

On Stacey Abrams and Body-Shaming: the Pernicious Effects of Trump's Misogynist Rhetoric

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I was about nine when the idea I might be fat entered my consciousness. My [doctor](#) informed me I was overweight for my age group, and though my [mom assured](#) me I was just growing faster than the other [girls](#), I felt something was wrong with me.

I was 16 when the idea I was fat led me to stop eating. I got thinner and thinner until I ended up [in](#) the hospital. [It](#) happened again when I was 20.

[It's](#) taken me nearly two [decades](#) to [divorce](#) my weight from my sense of self-worth. To do so required unlearning a [lifetime's](#) worth of messages [that](#) physical attractiveness -- and I [mean](#) attractiveness [in](#) the conventional sense -- is a prerequisite for mattering. These messages bore [into](#) me from [myriad](#) sources. [They](#) turned my mind [into](#) a [prison](#) of self-loathing, at which [point](#) I became my most aggressive abuser.

Body-shaming is pernicious on every level, which is why Trump's recent [retweet](#) attacking Stacey Abrams sent me reeling. John [K. Stahl](#), a failed politician [whose](#) [Tweets](#) are laced with [white supremacy](#) and misogyny, posted the original message. She "visited every buffet restaurant" [in](#) [Georgia](#) this [weekend](#), he quipped, along with a photo of Abrams [in](#) which frankly, she looks fierce [as](#) [hell](#).

Stahl has a paltry 100,000 followers [compared to](#) Trump's 80 [million](#). [His](#) taunt [would](#) have been sequestered [among](#) ultra-conservatives had Trump left [it](#) alone. But when [the President](#) [retweeted](#) Stahl's incendiary words, [they](#) reached [his](#) 80 [million](#) followers and received mention [in](#) every [major](#) news outlet.

Comments [like](#) Stahl's muck up an idea I've worked so hard to entomb: [that](#) a [woman's](#) only metric of worth is [her](#) weight.

Even Abrams, a [black woman](#) from [Mississippi](#) [who](#) has three [college degrees](#) including a law degree from Yale, [who](#) devotes all [her](#) time [toward](#) employing the impoverished and promoting voter rights, [who](#) has defied every precedent [laid](#) down by [racists](#) and misogynists, is susceptible to body-shaming. No matter [her](#) accomplishments, a [woman](#) is reduced to [her](#) physical appearance.

This isn't the first time Trump has scrutinized a [woman's](#) appearance. [In](#) 1996, [he pressured](#) [Alicia Machado](#), 18 and newly crowned [Miss Universe](#), to shed pounds. "She gained a massive amount of weight, and [it](#) was a real problem," he told [Fox News](#) [in](#) 2016. Machado has [since](#) [acknowledged](#) [that](#) the [incident](#) led her to develop bulimia and anorexia. When Jessica Leeds [accused](#) him of groping her on an airplane, [he said](#) "Believe me, she [would](#) not be my first choice." He's [called](#) the actress [Kim Novak](#) "an unattractive [woman](#)," [said](#) [Heidi Klum](#) is "no longer a 10," and [deemed](#) [Arianna Huffington](#) "ugly both inside and out."

Body-shaming controls women on a physiological level. In her memoir *Hunger*, Roxane Gay writes “This is what most girls are taught - that we should be slender and small. We should not take up space.” This control pervades every aspect of a woman’s conduct: “We should be seen and not heard, and if we are seen, we should be pleasing to men, acceptable to society.”

As a result, women are consumed with enhancing their appearances. If all the time and money funneled into dieting, skincare routines, watching makeup tutorials, buying makeup, plastic surgery, hair care, hair removal, nail appointments, and personal trainers had been devoted toward promoting gender equality, imagine where we’d be. We are marionettes controlled by a [\\$532 billion industry](#) that says we should buy more and eat less.

I lost years of my life to extreme dieting, and many more to years of recovering. I missed out on my final track season of high school, I had to take time off from college, and I spent my 21st birthday in treatment. What else did I lose in my fraught pursuit of thinness?

I am a white woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes, quintessentially “attractive” by society’s standards, yet I still believed the patriarchy when it told me I’m not good enough. This problem is astronomically worse for women of color, whose bodies are more vulnerable to ridicule and violence. Politicians have scrutinized Michelle Obama’s body from her arms to her butt, [fake nudes](#) of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez went viral, and Stahl, during the same Twitter rampage against Abrams, [called Kamala Harris a ho](#).

Sexist rhetoric is the patriarchy’s way of silencing women who pose a threat, which is partially why women of color are being targeted. According to [a recent report](#) produced by the [AAPI Civic Engagement Fund](#) and the [Groundswell Fund](#), women of color significantly influenced the 2018 midterm elections. 2018 saw a 30 million voter increase from 2014 and women of color saw a 37% increase. This turnout was the result of huge mobilization efforts: 84% of black women encouraged friends and families to vote, as did 76% of Asian American and Pacific Islander women, 72% of Native American women and 70% of Latinas. Most importantly, 93% of black women supported a Democratic house candidate, followed by 76% of Latinas, 73% of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and 68% of Native American women. But if women of color are busy dieting, they won’t be causing a stink about equal rights, campaigning for progressive candidates or running for office themselves.

Men like Trump and Stahl are terrified of women like Stacey Abrams. Intelligent, eloquent, and driven, she poses a palpable threat to their beloved way of life.

This knowledge doesn’t mitigate the pain of being body-shamed, whether it comes from an obtuse pediatrician or an ultra-conservative bigot. We still live in an androcentric world where a woman’s perceived worth is tied to her physical appearance. Having a compliant body -- a white body -- is too often a prerequisite for success. But at the same time, being “pretty” and “smart” are deemed mutually exclusive. Women must grapple with both of these realities and it’s exhausting.

Women like Abrams, Obama, Ocasio-Cortez and Harris give me hope that these standards are evolving, and I'd like to think Stahl is grasping for an era long-gone, but I question my positivity. America elected a misogynist just four years ago so I must ask, how much has really changed?