

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Céline LaBeouf, Associate Professor in Philosophy at Florida International University and author of the new book, *The Tyranny of Thinness: Understanding and Resisting the Pressure to be Skinny*. Now, I think that title is fairly self-explanatory, so I'd like to start with something I've heard, that the extreme skinny pressure of the early 2000s eased off a bit in subsequent years, but that this has made a resurgence in the 2020s. Would you say that's accurate?

CL: Yeah, I think that is completely accurate. I've been following all the trends because this is part of my research on the skinny ideal, and especially with the introduction of the GLP-1 medications, those have kind of migrated from medical uses to people using them more for cosmetic, last 10 pounds kind of usage, or to lose even more weight. So even on my Instagram, I see myself targeted for things like that. So I know it's not just purely for conditions like diabetes or any other aspect of someone's physical health that could be bothering them, but just for aesthetic purposes.

AT: I feel like what we're seeing in recent years with the influence of the manosphere and looksmaxxing means that there is much more of a push for men to be obsessed with their weight than there were in generations past. There's much more of that focus on "your percent body fat should be basically zero." And this isn't a good thing, obviously, but it is kind of fascinating to see this obsession with "you should look perfect at all times, and we're going to tell you what perfect is, and if you don't meet those standards, you suck as a human being." Seeing that applied to men as well as women. And again, this is not the gender equality we were looking for!

CL: Yeah, absolutely. So the book itself is focused on body image and the slenderness norm in girls and women. But I see the looksmaxxing that's caught lots of people's attention recently, also mirrors the kind of fat phobia obsession with having a lean body type that you see online. And one thing that's maybe a noticeable difference is that the male version of this is kind of a muscular look, plus very lean body type. So not much fat, very muscly physique. And I think women are also pushed, there's a certain push, especially I see this in Miami since that's where I'm based, to have a certain amount of muscle tone, aside being slender. But I think for men, it's like maximizing that muscularity is very important these days.

AT: Speaking of muscle tone, I'd like to discuss the framing of fat as unhealthy. And skinny is supposedly healthy, but we know that in fact, skinny is often extremely unhealthy, depending on how thin you are and how you got there. And so neither of these things is universally true. And in fact, my husband's a runner. And so he likes to say that thick thighs save lives. And of course, growing up in the early 2000s, we talked a lot about the thigh gap, like not me personally, but it was this thing, like there should be that gap between your thighs at the top of them. And I was asking my husband, if you have a thigh gap, are your thighs so lacking in muscle that you can't run away? Because that feels deliberate. But we have this idea that fat inherently equals unhealthy and skinny inherently equals healthy. And that's just ridiculous.

CL: Yeah, absolutely. You wanted to talk about the BMI and how that has become a measure, that has gotten a lot of criticism for just being inadequate and also for the racial biases that are built and gender biases built into it. So a lot of these measurements that got the BMI started were focused on the bodies of white men. So to transfer those metrics to other populations just does not work. It's not really translatable. And overall, these cutoffs are arbitrary, they get shifted over the years to suit the medical practitioners and health insurance policies, those decisions about health care. And so the cutoff points don't mean all that much. And in general, I think it's important to emphasize the disconnect between health and body weight, body size, because just like trying to say that slim or skinny equals healthy, as you're saying, or a larger body equals unhealthy just doesn't hold up.

AT: I got more into the BMI with my episode on medical racism with Alexis Pedrick, if anybody wants to go check that out once you're done with this one. But it also started out as a sociological tool. So the guy who originally created it was literally just looking at demographically, he was not creating this as a medical tool, he was not a medical professional at all. And then later iterations of it used health insurance data, which of course is very skewed towards white and wealthy enough to have health insurance, which sucks that that is even a thing in the US that you have to be wealthy to have health care. But again, that's another conversation. Outside of the issues with the medical professionals, you might have situations where a doctor isn't looking past a patient's weight. So for example, when I had high cholesterol in my mid-20s, I remember talking to the doctor and saying, "Okay, so what can I do to bring my cholesterol down?" And he was saying, like, do this, do this, do this, do this. And I was already basically doing all the things. And instead of saying, "Well, gee, why does this otherwise healthy young woman have high cholesterol?" which might have led him to learn that I have PCOS, which I guess is now called PMOS. He just said, "Well, you could lose weight." And ignoring that the things that he was telling me to do, like drink less alcohol, eat less red meat, eat less dairy, exercise more, all of those things would correlate to losing weight if somebody already wasn't doing those things. And so you've got situations like that, in a medical context where the doctor is just not looking at the patient beyond, "Oh, this person weighs more than I think they should," possibly because of the BMI. And they're not serving their patient well, because they're so focused on the patient's weight that they're not looking for anything else. And then beyond that, just in a social media context, I feel like is a big one. This idea that fat equals unhealthy is used to justify fat shaming in the name of "Oh, I'm just concerned about you." And I want to smack those people. Hard.

[Listen to Alexis Pedrick on medical racism](#) or [read the transcript](#).

CL: I want to circle back a little to what you were saying about the thigh gap. Because one of the things that I go over in the book is the transition from heroin chic in the '90s, which is something that I witnessed as a child and teenager seeing the super skinny models basically looking emaciated, to the thinspo blogs of the early/mid-2000s, where you saw things like the thigh gap really take off. It's not that these models from the '90s and have thigh gaps, but as a concept #thighgap, that was a thing that was really tied to those personal blogs or Pinterest boards, things like that. As well as other things may be less well known than the thigh gap, like bikini bridges. That's where your hip bones, you could imagine a line that would unite one to the other without it bending or curving. So if it's straight, that's when you have a bikini bridge. So yeah, I've been following the heroin chic to thinspo. And now to other incarnations like #skinnytok, which was recently that hashtag was banned last summer, summer 2025 on TikTok. But there's always ways of going around those. People find different hashtags to slip in similar content. So just because one thing gets banned, that doesn't mean that the phenomenon has disappeared altogether. Against a mirror, the way these trends are recycled. We had a hashtag, legginglegs a year ago, which is like the thigh gap, but just like a different way of putting it. So I'm interested in why these trends crop up again and again, and what shape what media messages are going on as people spread the gospel of skinny.

AT: When we're talking about the internet, I think it's important to point out that this is not a recent trend of using the internet to spread, as you say, the gospel of skinny. Because I remember when I was a teenager, so I was born in 1988. So we're talking late 90s, early 2000s. I was never on them. I fortunately never struggled with disordered eating. But there were "pro-Ana" and "pro-Mia" forums online for anorexia and bulimia, where women and girls, I think a lot of it was young girls, were sharing tips and encouraging each other and just creating these really toxic, under the illusion of supportive, environments. That actually, I think, again, you can see a lot of correlation there with like these looksmaxxing communities, where they give you this facade of community. But in fact, they're encouraging you to do really, really unhealthy things. Because going back to that whole healthy, unhealthy thing, diet and exercise, I feel like some people have this idea that, if you "eat right," which can turn into orthorexia, which is disordered eating centered around that idea of what is "right" to

eat. But like exercising too much, anything taken to extremes is going to be unhealthy. And I think that's the real danger of these communities. Whether we're talking about the modern manosphere, or those pro-mia, pro-ana forums 20, 30 years ago, that is going to be really damaging for people.

CL: Yeah, absolutely. I have poked around some of those earlier websites of pro-ana, pro-mia, and yeah, I think that's an interesting connection that you're making between these. There is this sense of support, people encouraging each other, but to what end? In the case of the pro-ana websites, it's just focused on starvation. It's unhealthy, it's self destructive. In terms of the evolution of all that, so you see these days, maybe leaving the looksmaxxing and men to the side for a moment. But also for some of these influencers or communities these days, you see similar things come up again: try minimize your food intake. Feeling faint is no big deal, just push through it. So it's frustrating. I feel frustrated to see so much of what I went through as a young adult be recycled again. Now I'm seeing this at my age, I just turned 40. So seeing the repetition can be frustrating.

AT: And I do want to come back to the "just push through," because I feel like that connects to the correlation of your weight to your morality that I did want to get into. But I do just want to point out as well that, with both of these types of communities, they're not real community. And I would assert, just putting this out there, that they are not real community because they don't care about you as a person, they care about pushing their ideology on you. And one of the really concerning things when we're talking about weight is that the idea of what constitutes "fat" or "skinny" is completely subjective. So you and I aren't defining what either of those things mean because it's going to differ by person. And so we're talking broadly about these constructs of what society considers "fat" and "thin." And because that's subjective, this obsession with it is particularly concerning because it can be impossible for someone to actually achieve that idea of perfection. I think you see this with disordered eating. I think you see this with looksmaxxing. There is this idea of an ideal that you will never actually achieve. And so you're just going to keep doing more and more extreme things because you internalize that you are never going to be good enough. And that also equates to never skinny enough.

CL: I completely agree. When you're talking about, there's a shifting target problem. I've seen this when I've looked at these pro-ana or the thinspo blogs to a certain extent where people put their like weight, goal weight, ultimate goal weight, where there's a kind of shifting target. They want to be this skinny, but once they get to that point, they're still not skinny enough. And that speaks to, yeah, there is no cutoff at which you would be like skinny, end of story, maintain that weight. It's always shifting because it, it is, as you said, subjective. So these communities comparing yourself to others, that's also another big factor there then can drive you to want to be even skinnier. So it's the downward slide, slide to bottom of how skinny you can be. Another thing that what you're saying brought to mind is also the role of the fashion industry in these norms, like the slenderness norm, like how there's a moving target to certain extents. If you live up to whatever norm there is, whether it's your body size or what you're wearing or your face or your hair, if you actually achieve the norm, then they're not going to continue making a profit because you'll have reached what they were trying to sell. So they always have to change the target again so that you can buy more products, diet services, cosmetic surgeries, clothes and the like, to then meet a new target, a new fashion standard, new beauty standard.

AT: And I think we're coming back to the question of morality, because when we factor class into this, because it's not just being skinny, it's not just starving yourself, because anybody can starve themselves. They should not, please don't. But being skinny "the right way," like in fashion, I feel like there's a lot of connotations of class and privilege there as well.

CL: Yeah, I completely agree with you. One of the sources in my book that I've looked into and drawn on is Sabrina String's research on race and fatphobia. And there she appeals to this idea that people want to distinguish themselves from others by cultivating certain body types, aesthetics, preferences, and so on. And

one of these things is cultivating a thin physique. And so that has a racial aspect to it, equating whiteness with thinness and other bodies with gross appetites, excess, and so on. It also has a socioeconomic class aspect to it. So there's that line, "one can never be too thin." That's drawn straight from a kind of aristocratic setting. So I think it's important, yeah, to factor in race, class, and gender when we're talking about the skinny construct.

AT: So coming back to the morality, that really stems, as I understand it, from the myth that fat people are fat because they lack self-control, are lazy, etc. And the U.S. has a strong fixation on morality in terms of, "if you would just do what you were supposed to do, then your life would be perfect." And this idea that you have much more control over your life than a lot of people actually have. And again, when we're coming back to that question of justifying fatphobia, so earlier we mentioned justifying fatphobia by saying, "I'm just concerned about your health." Another way it's justified is by blaming the person for their fatness and framing thinness as something that anybody can reasonably achieve, when objectively, that is not true. We know that medically that is not true.

CL: Yeah, absolutely. There's so many things to unpack there, but one of them being, we're just talking about class, but the relationship between access to food, access to clean spaces, movement, all of that, how that has a class aspect to it. People are saying, "if you only exerted so much self-control" are the ones who have access to gyms, trainers, the leisure time to devote themselves to dieting, or even weight loss. We've been talking about the weight loss medications, having the means to get those for cosmetic purposes. So yeah, there is that aspect to it. This idea that as you were saying, self-control is what is the deciding factor when it comes to your body weight, that's just bogus. And we have to think way more broadly about how people live and how that reflects in their body size and kind of leave to the side all the moralizing language about body fat.

AT: And just a note on drugs like Ozempic, which I believe are called GLP-1s. (CL: That's correct. Yeah.) My understanding – I'm not a doctor, fact check me, please, if you're listening to this. But my understanding is that when you stop getting the injections, because you do have to be able to afford these regular injections, my understanding is that once you stop getting the injections, people tend to revert to whatever weight they were before they started taking it. So it's not just one and done, it is something that you have to be able to maintain. And going back to that story I mentioned earlier about the doctor not bothering to investigate why I had high cholesterol, I later found out once I was diagnosed with PCOS/PMOS, that having this condition also makes it harder to lose weight. That is actually one of the impacts that that can have on your body. So the catch-22 of telling me to lose weight, while not bothering to investigate to even inform me that I had a condition, that would make it harder for me to lose weight. It's just, like you were saying, completely bogus to assume that everyone's weight is within their control for whatever reason, for class reasons, for their own medical reasons, for whatever reasons they may have.

CL: Yeah, genetics and the like. Your height is more or less going to be fixed by your genetics and body size, body fat levels are also, have a genetic determinant.

AT: Well, and disability, like telling someone to exercise more when they may have chronic fatigue, chronic pain, any number of conditions that make it harder to just get through your day, much less doing additional physical activity on top of that.

CL: Yeah, we've been talking about class and race and gender, but ableism is also an issue there when we're trying to shame people for their body size.

AT: I feel like we're touching on the fact that when it comes to society's obsession with people's weight, it's not just about self-control and the myth of self-control when it comes to your weight, but the fact that so many

societies focus on controlling particularly women's bodies, but I would say people's bodies in general, more so women's bodies, if we're being honest. So it's not just that you should be able to control yourself, but that society should be able to dictate that control: what your body does and looks like, and what you should be doing with it.

CL: Yeah, the idea of control is really interesting, because I've been thinking about the trad wife phenomenon recently, and also how diet culture intersects with that phenomenon. And, back up a little, some of the feminist analyses that I've been drawing on in my book show that there's a kind of replacement for religion as society became more secular with women trying to control their bodies and their appetites as a replacement for traditional religious faith. But these days with trad wives and religiosity going together, I think this skinny ideal is also getting melded with that, such that devotion to God also takes the shape of devotion to a certain body type, and that body type being a slender body type. So control your body, control your food take, all of this has religious connotations. Dieting in the name of God. And one thing that's interesting circling back to the GLP-1 discourse is that some of the trad wife influencers who are pushing skinniness also think that the use of these medications is cheating. So if you're going to lose weight, you really have to do it the right way and the right way being dieting, the honest way being dieting. So there's also a pushback, a weird interaction there between the different ways people are losing weight these days, seeking to lose weight.

AT: And I was actually recently watching a video essay by Rowan Ellis. It's called A Deep Dive into the Far Right's Secret Culinary Culture War that I definitely recommend if anybody wants to go check it out. But she gets into this question of women in particular, their weight and controlling their body as this Christianity-connected moral issue. But at the same time talking about like men being obsessed with like red meat and eggs and "veganism is an attack on my masculinity." So she's really looking at it from all those angles. But trad wives themselves are an illusion, right? Like they're making these meals and things for their families, but then they're also maintaining their model-thin weights themselves. And the inherent nature of trad wife influencers is that they are presenting a version of themselves that is inherently fake. Like they are presumably making all of these things, doing all these things on camera, but they almost certainly have all of this help. Like, I'm sorry, who's watching your kids while you're filming these videos? And this idea that, "oh, I'm just a housewife and my husband takes care of everything." I'm like, "how much money are you making off of this video that's getting millions of hits? You are certainly bringing in money, even if you're not the primary breadwinner because you married the son of a billionaire."

CL: I've thought a lot about that too, the monetary side of the whole trad wife influencer sphere. So yeah, they are making money, maybe not all, but a sizable number of them through selling a lifestyle where you don't want to make money yourself for some reason. So yeah, it's complicated.

AT: But I think we're coming back to illusions of perfection and the fact that, as discussed earlier, the ideal is never possible to achieve because it's going to be a shifting goal goal. And it's a target you can never actually reach. But I feel like there is a correlation here between the trad wife illusion and the illusion that you can ever reach perfect skinniness.

CL: Yeah, I like the idea of an illusion for the norm of skinniness. Like we were talking a few minutes back about the slide, like where does being skinny enough stop? And it seems that there is no stopping point. And so yeah, there is no real construct out there, no objective anything that would dictate what counts as skinny, what counts as not, and you could just satisfy a checkmark and be done with it. So yeah, I like the idea of the language of illusion to capture what's going on there.

AT: And I feel like both trad wives and skinnytok, if you will, the broader skinny obsession, are both stemming

from the idea that someone's supposed attractiveness dictates someone's worth or value. And that's something that we internalize even from childhood. And I think this affects both boys and girls, but in different ways. And so the idea that for guys, "oh, you've got to be successful and rich, and that's how you're going to get particularly women to like you," because there's a whole other path we could go down with the fact that men aren't allowed to express intimacy with each other in a friendship way. And so women become the only outlets for these men to get a freaking hug. And that's why we have a lot of issues with men not having friends and then turning to the manosphere. That's a whole other conversation that I don't want to go down that rabbit hole. I just feel like I need to point it out. But while men might be, "okay, you have to be successful and therefore wealthy" because those two things are inherently correlated. (Not.) And that's how you're going to attract people to you, to like you, and to want to be around you and be with you. And for women, a lot of that is centered on your physical appearance. You have to be pretty, you have to be thin. And the amount of girls who have diet culture forced on them from a young age is deeply depressing. Because they're told that that is their worth. It's not, "you're smart, you're funny, you get good grades. You have other skills." It's, "oh, well, she ate too much at dinner tonight."

CL: Yeah, part of the book itself is drawn from personal experience. So as a young teenager going into adulthood, I also got that kind of perception of myself or comments about eating or my body type. People around me had other things to say about my grades or music or all the other things that were going on in my life. But I was very slender naturally growing up. And I was also very tall and still pretty tall. And so that combination meant that lots of people were saying, "oh, you should model, you should model." And that was the first thing that I'd hear oftentimes when I would make an acquaintance. So there's the private life: friends, family, teachers who had a fuller view of who I was. But yeah, there was the other side of things where just looking at you prompts all sorts of comments. And that really got to me and shaped the way I related to myself and to my body because I felt, like I didn't go into modeling. I tried a few times, but I still had this pressure on myself to look like a model. I'm in academia. Why do I have to look like that? There's no physique requirement for the job.

AT: I'm curious because there's that line about like French women don't get fat. I think it was the title of a bestselling book. And because I believe you spent some of your teen years in France. But my impression of France from a culinary standpoint is that there is much more of an appreciation for food. And so I would imagine there is a lot less of that food shaming. But I'm just curious, what was your experience of that, just coming from a society that isn't founded in puritanical stupidity that we've been kind of touching on the impacts of? Yeah. What was it like living in France compared to the US as a teenager?

CL: Yeah, that's a great question. I really did not see the kind of messed-upness or conflict about food that I really came to appreciate when I came back to the United States for college. In my high school, there wasn't really discussion of disordered eating or dieting. But when I got back to the States, you were just thrown right in there with roommates who were struggling with those issues and so on. So I think just reflecting on my teenage years in France, I had a better modeling of a healthy relationship to food. So even though I was getting comments about my body in the States or in France, the actual way people ate and approached cooking and eating was saner, that's for sure, compared to US college.

AT: And so I feel like we've touched on this a bit in different ways with class, with race, with morality. But I think this obsession with thinness is inherently hierarchical and exclusionary. Like it creates a way for one group to feel superior to another. And I think that's part of why people who are vulnerable, again, whether we're talking about young women and disordered eating or young men and looksmaxxing, I feel like it makes it a lot easier when you have created this exclusionary hierarchy to prey on vulnerable, particularly young people, to say, "here is a way for you to move up that hierarchy, to be included," and to find that pseudo community that you

are probably desperate for.

CL: Yeah, that's for sure true when we talk about looksmaxxing these days. But also we were talking a few minutes back about the online communities around weight loss, dieting, or even disordered eating with thinspo and pro-ana websites, pro-mia websites that, yeah, there is a hierarchy of bodies. And you see that. I like the way you put, preying on young people's vulnerabilities to get them to, they want to shore themselves up, find a place, find a community, be praised for something. And that's something, unfortunately, can become how little they eat.

AT: But that comes back to the fact that this is a facade of community. Because that vulnerable person might have milestones where they do feel better about themselves in the short-term. Because I think, particularly with disordered eating, from what I recall, a lot of the reasoning around it was that idea of self-control, was that idea of, "I control my body. I can't control anything else in my life, but I can control how much food I put into my body." And there is a sense of satisfaction in that, but it's not reaching the deeper issues that that person is experiencing. And again, I'm not an expert on this, but I believe there is a lot of correlation there with self-harming behaviors like cutting, where when you feel like you are not in control of anything else, this is one thing that you can control. And it creates that short-lived satisfaction. But because you're not dealing with the root issue, it's never actually going to be enough. Just like you're never actually going to be skinny enough.

CL: Yeah, that's true. I was thinking as you were speaking also of the fact that, just to focus on anorexia for a moment, how it's not just self-control, but self-control interacting with certain personality traits like perfectionism or external things like a move, bullying, parents divorcing, a comment from a significant other, how those can all kind of form their own kind of toxic mix, such that people choose to starve themselves as a way of getting a control over everything that's going on in their environment. And as we were saying, it's an illusion. Controlling your food intake, starving yourself is never going to get that control that you were craving in the first place.

AT: You also look at how self-objectification is instilled in young girls and diverted towards activities that enforce objectification. So that is a couple big words. If you would like to dumb that down for me, please, as someone without a PhD. (laughs)

CL: Yeah, absolutely. So what's going on with the skinniness is that part of it is self-objectification. And what I mean by this is a fixation, a focus on your self as an object. And to put that in more colloquial terms of focus on your appearance. So people in feminist philosophy use the term self-objectification because they're playing on this philosophical distinction between your body as a subject and your body as an object. And when you're saying that your body is a subject, it means that you're like relating to yourself from a first-person perspective. The ball is flying at me. I'm going to grab it. And I'm using my hand to do that. And I'm not focusing on what my hand looks like. Actually, if there's any object I'm focused on, it's the ball that's about to hit my face. So often when we're relating to our bodies as subjects, we have a kind of transparent relationship to our bodies where we're not focused on them from the outside. When we're focused in contrast on our bodies as objects, we're homing in, lasering in on the appearance of the body itself. "Is it too fat, too skinny, too this, too that? Do my hips stick out? Are my breasts large enough? Or do they look too flat?" All the things that we've absorbed as ways of measuring our bodies up to standards. So when I talk about self-objectification in the book, I don't have anything mysterious in mind, just the focus of on yourself, on your appearance.

AT: It sounds like dissociating, like you are disconnecting from my body is the thing that I inhabit that does all the things that I want to do, hopefully. And looking at it externally, like an out of body experience almost.

CL: Yeah, that's a really good way of putting it. When I was myself involved in thigh gap, thinspo stuff, just a

mirror image, focusing on what you look like in the mirror, that's pure self-objectification. Like are your thighs touching or are they not touching? That's not how it feels from the inside. That's something you can just check visually. So I think that the skinny norm and self-objectification are all interacting to reinforce the ideal. Like without self-objectification, you're not going to have this constant pressure to look skinny, to be a certain dress size and the like.

AT: I think another aspect of objectification and looking at your body as a thing is the piecing of it, by which I mean, we're talking about a thigh gap. And I think you mentioned, hopefully this wasn't on Pinterest, but like these people who just have photo walls basically of thigh gaps. You are minimizing a person to just that one aspect of their body, right? You don't care about their entire body, them as a whole person. You care about just that one element. Or maybe it's like, "oh, your collarbones stick out so much," which I'm still confused why that's supposed to be a good thing. Just aesthetically, completely apart from weight, like that just aesthetically looks very concerning to me. I have a visceral reaction to the jutting collarbones or jutting hip bones, for example. That doesn't look aesthetic to me. But all of these markers that we're talking about other than say, percent body fat is still not even necessarily a holistic look at you as a person, obviously, but at least it's looking at your whole body. But a lot of these things are minimizing you as a person to these elements, to these physical elements of what your body should be, like you're some sort of Franken creature.

CL: Yeah, I agree. I think there's maybe two levels at which you're reducing yourself to your appearance. Like you're reducing yourself to your body. And then within these frameworks, you're reducing your body to a particular thing like the thigh gap or the bikini bridge, or you were talking about collarbones just a moment ago. Do you have collarbones or yacht shoulders? That was a thing briefly. (AT: What the hell is a yacht shoulder?!) A yacht shoulder, yeah. If you look it up, it's like a bony shoulder protruding, like the collarbones are protruding, as you were saying, when you're describing that aesthetic here, it's about the shoulders, a kind of thin physique where there'd be an X, the bones of the shoulder are accentuated.

AT: So you want to look skeletal. Like we want all these hip bones and shoulder bones and collarbones. Are we just supposed to be skeletons?! Is that the ideal body?!

CL: That seems to be over and over again, the ideal body. There's been resistance like with body positivity in the 2010s, the teens, trying to encourage people to have greater body acceptance and not reduce themselves to the smallest physical portion of themselves possible. But now I feel like body positivity has faced struggles for a whole bunch of reasons. One of them being the weight loss medications we've been talking about. We've referred to a few times that there is also worries that body positivity was to focus on beauty or that it was toxic positivity. You should just love your body full stop. And that would be the solution to all your body image issues. And people felt that was just like too simplistic. There's just so many things to say about the promise and the pitfalls of body positivity. But it seems at least there was a moment that I noticed some of the pressure – some, not all – some of the pressure may be losing its strength.

AT: I don't think I ever really clicked with body positivity. I like body neutrality, which is more just acceptance. Like this is my body. It is what it is. And I'm not going to obsess about it, because that's kind of my default. And I don't know how much of the fact that I've never really struggled with weight body image is because, like you, I was a tall skinny kid and it was only when puberty hit that I got more padded, shall we say. (laughs) And I was very lucky to have parents that didn't put any of that nonsense on me that I recall. And I just think so much of it comes down to that body acceptance, not just internally, because the reason that I have it internally is because my parents and the other people around me gave it to me externally. They just accepted that, this is how you look and we're not going to be weird about it.

CL: Yeah. Yeah. I think that the way the skinny ideal steals agency is that you're focused on your appearance at the expense of other things that you could be enjoying or doing in your life. I felt that split in my own life between wanting to be super skinny, focusing on that and all the other things that I could have been doing with my time, focusing on my academics, on relationships, on just enjoying life, going out on a walk without thinking about how fast or how much, how many calories I'd lose doing that. So there's a sense, yeah, that the skinny ideal steals joy from us. It affects our identities. Like, how do we relate to people? How do we relate to ourselves when we're just focused on a number on the scale or a dress size? Who do we become when that's the only reference point for our sense of self?

AT: I think we're coming back to that question of reducing. So you were saying like the multiple levels of reducing yourself to an object, reducing that object to its component parts, but you're also physically reducing your physical presence. And all of those things make it harder for you to do the things. If you see yourself as an object rather than a subject that does things, then you're, I assume, less motivated to go do the things in addition to being constantly distracted by how many calories are in the thing that I'm eating, rather than focusing on enjoying a meal with your friends, for example. You're not as engaged with the rest of your life if you're so focused on that objectification.

CL: Yeah, that's a great way of putting it. We were talking about reducing yourself to your body, your body to certain component parts, but there's a reduction, maybe you could say like more metaphorical of yourself to something small, something like the weight or the dress size. And I see that, yeah, against the backdrop of all the things that you could be enjoying, as you're saying, like the meal or the setting of your walk or all the other things that factor into a full life. So yeah, there's reduction at so many levels. And that's what makes it, I think, coming back from that, resisting it all the more powerful. You're not just changing what your body may look like when you stop dieting. You're also changing more generally what your life looks like, how you connect to other people, how you connect to just the physical world around you.

AT: And so the description of your book mentions drawing on the work of thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Audre Lorde, Roxanne Gay. Are there any specifics that you'd like to mention of how this person particularly influenced what you were doing?

CL: Yeah, I'd love to say a little bit more about Beauvoir and about Audre Lorde. Those are the two thinkers that I've been most obsessed with in recent years, and have influenced me the most in thinking about these issues. So Beauvoir is maybe my main source for the idea of self-objectification. She's drawing on the philosophical tradition that we were just going over of thinking your body as both a subject and an object. And she says that starting in childhood and then ramping up at puberty, girls learn to objectify themselves. So Beauvoir does mention body size and dieting and disordered eating briefly in *The Second Sex*. But one of the main things is just the self-objectification component. With Audre Lorde, I've really been inspired by her ideas about self care. And so I use them more in the second part of the book where I discuss resisting the pressure to be skinny, how important learning to eat intuitively, enjoy movement intuitively, how those are aspects of self care that can be really healing.

AT: I'd like to dig more into how individuals can push back against this pressure. Because from what you've said, it sounds like it's largely about reconnecting with your body. So if that self-objectification is disconnecting from your body as the thing that you inhabit that does the things that you want to do. I mean, it sounds like enjoying things is kind of key to that reconnection and rediscovering that joy that all of that obsession with skinniness took away from you in the first place.

CL: Yeah, joy, joyfulness, enjoying, I think those are the key terms. As far as self care goes, yeah, I think

enjoyment is part of it. But there's also the community aspects of it that I don't want to leave to the side, because it's just this worry, like, okay, you're going to push a narrative, like reconnect with your body and that's the end of the story. But it's just so hard to do given the pressures that we face, like once we step out of our apartment or house or what have you, you're still going to see the physical environment, the ads and so on, or just the moment you turn on your phone and have a look, scroll through Instagram or TikTok. So yeah, it's nice to push a line about reconnecting with one's own body. But I think it's important to have in mind the backdrop of connecting with communities, communities that would support you on your journey as well.

AT: So it sounds like part of that is getting away from the false community that cares more about its ideology and does not care about you as a person, and connecting or reconnecting with community that cares about you as a person.

CL: Yeah, I think that's a great way of putting it. One of my experiences that I describe in the book was learning to cook. So I resisted learning to cook until my mid-30s. And it was only when I was in counseling for my restrictive eating that I was like, okay, I have to learn to cook. And I did that with my mother. So it was a very special bonding experience. It was during COVID that all of this was going on. And so we decided to do virtual cooking lessons. She would call me on WhatsApp video, I'd prop my phone, and we would cook the same meal together. She's in New York, I'm in Florida. And I guess I could have learned to cook on my own, I could have done all this on my own. But having that nurturing connection was important to me. And also reminded me of way back when I was a young kid, how I used to cook with my French grandmother, who passed away when I was nine, but I also had that cooking connection back then. So retrieving that part of myself that enjoyed eating and that enjoyed cooking was really, really important.

AT: So ideally, in a perfect world, people who are doing this individually will contribute to a larger trend, right? Where it's not just, okay, one person got out of the cult – hopefully, they can inspire others to get out of the cult, or if enough of us get out of the cult, the cult will be weakened. So is, I guess, one person at a time one approach to changing the world?

CL: Yeah, I like that idea. I think one person at a time is a good way of capturing part of the book's message. Another part of it is just remaking our physical and digital environment. So blocking those keywords or those words that will drive the algorithms either on Instagram or TikTok to show you those harmful images. In terms of the physical environment, I know we talk a lot about digital environments, but the physical environments, what do we see around us? Do we want mirrors? Do we want scales? For some people, those tools are incredibly helpful. Let's say you're a dancer, you're trying to perfect some sort of choreography or move or what have you. Of course, you should have a mirror or you may need a mirror to do that. But there's also the mirror effect when you're looking for your thigh gap or looking at it. So for me, getting rid of mirrors was an important part of my time recovering. So there's remaking the physical world, remaking our digital worlds and connecting with other people. So overall, my message is one person at a time and let's remake the world so that others can also take that journey.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.