

[Music]

Mia:

[0:05]

Hello, and welcome to Mirror Mirrors podcast on “The History of Body Positivity.” I'm your host, Mia...

Marie:

And I'm Marie...

Mia:

And today we will dive deep into body positivity. Just a disclaimer, we are not professionals, we are students, and some of the content that we may be talking about could be triggering for you. So, please look at our calming info sheets just to center-ize yourself.

Marie:

So, Mia, what is body positivity?

Mia:

So, body positivity is a movement that is a celebration of yourself and others about loving yourself and feeling beautiful in the skin that you're in. It's definitely been popularized by social media and celebrities. But as we have researched this project, and we've dived really deep into body image, we have learned a lot about body positivity and the roots of such. And I think Marie has some pretty good points on that.

Marie:

So, I guess I'll take over the discussion from here. The history of body positivity was something that really interested me because I thought of it as more of a recent event. Late 2000s, it kind of became popular online and on social media. But there are a lot of stories and pieces that started the movements we know today as body positivity or fat acceptance, but this started way back in the 1960s. And so, I'm going to highlight as many of these stories as I have found. There may be some stories that we didn't find in our research, so if anyone knows more about the history, we would be happy to hear about-- more about the history of body positivity and fat liberation and fat acceptance. You can write about it in our feedback and comment section on our website... So, to start off, the first-ever documented fat activism event to protest against fat bias was brought together by Steve Post, and he was a radio host. And this event happened in 1967, and it occurred in the US at Central Park. In this event, demonstrators burned diet books and pictures of the supermodel Twiggy and arrived carrying banners reading “Fat Power” and “Take a Fat Girl to Dinner.” A few months after this fat-in, which is what they call this fat activism event, Lew Louderback published an article titled “More People Should Be Fat” in the Saturday Evening Post, which at the time was a major national magazine, and this article discussed the anti-fat bias seen in the workplace and in colleges where people were seen as less qualified and there were wage gaps seen between skinny and fat people. So, Lew also went on to write a book called *Fat Power*, which was published in 1970, and it had some really, really great ideas around diet and diseases driven by judgmental environments rather than fat. But unfortunately, it really missed the mark on feminism and racism and classism. It really missed the mark on that intersectionality piece that we find really important today in movements.

Mia:

I think it's important to note that a lot of people don't understand how these things are interconnected. Now, when we talk about body positivity, we're not just talking about loving yourself, we're talking about loving yourself and loving other bodies and appreciating other bodies in different lenses. There has been some whitewashing of body positivity. Also, I know, Marie, when you were explaining to me the history of body positivity, there has been a lack of diverse voices within this movement and platform.

Marie:

Yes, which I'll definitely get into a little bit more, but I have a few more pieces to get into before we get to the whitewashing. But that definitely-- especially with Lew's book missing the mark on intersectionality, I think that's kind of-- that could have been an area where the movement kind of fell through, is it didn't recognize racism and so there was a lot of whitewashing of the history... But I'll get back to the timeline of the history. And so after-- around the time that Lew's first article was published, there was a man named Bill Fabrey, who had a larger wife named Joyce, and he noticed that she was being treated unfairly and he was very angry about this. So, a few years after this article was written, Bill ended up handing out copies of this article to everyone he knew and eventually he gathered a small group of people and proceeded to create the National Association to Aid Fat Americans. And this was created in 1969, and it's now known as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. And it was created to fight against discrimination and began as a fat pride movement. But for feminists, who in the US, were also angry at this time-- angry at the discrimination people were facing, they created the Fat Underground around this time, and it had roots in the radical therapy movement with a couple of the founders being trained as radical therapists. And one of the beliefs of radical therapy was the belief that oppression continues to work if it is mystified, and it demands change of social values. *Fat Power* also inspired some of the members of the Fat Underground, and in 1973, a few members of the Fat Underground, Sara Fishman and Judy Freespirit, released the Fat Manifesto-- which we have up on our website for everybody to look at. And this was released in 1973 and it called for equal rights and it called out diet culture-- which we've talked a lot about in our other podcasts. Mia and I are very against diet culture. So, we love that the Fat Underground called that out. In the 1980s, the enthusiasm became widespread for this fat liberation movement and many other movements and groups were formed over the years to combat fatphobia and discrimination, including some queer and feminist fat acceptance groups. In 1996, the term body positive became a bit more established. So, Connie [Sobczak] and Elizabeth [Scott]-- so, it was a psychotherapist and an individual who had struggled with an eating disorder-- started a website, that is still up, and it's called thebodypositive.org and it has resources and education. And that is kind of, I feel, when the-- or at least, from what I've read, when the term body positive became a bit more established. In the 2000s to present, there seemed to be a move from acceptance of bodies to a change in attitude towards people with larger bodies: celebrities are speaking out, fat studies have shifted the perspective from a biomedical model to an interdisciplinary approach, and social media has really picked up the movement. There's even some bloggers and-- some articles call this a fatosphere of fat acceptance that these bloggers have created. And it appears across numerous articles the general agreed-upon year for when body positivity-- so it started off as fat liberation in the 1960s and became body positivity around-- it kind of emerged in 2012, or at least what we

know today. And then we also talked about body neutrality in one of our other podcasts, and it's kind of-- the date for when that appeared isn't quite as agreed-upon, but it seems maybe 2015 or at least a couple years after body positivity. However, unfortunately, the issue with this whole take that I've been speaking on-- on history-- is very problematic. And I read about this in an article written by Briana-- I want to say their last name is pronounced Dominici, but I might be pronouncing it incorrectly. They spoke on the fact that history has been very whitewashed, which is what Mia was mentioning earlier, and black activists were not included in founding the National Association or the Fat Underground. In fact, the first black woman to lead the National Association to Aid Fat Americans [National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance] was in 2014 to 2015, and her name was Phyllis Warr. So, let's share some of the history, as best as we can, that we have found on people of colour and the fat liberation and body positivity movement.

Mia:

Yes, when we first started researching this, as well, we found it extremely hard to find those voices of diverse backgrounds and people of colour. And we really did try we-- I went to the library. We went to chapters. There seemed to be such a lack of those voices and people proclaiming it, and it is-- I think it's not a discussion of whether or not they've been here. There have been people of colour and diverse backgrounds within the body positivity movement since the beginning. It's just the fact there hasn't been room made for them within the discussion and with the platform. Body positivity is, therefore, rooted in racism. I honestly feel the more we push this agenda of loving ourselves without really opening up the conversations for other things that body positivity affects, it's just ignorant and it's feeding into our ignorance.

Marie:

And something that I read about in one of the books when we were-- it's a very brief little write-up, but I did find a little bit of information in one of the books that I found at Chapters, and it talked about how body shame is a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy tool and it's rooted in social, political and cultural institutions. So, it did kind of point to the fact that body shame does have roots in white supremacy. And also, if we look at a book called *Fearing the Black Body*, the author Sabrina String points out in a quote "[Fatphobia] precedes the medical establishment's concerns about excess weight by nearly 100 years...it's actually rooted in the trans-Atlantic slave trade..." Religion pushed an idea of gluttony, so thin became the ideal and fatness became the opposite, and it was-- and being larger was seen as a racial, and moral impurity.

Mia:

You can definitely see that our cultural sense as well-- when you look at villains versus the heroes, you see this white shining knight who is in a Greek god type of body type and then you see the villain, which is usually larger and misformed. And that plays on the racism within body positivity, and how we use these body shapes to almost push this narrative that just shouldn't exist-- that bigger is worse, that bigger is evil. And that's just not the case.

Marie:

And it's also really unfortunate, some of the history that I did find was that it was noted, in a few articles, that back in the early 1900s-- so it was, I think, 1904 to 1934, although I'm not 100% sure if those were the exact dates. But there were terms used to put down

people of colour that had larger bodies and these terms were used in black newspapers that were very well-known at the time. And so, that's where you might hear terms like lazy used. And even back then, they were pushing diet ads in these black newspapers at the times, like diet pills.

Mia:

I actually read this book. Well, on the-- our book recommendations tab-- *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* by Aubrey Gordon, and she talked about this Harvard study that was done and they were trying to figure out people's biases, and where they stood now. And a lot of biases have gone down within gay marriage, poverty, women's rights, education, but there has been one bias that consistently has been growing, and that is the fat bias-- fatphobia. And although we'd like to think that we are combating fatphobia with body positivity, and although we'd like to think that within this, quote, unquote, body-loving world, we've gotten better with it, but that's just not the case. We've just kind of shoved it to the side and made a more airbrushed, acceptable version of what fat should be and what beautiful fat should be.

Marie:

That's interesting because I've never heard of that study before. So, I know you mentioned it a little bit earlier, before this podcast, to me, but it's still mind-blowing to me, I guess, that we haven't done enough work to get rid of fat bias.

Mia:

And I think within this project, we have definitely had to confront our own biases with-- on our own bodies and other people's bodies. And I think-- doesn't just stop at education and having conversations, it's including other people in conversations and getting to the root of yourself. Definitely that book, which is on our book recommendations tab-- *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* is a book to read. It completely blew my mind, and it's definitely something I will be keeping on my personal shelf for the rest of my life.

Marie:

I'd like to steer the conversation a little bit because I did start off this podcast talking about history that was very whitewashed and I talked about some notable figures: Steve Post and Lew and Bill and Connie and Elizabeth. But I'd really like to steer the conversation and talk about some notable black activists, and-- because we don't hear about this a lot. I have done so much research on this history. It's so easy to find things about Bill. It's so easy to find things but Lew and Connie and Elizabeth and Steve, but it's a lot harder to find information about black activists who were fighting against fatphobia at that time-- when there were some, we just-- we mentioned earlier, the history has been whitewashed. So, I'm going to mention a few individuals who I found some information about. So, some notable people who spoke up in later years about fatphobic experiences, as black women, included Margaret Bass and Johnnie Tillmon. And so, I'd really like to read this essay that Margaret Bass wrote but she-- Margaret Bass shared her story about experiencing fatphobia while in segregated South, in the 50s and 60s, in her essay "On Being a Fat Black Girl in a Fat Hating Culture." And unfortunately, I couldn't find this article to read it, but you can read it if you buy *Recovering the Black Female Body*. And I believe it's a book with more than just her essay in it. She noted in her essay that her weight was more picked at than any other piece of her identity, which kind of goes along with the Harvard study that Mia was

talking about there still being a lot of bias around weight. And another strong female activist includes Johnnie Tillmon, who in 1972, in Ms. Magazine said, quote, "I'm a woman. I'm a black woman. I'm a poor woman. I'm a fat woman. I'm a middle-aged woman. And I'm on welfare. In this country, if you're any one of those things you can count less as a human being. If you're all those things, you don't count at all," which I feel is a very powerful quote because she talks about a lot of oppressed social identities and how that almost made her invisible and less human, which is upsetting. Something that I found really interesting in this research is that some people noted a reason why history has been so whitewashed and it's that at the time, around mainstream fat activism, when-- with the Fat underground and the National Association being formed, the voices of people of colour were shut out because they were stereotyped as more accepting of fat people and, therefore, did not require activism. Which was very untrue because it's shown above. There were black female activists who were speaking up and at the forefront of creating and advocating for fat liberation, who were saying, "Hey, we're left out of this conversation too," and "We're experiencing fatphobia and racism and sexism that's not being addressed." And even in more recent years with the rise of social media, celebrities and bloggers are pushing body acceptance, but people of colour are not always seen as the forerunners in pushing this agenda in the media. So, that award is often given to people like Tess Holliday or Ashley Graham, which I've heard about these women, and I actually thought that they were the face of body positivity. But we don't give any thought to black women who were also the forerunners of creating this body-positive movement and engaging in body talk, and this is individuals like Gabby [Sidibe], and Stephanie Yeboah or Juicy D. Light. For example, Juicy D. Light, founded Rubenesque Burlesque in 2006 to highlight fat bodies in the burlesque world and was the founder of the Fat Flashmob in 2014. And Stephanie Yeboah, I've heard multiple podcasts and I've read multiple articles written by her, and she's been very open about her struggles stating, quote, "I didn't acknowledge the behaviour as an eating disorder." So, her eating habits at the time-- "I didn't acknowledge the behaviours as an eating disorder, because that was something I assumed only happened to super-slim white women," end quote. And quote, "But we were also depicted as hypersexual, aggressive dominant characters, a trope, often associated with... black, plus-size women."

Mia:

But when we first started this project, we were talking about the lack of diverse voices included-- or who we knew. And we only thought of Lizzo. That was the person that came to my mind when I thought of a black woman being body-positive and embodying herself and being super into her own skin. I could only think of Lizzo. And then when we started reflecting on that, you and I were both like, "Okay, well, that's a problem. We can name how many white women off the top of our heads of celebrities and writers and creators that are body-positive and on the body positivity front." Where are these black voices? Where are these Indigenous voices? These Asian voices? Where are they? They're there but nobody's talking about them.

Marie:

I think it's important not only to look at just the fat liberation movement because-- so the current board chair of the National Association is Tigress Osborn, and she pointed out that black women and femmes were not always at the forefront of the formerly

organized fat acceptance organizations, but they had an effect at the forefront of organizations like Black Pride and Civil Rights and the Movement for Black Lives. So, it might not have always been those formerly organized fat acceptance organizations that we think of when we think of the fat liberation movement like the Fat Underground and the National Association, but they were still there. But we don't acknowledge it, which is interesting.

Mia:

Interesting and problematic because it's silencing the voices that we need to bring to the forefront. Because the whole point of body positivity-- we've talked in other podcasts, is bringing the people who are silenced to the platform-- to the attention, so we are able to accept them and learn from them. But we're not doing that. We're just putting a simple whitewashed brand on body positivity and going, "That's it. That's what we want."

Marie:

Exactly.

Mia:

So how can we return body positivity to its roots? How can we define body positivity in a different way?

Marie:

I think the most important thing is to-- I mean, this podcast is a start for learning about the history of body positivity and kind of taking it away from a white narrative and remembering the other individuals who were included in the movement. But I think that's a big thing in returning body positivity to its roots is learning about the history and acknowledging who is left out of the history: refocusing that conversation and de-centering yourself. So, especially on social media, when you're posting in this body positivity hashtag, remembering to refocus that conversation to who actually started the body positivity movement and not just the whitewashed version. But who were the black female activists who were part of starting the fat liberation movement? And how can we move the body positivity movement from where it's going right now? Which is kind of going back to giving the control to privileged individuals. And how can we honour and celebrate diverse bodies? And that could be on your social media platform, sharing these accounts that show diverse bodies. Moving beyond the scope of social media, how can we do more, Mia? How do you think we can do more than just social media, I guess?

Mia:

I believe that body positivity needs to extend beyond the scope of social media. And I'm not saying social media isn't a powerful tool to make movements come off the ground, but at this point, it's just social media activism. It's not doing anything. Sharing that picture on your Instagram page and going, "Yay, body positivity," that's not doing anything. What are you doing to give these voices back to the people who need them the most? Are you doing research? Are you reminding yourself where the roots of body positivity is? Calling on big brands-- what big brands can you think of that aren't including more diverse voices and bodies? How can we make sure that you're not only seeing yourself represented but also other bodies and other people? I also think that body positivity should be a time to reflect on your own biases. Do you have fatphobia? Do you have a fat bias? How can you challenge that and confront that and look that in the face? And how can you use that drive and that self-awareness to further educate

yourself? I think a lot of the time, we assume that movements like body positivity are very individualistic, but that's not the point of body positivity. The point of body positivity is to have community and to have people that accept you and for yourself to accept you. You can't do that on your own. You need unity and you need to open the conversation.

Marie:

So, thank you all for joining us to learn about the history of body positivity. We hope you enjoyed this podcast episode, and please check out our website for more information: for activities, information sheets, and our other podcasts.

[22:22]

[Music]

This transcript is clean verbatim. Unneeded fillers like “um”, “like”, “you know”, “mhhh”, and repeated words are omitted. Anything in square brackets was added in to make the transcript clearer