Thin, White, All-American Gays:

Embodied Homonationalism, Anti-Fatness, and American Empire

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Abstract

Neoliberal creation of the 'consumer-citizen' within body politics has complicated the question of who becomes included in the national imaginary. Through discursive and textual analysis, this paper applies a fat studies framework to demonstrate how homonationalism in the United States demands thinness. Pulling from historical and contemporary developments of the American national imagination, in particular how the 'war on terror' and 'war on obesity' collided to both expand and constrict ideal citizenship, I investigate how the body exists as a symbol of the nation by drawing together developments of neoliberalism, (homo)nationalism, American masculinity, and anti-fatness. I look towards former South Bend Mayor and 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg as an example of embodied homonationalism, and critique queer/gay embodiments that uphold American empire, specifically through explorations of drag performance that reject and subvert homonationalist narratives. Questioning the history and processes of LGBTQ+ citizenship in relation to the national marking of fatness as failed citizenry, I argue that embodied homonationalism requires upholding anti-fatness.

Keywords: homonationalism, terror, anti-fatness, citizenship, queer, embodiment, drag

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Acknowledgements

This thesis comes to you, reader, as a culmination of four years studying with, and learning from, an abundance of feminist, queer, trans, fat, disabled, writers, poets, and scholars. I write from a platform built by numerous different lineages, to which I wish I could thank each and every person. I send so much of my appreciation to my caring, patient, brilliant, and wise advisor Dr. Kate Phelps. Without your guidance and passion, this project would not have come to fruition. Thank you for seeing me, challenging me, believing in me. More of my appreciation goes to my peers, who were both mentors and friends. To the folks who listened to my jumbled, disorganized thoughts patiently with trust and care. To my family, who may never read this, but will always support my endeavors. To the power of the written word—may language prevail against hatred, censorship, and fascism. May language be the medium to create community, to fight for community. Free Palestine, Sudan, the Congo; may liberation for all oppressed people be found in our lifetimes.

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Is She a Body, or a Nation?

The genesis of this project began as a final essay for a course titled "Framing Fatness: Gender, Size, Constructing Health" at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. After reading ranges of fat studies scholars, fat liberation writers, and engaging in the history of the body itself, I was struck by the very intimacy between the nation and the body. I read about former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson's address to the nation about the severity of the 'obesity epidemic' after 9/11. In December 2001, only a few months after the events of 9/11, he stated, "To fight the epidemic, all Americans should lose 10 pounds as a *patriotic gesture*" (Rosenblatt 2001; emphasis mine). Full stop, this was one moment of clarity for me: the body and the nation-state are one in the same, symbols of each other. And this is constructed, violently, through nationalist language, the protection of the state, and, blatantly, through an upholding of white supremacy in the United States. But I was left questioning why fatness? Why are Americans meant to be thin? How and why are the 'war on obesity' and the 'war on terror' so deeply entangled? This moment in U.S. history—the post-9/11 space—harkens the contemporary world we live in very deeply. I, being born in 2003, was not alive for the attacks on the World Trade Center, and yet, I feel as if I had been. Growing up in public schools meant asking your parents where they were during the attacks, what they felt, every year. Understandably so, this moment of national panic and insecurity struck our country in ways we had not seen for many years. It made the United States, all its citizens, witness and feel the fragility of empires. And thus, the post-9/11 contemporary has not only been a result of attempting to repair national security, but also of re-building the nation's metaphorical impenetrability, untouchability, and robustness. Further, I had been stuck considering the development of homonationalism, theorized by Jasbir Puar in 2007. I will explore these moments

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more in depth later, but the entrance of this thesis was rooted in the relationships between the nation's fight against 'obesity' which materialized simultaneously with an acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights (see appendix A). It was evident, later, that not much scholarly literature embarked in this intervention, one that seemed so inquisitive, and almost apparent to me. Thus, I add to this literature, one in which reckons and retorts the histories that lead us to this moment. I write this, specifically interested in fatness, due to the contemporaneous collisions of neoliberalism, the consumer-citizen, homonationalism, which created the body into a site for nation-building, and the body as a symbol of the nation itself.

Having a body[1] collaterally subjects one to be viewed, marked, symbolized, and consequently, surveilled, policed, and victimized via violence by and through structures of power. To have a body also constitutes a constructed representation of the nation in which the body becomes forcibly contextualized. As a result of this, a body contains subjectivities of embodiment that are either aligned or misaligned with the ideals of the nation, evidently reflective of the ideals of citizenry. It is not quite as simple, this dichotomy I pose, but I begin with such a distinction because more often than not, the consequence of misaligning does not render itself within rationality. In other words, it is not always decided by the person that 'misaligns' with citizenry whether they do, or do not, align; the state will either recognize you as a citizen, or it will not. In the United States, the body itself has long been under intense scrutiny—the process of European colonization ignited a violent ideological and methodological

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[1] Theoretical frameworks regarding the body and embodiment allow us to understand how the body itself functions as a symbol marked by socially constructed identities. The body does not, however, exist solely as metaphor; rather social constructions implicate the historical and material conditions of the survival and oppression of people. I note this as language surrounding the body, particularly describing persons as 'a body' or groups as 'bodies', has the possibility of being seen as a tool of objectification and/or essentialism that neglects material conditions and lived experiences. I will utilize this language carefully as I name the ways in which the body functions as a site for nation-building, nationalism, and national identity, as well as how I identify the 'body' itself as a symbol.

reformation and re/marking of bodies. As sociologist Sabrina Strings (2019) contends, the construction of race and the creation of race science began during the early days of European colonization. The creation of 'race' as determinant by the color of one's skin was utilized to justify enslavement of Africans, and further, to serve as evidence of European/white superiority (String 2019, 67). And the ways the body is marked by gender, sexuality, dis/ability, race, size, and citizenship exist in parallel with the historical and contemporary project of building a nation-state. Which is to say, the body functions as a site, or locale, for nation formation and symbolizes the nation itself. The definitions of citizenry (i.e., who is a citizen, who is seen as a citizen, how one becomes a citizen, and so on) are not fixed or stable. The following review of literature tracks the development of the body, specifically regarding fatness and body-size in the United States, as a symbol of the nation, and the shifting symbology of the body due to shifting goals of empire and nation-building. This mapping begins with the theoretical and material roots of the 'ideal' citizen: the white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, thin person. As historical and material conditions shift throughout time, ideas of a proper citizen fluctuate; the development of neoliberalism has shown to exploit new forms of multicultural diversity by expanding its ideas of productivity and profitability evidently moving, one example being the homonationalist shift of post-9/11. And, as I will further demonstrate, the creation of the neoliberal consumer-citizen fuels the national desire to surveil bodies via size, race, gender, and sexuality.

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Consuming the Citizen

To properly lineate the ways the nation and the body collide in contemporary times, I look to a history of neoliberalism in the United States. Neoliberalism, as a patchwork definition,

can be described first, as an economic ideology framing and motivating public policy, trans/national governmental decisions, and lawmaking. As an economic framing, neoliberalism works to revitalize classical liberalism as a direct rejection of Keynesianism and a direct desire for free-market, laissez faire-style globalization and economic decision-making (Steger and Roy 2010). The foundational reasoning of such (neo)liberalism expands individualism exponentially. Reagan-era economic policies in the 1980s slashed social safety nets, cut government spendings and sought to minimize the federal government. Simultaneously, Reagan's approach to economic policies foundationally relied upon neoliberal thinking in that the market will run itself because the consumers will spend. Rampant and destructive bureaucratization in the 1980s streamlined federal regulation thus stringing adequate and disciplined consumerism into the lifestyle of the consumer.

As a result of this process, the difference between being a consumer and being a citizen became at best blurred, and at worst, nonexistent. The creation of the consumer-citizen enhanced and solidified neoliberal governmentality within the individuals of the nation; the citizen exists as a reiteration of the nation, the nation being reiterated by the market itself. As expressed by Puar (2007), the "market is a foil for the state, producing consumer subjects (as well as highly skilled laborers) that simulate (and experience simulated) affective modes of belonging to the state, modes that assuage the angst of unrequited love" (26). Notably, this 'affective' belonging signals to Sara Ahmed's exploration of "national love" as a "form of waiting"; which is to say, a consumer-citizen might attempt to achieve the 'love' of the nation through high-consumption and high-labor but may never be recognized for this commitment (Puar 2007, 26). Success and stability in the United States, and within free-market neoliberalism, does not come guaranteed or

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seen by the state itself. It is in this way that the process of assimilation, complicity with the state, and the appeal towards nationalism reveal a sense of unrequitedness.

Thus, a second critical method of neoliberalism can be described as a mode of governance in which the regulatory power of the state (i.e., policy, law, marketization) extends to a regulation of the self (Steger and Roy 2010; Duggan 2002). The governmental rationality of neoliberalism "applies competitive free market principles to all domains of human life, including non-economic domains such as romantic lives, parenting philosophies, and personal health and fitness" to the extent that "in every domain, people seek to maximise their competitive 'value' through rational self-investment" (Hicks and Stanley 2023: para. 10). An extended illustration of this process resides in national ideas towards fatness and body size; as Courtney Bailey (2010) illustrates with the *Super Size Me* documentary released in 2004, in which Morgan Spurlock begins a month-long endeavor of eating McDonald's for every meal, tracking the 'deterioration' of his health. The intention of this documentary was to expose the impacts of unhealthy eating, of fast-food corporations. However, it mostly brought attention back to bodies, the nation's ideal body, and how to be a good consumer/citizen. For example, Bailey (2010) expresses, "external threats to the nation are often conflated with domestic threats to straight white masculinity" (443). The threat, domestically, is fatness, while the external one is terrorism in the Middle East, against the U.S. Thus, the 'threat' of fatness (re: obesity) concerns the nation because of its very contamination of "femininity, disability, impotence, darkness, and poverty" (Bailey 2010, 443). If Americans are 'contaminated' with this domestic threat, the nation becomes vulnerable insofar that the symbolism of the United States becomes fragile. The hard, impenetrable American empire (which relies so much upon the ideal of masculinity, whiteness, and fitness of the soldier), must remain so in order to continue its legacy. The *Super Size Me* documentary, after

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later being implemented in U.S. public health education, thus enacted a propagandist entry into the national imaginary. The changes of Spurlock's body (his decline in health, his growing size) functioned as a "metonym for the dissolution of the clear, rigid borders protecting the nation from external violation" which in turn "conjures the threat to white dominance from the influx of racial and ethnic others" (Bailey 2010, 449). Notably, then, fatness was constructed as a threat to the idealized American citizen—one that is white, cis, male, and thin. Spurlock's performance of fatness was also not completely relevant in relation to scientific findings; his most incredulous health problems related to his liver, which, after the documentary found success, evidently had to do with his alcoholism (Boykin-Patterson 2024). While this evidence largely debunks the entirety of the film, the damage was far-gone, and violently marked fatness as a threat to the nation, and further, as a "failure of citizenship" (Bailey 2010, 446). It is evident, due to this documentary coupled with national rhetoric, that fatness has been symbolized as a failure of citizenship—that citizenship being intimately tied to neoliberal capitalism. Fat people are seen, then, as failing to be a 'good' consumer-citizen. The framing of how neoliberal governmentality becomes inflicted upon the body, and specifically how it inflicts the fat body, is entirely foregrounded, also, by anti-Black rhetoric and right-wing, Puritan Christianity.

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Anti-Fatness, Anti-Blackness

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Historically and socio-politically contingent, the body, and the politics of the body, shift due to the needs and goals of a nation. Take, for example, the relationship of anti-Blackness and anti-fatness—a relationship constructed by, and for, the purpose of racial othering and reifying the supremacy of the white body, nation, and racial capitalism. Strings (2019) efficiently identifies and tracks the re-making of the fat body in which she correlates a rise of anti-fatness to

foundations of anti-Blackness as a result of collisions of Christianity (Protestantism more broadly, Puritanism more specifically), and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. At one time, during the early- to mid-nineteenth century in the U.S., anxieties around the body proliferated through two avenues: (1) the rising thinness of white American women as a sign of national fragility, and (2) an attempt at separating American citizens from European immigrants and other racially-othered minority groups (Strings 2019, 3–4). Importantly, this phenomenon contains intense gendered meanings; fatness in Black women was constructed into a marker of primitiveness (see Saartjie/Sara Baartman) and thus used both to degrade through racial othering and fortify discipline upon white women.

Strings (2019) provides a historicization of this ideology, one that continues to contextualize violence against fat people and fat communities. She states that "fatness became stigmatized as both black and sinful" (6), an embodiment that functions in direct contradiction with white Protestant people. And further, the "menacing" extremities of a fat body, one that is not American (4). Once this dichotomy established itself within the American mainstream, first socially and then medically, it revealed that "[the] phobia about fatness and the preference for thinness have not, principally or historically, been about health. Instead, they have been one way the body has been used to craft and legitimate race, sex, and class hierarchies" (Strings 2019, 6).

It is notable, as well, that much of the threatening symbology illustrated about fatness was in regard to fatness as excess, uneconomical, unsustainable for the economy and nation. For example, the idea of 'obesity' because of the overconsumption of food and resources ties back, explicitly, to rhetoric during WWI that calls for "corpulent citizens" to lose weight in order to "save fuel for the nation's fighters" (Strings 2019, 191). Further, the roots of white supremacy in health and medical language in the United States created fat, Black bodies and communities as

the very antithesis to health. Da'Shaun Harrison (2021) expresses how anti-fatness *is* anti-Blackness due to the historical medical, social, and political relationship between the policing of Black and fat communities in the United States. Ultimately, what became true is the body of the 'American Citizen' must exist intimately with slimness/fitness and whiteness.

War on Bodies: Obesity, Terror, Homos

In the United States, anti-fatness has developed in many ways; one important development, marked as the 'war on obesity', is the medical and ideological fight against body fat, larger bodies, and fear of the future of the nation. Evidently, part of this fight against 'obesity' works intimately with that of the national project of anti-terrorism in the United States. From Thompson's earlier described address to the nation about the 'obesity epidemic' in 2001, at a moment of intense national insecurity, capitalizes upon national panic and marks an explicit linkage of being a proper American with being slim, fit, or perpetually attempting to become slim as an extension of the duty of an American citizen. Charlotte Biltekoff (2007) expresses a convergence of the 'war on terror' and the 'war on obesity'; national and medical rhetoric spread throughout the early 2000s regarding an 'obesity epidemic' was scaffolded by largely contested and alarmist statistics about rising body sizes and health problems specifically in relation to the military. In 2003, US Surgeon General Richard Carmona expressed obesity as "every bit as devastating as terrorism", that it is a threat from within the body (Biltekoff 2007, 34). In other words, this 'threat' of 'obesity' (read: fatness) is placed on the same plane as terrorism, and materially marked as terror itself. Converging with this rhetoric is the exploitation of anti-fat rhetoric in media and the market; the beginning of Weight Watchers' tumultuous dieting plans and courses scaffolded the seemingly endless verbal and psychological abuse from media such as

The Biggest Loser (Bailey 2010; Biltekoff 2007). Simultaneous with the war on terror and war on obesity, was the critical development of homonationalism. As the nation began shrinking its idealized meanings of citizenship, it was also opening its arms to LGBTQ+ rights.

Puar (2007) grounds and frames a new mode of nationalist thinking in the United States, and the West more broadly. Linked intimately with the 'war on terror', both an ideological and militaristic war, the national shift toward accepting LGBTQIA+ people via institutional representation and legal protections reveals the instability of national identity, and the problematic and repressive intentions of the nation itself. Puar illuminates the homonational shift of the United States, one in which queer people, selectively, become part of the national project as a response to national panics of terrorism. As she contemplates Islamophobic, anti-Arab attitudes of the West intensified by the attacks of 9/11, Puar identifies how the queering of national American identity materialized in the early twenty-first century. The paradox of this shift, namely via the legalization of same-sex marriage, as well as legal protections of LGBTQIA+ people, responds intricately to the idea of the terrorist. In summary of Jose Esteban Muñoz's (1997) theorizations of 'terrorist drag' which further links, and subverts, queerness to the symbol of terror, Puar writes:

> …homosexuals have been traitors to the nation, figures of espionage and double agents, associated with communists during the McCarthy era, and, as suicide bombers, have brought on and desired death through the AIDS pandemic (both suicide bomber and gay man always figure as already dying, a decaying or corroding masculinity). More recent exhortations place gay marriage as "the worst form of terrorism," and gay couples as "domestic terrorists" (2007, xxiii).

Here, the queer body, the queer symbol, has historically existed as an anti-citizen, or a terrorist. Queerness was a threat to national identity, to the security of the nation; though when the nation was physically threatened via 9/11, this rhetoric shifted only to emerge as further separating itself from the Middle East and Islam. With this shift, the rejection of queerness became an

intensification of the rejection of the 'Arab'; policies such as 'stop-and-frisk' and the PATRIOT Act quickly, and violently, expanded the surveillance and policing of the nation itself.

To accept the queer into national identity occurred, also, as a point of economic expansion. Since neoliberalism requires an expansion via the exploitation of diversity for the gains of the so-called free markets, queer people became profitable and productive (Puar 2007). Compliance with the state, for queer individuals, exponentially grew as the once-radical gay liberation movements shifted into a normative, palatable assimilationism. For example, the legalization of same-sex marriage at the federal level in 2015 functioned as an entrance for gays and lesbians into the state—such an entrance allows for the legal recognition of citizenship and compliance with the state itself. The protections of state-recognized citizenship and productiveness similarly affirm the gay and lesbian citizen's ability to partake within the security (though fragile) of the state's authority. Neoliberalism's inclusion of multicultural identities and the expansion of identitarian politics has opened the United States' wings to allow for representation in national projects (Puar 2007; Steger and Roy 2010; Duggan 2002). In many ways, too, one might argue against relationships between legal and cultural realities—does legal recognition, for example, enable equality beyond law? This representation, specifically through legal recognition, does not protect historically othered individuals through state legislation. Instead, once abject subjects—in this case, I consider LGBTQ+ people and fat people through legal and cultural recognition—become hyper-visible, and thus hyper-surveilled. Fatness and homosexuality were once simultaneously scrutinized by eugenicists in the 1990's as projects to 'eliminate' such characteristics through genetic modification (LeBesco 2009). However, as the cultural and legal norm of American citizenry both expanded and constricted in the turn of the century, fat people were further constructed into a failed citizen, while once-considered anti-

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citizen, queer people were enveloped into the nation-state (Biltekoff 2007; LeBesco 2009; Puar 2007). Still, there are no legal protections for anti-fat bias in employment or beyond; the fat citizen is not yet a citizen. Insofar that queer and fat bodies were simultaneously under scrutiny through lenses of eugenics, an underpinned question remains: how did queerness, long seen as anti-citizen and threatening to the nation, prevail into inclusion and national identity yet fatness remains a threat and failure to the nation? The nation "shifted such that homosexuality is no longer a priori excluded from nationalist formations" so that "people who were once labeled as queer and other can now assimilate and have access to perpetuating the imperialist forces of the United States military" (Puar 2007, 2; Barrett 2021).

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To attempt to understand this question, I find suggestive framings through understanding the symbolism of fatness as feminine, weakness, and failure. While gayness has also been seen as feminine (in cis men), ultimately this leads us to how gay and fat embodiments have both been threats to white, American masculinities in that they disrupt the body and the imaginary of citizenry. Fatness being specifically charged under scrutiny by means of productivity and by militarism (e.g., the Captain America archetype), then suggests this to remain as a double-binding blockade against the embracing of fat people and communities into the national imaginary. Further, noting the racialized history of fatness (Strings 2019; Harrison 2021), it is suggestive that fatness remains as an antithesis to the ideal citizen. However, what I will reveal in my later analysis, this shift towards embracing gay identity into the U.S. national imaginary occurred due to the ways gay men and lesbian women can embody white, American racial and gendered norms. The difference between gayness and fatness, here, is that one can be hidden from sight; gay men, for example, can strategically or covertly choose when to reveal their sexuality, if, and when, they are able to perform other normative embodiments. Fatness,

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however, is much more precarious, culturally specific, and violently surveilled. Thus, I move to my analysis of embodied homonationalism to reveal how this embodiment remains tied to anti-fatness.

Queer, Fat Discourse Analysis: Methods

My research functions as part of a larger project of understanding how the body and the nation exist co-constitutively. Particularly, I am interested in how post-9/11 body politics and U.S. national rhetoric inflict, literally and symbolically, the body itself. This work is grounded in both queer and fat liberation framings, utilizing foundational theoretical literature to reflect how meanings of the body shift throughout time. In this work, I magnify five major historical collisions: 1) the history of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness, 2) the neoliberal creation of the consumer citizen, 3) the U.S. 'war on terror' and 'war on obesity', 4) the homonationalism shift in post-9/11 U.S nation building, and 5) political and filmic manifestations of the body as a symbol. I identify a thread of the development of nationalism between shifting queer/gay national inclusion and anti-fat rhetoric. My methodology leads me to the argument that homonationalism and neoliberalism converge as an embodied practice that scaffold, encourage and even require, anti-fatness. And further, that the operations and violence of anti-fatness cannot be separated from our understandings and theorizations of body politics, homo/nationalism, and citizenship in the United States[2]. To achieve these conclusions, I primarily utilize discourse analysis grounded in queer studies and fat studies methodologies.

[2] This thesis operates spatially within the United States due to the conclusions I illuminate. I recognize this limitation to my findings. However, I hope to provide a method and argument which allows for extending the implications of homonationalism and anti-fatness across borders. I also work within this limitation due to the timeline and size of this project.

Discourse analysis functions to analyze a multitude of materials, both cultural and social. I maintain my commitment to approaching the totality of my project through a queer lens. As noted in the introduction to their work, Browne and Nash (2010), "Queer scholarship…in its contemporary form is anti-normative and seeks to subvert, challenge and critique a host of taken for granted 'stabilities' in our social lives" (7). Insofar that 'queer' is both an identity, and a verb, I embody the practice of queer theory that is challenged normativity and rooted in deconstructing normative understandings of gender, race, class, sexuality, dis/ability, and body size. The troubling theorizations queer studies enacts often receives—rightfully so— criticism for its abstractions; often, theory provides language for recognizing how systems of power and oppression function, but does not provide actionable, material practice (Browne and Nash 2010). Being conscious of this detachment from scholarship to every-day practice, I facilitate my arguments and findings towards actionable conclusions. My analysis of drag and performance remains tied to material practice, due to its literal manifestations of what is theorized and symbology.

My analysis is similarly grounded in a fat studies framework. Perhaps less of a methodology and more of an orientation to methodology itself, I pull from Fat studies scholars who define the interventions fat scholarship hopes to make. Fat scholarship hopes to "identify and discuss mainstream and alternative discourses on fatness, analyse size as a social justice issue at the intersection of oppression, and critically appraise size oppression as it is manifested in various societal institutions (medicine, media, education, etc.)" (Pause and Taylor 2021, 1). Further, fat studies remains grounded in corporeal theorizing. The theorizing and findings are directly and inextricably related to bodies, the size of bodies, their political meanings, and their relationship with health structures and biological truths (Pause, Taylor 2021, 1). I note these

defining points of fat studies to reflect and illustrate my own methodology toward my work. I raise questions about embodiment—which is entirely related to the meanings of the body itself—how one embodies ideology, and how we might be able to create embodiments of rejection. More specifically, embodied rejections of homonationalism and anti-fatness, which, as I will illustrate, exist simultaneously.

My discourse analysis is informed by the method of queering and interventions grounded in fat studies. Queer, because I aim to subvert and challenge sexual and gendered meanings of the body, and fat because I am scrutinizing political and cultural meanings of the body, and body size. Through my discourse analysis, I note U.S. governmental and political statements alongside filmic imagery, such as drag, film, and media. I pull from the rhetoric of government representatives such as former Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson, former Surgeon General Richard Carmona, former President George W. Bush, former President Barack Obama, former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, and Wisconsin Senator Tammy Baldwin. I analyze these figures due to their explicit—and often implicit—reifications of anti-fat rhetoric, embodiment, and goals. I extend and reflect these historical and rhetorical tracings into theories of 'terrorist drag' from Muñoz (1997) which I apply to drag queen Divine as Babs Johnson in John Waters' 1972 film *Pink Flamingos*. My analysis is grounded in the desire to identify instructional and methodological modes of embodiment, whether by means of performance or subjectivity, that reject homonationalism, anti-fatness, and neoliberal governmentalities. It is also within my hope to identify the extremities of identity which rupture, subvert, and reimagine identities; in this case, my exploration of terrorist drag, and filth politics, represent modes of dismantling the body, the national anxieties of the body, and encourage a troubling of these embodiments.

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My intention behind these analytical choices is to recognize how rhetoric from the government intentionally and collaterally informs the citizens of a nation. Further, the entrance to my explorations resides in national rhetoric, and my interest in how nationalism informs the creation and construction of the 'citizen'. As Lowe (1996) expresses,

> [A]lthough the law is perhaps the discourse that most literally governs citizenship, U.S. national culture—the collectively forged images, histories, and narratives that place, displace, and replace individuals in relation to the national polity— powerfully shapes who the citizenry is, where they dwell, what they remember, and what they forget….In the United States, not only class but also the historically sedimented particularities of race national origin locality and embodiment remain largely invisible within the political sphere in this sense the legal and political formations of the nation have required a national culture in the integration of the differentiated people and social space that make up America (2).

I frame my analyses, too, within this understanding of the dual relationship between political and cultural rhetoric. Citizenship, firstly, might be recognized as a legal identity, but, as Lowe (1996) shows us, it is also culturally constructed. Further, she expresses it "is through culture that the subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as 'American'" (Lowe 1996, 3). In many ways, this provides clear framing for understanding how the body functions as a site for the nation to be established. The cultural ideals of citizenry are constructed, and are constituted by, the actions and rhetoric of people themselves. My interest in these two modes of citizenship inform my approach to media and film of the later part of my work. Further, I find that the government, and representatives of the government, provides scholars and activists with the most explicit rhetoric to illustrate the connections we hope to trouble. Government officials often say the quiet parts out loud. This argument will be solidified as I enter my discussions of the 'war on terror' and the 'war on obesity' in the United States.

Embodying Homonationalism

How does one embody homonationalism? The intricacies of this process are complex. Expressing evidence of how homonationalism is embodied requires scrutiny of the body itself as a symbol, alongside rhetoric used by a person in which materializes such symbolism. I begin my analysis by explaining how homonationalism and neoliberalism converge as an embodied practice and how these modes scaffold, encourage and even require, anti-fatness. I look to the ways homonationalism is embodied through interpersonal relationships, specifically in sexual and romantic online spaces, and later move into an analysis of Pete Buttigieg as a poignant symbol for such embodiment, particularly because of his national platform. The goal of this analysis functions to identify how homonationalism exists co-constitutively with the upholding of anti-fatness. Because normative American citizenship, both legal and cultural, requires an upholding of societal structures and ideations such as cissexism[3] (specifically phallus-centered), ableism, anti-fatness, and white supremacy, the idea of what it means to be a citizen is both constructed through the body and the state (Barrett 2020, 119). Further exploring the constructions and implications of citizenship, Brandzel (2016) expresses,

> Citizenship is, inherently, a normativizing project—a project that regulates and disciplines the social body in order to produce model identities and hegemonic knowledge claims. Moreover, it is a violent exclusionary operation, one that relies upon and reproduces a multipronged, gatekeeping apparatus that works to create, retain, and imbue citizenship with meaning at the direct expense of the noncitizen. Citizenship will always claim to be aspirational—to include the excluded eventually, once they are marked as deserving or human enough. But this is nothing less than an illusion, because according to citizenship, there will always be, *there must be*, (an) Other who experiences the full force of the exclusionary technologies of citizenship (5; original emphasis).

I view this quotation as a useful way of expressing the inevitability and requirements of expanding/declining inclusion of American citizenship in relation to queer and fat identities.

[3] For more on distinctions between transphobia and cissexism, see *Whipping Girl* by Julia Serano (2007).

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Specifically in terms of creation of the fat body as a "failed citizen", the United States encouraged perpetual attempts toward thinness for expansion and longevity of the nation (Bailey 2010). As normative gays and lesbians (i.e., cisgender, white, middle- to upper-class, educated, able-bodied, slim) embraced allegiance to the United States' national identity through same-sex marriage, military inclusion, and anti-discriminatory laws, fatness remains highly visible, yet highly unprotected.

Embodied homonationalism appears implicitly and explicitly. Barrett (2020) emphasizes how homonationalism is reified interpersonally stating: "Homonationalism…is a more rigorous societal structure that does not allow for simply passing or assimilating to the ideal citizen" (Barrett 2020, 119). And further, it is evident that the homonational project necessarily functions alongside anti-fatness. By utilizing homonationalism as a point of both reference and framing, Barrett (2020) describes that:

> Homonationalism allows us to look into how this nationalist fat-phobia is embedded in gay spaces through a lack of desire. These homonationalist demands of a toned muscular body is similar to the demands of a masculine performance and embodiment, in that, the tacit nature of lack of desire is what is ostracizing (130).

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Their exploration of homonationalism within gay dating apps—specifically for queer, bi, and gay identified men and gender nonconforming people in the US and Canada—illustrates the pervasive methods in which nationalism and sexuality appear in interpersonal relationships and in turn, construct ideals of citizenry. Knowing the extent to which anti-fatness and national identity have been conflated (Biltekoff 2007; Rosenblatt 2001; Bailey 2010), homonationalism thus also requires slim, thin ideals of citizenship. In some ways, this can be seen clearly—adding a prefix 'homo-' to such a noun does not reject the noun itself. Rather, it exists as a result of and between non-homonormative nationalisms. Much of this idealization, again, reflects how American national identity is fortified by whiteness and masculinity. Barrett's (2020) study

functions, then, as a critical collision between how the homonationalistic project functions as a continuation of anti-fat normativity, which contains intimate relationships to anti-Blackness, femmephobia and transphobia. I mark Barrett's (2020) study as a critical analysis that encourages further research and qualitative findings to better contextualize the contemporary moment.

It is further important to note that fatness, for masculine-presenting people (cis or trans), has been constructed into a sign of femininity. Austen et. al. (2022)[4] conclude "Masculinity is a currency that fat men have less of" and within this argument, they identify key points:

> (1) Heteronormativity shapes the value of masculinity, (2) Fatness as the antithesis of the masculine ideal, (3) Fatness can be masculine if compensated for by other masculine traits, and (4) Consequences of having less currency: fat men are socially isolated and rejected (163).

Their argument usefully contextualizes how fatness is related to gender and sexuality. Fat gay men have less sexual capital—the immaterial quantitative symbol of desirability. However, through that of subcultures in queer communities, fat men can hyper-perform and hyper-visualize traditionally masculine features such as being hairy, having masculine interests, a low voice, or stockiness (Austen et. al. 2022). Evidently, this suggests that fatness can be subverted through proximity to normative masculinity; this performance is similar in the ways gay men can perform their ways out of visible queerness. Citing Australian scholar Raewyn Connell (1995) who prominently theorized Western masculinities, Austen et. al. (2022) summarizes: "Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant and idealized form of masculinity in patriarchal

[4] Austen et. al. (2022) primarily pull qualitative data from interviewing people in Australia. Although this is a geographically different location, and they themselves express utilizing their conclusions in other Western contexts may not be exactly identical, I believe their explorations are scaffolded effectively by much of Connell's (1995) theorizations of hegemonic masculinity(ies). While Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) revisit such theorizations in response to their work being widely engaged in, their explanations of normative Western masculinities remain pertinent to homo- and heteronormative gender performance.

societies; within a Western context, it is embodied by being white, heterosexual, young, visibly muscular, and able-bodied" (161). However, this is not always the case across race, in that queer people of color are often already seen as queer due to their racialized gender (Ferguson 2003). It is important to note, then, that fatness extends to be a failure of whiteness in the way that citizenry in the United States is tightly knit to the body of the white, toned man. And in further scrutiny, functions in queer and gay communities as a failure of the queer ideal insofar as the ideal is similarly rooted in whiteness, thinness, and masculinity. Reiterating Bailey (2010), the feminization of fatness upon the body thus emasculates gay men and masculine people; this, in two ways, creates a non-normative body. As Barrett (2020) expressed, this ostracization remains grounded in homonationalist desires of reiterating the state, and the anti-fat rhetoric of the state.

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Toward a Queer of Color Critique
Roderick A. Ferguson 2003 U OF M Press

The Making of the All-American, Gay Mayor

Acknowledged by many contemporary scholars and critics, former South Bend mayor and former Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg represents one primary example of the symbolic homonational (Gessen 2020; LaFleur 2019; Robinson 2021). The complexities of Buttigieg's symbolism—white, cis, gay, male, fit, veteran—resemble, intimately, Barrett (2020) and Puar's (2007) theorization of homonationalism in that he properly fits the identities of power. His complexities, too, suggest evidence of how the expansion of gay and lesbian citizenship in the United States function to reify American empire and the national imaginary.

Buttigieg came out as gay, publicly, in 2015 just six days before the *Obergefell* decision federally legalized same-sex marriage (Buttigieg 2015) In his coming-out letter, Buttigieg supplements his decisions on becoming open about his sexuality: "Being gay has had no bearing on my job performance in business, in the military, or in my current role as mayor" (Buttigieg

2015). Here, Buttigieg demarcates his sexual identity—his political role and his commitment to the state is asserted as uninfluenced by his sexuality. Understandably so, the process of coming-out might function and/or require queer and trans people to explain their humanness despite their minority sexual or gender identity. However, Buttigieg reflects the on-going assimilation of gay identity into the American mainstream with an argument in which largely asserted justification for same-sex marriage rights:

> [The] true compass that will have guided us there will be the basic regard and concern that we have for one another as fellow human beings—based not on categories of *politics, orientation, background, status or creed*, but on our shared knowledge that the greatest thing any of us has to offer is love (Buttigieg 2015; emphasis mine).

His attempt to liken gayness to straightness (i.e., "we are just like you") supplants any meaningful challenge to heteronormativity, placing him within the boundaries of homonationalist imaginaries. It is evident Buttigieg enacts a sexual exceptionalism "that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire" (Puar 2007, 2), and as Buttigieg has explicitly named himself, through conceding his gayness to as simple as his "brown hair", "this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only for normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects" (Buttigieg 2015; Puar 2007, 2). Which is to say, his appeal to make his gayness invisible reflects a heteronormative reproach of erasure difference across sexual and gendered lines. Further, Buttigieg's coming-out statement foreshadows his larger neglect for intersectional queer politics. Robinson (2021) effectively contemplates the ways in which Buttigieg's presidential campaign neglected issues of gay rights, gender identity, class, or race. Thus, what can be identified, is the dissolving of identity through politics—when a historically othered subject cedes to normative power, the subject is required to remain neglected from their true identity (Muñoz 1997).

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The neoliberal approach to expanding the qualifications, both legal and cultural, of citizenship in the U.S. (e.g., the overturning of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, *Obergefell v. Hobbes*, *Lawrence v. Texas,* growth of the gay consumer) has thus enabled the growth of LGBTQ+ visibility within the government and beyond. Similar to the representation of Buttigieg, Tammy Baldwin—known as the first openly-lesbian Senator in the US, much before Buttigieg entered politics—expanded the national imaginary whilst providing evidence that proper queer citizenship requires assimilationist action and performance in alignment to goals of the American empire. In 2011, as debates continued regarding Don't Ask, Don't Tell before its end, Baldwin argues "In the land of the free and the home of the brave, it is long past time for Congress to end this un-American policy" (Hall 2013, 1124). Here, we can identify the ways gay and lesbian identity has been incorporated into the American national imaginary: discrimination of sexuality in the military shifts into an un-American law, suggesting the Americanization of queer identity. This shift precedes that of federal, legal recognition same-sex marriage, but properly reflects the goals of the gay movement in the early part of the century. While I do not thoroughly investigate Baldwin's political career, I utilize her example as contextual evidence to the ways homonationalism has prevailed in the political regimes of the U.S. I push towards rhetoric that constructs what it means to be an American gay. Similarly, to this language deployed by Baldwin, when Don't Ask, Don't Tell was inevitably overturned in 2011, former President Barack Obama reflected,

> Patriotic Americans in uniform will no longer have to lie about who they are in order to serve the country they love. Our armed forces will no longer lose the extraordinary skills and combat experience of so many gay and lesbian service members (Slack 2012).

Further, we can identify how the rhetoric of the state inflicts the body. The bodies of these gay and lesbian people become useful, and patriotic, as they uphold U.S. militarism, imperialism, and

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empire. And the justification, or relief, of this overturning, as Obama notes, resides in the perception that gays and lesbians are just like 'regular', 'patriotic' Americans—just gay. They are able to be productive and utilized for the mission of the United States, through militarism, and their identity as a sexual minority does not impede on this ability (i.e., they—gays—are just like us—straights). I note these critical rhetorical choices because they, for me, reveal the implicit truths of their language. Gays and lesbians can be citizens, legally and culturally, only when they are productive for the goals of the American empire. My suggestion here is not to advocate for a government that explicitly excludes queer people; however, I do put into question the necessity for militarism at large, and the discourse surrounding governmental bans of sexuality. The surveillance of identity is what is harmful; the inclusion/exclusion from the military is not quite the landing point[5]. As Puar (2007) describes, this homonormativity emerging within the U.S. nation-state "ties the recognition of homosexual subjects, both legally and representationally, to the national and transnational political agendas of U.S. imperialism" and thus "can be read as a formation complicity with and invited into the biopolitical valorization of life in its inhabitation and reproduction of heteronormative norms" (9). This complicity relies upon the very rhetoric Baldwin and Obama deploy to suggest that gay and lesbian identity fit into American identity without critique of imperialism and the ways the U.S. has long rejected the queer subject. However, knowing the extent to which American identity intertwines itself with militarism, patriotism, and physical hardness (Bailey 2010), this regulatory power of sexuality and gender inflicts the most vulnerable. And, the symbol of the soldier remains tethered to cis, white, masculine, and hardness of the body—even as the soldier can now be gay, as well, it simply reifies anti-fatness under the guises of homonationalism.

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[5] See Dean Spade and Aaron Belkin's essay "QUEER MILITARISM?! The Politics of Military Inclusion Advocacy in Authoritarian Times" published in 2021 by Duke University Press.

As Buttigieg's candidacy rose in popularity, discussion within the queer community contemplated his homonormative identity. Understandably so, critics of his campaign emphasized his homonormative, status-quo approach to politics, while the contrary supporters criticized this criticism. For many queer people, his representation worked to erase difference and reject more radical calls for queer liberatory visions (Gessen 2020). And for many others, Baker-Jordan (2019) largely sums up the latter approach:

> The thing is, *many (if not most) gay people are boring and want to live in the real world, which means living in a largely straight world*. They want *white picket fences, and nuclear families, and monogamy*. They spend their time not sniffing poppers at a Fire Island orgy, but praying in a flyover state church. They don't see their rights deriving from these institutions, as Keating argued, but from the Constitution. Many (but not all!) have politics that are moderate. Some even — quelle surprise! — are *capitalists who like their insurance*. In short, many gay people either are, or want to be, like Mayor Pete (emphasis mine).

Without exhausting this quote, I believe that Baker-Jordan (2019) excellently names what homonationalism and homonormativity (if one would call it that knowing they want to live in a 'straight world') sounds and looks like—unintentionally. For Baker-Jordan (2019), there is no queer imaginary, or even gay imaginary, outside of heteronormativity, capitalism, and the state itself. Their argument embraces an erasure of difference—one embodied by Buttigieg himself—in support of the U.S. national project, and further, succinctly illustrates how homonationalism is pervasive within queer communities. Further, their ahistorical, and largely flat, commentary on criticism of Buttigieg confirms a multiplicity of ideas: (1) identity politics do not exist in alignment to political orientation (Cohen 1997; The Combahee River Collective 1977), (2) nonnormative embodiments within queer identity remain heavily under scrutiny, even within queer communities themselves (Barrett 2020; Austen et. al. 2022), and (3) that the political imagination of gays and lesbians has devolved—I argue—as a result of the likening of LGBTQ+ identity and issues to national and state alliance. Here, also, resides one stark and necessary

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differentiation between language and meaning: a distinction between ‘gay’ and ‘queer’. To be ‘gay’, in Baker-Jordan’s (2019) words, might mean to embody a sexual identity intimately tied to the upholding of racial capitalism, heteronormativity, and imperialism. While the latter ‘queer’ identity specifically engages in a disruptive, anti-normative embodiment. But it is not always an autonomous decision to note who is ‘gay’ versus ‘queer’. ‘Queer’ has also been a term utilized to subject minority communities, often violently, as Puar (2007) theorizes queerness as a process of racialization (i.e., the queer terrorist). This distinction thus frames the contemporary politics of queer v. gay ideologies, allowing for a more intense and comprehensive critique of homonormativity and homonationalism.

Fig. 1: 2019 Time Magazine Cover with Pete Buttigieg and his husband, Chasten Buttigieg

(Image description: Two cis, white men pose in front of their home with white banisters. They are dressed in Oxford button-ups and slacks. They embrace slightly, with a space between them. The words “First Family” span horizontally across their chests in white lettering.)

In 2019, Buttigieg and his husband Chasten Buttigieg posed for the cover of TIME Magazine, following the announcement of his presidential campaign (Fig 1). This photo properly captures my recognition of embodied homonationalism. Poignantly, there are no queer signals or symbols in this photo. As LaFleur (2019) explores, this photo invites an exploration of the symbolism of whiteness and the aesthetics in which whiteness foregrounds; furthermore, she expresses how this photo "claims that there's nothing to see, because we already know what it is" (LaFleur 2019). In other words, this image does not invite viewers into any queer imagination other than there are two men together, presumably a 'family'. I extend LaFleur's (2019) analysis—she concludes with a reckoning with the complicit, assimilationism of gay identity which provokes an orientation of "heterosexuality without women"—to frame this image within my own argument. The image, whether it be symbolizing heteronormative gayness or not, instead reads as a performance of American masculinity, heterosexuality, and homonationalism. At best, a reader can interpret this image as queer only by knowing the names of these two men. Otherwise, these could be two friends. The intimacy within this photo, or lack-there-of, reiterates an erasure of sexuality identity; it is intentional and important that the couple is not kissing, holding hands. Without signaling to queer identity, the viewers can embrace the idea of a gay president as long as the 'gay' is not evident. As Robinson (2021) states: "For some straight viewers, Buttigieg's comportment and military record established his masculinity and 'all-American' values and negated anti-gay stereotypes" (324). Thus, this homonationalist embodiment deployed by Buttigieg culminates through visual symbols, rhetorical choices, and his relationship with the U.S. government. However, like that of Buttigieg's candidacy and governmental career, there is an erasure of queerness, and gayness, throughout. Thus, this image exemplifies how Mayor Pete displays both sexual and American exceptionalism—whilst

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disregarding his gayness, he is able to strategically use his identity insofar that it is scaffolded by his other features: married, white masculinity, fitness, veteran-status, and thus, his commitment to American empire. It is this image that solidifies, too, my exploration of how homonationalism requires anti-fatness insofar that its development was concurrent with the war on obesity and terror in the United States.

The critique of Buttigieg's embodiment of homonationalism does not function as an individualistic attack on his gayness. Instead, this critique comes from Buttigieg's actions, rhetoric, and political choices, in order to illustrate just how the development of homonationalism becomes recognizable. Moreover, this critique hones into ways Buttigieg strategizes his sexuality for political and national gain through white, male privilege, tools of assimilation, and respectability. Such strategies were accessible for Buttigieg precisely because of his race, gender, slim-body, and commitment to the American empire. As Robinson (2021) argues, Buttigieg's 2020 presidential campaign exploded because of his 'all-American' white male gayness, in spite of his backburning of LGBTQ+ issues of his platform (353). Further, my approach to examining Buttigieg forms from a more radical queer embodiment, one that rejects nationalist American patriotism as such embodiment perpetuates and exemplifies structures of white supremacy, militarism, respectability, anti-fatness, and American exceptionalism (Puar 2007). As Robinson (2021) in their analysis of Buttigieg explains, "'politics of respectability' is a strategy that foregrounds only the most affluent, traditional, and 'all-American' gays and lesbians, and it typically excludes or marginalizes bisexual and transgender people and people of color" (316). To assimilate into the politics of the state, which is that of respectability, rejects coalition with marginalized people, including the very gay people who fought towards the position Buttigieg held in the government. Further, I do not intend to rely upon the hypothetical

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question of "What if Buttigieg were fat, identified as fat, or was marked as fat by others?" This question relies, again, upon such an assumption that identity absolves one from their actions, morals, and their politics[6]. My intent, then, shifts towards larger questions of identifying how fat liberation frameworks and embodied fat liberation might challenge, subvert, and reject homonationalist embraces. What is necessary, then, is identifying alternative modes of embodiment that reject homonationalist approaches.

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Methodologies of Rejecting Homonationalism

> *"The toll is one that subjects who attempt to identify with and assimilate to dominant ideologies pay every day of their lives. The price of the ticket is this: to find self within the dominant public sphere, we need to deny self."*
>
> Jose Esteban Muñoz, "The White to be Angry" (1997)

I tackle the complex question of embodiment, and embodied rejection, of homonationalism in order to discover new ways of being. With that said, I am directly interested in performing a theoretical and visual analysis of drag for the purpose of reaching the extremes, the anxiety, the discomfort. I am looking for the most poignant and highly disruptive modes of performance and embodiment in order to identify instructions towards rejecting homonationalism. Because, as the epigraph above provides, when one attempts (i.e., tries, yet may never succeed) to assimilate, to play the game of the state, as a queer person, they will forever deny themselves. Which is also to say, I am looking for resources to reject the state from the body; from mine, from yours, from the social body, from the body-mind. The following exploration attempts (though may fail, and in that failure[7], might suggest counterintuitive

[6] For more on queer coalitional politics through a rejection of identity politics, see Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential for Queer Politics?" (1997).
[7] See Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011).

productivity) to capture instructive corporeal methodologies for queer, fat people in the United States.

I utilize Muñoz's (1997) concept 'terrorist drag', applying this framing to John Waters' character Babs Johnson (played by Divine) in his 1972 film *Pink Flamingos*. This interpretation comes as a direct result of conceptualizing how the construction of the 'terrorist' has functioned throughout the history I have tracked. To reiterate, Puar (2007) properly identifies how the 'terrorist' in post-9/11 U.S. culture was queered, and thus supplanted onto queer people (specifically Arab and non-Western sexualities). She similarly utilizes Muñoz's (1997) theories in her own understandings of the development of homonationalism, in that Muñoz (1997) identifies the history of the queer as a terror (via HIV/AIDS, gay serial killers, etc.). Further, Biltekoff (2007), as previously explored, illuminates how the fat body has been marked as a domestic terrorist threat. Fatness was, and has been, constructed as a 'menacing' (Strings 2019), 'bioterrorist' (CBS 2006) threat which 'feminizes' (Bailey 2010; Austen et. al. 2022) the American national identity thus signaling for vulnerability of American expansion and empire (Bailey 2010). Similarly, the 'war on obesity' emphasized fatness as a domestic threat to American militarism (Biltekoff 2007) in that when soldiers may be needed, they would be 'too fat' to serve. Evidently, fatness became metaphorically and tacitly a threat of terrorism, provoking a multiplicity of the nation's highest anxieties. These anxieties, as well, are not new—insofar as they are relevant to my historical lens, the body in times of national panic are always under scrutiny. Such that the racialized and gendered inflictions upon fat people and communities (Strings 2019; Harrison 2021), we are able to recognize the consistent anxieties and violence imposed upon fat people throughout history. However, the anxieties of the nation (i.e., governmental, militaristic concerns) inflict the individual body, the flesh, and the social body.

And, thus, these embodied anxieties, such as the violence of anti-fatness, or the desire to assimilate to normative power, establish a self- and community-surveillant mindset and uplifts oppression. Embodying homonationalism upholds the goals of the American empire, even as they remain in flux. Denying and rejecting the performance and embodiment of these anxieties and oppressions then means rejecting the state-within. Therefore, I look to drag performance for guidance, due to the subversive and disruptive spatialities in which drag exists.

Terrorist Drag

Muñoz (1997) contemplates the work of Vaginal Creme Davis, specifically her drag performance, in the 1990s, to evidently identify her methodologies of terrorist drag. He effectively explores her drag performances, which he names as "terrorist insofar as she is performing the nation's internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality" (91). Her tactical performances embody a sort of praxis in which terrorism (the literal act of terror itself) as a method of rejecting, rupturing, and exploding "salient popular fantasies" (Muñoz 1997, 91). In his own perspective, Munoz (1997) recognizes Davis' aesthetics and performative embodiments as part of her ability to function as an "organic intellectual"; this organicism is established due to her low-budget, "guerilla representational strategies" that engage in performances such as cross-racial minstrelsy (91).

By one example, Davis' performance of cross-racial desire as a white supremacist militiaman (namely Clarence) intervenes with the history of blackface minstrelsy by parodying the very cross-racialization of her body. Her performance, of whiteface, thus illustrates whiteness "through the vehicle of the black queen's body", which in turn, "interrogates white hysteria, miscegenation anxiety, and supremacy" (Munoz 1997, 93). The result of this performance,

terrorist in that Davis utilizes symbols of violence and supremacy, then functions as a destabilization of the very symbol it represents. Davis tactically embodies a symbol of the nation's anxiety to destroy the symbol itself. Further, her militiaman character Clarence, as Munoz (1997) describes, through a live striptease, becomes queer, and Davis appears underneath the embodied whiteface. She sings a song with lines such as "a homosexual / is a criminal. / I'm a sociopath, a pathological liar" and "I'll eat you limb from limb" (Munoz 1997, 90). By this stripping-away, Davis begins performing a homophobic serial-killer—a homosexual Dahmer-esque murderer who vibrantly magnified the homophobic popular imaginary (91). This symbol (the homosexual serial killer meets cross-racial whiteface) explodes whiteness and desire, and by extension disorients and distorts "sanitized understandings of a gay identity, which is often universalized as white" (Munoz 1997, 94). Thus, the very utility of Davis' drag resides in this terroristic approach to identities. For Munoz, Davis' praxis of drag is not interested in normative performance of 'passing' or achieving 'realness', but instead her work is

> A survival strategy on a more symbolic register than that of everyday practice. She is not passing to escape social injustice and structural racism in the way that some "straight-acting queers" do. Her disidentification with drag plays with its prescriptive mandate to enact femininity through (often white) standards of glamour (92).

I find this description to be quite poignant to my later explorations of Divine's drag performance in *Pink Flamingos*; the strategy, while perhaps symbolic and explosive, does exist embedded with ideas of survival. Perhaps not through the every-day, but nonetheless, this strategy of performance requires an embodiment of rejection that entirely subverts the power of national symbols of domestic terror and anxiety. And further, Davis' powerful disidentificatory tools function as an example of resisting and deconstructing the national imaginary at large. My intention, too, is rooted in finding the most extreme examples of disruptive performances to conceptualize more material, everyday embodiments.

I extend Muñoz's (1997) explorations to the performance by drag queen Divine as Babs Johnson in John Waters' 1972 film *Pink Flamingos* to further visualize a rejected sense of homonationalist embodiment. I look to *Pink Flamingos,* and her performance of Babs Johnson's filth, gluttony, murder, and sexual perversion as too a form of terrorist drag—she performs the nation's highest anxieties, and then some. The grounding of this extension resides particularly in the collisions of fatness and queerness; as it relates to my previous arguments and historical tracings, I look to a terroristic performance as it relates to body size. Knowing that one of the highest anxieties of the U.S. national imaginary, during and after the war on terror itself, was related to body size, I necessarily attempt at discovering ways to disrupt and subvert these ideas. While filmed in the 1970s, before Davis' performances, it remains crucial to my framing of rejected embodiments insofar that Divine's performance of anti-normativity and anti-citizen terrorizes—literally through murder—desirability, American suburban, whiteness, anti-thinness, and heterosexuality. I find Divine's performance to intentionally engage in drag, like Davis, to not achieve realness, or pass, but instead to terrorize the body and its desires.

Pink Flamingos is grounded in a narrative surrounding the desire to be the 'filthiest person alive'. Babs Johnson, living in a trailer home on the outskirts of Phoenix, Maryland, is dubbed the filthiest being; her politics of filth engage specifically in perversion, sexual fetishes, murderous tendencies, and anti-normativity. The course of the film follows Babs, her mother Edie, her son Crackers, and her companion Cotton—all of which similarly engage in some sort of filmic filth. For Edie, it is a gluttonous love for eggs; for Crackers, it is sexual perversion and bestiality; for Cotton, it is voyeurism. The 'villains', the Marbles, of this story are perverted rivals who kidnap young women and forcibly inseminate them to sell their babies to lesbian couples on the black market. Largely, the film is not for sensitive viewers. And in this way,

framing Babs' character functions (ironically) nicely within Munoz's (1997) theorizations. In the same way Davis explodes and disintegrates phobic images of the nation's anxieties, so too does Divine in that she, in the film, exists in the public mind as a wanted criminal.

Padilla-Diaz (2021) states the otherness permeating throughout John Waters' films "is associated with freakery, fatness, queerness, and criminality; forging an alliance of misrepresented bodies that, while making fun of fixed categories of identity, are continuously addressing mainstream society" (13). Babs' otherness exists intimately with rupturing normative embodiment. In the film, the intention of utilizing otherness and freakery to disrupt normativity are apparent through its camp aesthetics; evidently, the low-budget film mimics a guerrilla-style, exaggerated performance which terrorizes the literal film, and the audience themselves (Munoz 1997). Babs, a lesbian who will have sex with anything, or anyone, thus explodes the very identification of white lesbianism and homosexuality. She establishes the homosexual as incestual (when she performs oral sex on Crackers) or murderous (when she murders the Marbles in the end of the story), in order to disidentify and subvert the national anxieties around homosexuality. As a largely comedic film (via camp aesthetics), the humor of Babs and her extremity of fatness, sexuality, and class can be understood as a way "to mock and degrade" a "mode of apolitical gayness", or someone like Pete Buttigieg, for example (Munoz 1997, 98). Further, this mockery results in an "antigayness" which is "used as a way of lampooning and ultimately disrupting a modality of white gay male hegemony" (Munoz 1997, 98). Critically, then, the necessity of this framing points back to my analysis of Buttigieg, and the homonationalist symbology, which is rooted, as well, in the white gay male hegemony. Continued through Padilla-Diaz's (2021) explorations of Waters' films, she expresses the poignancy of the body itself. "The body," she contends,

> is reimagined as the main site for bad taste, one that operates "performing acts" that shake expectations of taste, beauty, and sexuality. Disturbing representations of heterosexuality and homosexuality, the films' politics of filth are queer politics that celebrate a temporary suspension of the official straight world in favour of the freak show, grotesque, filth, and abjection…The medium of laughter connects the filmic bodies with the public bodies: Multiple Maniacs and Pink Flamingos provide cinematic spectacles that shake the spectators on their seats and provoke bodily reactions. (Padilla-Diaz 2021, 44).

Here, as I utilize my framing, is a continued exploration of how the body itself functions within performance. In other words, Babs' embodiment exists under both an embodiment of terroristic desire and humor in which reimagines the body as a site for politics. A politic, in her case, of filth, rejection, perversion, and one that entirely ruptures the symbology of fatness, drag, and homosexuality.

The symbolism of class arises as a critical entrance of *Pink Flamingos*, as well. The geographic space of the film takes place both on the outskirts of society, without an address, and in the American suburbs. The filth and grotesque nature of the film makes visible a symbolism of 'white trash', an iteration of poverty and whiteness that the United States' national imaginary contends anxiety towards. Encapsulating this poverty-class whiteness, Babs' embodiment further terrorizes the domestic white image. Thinking back to Bailey's (2010) synthesis of *Super Size Me*, the national rhetoric surrounding the 'obesity epidemic' targeted lower-class Americans in that they were more susceptible to living in neighborhoods with high-access to fast food and low-access to fresh produce. This historic tracking remains imminent to the relationship between body size and class, as well as race—insofar that class and race have been systematically converged throughout the nation in terms of geography and economic investment. Padilla-Diaz (2019) illustrates how the symbol of 'white trash' represents as a failure of whiteness because white supremacy has fought to conflate whiteness with wealth[8]. This methodology has been used

[8] See "Whiteness as Property" by Cheryl Harris in *The Harvard Law Review* 1993.

to villainize and victimize poor and working-class white people, to further separate proper whiteness along class lines. In this way, I am interested in how Babs' embodies a doubly failed body; as a failure through fatness and also via low-class, whiteness. While I don't believe Waters was specifically filming within the ideas of how the body is marked for futurity, in my viewing I find the failures of the body to be comically utilized. Quoting Tad Friend's 1994 article "White Hot Trash!", Padilla-Diaz (2021) writes, "'The country is becoming underclass—laden, illiterate, promiscuous, and just plain fat", writes Friend, voicing the anxieties of the era into a category that encapsulates everything that is wrong with the nation, from illegitimate children and rising divorce rates to serial killers" (62). This anxiety, on a national level, contends the very constructions of class and body size. They are marked as futureless, insofar that they are useless to the nation's empire. Thus, if fat, 'white trash' people are marked for futurelessness, then Babs subverts and terrorizes this idea in that she does not engage in reproductive sex, she calls for legalization of murder, and murders others.

Commented [MOU35]: Re word this

These examples are not requirements, but instructions of how to reject homonationalism. Much of my research has discovered that perhaps there is missing and upcoming materials to be written about rejecting embodied homonationalism. I critique these missing pieces through a fat studies framework and intervene in the homonationalism literature discourses to identify how anti-fatness is one of the many scaffolds of nationalism—something that is often disregarded in this literature. It is not meant to be metaphorical, the ways I intend to rupture the internalized-state, but rather material. As I have demonstrated, the concurrent developments of the war on terror, the war on obesity, and homonationalism, it is pertinent that queer people (regardless of body size) to reject homonationalist embodiment to further imagine and reach liberation. Knowing, too, the very ways anti-fat rhetoric and violence materializes in interpersonal

Commented [KP36]: Totally! An important dearth of scholarship to identify!

relationships (Barrett 2021), the necessity for rejecting anti-fatness comes directly alongside rejecting homonationalism. These rejections, intentional and coupled, furthermore rupture neoliberal governmentalities in which demand hyper surveillance of the body itself, as a reiteration of the state and economy.

After writing into this analysis utilizing terrorist drag, my research has brought me to an exploration I have not quite settled in but will choose to explore for the purpose of continuing my thought process. The history I have traced of the body has brought me to considering the very usefulness of framing rejected embodiment, as it relates to fatness, through terrorist drag. The intention of this utility was to identify, perhaps, how drag performance invited exploratory and disruptive modes of embodiment specifically related to homonationalism. I contend that the usefulness of terrorist drag, and my above analysis relates perhaps more intimately with queer people, specifically white gay, cis people. The upholding of homonationalism in the United States comes directly through the body, and further, is extended by the upholding of anti-fatness insofar that their histories are so closely related. However, for fat embodiment, this framing might be as useful.

Consider the following thinking: if fatness has already been seen as a terror, and marked as a terrorist threat to the nation, then there is no way for drag to prevent this. Because this construction in the U.S. has intrinsically been extrapolated onto the body, then the highest anxieties (which would ground terrorist drag performance) are already ‘performed’. Fatness is seen, then, as stuck in a terrorist state that can only be rejected through compliance with anti-fatness; the only way to exit the state of terrorism is to concede to compulsory thinness and the American ideal citizen. Thus, fatness does not exist perfectly under a lens of terrorist drag and requires a different mode of exploration. The point of this caveat is to perhaps suggest that for fat

people and fat communities, performance might not be the most useful space for rejecting nationalism, and for queer, fat people, homonationalism. Instead, 'performing' the highest anxieties of the nation means waking each morning; but how might we reject this framing? My research, and thoughts, bring me to suggesting that it is a necessity of placing fat liberation practice and theory to the forefront of rejecting nationalism in the United States. Does this also suggest embodying terrorist drag frameworks in the every-day? I am not particularly one to say yes, or no, in this imaginary. However, I do believe a further exploration of fat futurity, fat pleasure, and theories of abundance would more critically provide answers to these suggestions.

Theorizing in Flux

My attempts to contextualize the ways in which fatness and anti-fatness are situated within modes of the contemporary homonational project follows the precarity of realizing the present. Because these historical events collide (terror, obesity, homonationalism), embodied homonationalism cannot be separated from anti-fatness—the national identity for LGBTQ+ people is foregrounded by the 'war on obesity' and the 'war on terror'. The 'proper' gay citizen is cis, white, thin/fit, masculine, and within proximity to the goals of the American empire. Like that of Buttigieg.

Commented [KP37]: Yes, absolutely. So well said.

I follow the pace of Puar (2007) in that she marks her work as "a historicization of the contemporary moment, historicizing the biopolitics of the now" such that my attempts to contextualize how fatness and anti-fatness are situated within modes of the contemporary homonational project follows the precarity of realizing the present (xix). This temporality

similarly makes use of fat futurity and the embodiment of the flesh[9] as framework for conceptualizing my theorizations as described by Yingling (2017),

> ...fat bodies in their material reality are in a constant state of disavowal from their lived contours. Often policed because of Puritanical understandings of excess and control that often are heavily racialized to signal the uncontrollable hedonism of lesser races in scientific racism (cf. Sara Baartman) and bolstered by the neoliberal body cultivation aforementioned, this disavowal encourages a liminality in fat embodiment as "there is a sense of suspension, of deferral, of hiatus. One is waiting to become 'thin'… (ibid.) (29, quoting Murray (2005).

The fat body (similar to trans[10] embodiment) exists symbolically and materially in a state between fixity and futurelessness. The expectation from structural modes of power (healthism, medical, social) is that the fat body will become thin, pointing to a future in which the fat body can move into acceptable existence; though paradoxically, many fat bodies across lines of class and race are marked for death, without a future. They further express that "Even if thinness is not a particular fat individual's desire, the thin imperative is ascribed to their skin, making fat flesh the site of an undesirable reality in the spectrum of control and excess" (Yingling 2017, 29). Both connecting fatphobia and biopower, Yingling notes the desired, or expected state of the body.

Commented [MOU38]: Add paragraph

A further iteration of this project would frame my work within theories of futurity (fat, queer, trans, disability) due to the relationship between how fatness and queerness have been constructed within anti-normative futures. As fatness is contained within a markedly futureless state a being—one that is marked already with death—so, too, is queerness, transness, and disability. However, these futurities (or lack-there-of) are constructed within a state that does not

[9] See L.H. Stallings' chapter "Black Trans Narratives, Sex Work, and the Illusive Flesh" in *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (University of Illinois Press, 2015).
[10] See "Trans Necropolitics A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife" by. C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2022).

hope to see their futures. Thus, I believe a continued iteration of this work would remain grounded in imagining futures that are not meant to exist.

Due to the timeline of this project, I do not reach the contemporary (and historical) moment of pinkwashing in Israel as a justification for genocide against the Palestinian people which remain so intimately tied to the development of homonationalism and American empire. I remain committed to emphasizing a liberation where all people are free—in a time where Palestinians are murdered and silenced, I hope to keep naming this truth in spaces that so often neglect and normalize violence and ethnic-cleansing. I do not name this reality as untethered from my explorations of anti-fatness and homonationalism. Each of these historical developments scaffolds and enable each other; the cyclical nature of oppression and empire will continue insofar that it is not broken.

I also do not reach the Ozempic moment we are currently surviving through–the body has become a commodity as a result of neoliberalism through social media and online spaces, as well as literal, physical spaces. This brings me to the question: Can we buy our way out of our body? This brings me back to my final explorations of terrorist drag and how fatness has been constructed. As more and more people continue to 'buy' their ways out of their body size (to their own detriment), there is much more to suggest about the shifting of class, race, gender, and body size as it relates to neoliberalism and the future of the United States.

Finally, my research scraped a surface of historical figures, but it does not reach this moment of creators, activists, artists which are ever changing and accessible. For example, as I was writing this paper, I stumbled upon musician Erykah Badu's 2025 performance at the Billboard Music Awards. In her performance, she wore a knitted bodysuit that mimics the features of Saartjie (Sara) Baartman. However, the media responses to this fashion choice only

engaged in questions of beauty standards, specifically in relation to BBL (Brazilian Butt Lifts) and Kardashian culture. What does it mean for Erykah Badu's performative caricature of Saartjie (Sara) Baartman's figure, as a reference to how Black women and Black bodies are fetishized, to be cleansed to a critique of BBL culture? To a sanitized version of body politics? And what might this suggest about how we see the body? Specifically, how does this replicate the anti-Black erasure of Black history and fat people? How our viewing of the body, in the U.S., might require the erasure of Black and fat histories? I do not have answers. But I do think these suggestions might lead a future project towards bigger understandings of the contemporary moment.

I mark these points because I see the national imaginary and ideal citizen as constantly in flux—and much more so as a result of national insecurity. Right now, we see a national panic over legal status within universities (such as this one where we are), travel bans from countries marked as criminal or terrorist, a violent attempt at erasure of trans and nonbinary people— all of which is to say, perhaps, this project is never concluded. I ground my work in the importance of realizing the material conditions created by national rhetoric, interpersonal relationships, and self-surveillance. I hope this research allows us to further identify the violence and harm of anti-fatness, nationalism, and thus work towards embodiments of rejection, complex subjectivities. I emphasize a need to understand history to understand the present—we must recognize how legal protections are given, why they are given, and to what gain. I insist on finding modes of embodiment that reject homonationalism, nationalism, and American empire.

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Commented [KP39]: I imagine all references will be listed here for the final draft?

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Appendix

A. *Timeline of Events*

The following (selective) timeline functioned as a guiding point for tracing how multiple events were colliding. While it is not intensive, I believe it reveals a visual connection to how the 'war on terror', 'war on obesity', and development of homonationalism and LGBTQ+ rights move together.

1970s

- Creation of neoliberal ideologies in economic schools (Steger and Roy 2010)
- BMI is coined/invented in 1973 (Strings 2019)

1980s

- Rise of the gay consumer (Puar 2007, 4)
- President Ronald Reagan, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher accentuate the global appeal towards neoliberal ideology and policies (Steger and Roy 2010)

1990s

- Introduction of weight loss medications
- Rise of neoliberalism into dominance (Steger and Roy 2010)
- Eugenicist search for fat and gay genes (LeBesco 2009).

1993

- First World Trade Center attack by Al Qaeda

1994

- Don't Ask Don't Tell introduced

1995

- World Health Organization is created

1997

- WHO adopts obesity category for BMI, followed right after by the US

1998

- August 7 - attacks on US Embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya.
- Obesity named as a disease by NIH (Rosen 2014).

1999

- the FBI, which created its first Counterterrorism Division in 1999

2000

- Al-Qaeda bombs USS Cole

2001

- Tommy Thompson loses 15 pounds as a response to his intensified war on obesity (Biltekoff 2007).
- Phenomenon of politicians losing weight as they are on the campaign trail or as gestures of 'political readiness / fitness' is not new and does not stop in the 2000s

2002

- 'Fat Soldier' scare, coming from George W. Bush & Reuters (Biltekoff 2007)
- Intensification of war on obesity towards minority populations (Black and Latino communities) — not fit for citizenship (Biltekoff 2007) see also Michelle Obama's later exploitation of Latino populations in her national health projects
- Body fat likened to bioterrorism (Biltekoff 2007).

- The dieter into the foot soldier against terrorism & obesity (Biltekoff 2007)

2003

- 'Terror within', and as threatening as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction from Richard Carmona (Biltekoff 2007).
- National Body Challenge, state-led initiative merging militarism and weight loss (Biltekoff 2007).
- Beginning of HealthierUS program, the government urges personal and individual changes to body weight (Biltekoff 2007).
- *Lawrence & Garner v. Texas*; overturning of anti-sodomy laws (Puar 2007).

2004

- *Super Size Me* film by Morgan Spurlock (Bailey 2010).
- *The Biggest Loser* begins airing (Bailey 2010).

2005

- Introduction to public school BMI report cards, Arkansas (Story, M., Nanney, M. S., & Schwartz, M. B. 2009).
- Movement towards normalization & marketization of LGBTQ consumer

2010

- Arab Spring begins

2011

- Bin laden is killed
- End of Don't Ask, Don't Tell in the US (Slack 2012).

2012

- Arab Winter

2013

- Obesity named as a disease

2015

- Legalization of same-sex marriage
- Trans people are able to participate in military, openly

2017

- Ozempic is created
- Banning of trans people in military