

Student Podcast Transcript

CSUN Queer Studies Capstone Podcast of Spring digital exhibit

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Edited by: Lorena Nunez

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Podcast Transcription: Queer Fat Latinas: Navigating Self-Love & Mental Health

[MUSIC]

LN: Hello everyone, and welcome. My name is Lorena Nunez and the research topic I will be focusing on today is Queer Fat Latinas: Navigating Self-Love & Mental Health. I chose this topic to conduct my podcast using the form of autoethnographic qualitative research because, during my adolescence and even now in adulthood, I see very little representation.

Accepting my intersectional identities has been a rollercoaster of dismantling deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs about my body, beauty, and value. I have been fighting with my own "internalized misogyny" to reject the "male gaze" and figuring out what that even means to me. This journey has led to breaking generational curses and disturbing cultural norms. However, one step at a time, or should I say, one crisis at a time... I have been able to reverse years of internalized hate through therapy and begin my healing.

Today, my podcast is primarily based on my personal experiences using the qualitative research method of autoethnography since I'll be analyzing personal testimony to connect my

experience with wider cultural, political, social meanings and understandings. I will also be showcasing similar testimonies of resilience in how other empowered Queer Fat Latina Women have cultivated their own self-love. I will begin by introducing the background of my journey before diving into further research and statistics.

As a self-identifying Queer Fat Latina, the way I came to terms with my identities was through years of baby steps in different eras of my life. I started accepting myself, kind of in the order of, first my Latina identity, then my Queer Identity, and lastly, accepting my body as both fat and beautiful. To begin, I grew up in Topeka, Kansas, where it was a very conservative and predominantly white area from the ages of six to fifteen, so basically my entire adolescence. Kansas did a number on me, as the environment really messed with my self-esteem. All of my friends were tall and thin white girls. I especially remember instances where we'd all be laughing and having fun, but then when we'd go into the restroom and look in the mirror... I never felt uglier in my life. You know those children's books "iSPY" like "What in this picture does not belong?" I felt like that. I cried in the bathroom so often, for reasons my little adolescent brain couldn't even begin to comprehend, give words to, or even voice... so I didn't. I suppressed it all and never told a soul just how much I hated myself, especially my appearance.

[NO MUSIC]

In their 2015 book, "The Wiley Handbook of Eating Disorders," Ann Kearney-Cooke & Diana Tieger say this is a fairly common thing amongst young women as research has shown that in the United States, around 50% of 13-year-old girls reported being unhappy with their body. This number grew to nearly 80% by the time they reached 17 years of age, and nearly 80% of young teenage girl's reported fears of becoming fat.

[MUSIC]

Due to the bullying and ridicule, I soon developed this nervous dissociative habit of zoning out and speed walking throughout middle school and high school because the hallways were so broad, and my locker always seemed so far away (at least that's how it felt in the moment) and everyone would stare at me. Like literally, stare and snicker about me every single day.

[NO MUSIC]

In her 2020 manual, Dr. Shoshanah Lyons, who specializes in Clinical Psychology, explains that "adolescents who have survived experiences which were frightening, or where their basic needs for connection were not met, are vulnerable to dissociating as a way of coping. It is a survival mechanism, one that is often overlooked in children"

[MUSIC]

In retrospect, I feel like I can't blame kids for staring since I did stand out like a sore thumb (I was literally the shortest person always, brown-skinned, and fat...you really couldn't miss me. This experience definitely made me gain this sense of "sexlessness" in later years. I was treated and felt so disgusting and atrocious that... it would feel gross and awkward for me to even acknowledge having any feelings of sexuality... so I suppressed those too. I genuinely felt like I wasn't allowed.

[NO MUSIC]

Similarly, for these reasons, in the Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality, researcher Brian Feinstein wrote the 2012 article "Self-concept and self-stigma in lesbians and gay men" concerning the correlation between low self-esteem and sexual orientation identity development. He examined the associations among three aspects: self-esteem, self-concept

clarity, and sexual identity confusion. In his research, 163 lesbian women and 125 gay men completed an anonymous online survey. The results indicated that individuals with lower self-esteem and lower self-concept clarity had higher sexual identity confusion and reported higher self-stigma. This study really resonated with me as it validated the delay in my sexual orientation identity, I knew was somehow correlated to my low self-image, but could never explain.

[MUSIC]

So, going back, still, a closeted baby queer, my only exposure to Queer media at the time was this show on the channel The N called "South of Nowhere," still, I couldn't fully connect to it since it revolved around two conventionally attractive thin white women. Looking back now, it makes so much sense how I didn't start exploring my sexuality until after my first year of college.

The era where I started to accept my Latina culture was during my sophomore year of high school when my family and I had moved back to East Los Angeles. I know it sounds strange, but it was a complete culture shock. It was night and day compared to being surrounded by white people, to being surrounded by my own culture. This, too, sent me through an identity crisis, one where I tried to hide and strip any sense of past identity...as teens do, to fit in. This was a bit difficult as I grew up watching Laguna Beach and listening to Taylor Swift. I was now in a space where I didn't feel embarrassed listening to Spanish music or speaking my native language. Still very much insecure and bullied, this time for my weight and mannerisms. I still started to come into my own and accept myself a tiny bit more.

Starting my freshman year of college, the first class I decided to take was a Queer Studies-based writing class. I hadn't even come out to myself yet. It was great. I slowly started to make queer friends. I had never had those before. Soon after, I started coming out as bisexual to a couple of friends, which felt so liberating. I started going out clubbing to this 18+ club in Hollywood called Tiger Heat, it so fun and exciting, and I started exploring my sexuality here. I attended my first PRIDE event in Long Beach that following summer. And actually, it was during this time when I accidentally came out to my family. On Mother's Day... literally moments away from leaving to a family party... it was pretty awkward! It happened during a heated argument with my parents over why I always got offended when they would make gay jokes and how they felt that they couldn't be themselves or speak freely around me for getting offended. And When my dad asked, "Why? Why does it make you so mad?!" I blurted out, "Because I'm Gay!"... and it got quiet. I was so used to immediately receiving warmth and open arms from friends. I was in shock when they didn't. I remember that whole day was uncomfortable...our drive there, during the party, and the entire ride back to the dorms. It was awful, but also... like super dope and liberating. I had never felt more alive. It's taken a few years, but my family is now accepting. Well, as accepting as can be for traditional Catholic & Mexican immigrant parents, I guess. They both have expressed that they love and support me in recent years, so that's good. I can tell they are still uncomfortable with it, so It's kind of like an "out of sight, out of mind" type of situation. Regardless, I do consider myself lucky, as I am aware that the nationwide statistics for coming out are not as fortunate.

[NO MUSIC]

In their 2012 article "Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Service Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth who are Homeless or At Risk of Becoming Homeless," Dr. Laura Durso & Gary Gates reveal that 40% of homeless teens in the United States who came out were thrown out by their parents onto the streets and 4 in 10 queer youth (that's 42%) say that the community in which they live is not accepting of LGBTQ+ people due to stigma.

In the Book: Queering Fat Embodiment. Author Kathleen LeBesco points out how both queerness and Fatness have been stigmatized and pathologized as unnatural, excessive, perverse, and threatening social order. Both identities are targeted to be managed and eliminated. Also seen as undesirable physically and morally. Author LeBesco says that this "Sheds light on how fat embodiment is lived, experienced, regulated and (re)produced across a range of cultural sites. These ideas paint an accurate picture of how these identities are perceived, especially together." I agree with LeBesco that both identities face violence to be cured in many historical and multi-cultural contexts.

[MUSIC]

I never fully understood how radical the concept of coming to terms with both Queerness and Fatness was at a younger age. One of my earliest memories of Fat acceptance came from the MTV show "True Life: I'm Happy to Be Fat" this episode rocked my world. I had so many mixed feelings. This was in 2008, so I must've been like fourteen years old. In the episode, a young black woman named Sharonda had recently gained 100lbs and said she had never felt more confident. There's this scene towards the end where she goes to the doctor, and he advises her to lose weight. And While she's on the treadmill, she says to the camera, "I am looking forward

to being healthier, but losing weight for the purpose of looks, isn't important to me at all." I had never seen or heard such a bold and powerful statement coming from a Fat Woman of Color. She was so incredible and ahead of her time. That episode gave me a glimpse of the freedom and confidence that came with rejecting the male gaze that came with traditional patriarchal standards of beauty.

[NO MUSIC]

In the 2017 article: Resilient Minds and Bodies: Size Discrimination, Body Image, and Mental Health Among Sexual Minority Women," authors Michelle Johns, Marc Zimmerman, Gary Harper, and Jose Baumeister explain how non-heterosexual Sexually Minority Women have higher BMI levels than heterosexual women, using the theory that Sexual Minority Women tend to reject the "male gaze" and feel more positively about their bodies than heterosexual women. This study gives more insight into how size affects Sexual Minority Women's mental health outside of the LGBTQ+ community and more in terms of systemic discrimination.

[MUSIC]

This brings me to the way I feel my presence is received. As a bold Queer Fat Latina, my newfound confidence allows me to enjoy getting dressed up and do my makeup when I go out. I don't know if it's in my head (from the years of trauma from Kansas), but I still feel looked at sometimes. For different reasons, though, maybe these days for seeing a Fat Girl be confident? I'm not sure. I still definitely get dirty looks, though. But instead of taking it personally, I'd like to think, "Maybe they're just not used to seeing a Fat Woman wearing crop tops and not try to be completely invisible?"

This noticeable pattern of public perception follows me well into family gatherings. Here, I feel that my presence is received as just a Fat woman. As I am not "out" to my extended family just yet. To be continued to say the least in that regard, but yes. Past comments my aunts have made have stuck with me throughout the years. For example, when I was fifteen, after rapidly and dangerously losing 20lbs in one month thanks to multiple weight loss supplements, my aunt said to me, "Ahi mija, te ves muy bien! Pero todavia te falta, eh!". Which roughly translates to "Oh honey, you look so good, but you still have a long way to go! Okay?!". To give further context, this was still about 50-60 pounds less than what I weigh now, yet I felt no difference. And if anything, my confidence was at an all-time low. Once, after coming home from my doctor's appointment where he had congratulated me on my progress (I received a lot of praise in this period), I remember looking in the mirror with frustration and thinking, "What is everyone talking about? I see no difference. Like NO fuckin difference!" This obsession led me to years of binge-watching major weight loss before and after shows and videos. But to my surprise, the underlying theme many women struggled with after having lost a significant amount of weight experienced this same sensation of Body Dysmorphia.

[NO MUSIC]

According to the Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, one may become diagnosed with body dysmorphic disorder if one has a strong obsession with 1 or more perceived defects or flaws in physical appearance that are not visible or appear minor to others.

[MUSIC]

On popular social media like TikTok, often, I will run to the comments, and they will be filled with women saying that they are left feeling confused over what is their actual true size. Left feeling like a stranger in or don't recognize their own body and experience mental battles with this emotional disconnect.

But again, it is in moments like these and more that have taught me how my family feels about my body and how it would leave me feeling as if I was inherently unattractive and unhealthy looking... unless I ultimately achieved thinness at some point. I started to notice how common it is for Latino families to talk about weight. How, in my opinion, this lack of boundaries is normalized and accepted for one's weight or appearance to be an acceptable center for casual conversation in family gatherings.

In the 2018 article "The Struggle of Growing Up an Overweight Latina Whose Family Thought It Was Cute To Call 'Gordita," author Naomi Roohnick states, "Ay, que gordita!" (gordita being a term of endearment meaning fat) These words always stung worse than the cheek pinching that inevitably followed. Even though I heard them time and time again, I never became numb to the pain they caused. Growing up Latina, I became accustomed to the idea that my weight was fair game to all of my relatives."

Additional testimonies like in the 2016 article "Love Your Curves, No Matter What Your Elders Say," author Patricia Reynoso interviewed multiple women about this and found that "For other women, the words did more than just sting" thirty-five-year-old, New York beauty executive interviewee, Adriana says, "Being called gordita when I was little, gave me a huge complex. It made me think that in order to be pretty, I needed to be skinny. But what my mom didn't understand was that the more she called me gordita, the more I ate."

However, within this same article, Reynoso says, *"not all Latinas take their moms' words quite so literally."* For twenty-one old student Marisa, her grandmother's longtime habit of calling her gorda (or fat) feels like a special bond. As she explains it, *"It's done out of love, so I think it's actually helped my self-esteem."* This goes to show how this cultural nuance can be interpreted in many ways, and what's important is to continue navigating our own self-love and acceptance regardless.

[NO MUSIC]

In their 2019 thesis "(Ill)usory Fatness Syndrome: [Un]framing the Chicana Lesbian Fat Body Towards Body Liberation," author Luna Dafne gives the example of the effect of carnival "house of mirrors." How this famous "illusionary experience" warps faces and bodies as full and wide. Creating comedy and rhetoric toward expanded bodies and faces. She says, *"The goal of this thesis is to understand how the Latino Obesity Narrative creates an internalized illusion of disease within Fat Chicana Lesbians"*. She challenges the reader to imagine this as a metaphor for the societal treatment of obesity nationwide, from the media to the judicial system and medical centers, viewing fat people as distorted bodies. She gives the example of Laura Aguilar's empowering artwork showcasing Fat bodies using photography as a counterargument to these notions to embrace body liberation that resists the United States' standards of beauty, especially in the Chicana lesbian community.

Further experience I have faced with internalizing having an unhealthy body due to discriminatory treatment, are the multiple times I have felt my presence ignored, primarily by straight-cis men. I have always figured that it was for being "conventionally unattractive." In romance, the few young men I've dated made me feel like they were keeping me a secret. Like

in public, their body language would be standoff-ish and cold... but when behind closed doors, it'd be a whole different story! This confusion has also played a big part in my former issues with my body image, self-esteem, and mental health.

Before my twenty-second birthday, is when I started to take action to begin building my self-esteem. I had recently gotten out of a bit of an unhealthy and frankly possessive friendship of almost three years. That friendship breakup was so painful, I started going to regular therapy provided by the California State University of Northridge Counseling Center. That was one of the first times in my adulthood where a woman took the time to explain to me how valuable I was. How I didn't deserve the manipulation and mistreatment I was going through. Until then, I truly believed that I was unworthy, undeserving, and willing to take any attention and affection I received... no matter the cost. My therapist really laid it out to me and slowly but surely started helping me build my confidence from the ground up. She helped me deconstruct so many negative beliefs by roleplaying their "worst-case scenario" and challenging their validity. Saying the ugly things, I would say, saying them out loud, words I would never say to anybody else ... only then did I realize how mean and cruel I was being to myself. Saying things like:

"I am so fat and ugly! Only pretty girls deserve love! I am worthless. My only value comes from what I can do and give to people."

Thankfully, these things started to sound pretty silly after a while! She let me know that That wasn't it! She patiently explained how I was inherently valuable, kind, compassionate, supportive, empathetic, a good friend, a great sister and daughter to my family, loving and beautiful! How all of these qualities had great value. She dug positive affirmations deep into my mind, and that's where my real journey to healing and self-love flourished.

Now that I have been able to heal from past wounds, the next step in my journey is to strip the word "fat" from any and all negative connotations in order to take away its power and see it for what it is, a descriptor word.

In a 2017 Revelist online magazine article, plus-size fitness blogger Lauren Cronin states: "I am fat, obese, overweight, plus-sized, whatever you want to call it... I am fat. That doesn't make me unworthy, unloved, or less than anyone else. All it does is describe the outside."

Some empowering content I have found very moving derives from the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance organization's YouTube channel. Here, they have panels with other queer and fat-identifying people. In one of their 2018 panels, interviewee Andy Duran states:

"Coming to terms with Fatness is a struggle that parallels both identities seen as a choice instead of an inherent part of your nature like, 'Why don't you lose weight? or Can't you just choose to not be that? (in regard to her queerness)' to these statements, she argues, 'I'm just trying to be myself. I'm not trying to be radical. It's just my inherent nature.'"

Co-founder of the Latina feminist collective Chingona Fire, Yesika Salgado, also gives excellent encouraging empowerment through her activism using poetry. In 2017, she gave a TEDx TALK to students at California State University, Los Angeles titled "What Comes After Loving Yourself? Advice from a Fat Fly Brown Girl". In this talk, she gave personal experience and nuance to the consistent work that involves developing self-love as a Queer Fat Latina. Her advice is to get comfortable looking at yourself in the mirror, wearing the clothing you've never allowed yourself to wear before, and to say "Yes!" to yourself at any chance you get. Her spoken word poems contain metaphors stating that "loving yourself isn't a spell you pour over yourself... it is armor you put on. Piece by piece". She advises to leave yourself love notes and

reminders of the days you felt invincible because nobody can take away the truth you tell yourself.

[MUSIC]

To bring an end to this podcast, the coping mechanisms I have found useful in bettering and maintaining my mental health come in the forms of confiding in loving support systems such as close friendships, family, leaning on the community in my spiritual practice, and consistently opening up to my current therapist to do my work.

I hope this podcast shined a light to how powerful overcoming the adversities that come with this territory can be. I am grateful to have been blessed with this journey, to be able to proudly identify as a Queer Fat Latina. Thank you for listening.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]