embodies a convergence of fatness, queerness, and desirability politics that repeatedly test popfeminist body positivity's limits. Her plea, "I'm not a man. I'm not unworthy of love" (ibid. 10:38), reveals the psychic toll of structural anti-fatness and cisnormativity. This convergence of fatness and queerness gestures toward a radical potential beyond body positivity's assimilationist logic: an abolitionist refusal of bodily hierarchies altogether. Yet this potential is constrained by the show's reality TV framework, which folds her testimony, "I've been called tranny, faggot, fat ass […] I've been told I deserve to die of AIDS" (ibid. 02:16) into a narrative of individualized healing. Writing her own name on the glass, she concludes, "I'm finally growing and I'm letting go of all the bullshit and toxicity […] that I put on myself" (ibid. 41:12). Structural violence is thus repeatedly rerouted into self-work, and Jayla's fat/queer resistance is recoded as neoliberal resilience.

If Jayla's vulnerability is domesticated, Jasmine's anger exposes the show's affective limits. Jayla's pain becomes a resource for uplift, Jasmine's refusal is framed as a threat to group cohesion. Once celebrated as a

maternal leader, she is later cast as "bossy" and "toxic". Her claim, "I'm fierce and unapologetic" ("HBCYOU Band" 37:44), is reframed as defiance through reality TV's affective grammar: confessionals, reaction shots, and evaluative commentary that cue the viewer to read her as the problem. While Jasmine may indeed challenge group dynamics, the show flattens her into antagonism rather than allowing complexity. As Ahmed observes, the "affect alien" who rejects happiness scripts is cast as disruptive (Ahmed 2010, 41). Fat sisterhood here tolerates only sanctioned dissent.

Occasionally, the show gestures toward radical horizons. Asia's grief at a memorial for Black victims of police violence ("Good As Hell" 07:55) briefly links fat and Black survival to ongoing structures of racial violence, centering mourning without immediate redemption. In these moments, *LWOftBG* flashes radical genealogies of fat and Black liberation's radical roots: collective grief as embodied refusal. Yet grief is soon aestheticized into another phase of emotional growth, and critique of policing, racial capitalism, and anti-fatness remains fleetingly before it is subsumed by perseverance.

Figure 5: Multiple scenes of the memorial in Minneapolis dedicated to Black victims of police violence ("Good As Hell" 08:24-09:16)

Lauren Berlant's concept of *cruel optimism* clarifies this bind: the fantasy that individual resilience can dismantle structural oppression sustains the very order it critiques (Berlant 2011, 24). Within *LWOftBG*, vulnerability performed on cue becomes a form of *affective training*, learning to desire, and remain attached to, exhausting systems. The contestants' and viewers' attachments in the show's promises (visibility, fame, 'making history') are not naïve but tactical, forged in a world that offers few livable alternatives. As

Berlant writes, "our cruel objects don't feel threatening, just tiring" (ibid. 31). If the present is structured by these attachments, liberation demands more than adjustment to the terms of visibility. The shattered glass staged by *LWOftBG* ultimately falls short: liberation cannot be reduced to symbolic breakthroughs or narrativized healing arcs. It requires refusing *cruel optimism* itself, shifting from survival-through-performance toward collective world-building otherwise, where fatness, Blackness, and queerness no longer need to be justified, beautified, or redeemed to count as livable.

Lizzo's (Online) Activism – A Cruel Outlook

As a fat, Black woman, Lizzo explicitly challenges hegemonic *white* body norms, yet her activism remains shaped by platform capitalism and neoliberal values promoted through *LWOftBG*. She exemplifies what Elliott and Boyd call celebrity's inherent instability: "shot through with contingency and contradiction [...] always in the process of becoming" (Elliott, Boyd 2018, 5).

Figure 6: Photos of Lizzo's Instagram nude photoshoots ("Nude" 18:22-18:25)

Lizzo's early online presence, from her highly mediatized 2019 VMAs speech to the backlash surrounding her courtside outfit at a Lakers game in the same year, functions within a longer history of Black fat bodies as spectacle. As Senyonga and Luna argue, Lizzo's reception "illuminates both a racial past and present" (Senyonga, Luna 2021, 274), exposing not her body itself but the cultural gaze that polices Black fatness, framing unapologetic displays as transgressive while upholding *whiteness* and thinness as neutral ideals. These contradictions resurface in *LWOftBG*, where visibility becomes

both currency and constraint. Lizzo frames her dancers as extensions of her brand: "To be a Big Grrrl is to be a sister. This is family" ("HBCYOU Band" 01:21), binding belonging to loyalty, labor, and productivity. Coach Charm echoes: "[Lizzo] works hard. Everybody works hard" ("Becoming 100% That Bitch" 23:57) and further sutures empowerment to discipline and grit, aligning body positivity with neoliberal work ethics and affective governance.

Miller and Platenburg celebrate Lizzo's "hyper-embodiment" (Miller, Platenburg 2021, 3) and "emancipatory rhetoric" (ibid. 4), framing her digital activism as "written advocacy" (ibid. 29) – a blend of self-disclosure, community building, and political resistance. Within the genealogy of fat activism, Lizzo inherits the *fatosphere*, which Kyrölä describes as a digital space of embodied resistance (Kyrölä 2021, 113). Yet, as Bronstein observes, earlier fat activists engaged in "somatic and emotional transgression" (Bronstein 2015, 106), forms of refusal that are harder to translate into platform-friendly intimacy and brand coherence.

Lizzo's 2021 TikTok critique of body positivity co-optation – insisting that "fat people are still getting the short end of this movement" – momentarily reclaims this lineage through affective refusal. Read through Russell's *Glitch Feminism*, this moment performs a "glitch": a disruption that "carve[s] fissures in existing systems" (Russell 2020, 63), queering visibility and defying palatability. But, as Russell cautions, systems repair their ruptures. Lizzo's occasional livestream commentary on anti-fat politics ("Curves and Confidence" 10:07) briefly punctures empowerment culture, yet these fissures are repeatedly reabsorbed into neoliberal affect economies. As Elliott and Boyd argue, celebrity operates as "media meta-capital" (Elliott, Boyd 2018, 12), turning even resistance into a commodified asset. Lizzo's visibility-based activism thus embodies the *cruel optimism* of celebrity empowerment, where radical promise meets the machinery of neoliberal incorporation.

In August 2023, three of Lizzo's former dancers – Crystal Williams, Arianna Davis, and Noelle Rodriguez – filed a lawsuit alleging sexual harassment, discrimination, and a hostile work environment against Lizzo, her company Big Grrrl Big Touring Inc., and dance captain Shirlene Quigley. Williams and Davis had been cast through *LWOftBG*. Their accounts of coercive sexualized outings, weight-shaming, and punishing work expectations echoed the disciplinary structures the show claimed to resist. The backlash fractured along familiar lines: some accused Lizzo of hypocrisy; others pointed to the racialized and anti-fat undertones of the backlash (Zhou 2023). Lizzo's Instagram statement – "I'm not the villain people and the

media have portrayed me to be" (Lizzo 2023) – centered her emotional hurt over structural accountability, exemplifying neoliberal feminism's tendency to personalize systemic harm. A second lawsuit by stylist Asha Daniels deepened these contradictions, alleging racialized exploitation within Lizzo's production team (Mzezewa and González-Ramírez 2024).

When the show's empowering narrative faltered, public affect flipped sharply: disappointment, anger, and betrayal surged, marking a rupture in the affective economies that sustain celebrity feminism and exposing the fragility of movements built on marketable dissent. In a later interview with Keke Palmer, Lizzo reframed herself not as an employer accused of harm but as a benefactor betrayed: "I was very deeply hurt […] these were people that I gave opportunities to" (2024, 04:42). Here, labor exploitation becomes reframed as personal betrayal, a privatized grievance rather than a structural account of power.

In the wake of these crises, Lizzo's public presentation of her body also shifted in ways that complicate body positivity's politics of refusal. By early 2025, she shared on Instagram: "Today when I stepped on my scale, I reached my weight release goal. I haven't seen this number since 2014! Let this be a reminder you can do anything you put your mind to" (Lizzo 2025). The post displays weight-loss metrics from a tracking app, highlighting her reduced body fat and BMI. This quantification anchored her transformation within wellness and productivity discourses that equate thinness with control and virtue. By celebrating quantifiable "success", Lizzo reframed her body as evidence of discipline, blurring the line between empowerment and the inscription of anti-fat norms.

This trajectory marks limits of what I call the *post-body-positive regime*: a cultural formation in which the rhetoric of empowerment, diversity, and authenticity coexists with intensified bodily governance. Following Harrison's identification of this post-body-positive turn, where body positivity is folded into wellness, optimization, and consumption, I extend their framework to include the affective management as a mode of neoliberal control. Within this regime, self-love functions as discipline, and vulnerability becomes capital. Lizzo's brand, rooted in hypervisibility, emotional openness, and entrepreneurial selfhood, embodies this shift.

To read Lizzo's weight loss as simple hypocrisy misses the structural bind of fat celebrity under neoliberalism: visibility depends on the continuous negotiation of palatability within systems that reward aspirational transformation over collective critique. The post-body-positive regime thus operates both economically and affectively, converting empowerment into

emotional self-management. Posting weight loss is never neutral; it participates in the cult of thinness and the before/after economy that renders thinness a moral ideal. For Lizzo, it signals a shift from defiant outsider to aspirational insider – illustrating how radical-seeming body politics are absorbed by the machinery of optimization and profit.

Ultimately, the scandals surrounding Lizzo register an exhaustion point for marketable fat activism. *LWOftBG* promised empowerment while reproducing logics of surveillance and productivity, and managed intimacy central to the entertainment industry. Visibility alone cannot dismantle bodily hierarchies when tethered to capitalist imperatives. The crisis reoriented discourse from visibility to labor, revealing that fat liberation must move beyond the representational and affective vocabularies of positivity. If body positivity once sought to make fatness visible, its post-regime successor makes that visibility profitable, and once that visibility ceases to sell, it loses its cultural value. The dancers' lawsuits make this clear: the issue was never visibility alone, but the material conditions of those performing it.

As Manne declares, "By the time you read these words, I fully expect to be fatter, and do not regard that as a problem. Indeed, it would be more me: my body runs to fat. And I am ready not to fight it, nor to hide from the world in consequence" (Manne 2024, 14). This calls for more than an end to individual struggle; it demands a reckoning with the cultural, political, and economic forces that perpetuate body hierarchies. The task ahead, then, is not to reform body positivity's neoliberal concessions but to reclaim fat liberation's insurgent potential – to center fatness as political resistance, to treat the unruly, unshrinking body as a threat to the order that fears it.

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Figures

All stills taken from *Lizzo's Watch Out for the Big Grrrls. Season 1.* 2022. Nneka Onuorah. United States: Bunim/Murray Productions; Lizzo Bangers; Amazon Studios.

Figure 1. "The Dolls" dancing in a closet, posed like a Barbie Doll package titled "Trans Diva" (Episode 3 "Curves and Confidence" 45:42)

Figure 2. Jayla posing nude on a bed set in the garden of the house (Episode 4 "Naked" 22:40)

Figure 3. Isabel and Arianna posing while covering up during nude photoshoot (Episode 4 "Naked" 24:41-26:17)

Figure 4. The contestants shattering glass during the dance challenge of the week (Episode 4 "Naked" 37:06)

Figure 5. Multiple scenes of the memorial in Minneapolis dedicated to Black victims of police violence (Episode 8 "Good As Hell" 08:24-09:16)

Figure 6. Photos of Lizzo's Instagram nude photoshoots ("Nude" 18:22-18:25)

Author

Mona Rosenberg is a doctoral candidate in Cultural Studies at the Institute for English and American Studies, University of Potsdam. This article is based on her master's thesis in Gender Studies and English/American Studies at Ruhr-University Bochum, supervised by Jun.-Prof. Dr. Heike Steinhoff and Prof. Dr. Julia Bee.