

# The Body Is Not An Apology: The Impact of Sexism and Sizeism on Our Bodies and Health

Sonya Renee Taylor

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**Dara Burwell (Co-President, Transformative Alliances LLC):** Welcome. My name is Dara Burwell, and I am one of the Co-Presidents of an anti-oppression and equity consulting organization known as Transformative Alliances. Transformative Alliances has been funded by The Colorado Trust to create, coordinate, and support a program known as Community Leaders in Health Equity, or CLHE. CLHE is an intensive education and leadership training program that spans the state of Colorado, and focuses on the connection between equity and health – with a particular concentration on racism, classism, sexism, nationalism, language oppression, and their associated health outcomes.

There are three components or aspects of the CLHE program, and the one that you are participating in right now mirrors that of the Health Equity Learning Series.

At its root, Transformative Alliances defines health inequity as the negative and avoidable health outcomes due to oppression.

We work with participants to develop a deeper understanding of how oppression works so that we can better recognize how it functions in our lives, so that we can recognize the health consequences of those oppressions – both outside and inside of medical systems, and so that we are better equipped to work toward a just, equitable, and healthy world.

To help us along in this important journey of many stages, we are grateful to have Sonya Renee Taylor here with us today.

Sonya Renee Taylor is the Founder and Radical Executive Officer of The Body is Not An Apology, a digital media and education company with content reaching half a million people each month. As an award-winning performance poet, activist, and transformational leader, Sonya addresses oppression, body terrorism, and radical self-love through an intersectional lens. She has contributed in so many ways, including as an author of several books, and we appreciate her powerful and deeply human message.

Today, Sonya is going to deliver a talk titled "The Body Is Not An Apology: The Impact of Sexism and Sizeism on Our Bodies and Health." In this talk, Sonya is going to help us delve into a more meaningful exploration of sizeism and fatphobia, patriarchy and sexism, side-by-side with other oppressions. And through her process, she is going to pull out some of the many threads that link these injustices to health, and also support us in thinking about how to untangle ourselves and our society.

Thank you, Sonya. We look forward to hearing your message.

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**Sonya Renee Taylor (Founder and Radical Executive Officer of The Body is Not An Apology):** Kia ora koutou. Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for having me. Thank you, Dara, for that introduction. Thank you [The] Colorado Trust for spending this -- creating this container that allows me to spend this time with you all today.

I'd like to let everyone know I am talking to you from the future. It is Thursday in Aotearoa, New Zealand, which is where I reside. And it turns out to be a pretty good day, a little overcast, but lovely nevertheless. So I look forward to meeting you on Thursday, when our times overlap for a brief period of time.

I'm really excited to have this conversation today and to talk about the ways in which these systems and structures of oppression, specifically the ways in which sexism and sizeism, and their sort of larger container of fatphobia and patriarchy, impacts our health outcomes. Impact the ways in which we understand and relate to our own beings and bodies, and impact the larger structures of equity and justice in the world.

And then what is our individual role as human beings on this planet, in disentangling those systems, not only at an interpersonal level, not only at the level of self, but at the level of the collective. And how does, disentangling that experience at the level of self impact and transform the collective? 'Cause that, to me, is the thing that is the juiciest part of the conversation for me. So I'm excited to be in that today.

I want to start by sort of grounding us in our own experience. I think sometimes we talk about these issues of systems and structures, these big sort of mammoth ideas like patriarchy, or sexism, or fatphobia, and they feel so detached from our lived experience. They feel like this big monster out there. And it obscures the ways in which we actually have to live with these experiences on a daily basis. And we have been, oftentimes in ways that we may not be all that consciously aware of.

And so I think it's always important to come back and center ourselves in our own lived experience. And so I want to take a little bit of time. First, I want to invite you to think in your own life, about the experiences that you have had with your own body. I want you to think about the earliest experiences you had in your body when you received the message that somehow your body was wrong.

And maybe it was wrong because of race. Maybe it was wrong because of size. Maybe it was wrong because of gender. Maybe it was wrong because of ability. It could be any kind of way. But I want us to get in touch with that earliest memory of being like, "Oh, there's something wrong with me."

And I think it's so important to touch into that memory. Because that memory is actually our earliest cognizant experience of being impacted by these larger systems. And when we're having that experience, as a young person, we're not thinking about it at a systemic level. We're not thinking, "Oh, I'm engaging with sexism right now. Oh, this is fatphobia. Oh, this must be racism."

We're not thinking that, right? We're thinking, "There's something wrong with me. There's something -- something about me isn't right." And I -- and so much of the way that we move through life from that moment becomes shaped by this notion that, "There's something wrong with me."

And I, I wonder, I marvel at the idea of what becomes possible if we could reverse time, to that moment, to that seminal moment where we got that message that something was wrong with us and never ever thought it was true.

And never actually thought, "Oh, there's something wrong with me." But instead, was able to be like, "Oh, this is that thing I learned about, that's that system! Oh, that's that thing that we call patriarchy! Oh, that's that thing that we call transphobia! Oh, that's that thing we call racism! And this isn't actually about me." Right?

How might we -- how might our lives have been transformed in that experience? And how might entire systems of society be transformed if we all had that moment? And so, you know, I go back to my own experience. One of my earliest experiences of sort of childhood shame came from being teased about my hair as a little girl.

I had what was called traction alopecia, I had a mama with big, strong Black woman hands and a penchant for braiding hair. And so she would braid my hair in these really

elaborate, beautiful styles. And at the same time, she was murdering my hair follicles. Just, just disintegrating my hair follicles.

And so by third grade, I had permanent bald spots on the side of my head. And I got teased unmercifully about these bald spots. And I clearly grew up thinking, "Something's wrong with me." Right? Like there's something wrong with how I show up in the world. And the something that's wrong with me means a bunch of things, it means I'm not beautiful.

It means I don't belong. Right? It means there's a part of me I need to learn to hide. Right? It means -- it ended up having all of these tentacles that bled into all of these parts of my life. And at the time, of course, I didn't have the information to be like, "Hmm, what is our relationship with hair and its assignment of femininity?" Right?

I didn't know to ask that question in third grade. I didn't know that there was some template that westernized beauty ideals had said was what a girl should look like. And that that template was never going to look like me, as a dark skinned Black woman with short, nappy hair. Right?

I didn't realize that what I was experiencing was my entire cohort of peers' indoctrination into sexist, racist ideas about beauty. I didn't know that at the time. Right? And so instead, I just knew that I was wrong, that something was wrong with me.

And the reason that I ask us to go back to this earliest point of body shame, is because it is so important for us to go back and be able to identify that moment that oftentimes 20, 30, 40, 50 years later, we are still identifying as, "Something wrong with me."

We are still identifying it as some personal failure, and not a system of indoctrination, that created a belief that then got passed onto a bunch of people about how they should or should not exist in their bodies. Right? And that foundation, that earliest foundation, becomes all the ways that we move through and understand ourselves, and also understand the larger world.

Because one of the things that I think is important for us to remember is... You know, when I -- oftentimes when I'm in a workshop, and I'm talking about these issues, people are like, "Right, well, that's just, you know, like, that's just my experience, and it was bad, but like, it's not a big deal."

Even, you know, even when acknowledging that it has all of these individual impacts in their lived experience every day. But there's still a way in which that experience feels so distant from the ideas of oppression. But what we fail to realize often is that experience is not separate from oppression. That experience is oppression played out at the individual level.

That -- that is oppression, distilled down to the interpersonal. Distilled down to the playground. Distilled down to the third grade classroom. Right? And the mechanisms that live in that are the same mechanisms that have a doctor refuse, um, refuse to believe the symptoms, oftentimes, that women present when they go to the hospital, because they assume that women are over-exaggerating their experience of pain or discomfort.

That system that says, "Women are not to be believed because women are actually just sort of exaggerative," is the same system that says, "The value of little girls is only aesthetic, is only whether or not you look like this template." Right? "And the rest of you is irrelevant." And so the belief that the rest of you is irrelevant plays into a far larger, longer system that then serves as the foundational underpinning for not believing women. Right?

So this is why thinking about where we started is so important to understanding where we are as a society. Right? These things are deeply connected. Oftentimes when I do this work, people ask me, "Why, you know, like, why is the lens of your work about the body, Sonya?" And I have to remind folks, I have to remind myself all the time, that all oppression is an experience of the body.

Even when oppression isn't about the body, all oppression is an experience of the body. When we are talking about racism, when we are talking about the prejudice and discrimination based on someone's phenotype, based on someone's skin, we are talking about the body. When we are talking about homophobia, we are talking about discrimination and prejudice based on the ways in which bodies experience desire and attraction.

When we are talking about sexism, we are talking about the belief that bodies, based on our concepts and ideas of gender, can be ranked as better or greater than or less than. More important, less important; more worthy, less worthy. We are talking about our bodies.

And even when we're talking about oppression that isn't about the body, I think oftentimes about climate chaos in this moment that we're in right now, where the planet

is clearly letting us know that it is not pleased with what we've been featuring. Right? But we are not talking about it in some sort of conceptual idea.

I laugh when people say things like, you know, "We have to save the planet." And I'm always like, "Y'all, that's very, that's such, you know, human hubris of us." What we're really trying to do is save our butts on the planet, right? Like the planet has a plan for us. It's gonna extinct us and carry on about its business.

So saving the planet is actually a conversation about, "Can we maintain conditions on the planet that allow our bodies to survive here?" That's a different question. Right? So even when we're talking about the oppression of environmental degradation, we are still talking about its impact on the body.

And I'm a deep believer that if we understood at a fundamental level our relationships with bodies, and transformed our relationships with bodies. Transformed the idea that there are some bodies that are valuable, and some bodies that are not valuable. That there are some bodies that are deserving of care. There are some bodies that are not. That there are some bodies deserving of resource, and some bodies that are not.

If we could dismantle that idea, we might just dismantle most of the foundational underpinnings of oppression that exists in the world. That's my premise. Now, I could totally be wrong. But I'm also like, we could try and see. That's my philosophy. We could we could test out this philosophy and see, you know?

And so the body is also the great equalizer. It's the one thing we all have. If you plan to do this particular journey on this particular spinning rock, as far as we know, you got to do it in a body. Right? And if you've got to do it in a body, then we all actually foundationally are having a very similar experience that we're being told is very different. It doesn't -- it's actually not.

But we've created lots of edifices, we've created lots of structures and ideas and ways of organizing that pretend that we're having some really different experience. But at its most foundational level, we are humans in a body trying to figure out how to live. And all the other things we have constructed that make it really difficult to do that thing.

And if we can deconstruct all those other things, then we might have a better shot at having a thriving existence as humans and bodies. And so that is why I situate the work that I do inside of this conversation of body.

I want to take a moment, I want to rewind a little because I realized I launched into these ideas, these big weighty ideas without really telling you who I am and how I got here. How I started doing this work, which feels like an important point of conversation as we move along.

So, my historical background, I've had many lives. I've done all kinds of jobs. But I spent 10 years of my life as a performance poet, and slam poet. So I wrote and performed poetry all over the world. I competed in what they call competitive performance poetry. It's this wonderful, raucous game where people in bars judge your poems and give you scores. And if you're lucky, maybe you'll win some money or a free beer. That was my life for about 10 years.

And part of what that life gave me was this amazing opportunity to meet and connect with humans of all kinds in all kinds of places, and to begin to understand all these different stories that made up us. And it was in this particular game in Knoxville, Tennessee, that I was competing at what was called the Southern Fried Poetry Slam. And everything I'm telling you is also -- I tell it in my book, and I'll get to the book in a little bit. But I talked about this at the beginning of my book.

I'm in a poetry slam in Knoxville, Tennessee, it's a team of us. We are, you know, we're like the UN. We're a Benetton commercial. We're Black and we're queer. And we're disabled. And we're Tamil. And we are all this kaleidoscope of humans in different bodies. And we're getting ready to play this strange, silly, ridiculous game. And I'm having a conversation with one of my teammates in our hotel room. And she confides in me that she is afraid that she might have an unintended pregnancy.

I am the friend who will get in your business from a place of love. I'm the nosy friend. And I'm the nosy friend for a couple of reasons. I'm the nosy friend because I'm nosy. I'm the nosy friend because I'm curious about our lives.

I'm curious about how we make the decisions we make. I'm curious about the barriers and obstacles that keep us from living into the highest, most beautifully expressed versions of ourselves. I'm a curious person in that way. And I'm also a little bit of a like, "Oh, really, that happened to you too? Tell me about it, let's compare notes," kind of person.

And so as my friend shared this with me, I started to ask her questions. And I started asking her questions about her sexual health choices. And I asked her why she wasn't using condoms with this casual partner that I knew she had.

And I'd like to say that there are three things present in that conversation that made it transformative, and it ended up being incredibly transformative. The first was radical honesty. I asked a really honest question, like a real in-your-business question. Right? A question she could have recoiled from. A question she could have been like, "Mind your business!" Right? She could have.

But the other thing that was present in that conversation was radical vulnerability. That there was some source of trust that existed between us that made it possible for her to show up in, you know, in what could have been one of the most tender parts of her life. And I think part of that is because there was rapport and relationship. I think part of that is because we were ridiculous poets who told our business on stage for a living. I think part of that was because there was no shame or judgment in my question.

I didn't ask her like she'd done something wrong. I asked her like, "There, but for the grace of God go I." I asked her like, "Oh, yeah, I know that place. I've been that place. How'd you get there?" And my friend responded with this incredibly vulnerable, honest answer. And she said -- my friend had cerebral palsy, and she said her disability made it difficult, already, to be sexual. And so she didn't feel entitled to ask this person to use a condom.

And the final piece that made this conversation transformative was my response that came from what I like to think came from a space of radical empathy. I got it. I understood all the times I had made concessions around my own care and well-being because I thought something was wrong with me. Because I was carrying that story from third grade into my adult choices.

So I understood what she was saying. And in that moment, something, the response that came through me... And I'm very clear it was through me, not of me. It wasn't mine. I was divine channeling in that moment. I said to my friend, "Your body is not an apology. It's not something you offer to someone to say, 'Sorry for my disability.'" And in that moment, something got made. Some new way of understanding her experience showed up and some new way of understanding my own.

All of a sudden, I wasn't just talking to my friend, I was talking to my history. I was talking to my own choices and decisions. I was talking to all the times I had apologized for being this fat, Black, dark skinned, queer, neurodivergent woman in the world. All of these markers that the world says are less than. All of these ways that my body showed up, and

-- and was deemed not worthy. And all the times I had apologized for that, supposed unworthiness.

And so that moment, you know, was powerful, and we cried, and it was beautiful. And I'm still a poet. So I was like, "Damn, that was really poetic. I'm gonna have to write a poem. That, as I said, just says something -- I said a word there! That's going to become a poem." And so I started working on this poem called "The Body Is Not An Apology." And that, like I said, that moment was so transformative that it started making things. It started just generating its own imagery.

And so first, it generated that statement with a friend. And then it generated this poem. And then that poem generated a moment where I realized like, I'd had a selfie in my phone, I felt really fabulous in it. And I also was like, "Don't you post that selfie on the Internet. People are going to judge you. You are too fat, you too dark. Don't you dare post that picture."

And so this word, the body is not an apology, that I had now turned into a poem that I was saying on stages, started talking to me. "Hey, pumpkin, I thought you said, 'the body's not an apology?'" And all of a sudden, the places where I wasn't moving in alignment with the word started feeling uncomfortable. The places where I wasn't in alignment with what was my soul's truth started feeling itchy.

And it was really just this one picture in this particular moment. And I finally decided to post the picture on Facebook. And I decided to post that picture because a plus size model, a picture of a plus size model, showed up on my Facebook wall. And she was really fabulous. And I Googled her. And when I Googled her, one of the first pictures I saw was her wearing the same sort of black corset that I was wearing in the picture I had been hiding away.

And one of the things that I think is so important about that moment is, and this is what I really hope that we are able to get inside of this conversation is, we are always either reinforcing or deconstructing these systems. We are never neutral. Neutral is not real, it's an illusion. We are either building up the edifice of shame and oppression and inequity. Or we are tearing it down by our choices and our actions and our own everyday lives.

Because the system, these systems, are not some amorphous, menacing blob. These systems are the decades of individual and collective choices of humans, i.e., us. So this person, this model on the internet, minding her business, unapologetically standing in a

corset with her juicy thighs, gave me a moment where I recognized that perhaps, I was being ashamed of a thing that I didn't need to be ashamed of.

I had this moment where her living unapologetically in her body inspired me to practice doing the same. It was contagious. Right? And so it's important for us to think that -- particularly in a period of time in our lives where we are living in a system of great contagion. Right? What do we want to spread? What do we want to intentionally spread? And this model minding her business wherever she was in the world had spread a bit of empowerment to me by simply doing her own calling.

And I posted a photo of myself. And then I invited other people to post pictures where they felt powerful and beautiful in their own bodies. And the next morning, I woke up, and there were 30 pictures on the Internet of people of all kinds of identities and bodies and sizes and shapes, feeling powerful, and embodied in their own bodies.

And I was like, "That is really cool. Maybe we just need like a place where we're allowed to be unapologetic. Maybe I'll just make a little Facebook page, and I'll name it after this little poem I have. And so here's this Facebook page, and I'll call it The Body Is Not An Apology. And here are 30 people who are going to join me over there doing this work."

That was a decade ago. That was a decade ago, that was millions of people later, that is a life in another country later, that's a New York Times bestseller later. That brief encounter, of shifting and changing and stepping into my own unapologetic power, continued to have a ripple effect that changed the direction of my life, and continues to change the direction of other people's lives.

And I call that work that I've been doing over this last decade, the work of radical self-love. The work of recognizing our inherent enoughness. Recognizing our inherent worthiness. Recognizing our inherent divinity. And then working to deconstruct any systems that work at odds with those things. That's the work of radical self-love.

And all of that became from an understanding of the intersections of all of these identities. The intersections of all of these different ways of being in our bodies, and what those messages were really coming to tell us.

And so I want to take it back for a moment. And I want to talk about sort of some of the -- some of the structures that are moving everyday that we might not notice. And how we can start to identify those things so that we can begin to intentionally deconstruct them as we come up against them. And first by deconstructing them inside of ourselves.

So in my book, I'll give you a little plug here, there it is, I'm naked on the cover, it's great. This is the second edition of "The Body Is Not An Apology." The first edition came out in 2018. The second edition came out in February of this year, and there's also a workbook this year.

And you know, the ideas that I present in the book are really about, again, how do we take this concept of radical self-love? How do we understand this idea of the body and its relationship to oppression? And how do we distill it to the practical? How can I identify it in my everyday life? How can I see it and begin to shift and change, where necessary, around these ideas?

And so one of the key ideas that I talked about in the book is the idea of the default body. And the idea of the default body is important for us to understand, again, how bodies relate to systems of oppression. How our individual bodies play into a larger ecosystem of identities, and the valuing or devaluing of identities. The default body is the body in any given society that we decide is the better body.

Now I want to take a moment and I just want you to sit with the idea of a better body. Right? Because we've all been indoctrinated into the idea that there is such a thing. Right? But if the premise of a body is, "Can I be alive?" the bar is pretty low. Right? Like, you don't actually need to do a lot of extra.

If the premise is, "Am I alive? Does it allow me to do living?" Right? Then I would imagine as my friend Glenn Marla says, "There is no wrong way to have a body." If the body is allowing you to do the living thing, then it's a body. Great. Right? But that's not the way we've been socialized. That's not the messages that we've grown up with. We've grown up with, "There's a right and a wrong way to have a body. There's a better body and a worse body." Right?

And part of those ideas have -- are tied to, you know, notions that seem on their surface morally sound or good. Right? Like we decided that a healthy body is better than a not healthy body. Right? And that seems on its surface a morally sound notion. Except that as soon as we decide that there is a better body than some other body, inside of a system of hierarchy, inside of a system of scarcity, inside of a system of injustice, what we inherently end up doing is deciding that better bodies deserve more and lesser bodies deserve less.

The better bodies deserve good treatment, and the bodies we deem lesser deserve less. That is not a morally sound position. Right? But it gets all jumbled up. And part of that is because we start with this idea of a default body. And the default body is the body that society says socially, politically, economically, culturally, is a good body. Is the best body. Right?

And we can identify the default body a couple of ways. You can identify the default body by bodies that have the greatest access to power and resource. Whose bodies get to make decisions? Whose bodies get to make decisions about other people's bodies? Right?

You can decide what the default body is by noticing the bodies that we -- who -- that have the most visibility. That we see, versus the bodies that we hide away. Whether that be via media. Whether that be via our educational systems. Whether -- any of these other places where life happens. Whose bodies do we see, whose bodies are represented, and which bodies are not?

Right? That's one of the ways that you can identify the default body. Whose bodies have access to resource? Whose bodies do not? Right? And so -- and then often, one of the things that I often ask people to think about is just... When someone says, you know -- and we have books throughout history that have done this, you know -- "Humans, when humans sought out to do this," or, "When humans sought out to do that." But then when you look inside the book it's very clear they mean a specific kind of human.

Right, it's clear inside the writing, because there is no representation of any other kind of person. That when they say human, they mean something very specific. That's the default body. And in Western culture, the default body is most often white, and male, and cisgender, and able bodied, and relatively thin or fit. Right? And usually relatively young. That is the default body.

Those are the markers that we have, culturally, socially, politically, and economically decided, are the markers that make for better bodies. Right? More resourced bodies, more cared for bodies, more attended to bodies, more powerful bodies. And inside of that system, we -- because we're a culture that really likes hierarchy, that really likes to rank things from top to bottom -- sort of push everybody into a hierarchy of bodies, with the default body being the body at the top.

And I call this the ladder of bodily hierarchy. Here's what I want you to know about the ladder of bodily hierarchy. It's an illusion. It's not actually a ladder, it's a hamster wheel.

It goes in circles. Whoo! You're up and then on you're -- before you know it, you're on your way back down. Right? And that is because there is no body... In order for a hierarchical system to maintain itself, right? The top has to be tenuous. The top can't be stable. Right?

If the top is stable, then the people at the top could chill. Right? They could just be chillin'. But here's how we know it's not true. That the people at the top aren't even chilling, right?

I think about, I think about this in sort of the context, the American context, of sort of like the super-wealthy these days. Right? I was like, Elon Musk would be considered a default body at the top of the bodily hierarchy. Right? This guy is able bodied and he's cisgender and he's white, he's young. He's at the top.

And if Elon Musk knew that he was enough, Elon Musk would never need to accumulate another dollar in his life. There'd be no reason. What reason -- when you have already... You know I saw a meme one time that was just like, I wish that billionaires would just be like -- you could just give them a trophy and say, "You won capitalism," and then tell them to go away.

And so what it makes me think of is, there's got to be some drive to continue to accumulate more when you already have beyond anything you could ever actually use. Beyond anything you could ever actually offer in the world to serve any -- to serve you, or your children, and your children's children, and your children's children's children's children. To have enough resource to do all of that and still have money to burn. And still have the endless desire to accumulate more to me says there is something at the center of you that still doesn't know you're enough. That doesn't have an understanding of enough.

That's the top of the ladder. The top of the ladder still has to be uncertain of its own value, in order for the system to continue to repeat itself. For -- in order for the system to continue to reaffirm itself inside of society. No one can actually ever feel safe in their bodies inside of that system. Not truly safe.

They can have the illusion of safety. The illusion of, "I have enough money to fly myself to Mars if the planet explodes." That's the illusion of safety. But it's not true safety. Right? That is the ladder of bodily hierarchy. And all of us are finding our way inside, "Where do I fit?" Right?

And some of us will never, ever, ever be at the top. Period. I could do all the things in the world, I'm never gonna be a straight white man. I'm just not. And you know, technology shifts a lot of things. I don't know what could be possible later. But as it stands right now, I can't become a straight white man. Right?

So I'm never going to be at the top of that ladder in the social context that we live in right now. Right? But there are ways in which inside of this system, I still need to try to scurry as far up as possible. Right? And as long as there is a ladder, that ladder is only validated by the idea that there are people below us.

Whether or not we consciously allow that in or not, the value of that ladder is to say, "At least I'm not at the bottom." Which means that there will always be bodies that we have been indoctrinated into believing are less than us. Right? And again, if we're inside of a system that we are always participating in, either upholding or destroying, then even our unwillingness to acknowledge that there are people on the ladder below us helps to keep them below us.

And that's where I want to talk to this conversation about fatphobia, and sexism. Because they are rungs on this ladder that oftentimes, I think can be invisibilized. Right? Or can be hidden in conversations that obscure what's really going on. So fatphobia is defined as prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's size or weight.

That's the definition of sizeism and fatphobia is the fear and/or dislike or hatred of fatness. And, you know, it is such a pervasive mindset in our society. Fatphobia and sizeism is such a commonplace way in which we have been taught to value some bodies over other bodies. Right?

We have normalized the hatred of fat bodies, such that we had a television show that encouraged disordered eating and disordered exercise that ran on air to incredibly high ratings for years. For years, we gave people money to harm themselves to be thinner.

That is the cultural reality of fatphobia and sizeism. And it gets obscured because then we have conversations that are like, "Well, but what about their health?" Now what I always find fascinating about the conversation, particularly around fatphobia and health, is the idea that somehow shaming, berating, belittling, and denying access to care for fat people is the "healthy choice." Is "healthier" than just being fat. Right?

So when we start asking these questions about health, we have to say, "What do we really mean when we say healthy? What -- whose definition of health are we applying in

this conversation?" Right? Because we're obviously not talking about mental health. Right? We couldn't be talking about mental health, while continuing to systemically and economically disenfranchise an entire group of people based off of their bodies. Right?

We couldn't really even be talking about physical health when we create the conditions that have fat people go to the doctor and be continually misdiagnosed because of physicians' fat bias that refuses to actually look at any other health indicators other than the size of their body. And then, consequently, do things like miss cancer diagnoses.

Or to make the experience so unbearably uncomfortable that people go decades without going to the doctor, because they know that it's going to be an emotionally and psychologically painful experience. So what do we really mean when we are saying health? These are the questions we have to start asking ourselves. Right?

And then we have to think about it in the small everyday ways that we experience it in our own lives. You know, the constant sort of badgering of, of heavier people inside of family about, "Oh you look like you put on weight again. Oh, you gonna to eat that?" Right?

These ways that shrink and constrict and, and further, you know, terrorize people in fat bodies from being able to live in the fullness of their own identities. That system is everywhere. And then we call -- we -- we validate the way that we treat people, particularly fat people, by saying, "Well, it's healthy. It's about your health." You know?

So these are the kinds of questions that we have to be asking ourselves. And then we have to be interrogating our own positions and ideas about it. Who -- I had a conversation with a friend one time. I was in Brazil. I was on, uh, an amazing forum, for - - feminisms forum in Brazil. And I was walking with this young lady. We were just sort of out and about, and she's very petite. Very petite young lady. And she was complaining about her pooch in her belly. "Oh, I need to get my stomach flat again."

And, and I and I said to her, "Who told you you had to have a flat stomach?" And she was so confused -- you could see the wheels turning in her brain. She didn't even fully understand the question I was asking. Because I was asking it in a really, like, practical way. Like, "Where did that message come from? Have you ever stopped to consider who told you that that needed to be true? And why?"

And it never occurred to her to question this message that she had constructed her dieting around, her clothing choices around, the entire aesthetic of her body around.

She'd never stopped to say, "Why do I believe this? Who told me I should believe this? And who does it serve that I continue to believe this?"

That is the question that we get to ask ourselves as we are trying to divest from these systems of bodily hierarchy. As we are trying to divest from the notion that there is some body that is better than another body. That there is some kind of body that is more valuable than other kinds of bodies.

And then I wanted to -- and one of the things that I again -- that she couldn't... She certainly wasn't making the connection between that relationship between fatphobia, right, this, "I must police the size of my body," and who. And who was telling her that? And its relationship to her gender identity. Right? I've never walked with a cisgender man, one moment ever in my life, who was like, "Well, I gotta get my stomach flat." I've never heard it. And that doesn't mean it's never been said.

But I can assure you that it is not the same kind of messaging that we are giving to people assigned female at birth. It's not the same kind of messaging, at all. And so the question becomes, why isn't it the same kind of messaging. Right? And so this conversation of sexism, and again, to define that word, sexism, being the prejudice and stereotyping, and discrimination, typically targeted against those assigned female at birth, on the basis of sex.

And, and I always connect, so -- so you can't talk about sexism without talking about its, you know, its big bully brother, the larger system under which it lives, which is the system of patriarchy. Which is a system of a society or governments in which men hold the majority of power, and women are largely excluded from it. And that actually, that definition should just say everybody else is largely excluded from it.

Everybody else. All other identities, all other gender identities all end up being further excluded from that system of power. And so in this moment, where, where my young friend is lamenting whether or not she has a flat stomach, she's also not connected to the ways in which the energy of body policing, the energy of size policing, is an energy that we actually ask most often of people assigned female at birth. As a way to siphon off political energy, to siphon off energy and power that could live someplace else.

There is a quote by Naomi Wolf that says, um... I want to get the quote quite right. It says, "Dieting is one of the most political -- powerfully political sedatives in existence. It quietly," what is it? "A hungry population is a tractable one." And I'm mis-, I'm paraphrasing it. But what she's getting at in that quote is that if your energy is consumed

with whether or not you are in a good enough body, then your energy is probably not being directed at what are the systems that are attempting to control my body? And how do I turn my energy and power in that direction?

A friend of mine shared a conversation with me the other day, that floored me. Floored me. She's in Austria right now with her family. And her mother is a stonemaker, makes stone art, and was having an exhibition in her yard. And there was a gentleman -- my friend is always complaining about the rampant sexism that exists in Austria. I've never spent any time in Austria. So, you know, this isn't a, this isn't an attack on Austria as a nation. This is a conversation though about Westernized ideals around sexism.

And so a gentleman was in the yard and a woman walked in who was a former coworker of my friend's father, my friend is a pilot. And the woman was, you know, introduced herself. She said, "Yeah, I'm a former coworker of so and so." And the man said, "Oh, that they make those?" speaking of female pilots. And it was this moment -- and it had this woman reflect on the sort of history of sexist beliefs that had always sort of existed inside of that period of time. And this is late 90s, early 2000s. So we're not talking 1962 or anything.

And she began to recount to my friend that she had a -- when she first became a pilot she had to order her uniform, and they sent her our brochure to order her uniform out of. And in the brochure, the images -- there were three images of female pilots. One of them was an image of a female pilot in her uniform sitting seductively inside of a suitcase.

The second image was of a seated female pilot in the cockpit with a male main pilot, pouring him a drink. And the third image was the female pilot vacuuming the cabin. Now, this is, this is -- mind you this is, this is not a public magazine. This is an internal magazine to order uniforms for pilots. Right? And even inside of that space, the request is for female pilots to appear subservient as to not disturb the rank of bodily hierarchy that male pilots hold themselves in.

Because clearly this wasn't about how female pilots view themselves. This magazine was mostly for the mostly male population of pilots who would be uncomfortable having to look at female pilots as equal to them in an advertising setting. That is the way in which sexism pervades our everyday lives.

I just had a moment where I thought about a friend of mine had a hysterectomy lately -- recently. And, and this procedure, the hysterectomy, I kept being drawn back to the root word. And the early experiences of women in the medical center, people assigned

female at birth at the medical center, was that any time they had an issue with their reproductive system, again, they were labeled as something -- as ill. That it was considered some version that must be in their head.

So the root word of hysterectomy comes from the root word hysteria, because that is what they diagnosed people assigned female at birth with when they came in talking about the medical challenges that they were having with their bodies.

That is the historical underpinning of how sexism and patriarchy label and assign beings and bodies. And the interplay of those health systems with whether or not people ever actually got their real needs met. Right? That is the intersection of those experiences. That is the relationship between those systems and structures, and all the things that those systems and structures make. Which are our healthcare systems. Which are our economic systems. Which are our educational systems.

There is no place where we cannot -- where we fail to deconstruct the ideas of oppression and marginalization that do not have their tentacles in the everyday aspects of our lives. And so the work of radical self-love, is to be continuously and soul searchingly excavating those tentacles from our own set of beliefs.

How do I find myself trying to situate myself on the ladder of bodily hierarchy? How have I come to believe that there is some better body? And what do I do on a daily basis to try to ascend up that ladder? And what would it look like for me to divest from the ladder?

Because here's -- the most powerful visual to me is, if everyone not only stepped off the ladder, but took the rung they were stepping on, the ladder would collapse. It would cease to exist. Its existence is dependent on our belief in it and our continued attempt to scale it.

And our unwillingness to look at the places where we have been indoctrinated into the kinds of messages that have us believe that thinner bodies are better than bigger bodies, that male bodies are better than AFAB bodies, or trans bodies, or gender non-conforming bodies. To have the idea and belief that white bodies are better than Black bodies, or Asian bodies, or Latinx bodies, the idea that there is some better version of a body.

And the ways in which we have come to play that out in our regular lives by being reinforced in story after story, from the point of our childhood, from that earliest memory

of body shame. Until where we are now. Where are we still invested? And how do we do the work to divest? That's the power.

I wrote these books because that's my attempt to help us not only understand that, but to begin to practice on a practical and foundational level, how do I divest from this system? How do I identify the places where I am still believing these stories? And how do I begin to create a new story for myself, that shapes how it is that I move and operate in the world, toward the direction of greater justice, equity and compassion? That, that's the goal. That's the work.

I hope you all will continue to be on that journey with me. We're in it collectively, whether we know it or not. And I believe that with just a bit more radical self love, we might get there.

Thank you all so much. I'm excited to spend the next bit of this time being in conversation and answering questions. Thank you so much for your time and energy in this space.

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**Dara Burwell:** Beautiful, thank you very much, Sonya. So appreciate that. So I am going to go through some of the questions that we have received.

**Sonya Renee Taylor:** Wonderful.

**Dara Burwell:** And I would love to actually begin with the question that I think jumps right off of where you ended. Which is you're encouraging us to begin to deconstruct these things, and to stop believing them. Right? And also, as you've pointed out, we have been indoctrinated to believe these things throughout the entire course of our lives.

**Sonya Renee Taylor:** Yeah.

**Dara Burwell:** So, Sonya, what are some, some ways that you would recommend to us to begin to do that? Knowing that we cannot just be like, "Okay, I am no longer going to believe it." Like, right?

**Sonya Renee Taylor:** Yes.

**Dara Burwell:** What are some ways that you would recommend that we begin to actually -- to separate ourselves from those beliefs and to take on other beliefs?

**Sonya Renee Taylor:** Absolutely. So inside of the book, I frame this conversation as what I like to call thinking-doing-being process. And it really is the world's most distilled version of what they call cognitive behavioral change theory. Which is a big psychological term that really just means the first step is to raise your beliefs to conscious awareness.

Part of what happens -- again, the same reason I call that thing the default body is because it's the body that we don't even think about. We just assign it and then go on about our business. We don't even -- we're not even consciously aware all the time that we're saying, "That body is the better body." Our default beliefs and ideas just run in the background, like a TV on all night. My mother used to do that, she just slept with the TV on all night. I was like, "You're not watching nothin'." But it was just [static noise] in the background.

That is the way these beliefs often operate for us. They're not conscious, they're subconscious. Right? And so the first step is to raise what is subconscious to consciousness. And that comes through curiosity. When you say something, pause and hear it. Actually let yourself hear it. And sometimes that can happen through, um, you know, I, you know -- I know people who give themselves like a quarter jar. Like my, this was when -- when I was a kid, I gave my dad a swearing jar, because I was like, "You swear too much." Right?

And so I was like, "Every time you say a curse word, you got to put a quarter in the jar." Right? So what it did was that economic sanctions, moved his unconscious language to conscious language. Right? All of a sudden he had to become aware. He had to stop and think about what he was saying. And so we can practice that for ourselves.

When you find yourself in a moment of self-, you know, like self-shame and disparaging, deprecating talk. When you just talkin' trash on yourself. You can stop in that moment. Right? Or you can also assign people in your life who you love and trust to say, "When you hear me talking like that point it out, please." Right?

And then all of a sudden, that is now no longer background noise, that's conscious. I am aware of that thought. Right? Once I'm aware of the thought, I'm at choice. Once you are conscious of a thought, you are at choice about how you act on it. So that's the moment where you say, what would opposite action be in this case?

If the default status is for me to talk trash on myself, and now it's -- I notice it enough to stop it, then what's the thing that I do in its place? Right? And maybe that is an affirmation

that I created for myself. You know, "I'm actually -- I'm perfect and enough in the body I have today."

And I walk you through this in the "Your Body Is Not An Apology" workbook where I help us figure out a mantra, a thing you can say, that interrupts that old tape that usually is playing. The repetition of that process, raising your thoughts to consciousness, taking opposite action, raising your thoughts to consciousness, taking opposite action, raising your thoughts to consciousness, taking opposite action, is the process that creates a new way of being. You start to be different.

You -- this is also the process of developing a new habit. On a physiological way, it is the process of creating new neural transmitters. New neural pathways in your brain that take your brain to a different route than it used to. That's the first and I think most tangible step that folks can begin taking. And then there's a host of other things, but start there. Start by raising those unconscious ideas to consciousness.