

The Power of Fat Liberation: Rereading Laura Aguilar's Nude Self Portraits

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Fat is not a bad word. Being fat is not a death sentence. In fact, it is perfectly normal to be fat.

Our society shames visible fatness, or for that matter, any flaws that stray from the thin, cis, white, heterosexual body ideal. Yet there is still much to consider regarding how fat individuals view *themselves*. One way to harness the power of representation is through self-portrait photography, in which the pictured person is not the subject of someone else's vision but the center of their own. I learned this lesson by spending time with the work of Laura Aguilar and noticing how she engaged with documenting her own fat body. Aguilar passed in 2018 and left behind a remarkable body of work that has been critically commented upon but certainly merits further consideration.

Recent interventions in fat studies have critiqued the field's over-concern with white individuals, and lack of intersectionality. The discrimination a fat person experiences is exacerbated when their identity overlaps with other marginalized identities—in other words, when that person also strays from the white cis norm. Thus, an intersectional intervention is essential to an understanding of the visual works of Laura Aguilar. Here I will analyze three of Aguilar's self-portraits, offering introductory themes from the fat studies field and its recent intersectional interventions to sincerely consider Aguilar's queer, fat, Latinx identity as expressed in her work.

One of Aguilar's earliest engagements with self-portraits was her 1990 work *Clothed/Un clothed #1* [fig. 1]. This work consists of two twenty-by-sixteen-inch gelatin silver prints of herself, one clothed and one naked. In the left image, she wears a short-sleeved collared shirt with dark repeating floral patterns whose slightly open white buttons reveal her neck and upper chest. The shirt does not cling to the contours of her body but instead creates a boxy shape, disguising the abundant curves of her figure. It might be tempting to read the masculine shirt as an expression of Aguilar's queerness, but another approach involves considering the limited access to clothing for fat women, also known as plus sizes. In the United States, plus size generally refers to women's sizes between 16 and 28, and as of 2018, plus



Figure 1. Laura Aguilar, *Clothed/Unclotted #1*, 1990.
Two gelatin silver prints, 20 × 16 in. each.

size individuals have just 2.3% of clothing options compared to their thin counterparts, whereas men’s clothing in various “big and tall” sizes is widely accessible.¹ Though there are select women’s stores like Torrid and Lane Bryant dedicated to plus size individuals, they are relatively new to the mainstream market, having emerged only in the last few decades. Furthermore, there is still extremely limited sizing for “infinifat” people, or those that exceed a 6XL or US 34.² Fat scholar Ash Nischuk from the *Fat Lip* podcast offers a fat spectrum to better understand those that do not occupy thin, also known as straight-size, bodies. “Small fat” is a size 1X–2X, US 18, and such individuals typically have no difficulties finding clothes in brick-and-mortar shops. “Medium fat” denotes a size 2X–3X, or a US 20–24, and these individuals can find some clothes in person but typically shop online. “Superfat” is a size 4X–5X, or a US 26–32, and these people may find clothes at plus-size retailers but typically are limited to shopping online. “Infinifat” is a 6X or higher, or US 34 or higher, and makes for an extremely difficult time finding clothes; custom fittings are often necessary.³ This spectrum provides us with

¹ Aubrey Gordon, *What We Don’t Talk about When We Talk about Fat* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 11.

² Michelle V. Scott, “Fat Privilege: Revelations of a Medium Fat Regarding the Fat Spectrum,” *Medium*, Aug 14, 2019, <https://medium.com/@michellevscott/fat-privilege-revelations-of-a-medium-fat-regarding-the-fat-spectrum-ec70dc908336>.

³ *Ibid.*

vocabulary to discuss the privileges and layers of systematic oppression for those with marginalized figures. To me, it seems safe to assume that Aguilar's clothing choices were limited due to her size, and that her choices were at least partly based on access to clothing rather than gender expression.

The removal of the shirt in the right-hand image can therefore symbolize a shift toward liberation, as the artist is no longer constrained to clothes that limit the expression of her identity. The pose and facial expression of the left-hand image are repeated here, except that the artist is naked. The soft contours of Aguilar's shoulders and arms become visible, along with her collarbone and chest. Her large, bell-shaped breasts meet the insides of her elbows where her waist begins. The curves of her stomach become visible as our eyes move down her body. Her abdomen is abundant as it peeks behind her arms and gently rounds down her legs. The shape of her hanging belly comes into focus near the center of this portrait.

Of this work, Aguilar stated, "I'm trying to allow the softness of myself to be out and represented in these photographs. I believe that the viewer is as vulnerable as the nude person in the clothed/un clothed series because as they view the images, they are hopefully seeing images of themselves."⁴ She notes her artistic intentions of vulnerability in sharing her nude figure with the viewer. Art historian Amelia Jones elevates this claim and argues that this work's power of naked vulnerability is heightened by Aguilar's unapologetic expression.⁵ As she maintains eye contact with the viewer, her vulnerability is strengthened through self-assurance. And I would argue that this vulnerability is heightened by her self-identified queer Latinx identity. Body theorist Caleb Luna argues that colonial constructions of beauty led to labels fat, brown, and/or queer femmes as ugly and undesirable.⁶ Aguilar's choice to center her multidimensional identity translated into a radical act of vulnerability in a politically charged world that rejects bodies like hers. The naked vulnerability she engages in forces viewers to confront the potential discrimination instigated by body shame, homophobia, and racism.

Body liberationist Sonya Renee Taylor furthers this claim and calls for a collective radical self-acceptance practice that considers the structural discrimination at the core of body shame. Confronting body terrorism requires de-indoctrination, which requires us to "evict the voice of judgment, hierarchy, and shame." Confronting the internal voices that harbor shame and judgment toward ourselves and others opens space for emerging beliefs of acceptance and understanding.

⁴ *Laura Aguilar: Life, The Body, Her Perspective* directed by Michael Stone (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2009).

⁵ Amelia Jones, "Clothed/Un clothed: Laura Aguilar's Radical Vulnerability," in *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, ed. Rebecca Epstein (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017), 44.

⁶ Caleb Luna, "The Natural History of the World," *Canadian Art*, February 27, 2019, <https://canadianart.ca/features/the-natural-history-of-the-world/>.

Taylor states that collective compassion “bridges the socially transformative powers of radical self-love.”⁷ This work requires all individuals to consider how internalized forms of body terrorism, a term which encapsulates the pervasive overlap of fat phobia, homophobia, and racial discrimination. And self-compassion does not end with ourselves, but rather is the first step in unlearning the oppressive structures that impact our ability to engage with body compassion for others.

Fat scholar Aubrey Gordon states that “fat hatred and anti-fatness are umbrella terms that describe the attitude, behaviors, and social systems that marginalize, exclude, underserve, and oppress fat bodies. They refer to the individual bigotry and institutional policies designed to marginalize fat people.”⁸ And fat scholar Virgie Tovar notes that fatphobia makes fat people “scapegoat[s] [for] anxieties about excess, immorality, and an uncontained relationship to desire and consumption.”⁹ Society’s general treatment of fat people is a way to control the body sizes of all people. Visible hostile treatment toward fat people encourages our society to fear fatness and engage in violent and unjust treatment. Aguilar offers the image of her naked figure to the viewer, making herself vulnerable to judgment and discrimination. We do not have full access to Aguilar’s clothed or unclothed self; instead, the trope of unclenching, paired with her unapologetic eye contact, makes us aware of her overall empowerment and strength.

To expand upon Aguilar’s engagement with self-expression, *Self Portrait #14* (1996) [fig. 2] conjures the previous themes of vulnerability, and is amplified as the artist poses in a public setting. This twenty-by-sixteen-inch gelatin silver print shows her gazing and reaching toward her reflection near a body of water. At the center, Aguilar’s hanging belly and abundant rolls shine brightly in the sun. Her body and the pool of water offer an oasis amid the otherwise dry, rough terrain. The small dark pond consumes the entire foreground, where Aguilar’s bright reflection beams back toward her. The reflection mimics the rolling shape of her contours and appears to ripple upon the water’s surface. About this work, Aguilar stated: “In these images, I feel beautiful. I feel very safe and comfortable. I have that sense of myself that I never had most of my life. And I am much aware that I am a large person and that I am not necessarily beautiful in the way people think of beauty. But I can see my own beauty.”¹⁰ *Nature Self-Portrait #14* asks its viewers to reconsider their internalized fatphobia and assumptions about fat individuals by seeing this figure as being as natural as the landscape it rests in. Indeed, these

7 Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2018), 71, 79.

8 Gordon, *What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Fat*, 17.

9 Virgie Tovar, *You Have the Right to Remain Fat* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2018), 22.

10 Laura Aguilar: *Life, The Body, Her Perspective*, dir. Michael Stone (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2009).

11 Association for Size Diversity and Health, “About Health at Every Size® (HAES®),” April 24, 2022, <https://asdah.org/health-at-every-size-haes-approach/>; Paul A. McAuley and Steven N. Blair, “Obesity Paradoxes,” *Journal of Sports Sciences* 29, no. 8 (2011): 773.

12 Tracy L. Tylka et al., “The Weight-Inclusive versus Weight-Normative Approach to Health: Evaluating the Evidence for Prioritizing Well-Being over Weight Loss,” *Journal of Obesity* 2014 (2015): <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/jobe/2014/1983495/>.



Figure 2. Laura Aguilar, *Self Portrait #14*, 1996.
Gelatin silver print, 20 × 16 in.

considerations require the viewer to question stereotypes about fat bodies that claim they are unnatural.

Resistance to this belief is encouraged by what the medical industry fails to understand about body size. Its weight bias has labeled fat bodies like Aguilar's "non-normative" and places blame on the individual. These labels attempt to indicate the "unnatural" character of fatness or "obesity." Weight bias research such as *Health at Every Size* and "obesity paradox literature" aims to explain how many variables affect our weight and size.¹¹ Many of these, such as genetics, predispositions, and socioeconomic factors such as access to fresh food and health care, are often out of our control. Furthermore, research shows that fat individuals have relatively higher survival rates and similar metabolic health levels than thin individuals. Fatness does not explicitly correlate with disease. In other words, it is possible to be both fit and fat or unfit and thin.¹² Accepting that fatness is not a death sentence or something that needs eradication leads us to accept imperfect bodies. Understanding that weight and size are not entirely under our control makes more space for accepting what we cannot change. That all bodies are valuable and deserve equal rights is a belief that should be normalized.

Aguilar's work gives us an opportunity to examine the self-representation of fat figures, especially subjects who are queer people of color. In Aguilar's triptych *Three Eagles Flying* (1996) [fig. 3], her nude figure is tightly wrapped in a US flag and a Mexican flag; her face is covered by a large eagle devouring a snake atop a cactus, while her lower half is taut with stars and stripes. A thick, fibrous rope coils around her entirety and loops into a noose around her neck. Two additional flags hang in the background, pointing to her Mexican American upbringing.

The inspiration for this work came from an experience Aguilar had with a queer fundraising group planning a meeting in Mexico. She was hesitant to travel, as she did not speak Spanish and was challenged by auditory dyslexia. After much convincing, she attended the conference and indeed was disappointed by her experience. It was impossible to communicate, and she felt like an outcast as a fat person. She also felt extreme frustration at how the community assumed she was "butch" because of her fatness and failed to recognize the femininity she noticeably felt from her photographs. In her own words: "I'm not butch. I might look it because I'm big, and I always took butch with being more big or masculine. And I didn't think I was masculine at all. And that's why it was a big



Figure 3. Laura Aguilar, *Three Eagles Flying*, 1990.
Three gelatin silver prints, 24 × 20 in. each.

thing when I did *Three Eagles Flying*. . . . It was like the first time I saw my body. I saw the shapes of the shadows from the light on my breasts. . . . It really changed how I saw my body.”¹³ Here Aguilar expresses dissonance between internal and external perceptions of her fat body. This emotional tension wrapped up in her queer and Latinx identity mirrors the tension of the flags wrapped around her. But to completely understand the inherent tension of fabric, we need to dwell for a moment on the process of cloth making.

All cloth comes from fibrous materials that are harvested, dried, shredded, and spun. These fibers are then woven into the fabric, creating tension among the threads.¹⁴ Furthermore, cloth is a primary signifier that distinguishes nature from culture and thereby “remains forever liminal in its cultural significance.”¹⁵ The human touch is embedded in the fiber-making process, always returning to a geographic and cultural location. Thus, the roots of Aguilar’s Latinx and American identity are embedded in the flags that restrain her.

The art historian Deborah Cullen argues that the fact that Aguilar’s face is literally beneath the “crucifixion” of the eagle’s talons on the Mexican flag presents a symbolic expression of the effects of US colonization.¹⁶ On the other hand, Mexican historian Ricardo Cañas Montalvo notes that “the eagle is one of the few animals that, no matter how injured, will never crawl. . . . It continues to fly no matter what, a situation that resonates to all Mexicans who, despite their circumstances, always persevere.”¹⁷ Aguilar may be experiencing what Cullen calls a “crucifixion,” yet her face is covered in a symbol of triumph. She is engaging in an act of resistance toward a group of peers who could not perceive her sexuality as a feminine lesbian due to her fat status.

Additionally, the US flag wrapped around her body carries unique tension that is inherent to our relationship with fatness and race. Scholar and educator Sabrina Strings has uncovered an archive of race-centered studies to produce a historical examination of the origin of the thin ideal and the development of fat hatred as rooted in anti-blackness. In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia* (2019), Strings argues that the roots of present-day fatphobia stem from religious and scientific shifts in the Enlightenment period as impacted by the transatlantic slave trade and the rise of Protestantism. Racial and religious fears of “excess” considered blackness as excess with respect to the “ideal” US racial identity. Fatphobia became a tool to reinforce the racial hierarchy of Black women and

¹³ Laura Aguilar: *Life, The Body, Her Perspective*.

¹⁴ Lois Martin, “How Did Cloth Mean? Ancient Peruvian Plain Cloth and Cloth Planes,” *Surface Design Journal* 20, no. 2 (1996): 8.

¹⁵ Claire Pajaczkowski, “On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth,” *Textile Journal*, 3 no. 3 (2005): 229.

¹⁶ Deborah Cullen, “Beyond Face Value: Reconsidering Laura Aguilar’s Three Eagles Flying,” in *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, 35.

¹⁷ Vanessa Sam and Carlos Ramírez, “The Eagle Has Landed: The Symbol Personifies the Spirit of Mexico,” *Zenger*, February 20, 2021, <https://www.zenger.news/2021/02/20/the-eagle-has-landed-the-symbol-personifies-the-spirit-of-mexico/>.

control over white women while simultaneously creating thinness as an essential trait of whiteness, white beauty standards, and white identity. Strings's text outlines the key formations and the sociocultural and political factors that defended the tethering of racism to the body and contributed to current size biases.¹⁸ The US flag restraining Aguilar's body symbolizes the destructive aftermath of colonization, active discrimination toward people of color, and the racial beginnings of fatphobia. *Three Eagles Flying* displays a rich and complex expression where fatness weaves into queer and Latinx identity.

Studying Aguilar's nude self-portraits through the lens of intersectional fat studies allows us to consider how her work values the unique qualities of the fat identity beyond the over-studied heterosexual white figure. Body liberationists such as Caleb Luna, Virgie Tovar, and Sabrina Strings have made critical interventions in the field to deeply consider the variety of identities that should fall under the purview of fat studies. Here, the goal is not to speak on behalf of Aguilar, but instead to inform how her work contributes to the visual field of intersectional fat studies.

¹⁸ Sabrina Strings, *Fearing The Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 5–6.

Acknowledgements

My journey as an MA and MFA candidate is deeply impacted by the desire to contribute to the visual and academic field of fat studies. I am honored to offer my knowledge of this discipline and advocate for its presence in the CCA academic community. I am grateful for the generous feedback from my advisors and confidantes throughout this triumphant experience. A special thanks to Gia Stark for her year's continuous support and unconditional care during this adventure.

Thank you to my colleagues Aliya Parashar, Katherine Hamilton, Kristen Wawruck, and Liz Hafey for the generous feedback throughout the last few years.