my body, I may not have let street harassers bring me down so low. I wouldn’t have risked my life sleeping with assholes. I would have known how to defend myself.

I accept this now and fight to unlearn twenty-one years of conditioning. So far, I’m doing pretty well. Without realizing it, I’ve developed a new body language. When I walked with my head down, men picked up on my powerlessness. I believe that my confident new stride actually scares some of those assholes away. Once in a while, I get catcalls, but now those men are sure to get flipped off, barked at or blown a kiss. I realize why my friend is willing to fight boys, and ultimately, I would fight a man. I spent so many years feeling ashamed of my body that rolling in the dirt might make me feel cleaner.

In the end, no Superfeminist ever flew in from the sky to save me. It took me years to realize that nobody else could rescue me. I didn’t have to be a superhero. I just had to allow myself to become la mujer.

HOW DO YOU FUCK A FAT WOMAN?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What forms of violence manifest against women who are socially constructed as “fat” in Harding’s account?
2. What roles do “cognitive dissonance” and “body image” play in shaping notions of sexual identity, desirability, attraction, and love?
3. How do constant messages of diet fads, gym memberships, and body-mass-index measures, among other things, frame notions of “chubby,” “fat” and “obese” as an individual problem as opposed to a structural system that constructs beauty and body ideals?

You should consider yourself lucky that some man finds a hideous troll like yourself rape-able.

That's an actual comment left on the blog of a friend of mine, in response to a post she wrote about being raped and nearly killed. Every feminist blogger with more than four readers has dealt with comments along these lines. There are certain people who feel it's their sacred duty to inform us, again and again, that "rape is a compliment." (Or, more precisely, "Rape is a compliment, you stupid whore.") Rape is not a violent crime meant to control and dehumanize the victim; see; it's evidence that you were just so ding-dang attractive to some perfectly average guy, he couldn't stop himself from fucking you, against your will, right then and there! He thought you were pretty! Why are you so upset?

All in a day's work for a feminist blogger, sadly—and when you're a fat feminist blogger, it comes with a special bonus message: No one but a rapist would ever, ever want you. In this iteration of the "rape is a compliment" construct, our hypothetical rapist is no longer a perfectly average guy—because perfectly average guys aren't driven to sexual incontinence by fat chicks. I mean, duh. No, the guy who would rape a fat chick is not only paying her a compliment, but doing her an enormous favor. He's a fucking philanthropist, out there busting his ass to save fat girls everywhere from vaginal atrophy.

You fat whores would be lucky to even get raped by someone. I hope you whiny cunts find your way on top of a pinball machine in the near future.

Whoever raped you could have just waited at the exit of a bar, at 3 am and gotten it consensually without the beached whale—like "struggle" you probably gave.

If any man would want to rape your gigantic ass, I'd be shocked.

It's tempting to dismiss the lowlife assholes who leave comments like that on feminist blogs as...well, lowlife assholes. As in, people beneath not only our contempt but also our notice. Problem is, these comments show up frequently enough that they're clearly not just the isolated thoughts of a few vicious, delusional wackjobs. They're part of a larger cultural narrative about female attractiveness in general, and fat women's sexuality in particular.

It starts here: Women's first—if not only—job is to be attractive to men. Never mind straight women who have other priorities or queer women who don't want men. If you were born with a vagina, your primary obligation from the onset of adolescence and well into adulthood will be to make yourself pretty for heterosexual men's pleasure. Not even just the ones you'd actually want to have a conversation with, let alone sex with—all of them.

So if you were born with a vagina and genes that predispose you to fatness, then you've got a real problem. You've already failed—fat is repulsive! Sure, there are men out there who particularly dig fat women, and plenty of other men who would be hot for the right fat woman if she came along. But those men, the culture helpfully explains, are outliers. Freaks. Even if you chanced upon one—which you could go a whole lifetime without doing, so exquisitely rare are they!—who would want to be with a man who's so broken, he finds fat women attractive? Besides which, as we've discussed, your job as a woman is to be attractive not only to the men who will love you and treat you well, but to all heterosexual men. And if you're fat? Well, as the kids on the Internet say, epic fail.

"I'm against rape. Unless it's obese women. How else are they going to get sweet, sweet cock?"

People really say this shit.

Whether they really believe it is almost immaterial. The purpose of comments like these isn't to argue sincerely that rapists are doing a favor to fat chicks; it's to wound the fat woman or women at whom they're directed, as deeply as possible. And it works, to the extent that it does (which depends on the person and the day), because too many of us fully believe the underlying premise on which that twisted leap of logic is based: No one wants to fuck a fatty.

When I was in college—long before I discovered, let alone joined, the fat acceptance movement—I had a months-long non-relationship with this dude whose girlfriend was studying abroad for the year. We started out as Just Friends, then moved on to Friends Who Give Each Other Backrubs, and then to Friends Who Give Each Other Half-Naked Backrubs, Like, Three Times Daily. As you do in college.
One afternoon, I was lying on my stomach on a dorm bed, shirt and bra on the floor next to me, while this dude straddled my ass. He was giving me a backrub that, as usual, involved his sliding his fingers under my waistband and kneading handfuls of side-boob as if he just didn’t notice it wasn’t back fat. Sarah McLachlan’s Fumbling Towards Ecstasy was on the stereo (appropriately enough), a cheap vanilla votive candle was burning, and I was trying to regulate my breathing so he wouldn’t notice me pretty much panting. Because, after all, we were just friends. He had a girlfriend, even if she was on the other side of the world. This backrub thing was just... I don’t know, a hobby?

And then, out of nowhere, he says, "Hey, I kind of feel like making out."

Now, I wanted to make out with this dude more than anything in the world just then—I’d wanted it more than anything in the world for months. And he’d totally just opened the door! Finally!

So here’s what I said: "What?"

I’m slick like that.

And here’s what he said: "Oh—oh, nothing. I didn’t say anything. Forget it."

And with that, I immediately convinced myself he hadn’t just expressed interest in making out with me, for the very same reason I’d asked him to repeat himself instead of throwing him on his back and kissing him in the first place: I didn’t believe it was possible.

Let’s review. This guy was coming to my room every day, more than once, to doff substantial amounts of clothing and touch me a whole lot. On top of that, we were both nineteen. And I didn’t believe he was attracted to me.

It sounds absurd to me now, but back then, it somehow made all the sense in the world. I was a fat girl! Nobody wants to have sex with a fat girl!

Compounding the absurdity of it all, I was just barely chubby back then, but of course body image doesn’t necessarily have jack shit to do with reality. My closest female friends were positively waifish, both naturally thin and not yet settled into their adult bodies. The guys I was attracted to—including this one—dated only skinny girls, at least on the record. And the guy in question had, in fact, mentioned on more than one occasion that it would be cool if I worked out more, while straddling my ass and groping side-boob. He’d made it perfectly clear that he didn’t find me especially attractive—certainly nowhere near as attractive as his girlfriend—while rubbing his hands all over my bare skin.

I didn’t know what “cognitive dissonance” meant back then. I knew only this: I was fat. And that meant he couldn’t want me. Sex was a nonissue because I was a nonsexual being—never mind what I felt, thought, or did on my own time. The important thing wasn’t my actual sexuality, or even how this particular dude perceived me; the important thing was how all heterosexual men perceived me. Remember?

And the culture never failed to remind me how I was perceived, via women’s magazines offering a new way to lose weight and “look good naked” every goddamned month; cheery radio jingles for fitness centers about destroying your “flubbery, rubbery gut”; Courteney Cox Arquette dancing in a fat suit on Friends, between ads for weight-loss programs; low-cal, low-fat menus with cutesy names like the Guiltless Grill in restaurants; sidelong glances in the dining hall; size 4 friends who were dieting; and—just in case all that was too subtle—the NO FAT CHICKS bumper stickers, the “How do you fuck a fat woman?” jokes, the fatcalls on the street. Women with bodies like mine were unwanted, unlovable, and definitely unfuckable. I was utterly, unwaveringly convinced of this.

So I really believed that dude and I were just, you know, backrub buddies. It was strictly platonic—even if I have never in thirty-three years had another platonic relationship in which a friend and I would greet each other by ripping our shirts off and getting into bed.

I have a dozen more stories like that. Add in my friends’ stories, and I’ve got a book. The Ones That Got Away: Fat Women on Their Own Goddammed Romantic Cluelessness, something like that. In our thirties, with most of us partnered off, we can laugh about it—but in our teens and twenties, the pain of
rejection was fierce, and we truly had no idea that probably half the time, that rejection wasn’t even coming from outside us. We rejected ourselves as potential dates or partners or fuck buddies before anyone else got the chance.

Worse yet, some of us assumed our manifest unfuckability meant that virtually any male attention was a thing to be treasured. While I don’t know any women who have bought into the “rape is a compliment” theory, I certainly know some who believed abusive boyfriends when they said, “You can’t leave, because no one but me would want your fat ass.” I know several who have had multiple semi-anonymous one-night stands, not because that’s what floats their boats but because they were so happy to find men—any men, just about—who expressed sexual interest in their bodies. There’s a reason why so many TV shows, movies, and rude jokes represent fat women as pathetically grateful to get laid; some (though nowhere near all) of us are grateful, because after years of being told you’re too physically repulsive to earn positive male attention, yeah, it’s actually kind of nice to be noticed. And from there, it’s a frighteningly short leap to “You’d be lucky to be raped.” Even if you never officially make that leap—and I really, really hope there aren’t women out there who would—you’re still essentially believing that you have no agency in your own sexual experiences. Your desires aren’t important, because they can never be fulfilled anyway—you aren’t pretty enough to call the shots. The best you can hope for is that some man’s desire for sex will lead him to you, somewhere, some night.

Of all the maddening side effects of our narrow cultural beauty standard, I think the worst might be the way it warps our understanding of attraction. The reality is, attraction is unpredictable and subjective—even people who are widely believed to meet the standard do not actually, magically become Objectively Attractive. I fall right in line with millions of heterosexual women when it comes to daydreaming about George Clooney, but Brad Pitt does absolutely nothing for me. I think Kate Winslet is breathtaking, but my boyfriend thinks she’s meh. Ain’t no such thing as a person who’s categorically hot in the opinion of every single person who sees them.

But that’s exactly what we’re trained to believe: “Hot” is an objective assessment, based on a collection of easily identifiable characteristics. Thin is hot. White is hot. Able-bodied and quasi-athletic is hot. Blond is hot. Clear skin is hot. Big boobs (so long as there’s no corresponding big ass) are hot. Little waists are hot. Miniskirts and high heels and smoky eyes are hot. There’s a proven formula, and if you follow it, you will be hot.

Of course, very few people can follow that formula to the letter, and some of us—fat women, nonwhite women—physically disabled women, flat-chested, apple-shaped, acne-prone women—basically have no fucking prayer. That doesn’t stop purveyors of the beauty standard from encouraging us to keep trying, though—with enough hard work and money spent, we can all at least move closer to the ideal. Sure, women of color can’t be expected to surmount that whole white-skin requirement (sorry, gals—better luck next millennium!), but they can torture their hair with chemicals and get surgery on those pesky non-European features if they’re really committed. There’s something for everyone in this game!

And for fat women, the solution is actually quite simple, they tell us: You can diet. You can work out as much and eat as little as it takes until you look like your naturally thin friend who loves fast food and despises the gym. Never mind that studies have shown over 90 percent of dieters gain all the weight back within five years. Never mind that twin studies show weight and body shape are nearly as inheritable as height. And definitely never mind that your one friend can maintain this shape without ever consuming a leafy green vegetable or darkening the door of a gym, and another friend can maintain it while eating satisfying meals and working out for half an hour, three times a week, but for you to maintain it requires restricting your calories to below the World Health Organization’s threshold for starvation and spending way more time exercising than you do hanging out with friends and family. The unfairness of that is irrelevant. You just have to want it badly enough.
And you must want it that badly, because fat is Not Hot. To anyone, ever.

*How else are you going to get sweet, sweet cock?*

It’s really tempting to simply declare that fat women oppress ourselves, demean ourselves, cut off our own romantic opportunities—and the obvious solution is to knock it the fuck off. It’s tempting to say that because, you know, it’s kind of true. But it’s ultimately a counterproductive and nasty bit of victim blaming. When you’re a fat woman in this culture, *everyone*—from journalists you’ll never meet to your own mother, sister, and best friend—works together to constantly reinforce the message that you are not good enough to be fucked, let alone loved. *You’d be so pretty if you just lost weight. You’d feel so much better about yourself if you just lost weight. You’d have boys beating down your door if you just lost weight.*

*You’d be lucky to be raped, you fat cunt.*

That’s just the way it is, baby. Fat chicks are gross. Accept it.

Refusing to accept it is hard fucking work. And being tasked with doing that is, frankly, every bit as unfair as being tasked with keeping “excess” weight off a naturally fat body. We shouldn’t have to devote so much mental energy to the exhausting work of *not hating ourselves*. Believing that we can be desirable, that we deserve to be loved, that that guy over there really *is* flirting should not be a goddamned daily struggle. It should not feel like rolling a boulder up a hill.

But it does. So the question is, which boulder are you going to choose to roll? The “must lose weight” boulder or the “fuck you, I will boldly, defiantly accept the body I’ve got and *live in it*” boulder? It’s backbreaking and frequently demoralizing work either way. But only one way can lead to real sexual power, to real ownership of your body, to real strength and confidence.

Imagine for a minute a world in which fat women don’t automatically disqualify themselves from the dating game. A world in which fat women don’t believe there’s anything intrinsically unattractive about their bodies. A world in which fat women hear that men want only thin women and laugh our asses off, because that is not remotely our experience—our experience is one of loving and fucking and navigating a big damn world in our big damn bodies with grace and optimism and power.

Now try to imagine some halfwit dickhead telling you a rapist would be doing you a favor, in that world. Imagine a man poking you in the stomach and telling you you need to work out more, moments after he comes inside you. Imagine a man going on daytime TV to announce to the world that he’s thinking of getting a divorce because his wife is thirty pounds heavier than she was the day they were married. Imagine a man telling you that you can’t leave him, because no one else will ever want your disgusting fat ass.

None of it makes a lick of sense in that world, does it?

*It doesn’t in this one, either.*

Imagine if more of us could believe that.