

The (In)Visible Funny Fat Girl: Cinematic Erasure Of The Fat Female Body And Gendered Body Politics In The D.U.F.F (The Designated Ugly Fat Friend)

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Popular Culture in the 2000s perpetuated fat-phobic attitudes into mainstream contemporary discourse, relegating corpulent women to comedic roles and positioning them as the stereotypical butt of jokes made by actors occupying normative bodies who fit into narrow beauty standards set by Hollywood. Despite their visual presence, these adipose women were often rendered invisible by the camera and suffered the stereotypical trope of the jolly fat friend, the fat female desperate for male attention or the lazy slob- essentially, they embodied the binary of the sidekick that highlighted the beauty of the slimmer heroine. Fat studies is an emergent interdisciplinary and intersectional field that addresses the marginalization of big women; this paper here explores how fat women are reduced to minor roles that often lack narrative significance and are placed in situations where their body is the punchline to the joke. It borrows from Feminism, Culture Studies, and Psychology to argue against the erasure and stereotyping of fat female bodies in Mass Media and critiques their widespread erasure on the big screen. This paper deconstructs the trope of the funny fat friend using the 2015 movie *The D.U.F.F (The Designated Ugly Fat Friend)* as a primary source. It is based on the 2010 book of the same name by American young-adult author Kody Keplinger, which establishes the idea that every female friend group has a 'designated ugly fat friend' who is the approachable gateway towards her more attractive friends. The movie stars Mae Whitman as 'Bianca', a smart but loud, sarcastic and poorly dressed snark with two gorgeous best friends Casey and Jess. The male love interests are 'Wesley' the jock played by Robbie Amell and 'Toby' the seemingly sensitive musician who is also Bianca's long-time crush. Wesley points out that she is the D.U.F.F in casual conversation when they have an argument, not knowing that this would insult her greatly and have her questioning her close female friendships when her worth is undermined by her friends' attractiveness. In a classic trope not new to the romantic comedy genre, Bianca is rejected by Toby who only befriended her to get closer to her beautiful friends. She then pairs up with her nemesis, Wesley, for a social and physical makeover designed to make Toby want her. Sparks end up flying between Wesley and Bianca, and the latter uses Wesley as a coping mechanism during her parents' divorce as she vents out her frustrations by beginning a physical relationship with him.

The D.U.F.F is unique because it propagates the tropes of the fat funny friend while simultaneously challenging it, in a manner that parallels the complexity of the fat woman's lived experience. There are a number of excellent introductory texts to Fat Studies used in this paper which has contributed to its central framework and thematic content, of which *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* remains an outstanding example. *The Contemporary Reader of Gender and Fat Studies* provides extremely valuable background and reference

materials. Prominent Fat Activists Esther Rothblum and Sandra Soloway have co-edited *The Fat Studies Reader* and *Bodies Out of Bounds* offers a useful insight into the Mindspace of teenagers like those in the D.U.F.F and is an excellent resource that provides a summary of current developments and key debates in the cinematic arena. Testimonial essays compiled in these handbooks lend key ideas to an academic commentary on the camera's gaze over the fat female body in this paper. Gender roles are challenged by well-rounded characters of snarky and autonomy over the plot, as protagonists such as Bianca defy the cliché of the one-dimensional goody-two-shoes who overcompensates her adiposity. The paper is divided into three interconnected sections:

Section I: 'Bianca is Erased' introduces readers to the historical background of fat female characters in Hollywood and introduces the primary source to deconstruct the systematic erasure of onscreen obesity. It also includes a summary of the movie used to illustrate widespread notions of conformity, acceptance and rejection of beauty standards set by western mass media. Section I thus offers readers an introduction to basic concepts of erasure and identity that are developed throughout the paper.

Section II: 'Bianca is stereotyped' provides a description of the fat women who do appear in cinema, the roles offered to female actors who are on the larger side and the centrality of their characters to the plot. Fat embodiment is manifested in stereotypical character traits of laziness, greed and punchlines that are attributed to their bodies, although the primary source shows duality in the way it both advocates body positivity and challenges preconceived notions of fat-hatred in a romantic comedy about a 'fat' female lead.

Section III : 'Bianca Fights Back' highlights how the protagonist owns her supposed ugliness and fatness, and turns the insult that hurt her so deeply into a mere descriptor that empowered her instead of limiting her. This patriarchal setup has the female audience internalising fat-phobic media content shown on screen so that their self-worth is dependent on their weight and their minds are largely occupied with how small and delicate their bodies appear.

The marginalisation and erasure of fat female characters in lead roles is the elephant in the room, as it reflects widely held societal and cultural beliefs upon the worth of a woman being inscribed upon her body. The subjugation of fat female bodies is heavily based on patriarchal standards that expect submission, complicity and docility from women- in other words, they are expected to make themselves small, docile and compliant- never transgressive or excessive in terms of size or presence. When this expectation set on normative gender binaries is breached, the trouble begins. One of the most notable fat female characters co-starred with Charlie Chaplin during the depression era. Despite acting in the genre of comedy, the size of her body was not ridiculed and films such as *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914) illustrate how the bigger body was allowed agency and broke stereotypical notions of the beauty ideal held up by Hollywood. A foray into the question of what transpired in order to construct the image of the corpulent female body as an object of ridicule can be traced to 1930s. Hollywood during this time, the body ideal changed and the slim frame was upheld as the beauty standard. Along with this changed the cultural interpretation of the female body being represented visually, and bigger women were cinematically represented as being matronly and undesirable. *What and How Are They Teaching About Us? Fat Stories in the Classroom* by Susan Koppelman from *The Fat Studies Reader* traces the intersection of body size and female sexuality, examining how fat is seen as excessive and the fat female body is put forth as something that deviates from the norm. Fat women were targeted as jokes for decades after that, but it was only during the 2000s that their fatness was a central theme to be narrated in the movie. Films like *Shallow Hal* and *the Nutty Professor* had thin actors donning fat-suits for a temporary fatness, one where their weight could be put on and taken off in a way that is not true for corpulent people and their lived experiences.

The lead role of Bianca is played by Mae Whitman, who does not appear to have a BMI over 30, but is not as statuesque as typical female leads in romantic comedies. Romantic comedies as a genre are geared towards a female audience but more often than not, they are complicit in perpetuating the internalisation of fat-hatred in their viewers. This movie is unique as it uses the tropes commonly used in comedies of fat embodiment set in the high school era but also subverts the very genre by giving Bianca a sense of agency and autonomy over the narrative. Without sidelining her to a minor role, it has her on the centre stage and the plot foregrounds female

friendships to take actionable steps towards body-neutrality on screen. Hollywood constructs a transformative narrative on actors with unconventional appearances and Bianca too chooses to undergo such a transformation of her own accord - to win Toby's affection, and with Wesley's help. She changes out of her casual-grunge clothing into more provocative, mature dresses for the male gaze and camera's gaze, both of which dictate narrow standards of beauty that women must conform to. Bianca is shown to be a stellar student, one who does not concern herself with frivolous parties or high school relationships, but the size of her body demands the erasure of these distinctive characteristics. Her transformation is not one of self-improvement as she is complicit in her partial self-erasure for the sake of Toby's validation and that is an external pressure which demands that she must change herself to be worthy of him, in a way that reinforces patriarchal ideals.

A lot of the language used against fat people in contemporary society everyday speech is modelled after jokes and innuendos popularised by mass media. This can be seen in the way Bianca is stereotyped as the 'designated ugly fat friend', as though her personality, worth, and the way she is to be treated is dependent upon her physical appearance. The physical transformation that Bianca wishes to undergo reflects how 'fat' characters are cinematically positioned so pitifully- her current state of being is signalled as something that must be changed in order to achieve success and happiness. The level of attractiveness of the female body is often tied up with male validation and approval. The Duff inverts the paradigm of normative femininity when Bianca uses Wesley Rush to vent out her emotional frustration's; here, it is not the male lead using the female body but vice versa. For years, Hollywood has presented mid-sized women and tried to convince its audience that they are obese, instilling a sense of discomfort and unease in the women watching it. Teenage is an especially turbulent time during which the characters in this movie are set to develop a sense of self, as it intersects with their role in society. Movies mirror the way in which, much like real life, these peer interactions are based on one's physical appearance. Thinness is privileged, and the binary it creates is that of the invisible 'fat' friend; the D.U.F.F here is said to be someone who is not necessarily ugly or fat, but is the least attractive person in the group who due to their attractiveness makes them easier for men to approach. They are not approached due to their sexual desirability but because becoming friends with them makes it easier for men to talk to their more attractive friends. The role of the invisible fat women must be traced cinematically to pin point how the discourse of blonde, blue-eyed and slim women are deemed worthy of being love interest while the women who dare deviate from that norm are presented as the D.U.F.F.

In the current cinematic arena, laughter is used as a tool to reinforce beauty standards and body norms. Anybody who does not adhere to these societal rules is ridiculed and the ones who do are celebrated ideals. This leads us to the question - if Hollywood has commonly established and accepted body norms, then whose body is set as the standard? More often than not, it is that of cisgender white women who are represented widely across genres of romance, action, superhero films and thrillers. This dominant discourse of feminine beauty that only deems these white, lithe bodies of being heroines renders the other half of the binary invisible. Intersectional deviations from this Hollywood standard for blonde, blue eyed and fit women render women who differ in terms of shape or color less likely to be cast in lead roles. When a fat woman is shown on screen, she is often the best friend who acts as a foil character to the beautiful main lead, or the funny fat friend who is full of one liners and rejoinders. The corpulent female actor, be it Amy Schumer or Melissa McCarthy is never allowed the dignity their slimmer counterparts are. They are not allowed to be feminine- here, Bianca goes shopping with Wesley for her makeover and jokingly pretends that a nearby mannequin is her crush, Toby. A video of this goes viral at her school and she is bullied for it, as though the very idea of a teenager who does not embody the beauty ideal must lead to public mockery. Humor is used to subjugate and discipline Bianca's 'excessive' body in the scene where her discomfort with feminine clothing aimed at slimmer women is used for comedic effect, as though just the notion of the D.U.F.F trying to look pretty is comedic in itself. By tying up her identity to her appearance, the movie illustrates how the scholarly achievements of the adipose female student is sidelined so that her body can take centre stage.

On having read this paper, readers can locate how the corpulent female body marked with curves and rolls is problematised visually on the big screen. The erasure, stereotyping and subsequent marginalisation of fat women on screen spreads its malevolence to mainstream attitudes towards women at large, especially when even

mid-sized actors are labelled fat.

Bianca, aka The D.U.F.F subverts the generic demands of the movie and takes her power back in the narrative by owning her label as The D.U.F.F. although her transformation empowers her and she reclaims the insult, it is catalysed by the desire to conform to societal pressure and male approval. Much like the demands set by fat activists to reclaim the word 'fat' to mean a descriptor instead of an insult, Bianca reclaims the insult as her own; by saying that everyone can feel like The D.U.F.F sometimes, she shifts the insult from a fixed identity to a changeable state of mind that anyone can feel in a moment of insecurity. Her mind is not occupied by thoughts of changing her appearance to conform to societal beauty standards- instead, she takes back power by using the very word that was used to hurt her to empower her, thus achieving true self-acceptance by challenging societal labels. Fat women are often relegated to specific roles and genres that reinforce negative stereotypes, both on screen and off-screen. Being frequently portrayed as comedic sidekicks, objects of ridicule, or pitiable figures mirrors societal attitudes towards women who do not conform to body ideals. These highly visible (in terms of size) individuals are rendered invisible through the cinematic and social marginalisation, a paradox that highlights how they are systematically devalued in our public discourse. Thus, the arbitrary nature of beauty standards set by Hollywood is critiqued in this movie which foregrounds self-acceptance and empowerment in a strong, decisive shift towards body neutrality. Fat does not always have to be beautiful as beauty is not the price one must pay to exist; we must collectively work to ensure our sense of worth and self-consent transcends harmful beauty standards -both in real life and on screen.

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