

1. Health & Morality (from *This American Life*, “Tell me I’m fat”)

Ira: “How old were you when you first came out?”

Lindy: “It just felt impolite to talk about, like me not wanting to burden you with my failure.”

Ira: “Like, I’m not going to bother you with this.”

Lindy: “Yeah, and just give me a little more time. Let’s not talk about it, and I promise I’ll fix it. . . . The way that we are taught to think about fatness is that fat is not a permanent state. You’re just a thin person who’s failing consistently for your whole life.”

Discussion questions:

- What’s *moral* about “health”? what are the many & varied ways that health is systematically *moralized*?
 - Why is it so “radical”, as Ira puts it, to “come out as fat”? why does Lindy need to stop Ira and correct his use of the word “overweight”? why is Lindy praised for her “confidence”?
- What are strategies for prompting people to “unlearn” their moralizing habits?
 - Did Lindy successfully challenge Dan Savage to transform his assumptions about bodies, health & normativity?
 - How did Lindy herself begin to “unlearn”? Lindy: “I remember **feeling like my brain was changing shape**. . . . It wasn’t just conceptual. . . .”
 - Leonard Nimoy’s “The Full Body Project”: photographs of a burlesque group in San Francisco. Nimoy explained, “Heather MacAllister, who formed the group, was an anthropologist by training. And during one of our sessions, I said to her, what are you doing with your anthropological training? And she said, I’m doing this, meaning this Fat-Bottom Revue. And she went on further to say, whenever a fat person steps on stage to perform, and it’s not the butt of a joke, that’s a political statement. And I found that quite profound.”

2. Futurity

Ira: In talking about this show, “we come to the subject of fat suits. And one of our staffers, Elna Baker, blurted out, if she put on one of those today, she’d feel like herself again.”

Elna: “Of course, I’d lost the weight to fix two specific problems. I wanted to get a job and find love. Old Elna looked for a job for a year and a half. New Elna was offered work a month after she hit her goal weight, an entry-level position on an actual TV show. I was hired to be a page at the Letterman show.”

Discussion questions:

- What role does an “**imagined future**” play in Elna’s transformation?
- How does she sustain this bodily change?
- How does her transition cause her to see the world differently? What does she discover at the Letterman show, for example? Or at the grocery store?
- Elna: “Old Elna longed for someone like Andy and never got him. She tried so hard for everything that I now got so easily. New Elna didn’t have to be a good person. . . . It’s just **such an unbalanced reward system**. It took so much more kindness, hard work, and ingenuity to be a person in the world when I was fat. All this took was not eating.”

Feminist Queer Crip

Audio assignment:

- “Tell me I’m Fat” *This American Life*

Reading assignment:

- Alison Kafer, “At the Same Time, Out of Time: Ashley X,” *Feminist Queer Crip*
- Stephanie Jenkins, “Defining Morally Considerable Life,” *Feminist Philosophies of Life*

Key Words: • “health & morality”
• “futurity”
• “disability”

What does “futurity” mean in the context of normative health prescriptions?

1. Development: one-way, linear march “upward”. (If there’s a problem with development, it can and should be fixed!). Normal adulthood is a time of, and defined by, productivity (Kafer 54).
 2. Your imagined future can be held against you. Ashley X faced “a future of no future” (Kafer 54).
 - Kafer: “reshaping children’s bodies without their consent,” holding Ashley’s *imagined* future body against her, using it as a justification for the treatment” (49).
 - “[Ashley] was embodied asynchrony; her mind and body were out of sync. By arresting the growth of Ashley’s body, the Treatment could stop this gap between mind and body from growing any wider” (48). Ashley’s “disconnect,” her developmental disjuncture, required intervention (53).
- Alison Kafer uses the phrase “crip futurity” to refer to a dissonant, queer, non-normative approach to the future. It is a real question: is it even possible to “crip” the future?
 - “how to imagine desirably disabled futures” (49)
 - How to resist and undermine “a curative response to disability” (57).

3. Disability & the Curative Imaginary

Ira: “does God want you thin? Some people think so.... There is this moral dimension to it that is just gross—this idea that you’re fat because you’re weak, you can’t get control of your own life.”

From Alison Kafer’s chapter:

“Ashley had to be cured of her asynchrony, at least to the fullest extent possible. She also had to be freed of the specter of her future body, the full-sized, large-breasted, menstruating and fertile body to come” (57).

“the attempt to draw bright lines between classes of disability is rarely successful; one person’s ‘severe’ may be another’s ‘moderate’ or ‘mild.’” (59).

Curative responses are also often *privatizing* responses: quality of life is described, by others, as “self-evident”.... But “if a disabled person has never been given any kind of adaptive therapy or training, or if someone has no access to adaptive equipment (or only to substandard equipment), then one’s function might be much lower than one’s ability. Quality of life, then, is affected by **one’s access to resources and bodies of knowledge** rather than a necessary fact of the body/mind. Indeed, descriptions of another’s pain and suffering often rely more on **assumption** than fact, as do presumptions about what level of function is required for a good quality of life” (63).

We need to be open to the unknowability (64). And give up the “god’s eye view,” the “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere,” making decisions free from bias or subjective opinion.” (60).

Kafer writes, “I am haunted by that unknown” (66).

Discussion questions:

How open is this episode of *This American Life* to the haunting unknown? How hopeful are you that this episode will prompt *crip, feminist and queer* responses? Put otherwise, how *curative* and *heteronormative* do you find this episode, especially taken as a whole?