

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Professor Sabrina Strings

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious and hopefully makes you curious, too. On today's episode, I'm joined by Professor Sabrina Strings, where I ask her: How fucked up is the history of fatphobia?

Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. We have such an incredible guest today. Welcome to the show Dr. Sabrina Strings, who is an associate professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine. Her book *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, was published by NYU Press—yes, NYU Press—in 2019. Welcome to Getting Curious should I say Professor Strings, or do you want me to call you Sabrina?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:00:49] Please call me Sabrina. And thank you so much for having me. I'm thrilled to be here.

JVN [00:00:54] Okay, so let me just give you, like, a little teeny bit of context. On Getting Curious on Netflix, which was, like, a TV version of this podcast, we did an episode on snacks. I wanted to remove shame from the conversation of, like, disordered eating, binge eating, both of things that I suffer from and have for a long time. And I wanted to be able to kind of remove shame and, like, talk about it more freely. But there was a lot of feedback around fatphobia and around diet culture. So what I want us to start off with as we're diving in is, true or false: fatphobia is about health. Subquestion: why do you think so many people get this answer wrong?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:01:42] Fatphobia is absolutely not about health. Because what people like to say frequently is that there's some type of association between weight and health outcomes. And so let's just take a corollary for a second. There's also an association between race and health outcomes, but we wouldn't say, "Oh, you know what, we feel good being Negrophobic because Black people have poor health outcomes." Right. So already we can understand that phobia about a group of people that we believe are unhealthy is already problematic. But then there's the question of whether or not being so-called "overweight" or "obese," which I always use in quotes, because these apply to a particular orientation to science that I find to be nonscientific. But anyways, so is it the case that being so-called overweight or obese is somehow proof of being sick? And the answer to that is no.

We get this from a series of maneuvers, largely that happened in the United States in the middle of the 20th century. What was happening is that there were a few prominent doctors, all of whom were white, who were, like, "We need to create a measure of the relationship between weight and health that is not coming from insurance companies," who had been the ones originating these, "But is our own tool. And we're going to do something called Body

Mass Index, that's arbitrary. But we control it, don't we?" That's effectively how we've gotten here. It's so disturbing to go back into the research and recognize just how little data exists about any true relationship between weight and health. And so that's why so much of my work is an interrogation of how we got here and an attempt to undermine these false associations.

JVN [00:03:27] Which kind of reminds me of, like, we did this amazing episode of getting through the podcast with this, like, biological anthropologist who studies hair and, like, the evolution of hair. But in hair school, we learned that like, the shape of your follicle is, like, what determines the texture of your hair. And it turns out it's a full lie. And that has a lot of implications that, you know, people can go back and listen to in that episode if you haven't listened to it. But it's very interesting. So if fatphobia isn't about health, what is it about?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:03:56] So when talking about the question of health, there is a very clear origin in the United States because the US was the country par excellence trying to say, "We need to figure out what is the relationship between fat and health or illness." But when talking about fatphobia in general that has existed in our society for quite some time, we have to go back to the era of slavery, which is where fatphobia really took off. What was happening in the early decades of the slave trading enterprise was that there were a lot of Europeans who were encountering Africans for the first time, and many of them were excited. They were like, "Oh, look at this!" People don't appreciate that the very first racial scientific treatise was more or less a white Frenchman who was describing the figures of women in various parts of the world. So questions about feminine attractiveness have always been central to racialization. And so to the extent that in the early racist science, they argued that, "Well, some Black women, you know, those ones in Senegal, they have some of the best figures in the world."

What took place in the later centuries within the slave trade was a reconfiguration of these values. So instead of people encountering Africans and saying, "Oh, look how attractive their figures are," people encountered Africans and said, "Their figures are proof of the difference between Europeans and Africans. And we already know that Europeans are the elite group of people in the world and Africans are the inferior group. So we need to reconfigure our relationship to weight and our relationship to beauty." So rather than thinking that weight, like, being fat, is an index of beauty, which was a value in the, let's say 15th century, by the 18th century, there was this new idea that, "Oh, no, fatness is related to Blackness and Blackness is inferior, and therefore and thinness should be related to whiteness. And thinness should be our white aesthetic."

JVN [00:06:01] Mm. Fuck. So what's the difference between, like, you know, 1500s and 1600s, like, at the inception of, like, the trans Atlantic slave trade and then, like, 1800s. And before we dive in, can you brief listeners on how art can help us understand this history?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:06:21] Yeah, I really like that question because when we are talking about our contemporary aesthetics, we often look to the media, we look to magazines, we

look at models on runways, we look at television shows, films. These are the ways in which we can understand our shared aesthetic values. And art played the same role throughout much of Western history. There were a number of different artists who weren't just painting women they thought were beautiful, but painting what they thought were representations of "Beauty," with a capital B, that being the kind of beauty that we are all supposed to line up behind. So that when we're looking at, for example, the 15th, 16th, and even some parts of the 17th centuries, and again, these are the early, you know, relatively early periods of the slave trade. There were voluptuous women, there were fat women, there were undulating folds. These were the things that were prized. But in the late 17th century, which was the dawn of race science, then we're starting to get a very different depiction from European artists. By the middle of the 18th century, you can see the stark contrast from what was happening in the Renaissance, by that period, by the Enlightenment period, the women who were drawn were drawn to be very demure, very quiet seeming, very refined and also very thin. And so we get that this is taking place, this is largely being archived, through the space of Western art.

JVN [00:07:46] Ohmigod Sabrina, ohmigod. You're, like, lighting my world up right now because it's, like, it's so true. Like, you think of those images, like those Botticelli images of, like, you know, exposed breasts, like, beautiful, like, full bodies. Like, there's no shame. It's just, like, you know, it's, like, we're just really, like, and everyone's naked. Like, everyone's just, like, you know, you know, naked and stuff. And then obviously, like, you know, small penises were, like, you know, seem to be like the cat's meow back then, we learned. It's, like, you know, they're all about a small penis and, like, Greek and Roman times. But then as they get a little bit further down, it's like it's so true. Like, all of a sudden, women are, like, extremely clothed. They do get much smaller, like by, you know, like, just teenier. That's so-, interest. Yes. Yes. Okay. What other documents in archives did you get to use in, in your research?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:08:37] Oh gosh. I was calling on pretty much anything that I could. So I was using newspapers and magazines from the United States. I was using scientific treatises. I was using anything that I thought would be useful to the exploration of, "How was it that women were supposed to look?" "How is it that Black people were supposed to look?" You know, "And how is it that, you know, these were supposed to be seen in opposition?" That is, the women they were talking about usually were white women. And when they were talking about Black women, there was the sense that, "Oh, this is wrong." And so this is how we get this idea that white femininity and Black femininity are supposed to be so visually distinct because there was this array of archival materials that were trying to suggest that there is something inherently different about white women and Black women. But not just that they're inherently different, but that we also must police these boundaries. White women must never find themselves trying to look Black, right? Because that would be deemed a loss of status. But Black women, too, are never supposed to be seen as trying to, quote unquote "look white," because then they're trying to aspire to something that is above their station.

JVN [00:09:49] Hmm. I-, I had an intrusive thought. I'm going to be honest, I did have an intrusive thought. Obviously it's, like, a hard right. Like, I couldn't help but think of Rachel Dolezal.

SABRINA STRINGS [00:10:06] Oh, no! Gosh!

JVN [00:10:07] Who did the most! I get it. She did the most. She did the most. Did you see that documentary?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:10:14] I didn't because I was all full up with Rachel Dolezal. In a way, there's almost a fine line between a Rachel Dolezal and a Khloé Kardashian. You know, it's just, like, I don't know how many times the Kardashians have been called out for Blackfishing. And so they would not come out and say, "We are Black," but they just happened to choose these aesthetics that are normally associated with Blackness. And so there is this way in which Rachel Dolezal's real crime was to say, "I'm Black." We wonder what would have happened to her if she simply didn't say that, if she just, "Okay, I'm going to get myself a deep tan, put this perm on, and let me get my ghetto earrings." Like, you know, "I'm going to do all that, but just not say the word Black."

JVN [00:11:00] I'm so glad I went with that intrusive thought, I just, like, let myself. I was, like, "If I put my foot in my mouth, like, that, it is what it is. It's not the first time," but, that's so true. That is so fucking true. And also, I think the reason that I thought of her was just that, like, this idea of, like, policing the boundaries of, like, whiteness. And, like, just like we learned about transphobia, so often, it's, like, our fights against transphobia now, like, we've been having them for hundreds of years, but we're made to think that they just started right now. But it's, like, this whole idea of like, you know, a Khloé Kardashian or a Rachel Dolezal, like, that's also not new. Oh, this is such a good question to come back from that with. Hello. What does it take to center Black women in your work when so much of the historical documentation is written by white men?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:11:45] Oh gosh, that is such a fruitful question, because when I started to decide, "Okay, I'm going to investigate how Black people felt about this," I was, like, "Oh, there's no archives that I can turn to for that?" There's, you know, of course there isn't. And there was this entire politics of trying to keep Black people illiterate. So Black people did not have access to the means of publication. So what I could find was largely things that were either written by white men about Black people or written by white women about Black women specifically. That was another important finding, because so much of what had been talked about in the 80s and 90s about the "slender ideal" was white women responding to the demand that they be slender and that it was a gendered issue and women's oppression. And I'm not going to suggest that those things are true, but given their racial privilege, they were ignoring this huge history of the way in which their very ancestors were also using the thin ideal to prove their superiority to Black women. And so there is this way in which a lot of what I'm able to describe are the racist forces imputing on the Black body without really being able

to describe how Black people responded to this. And so the last thing I'll say is that because so much of this conversation was taking place in elite white spaces, I also found that there are a number of white folks who were not talking about it in the South. So take a minute to think about that. That is to say that a lot of the racist productivity as it surrounded the policing of body size was taking place in so-called "liberal" spaces.

JVN [00:13:21] Mmm, yes, that's another thing that I think for me is, like, I'm from, like, a rural city in Illinois. But, like, growing up in the late eighties, I was born in '87, graduated high school in 2004. But as a much younger kid, I remember, like, when I started to learn about, like, slavery and segregation, thinking, like, "Oh, well, this is Illinois. So, like, we were actually fighting for the North. Like, we didn't do that up here. It's, like, you fucking, like, busted hags down there, you know, being all racist, that must have been, y'all were fucked up. But we up, we didn't," you know. But then I, you know, I get a little older and I realize, like, "Oh, segregation was in, like, the Continental 48. Didn't matter where you were." And, like, people were investing in slavery in the North and in Europe. Like, we're holding up these systems, like, from all over the place. And so, like, the indictments, like, I'm just not surprised to hear that. And it's fascinating that the mental mechanics and the mental gymnastics was taking place in "liberal" cities. But then, like, the actual, like, carnage and violence and—, but also that carnage and violence and death was happening in the North, too, because they were, like, you know, capturing people and, like, you know, being all fucked up. So it's, like, it's just, I hate it, I hate it here. And, you know, whatever, it's, whatever.

SABRINA STRINGS [00:14:32] It's problematic, but I love the way you put that, it's true. There are different types of violence that were taking place in the south. In the North, we hear all the time about the violence of slavery, what was going on, the plantations. But we don't hear enough about the violence that was going on against Black bodies in the North. And there is a study that just came out today in The Washington Post that there were something, like, 70 Harvard officials who owned slaves. You know, it's, like, "Hmm, you know, what does it mean that some of our revered institutions were also implicated in some of our more shameful institutions?"

JVN [00:15:07] And then there, like, continues to be no accountability for that. So when, when you were talking about the white women that wrote about Black women, was that, like, just, like, O.G. Karens, just, like, O.G., like, Lauren Boebert, like Marjorie Taylor Greene stuff?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:15:24] It was a difficult thing because, you know, a lot of what survives are the speech of elite folks. So, you know, definitely there were those white women who resisted the slender ideal. Some of them were also abolitionists. And so there, there are certainly those white women who are, like, "Wait, this is wrong and we need to counter this." But I don't think so many of them during the early 19th century, which is largely when these magazines were popular, were resisting it on racial grounds, they would have resisted on the grounds of humanism, but they would not have said, "Hey, racial hierarchies are wrong." That's what's so, I suppose, insidious about these forms of quote unquote "science," race

science and obesity science. They're trafficking in this very same problem, which is that people can recognize that something is wrong here, but they don't often get to the root of the problem. And racialization is at the root.

JVN [00:16:17] Mm hmm. Okay. So, yes. You mentioned earlier about, like, the Enlightenment era. So, like, what timeframe does that put us in again, like the Enlightenment era?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:16:27] So we're looking at the long 18th century.

JVN [00:16:29] Do you guys remember that episode when we learned about what the long century means? When we learned about because we learned about what the long-, we learned about the for the Georgian English one because we were, like, "What's the long one" Ah, I love history. Okay. Yes. Obsessed. So. Okay, so when we talk about, like, the Enlightenment era, it's like the long 18th century. So it's, like, right before the 1700s start until like...

SABRINA STRINGS [00:16:51] Like, the 1680s to the early 1800s.

JVN [00:16:53] So in that era, as we as we, you know, arrive to the Enlightenment era and the ideas around fatness are changing. How is fatness seen and understood, like, between men and women?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:17:06] Yeah, that's a crucial distinction because in fact, it was men's bodies who were regulated first, which is to say that it wasn't the case that so many men were being shamed on the streets the way fat people would be shamed on the streets today. But it was the case that men who found themselves to be intellectuals, who found themselves to be leaders of society, especially those individuals who were working at universities, thought it to be very important that they maintain a slender physique. For them, slenderness was proof that they were, quote unquote "hard students," that they cared so much about learning about the world and about making an impact in the world that they, that they decided to let go of all of these "low" pleasures, like, eating and drinking and fornication and all those things that they really actually probably really cared a lot about. But they claimed that they didn't want anything to do with this. So what took place first, and this was largely in the 16th and 17th centuries in which there were a number of men who were, like, "We think that the intellectuals, the clever, the cunning folks, these are the slender men." And it wasn't until the rise of race science, which suggested, "In addition, fat people tend to be Black," that they said, "Oh, well, in addition to not wanting fatness for ourselves for intellectual reasons, we don't want fatness for our women for aesthetic reasons." Right. So there was this interesting way in which men's bodies' were regulated first in this space.

JVN [00:18:34] And then also it's just, like, obviously, like, I just I can't help but think about it too, because it's, like, at this time in, of, like, eugenics and, like, the influx of eugenics and, like, Darwinism and all of this. It's like that's also when, like, the distinction between, like, men

and women starts to happen just, period, too. So was there a difference between, like, how, like, fat white women or, like, fat Black women—, and even just this is an interesting thing for me. I once got in trouble about this on *Queer Eye* because one of the heroes referred to himself as fat. And I was like, “You're not fat, you're gorgeous.” And then these people on Twitter were, like, “Girl like you. What, so you can't be, like, gorgeous and fat?” And I was, like, “Oh!” Like, I had to interrogate, like, my own subconscious fatphobia that, like, I've been living with but didn't even know that it was there. And so it's, like, when I asked this question about, like, “Was there a difference being, like, how fat white women and fat Black women were treated?” Even just saying that I feel like I need to be, like, “Oh, wait, I shouldn't say that.” Like, that's, like, but it's, like, fat's fierce. But I just think it's interesting that even after everything I know, I mean, I've like literally just wrote a book where there is an essay about, like, body neutrality and body positivity, I still feel this, like, kneejerk reaction to, like, worry about after, like, just feeling like “fat” is a derogatory word, like, this learning is in me so deep and it so hard to, like, farm it out. Because you just get so—, I get so defensive about it and just so, like, worried about it, I just, it's still so in there. So anyway, back to the question, was there a difference between how fat white women and fat Black women were treated in the Enlightenment era?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:20:21] I would say that there is, and largely it was because fat Black women during the Enlightenment era were invisibilized. They were just a specter. So thinking about the way in which slavery worked, it was, like, “Okay, European colonists would go to Africa, they would steal people from the continent and then take them to one of the colonies.” It was rare that African people would actually make their way back to various European cities. So a lot of the writings about fat Black women were making their way to Europe, but rarely did Europeans see these women. And so instead of there being this real visceral reaction to people that you actually know or can touch, it was a reaction to an *idea* about bodies. And so because there was this narrative that “fatness is Black,” white fat women were highly likely to be criticized, to be condemned, to be ridiculed because of the sense that they were behaving in a way that was out of bounds for their race.

JVN [00:21:23] My friend Ashlee Marie Preston, who I love, she said something that's, like, stuck with me for a long time. She said, like, “white supremacy will eat its own young.” And, and it's, like, and it's true because, like, I am like a queer, HIV positive, like, white person who also has, like, been in different-sized bodies of, like, what is considered, like, you know, “conventionally attractive.” So it's, like, I have experienced some of the ramifications of white supremacy, but still, as a white person so I still have, like, privilege within that. But it's, like, white supremacy is fucking up white people too, like, it's fucking up everybody. And this was, like, created by these, like, select, like, “elites.” I am holding up air quotes like elite white men in the fucking 1600s, and meanwhile, we're all still fucking killing each other over it. And just, like, not seeing each other's humanity over it, which I just think is, like, so frustrating when we realize that a lot of these fights that we're having are hundreds of years old and, like, not everyone is, like, seeing the reality of that, which is just, Get it together. Come on. Did the

ways in which fat white women and fat Black women were treated differ depending on where you were in Europe?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:22:31] I think that a lot of the early artwork that was valorized in voluptuous physiques, including Black women's physiques. And this is, you know, the time before the Enlightenment, those, those were being painted in like the Dutch lowlands, in Spain, and then also in parts of Italy. But when we're talking about where the slender ideal really took off in Europe, we're talking about England and France. I always think that there is a tremendous irony and the ways in which race scientists who came from France largely represented Black women's bodies and the contemporary fetishization that goes on in France about Black women's bodies to which I, you know, can speak to. I thought, "Oh, well, how can it be that these two histories are the French history?" You know, that's, there's so much more to mind there. And, you know, I think that when we're talking about the United States, there was a way in which fatness across race was policed and degraded in the North. And in the South, if you were Black, you were going to be degraded on the basis of your Blackness. People didn't really care as much about your size. And also, if you were a voluptuous white woman in the South, you were given more room to shine. I want to say, like, in the early 20th century, there was even, like, these territorial battles that were going on within white America. There were, like, "Okay, we got our Tennessee beauty, and look at this figure, you know, represent." And then there would be, like, "But then our New York beauties look like this." And this was, like, the whole debate about "who were the true American beauties." And as you might expect, the beauties in the South were thicker than the beauties of the North.

JVN [00:24:06] Mmm. So as we, like, get out of, like, the Enlightenment era and also, like, through the Enlightenment era, like, 1600, 1700s, 1800s, there's, like, cotton and then there's, like, sugar and, like, those two industries are, like, really what's powering the economy of, like, the 1700s and hundreds and obviously like race is really like malevolently, like, woven through that. How did sugar production and consumption shape ideas about fatness in the U.S. and in Europe in the 1600s to 1800s?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:24:39] Well, we have to keep in mind, even though sugar is ubiquitous now, if sugar was a rare commodity throughout much of Western history, and so the way in which sugar started to really tick up in availability was through the slave trade. You know, obviously it was, like, slaves in the colony who were working the sugar plantations and sort of cultivating it. And that crop was then taken to Europe so that when sugar became widely available in places like England, there were a lot of people—I mean, thinking about the role of Protestantism and Puritanism in a country like England—there are a lot of people who are like, "We do feel like that you're eating in a way that does not serve God." And so interestingly enough, there was this very clear religious regulation surrounding diet. And so one of the individuals who was prominent in trying to reframe the diets of English people in the 18th century was this Protestant by the name of George Shane. And his thing was, "Okay, I am drinking far too much sugar-sweetened beverages. You know, I'm having vertigo. My whole situation is messed up. What I need to do is get my life right." And so he's, like, "Okay, I

adopted a milk diet, you know, no sugar. None of these types of drinks that are supposed to excite the system. Just a very simple milk diet." Milk and seeds. Now, that sounds disgusting. And yet it's supposed to work because now it takes you out of this, you know, investment in the "oral appetites that are not for God" and puts you more in a space of eating in a way that, quite honestly, we might today call "clean."

JVN [00:26:25] I could watch you do impressions of people from history, like, it's really, like, are you on TikTok? Because you need to be impersonating these fuckers on TikTok because it's really genius. So there's, like, a religious context. So because, you know, it's so hard for people to realize, like, that multiple histories are happening at one time. Like, I'm so guilty of this. Like, I never realized that, like, the Roman Empire and the Greek Empire were, like, happening at the same time. And when-, I was, like, "What!" So because American and European history is happening, like, at the same time, and the Enlightenment period and then after that, I mean, obviously America wasn't called it yet, but, like, all these histories are happening at the same time. And we've already kind of talked about it a little bit. We've talked about how, like, at this time of, like the, you know, early 1900s, the US is getting, like, "Tennessee belles are like this and Georgia peaches are like that. And the New York ladies are like this."

So they're already kind of getting their idea of like, you know, "regional beauties" and, like, but like, why the fuck have we always been doing that to women, I guess, is one question. It's, like, you know, be like, cause did we have, like, "This is like what our males look like in New York. Like, look at the dick size in New York. Look at, look at the pecks over here in Missouri. Like, look..." I just wish I would have much more, you know, I would have gone to that show. Like, that's what I would have been into. You know, like, but I mean, just like a really, like, hot, sexy, like, Mr. America, like, okay. Oh, you know, but maybe not in the day would have been sort of in way too-, whatever, focusing! What about magazines, honey? Because you were saying we were talking about art and, like, the Enlightenment period. And I almost feel like the art and like the way that that art was kind of, like, you know, stored in history. Like that was almost like the cover of, like, Vogue and Elle and Harper's Bazaar is back then. Like, those are like the idealized versions of Beauty back then. But then we actually got like magazines in print that started to do that, like, later. So what role did magazines have in, like, creating this, like, American beauty standard? As we get kind of like out of the Enlightenment period and more into, like, contemporary history?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:28:34] Magazines played such an integral role to the dispersal of this ideal. So keeping in mind that when this started, there were just a couple of people, either in the colonies writing about what they supposedly saw among Africans or Europeans who had never been to Africa at all, but had received these reports from the colonies and decided to reproduce them. So a lot of it was just hearsay. But once this kind of notion made its way into magazines, it proliferated rapidly. We might imagine the reasons why, because part of what magazines are doing and they're trying to sell us something, they're trying to sell us a lifestyle. They're trying to sell a certain brands. They're wanting us to consume more first. They want to

consume more magazines, but also they want to consume the products that are being advertised in the magazines. And that was no different in the 19th century. There were still ads. Right. And so part of what they were doing, they were selling "weight loss cures," you know, snake oil, as you might have it. But nevertheless, they were considered weight loss cures. They were trying to sell women a certain way to "be a woman." They were selling an imagined community of largely white femininity. And if you are a white person who might be, let's say, an immigrant to the United States, and immigrants are degraded. They are derided. They are deemed to be outside of our "American community." One way, if you are a European immigrant, that you might be able to prove your belonging is to take a magazine, follow its advice, and then reform yourself into the American ideal.

JVN [00:30:03] Right. And I feel like that was really romanticized. Like, "It's a sign of respect if you come to the country and learn its language and, like, assimilate." I feel like I read stuff like that in, like, social studies when I was, like, in third grade, like, I feel like they teach you to think that that's like versus when you're like, a little kid! When really, it's, like, "Wait, why can't people just, like, be themselves and stuff and, like, either wear their clothes and like, whatever?" Like, it's also possible to be bilingual, like, why, you know, we've always been making people pick, can't stand it. So what if we kind of talked about like we started to get there with like that one, like, Protestant guy who was, like, you know, "God only wants you to do, like, nuts and, like, you know, milk."

SABRINA STRINGS [00:30:44] Gross.

JVN [00:30:45] So what's the connection between, like, fatphobia? Chastity? Desire? Like indulgence? Greed? Like, what are those, like, religious implications of, like, the history of fatphobia?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:30:56] Yeah, I really enjoy that because it gets at the heart of what was really so terrifying to a lot of the Europeans who were attempting to manage usually other Europeans' bodies, which was the idea that, "If you want to be a holy individual, you need to be removed from concerns of the flesh." And concerns of the flesh are, undeniably: we need to eat and we need to get it on, right. That we cannot maintain our population if we are not fed and if people aren't getting busy. But what they were saying as Christians was, like, "Okay, we know this is necessary for procreation, but we don't want people to enjoy it." And so to the extent that people are spending too much time enjoying what they're eating, are too much time enjoying sex, they are not serving God. So there is a very clear and important role in all of this that religion has played—an under-, I think, explored role because there's a way in which we talk about religion today. And it seems like something that, like, old fogies did back in the olden times. But we forget that this country was founded by Puritans and we have not discharged all of our Puritan ways of being.

JVN [00:32:06] My stepdad always told me growing up that, like, "If you want to look at anything, in any war, like, it's always about money." And one thing that I do think that is really

scary about this, and it is something we need to be—, we need to interrogate just in the way that, like, white people will hold up white supremacy even in detriment to themselves. Right. So there's that thing. Just how cisgender people will hold up the binary, even if it's killing them. There's that thing.

SABRINA STRINGS [00:32:30] Absolutely.

JVN [00:32:31] When we think about the role that religion has played. If you look at Roman Catholicism. Corruption and, like, staggering greed has been interwoven with the Roman Catholic Church from the very beginning. Then you have the Church of England. Then in the US, it becomes a much more sinister thing as we realize now, because, like, there's tax exempt status. So it's, like, the more that you can keep, like, morality tied to your faith, tied to religion, and then use that as a means to, like, control people to extrapolate their money from them. Like, it keeps power where it is and, like, prevents, like, the transfer of power. I'm just observing this. Just, just brainstorming. Okay. So as we come into, like, the implications of this long history of fatphobia. What's at stake for Black people that are facing fatphobia today? And how have these perceptions of fatphobia extended beyond food for Black people today?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:33:30] Yeah. So when we think about the history of fatphobia, what we have to acknowledge is that there's so much condemnation that's going on right now in the United States surrounding fat Black women, because there is some sense that fat Black women are somehow a burden on the public health. Now, that's absolutely false because it relies on these, again, BMI biomarkers that were created by a couple of white guys in lab coats. So it has nothing to do with the actual health outcomes in communities of color. But because of the way that aesthetics work, because it's so visual, people think they can take a look at a fat person's body and then assume that they know about their health status and then make judgments about their behaviors. "Okay, well, we assume as a society that they must not be eating right. They must not be exercising. Why don't they just go to Whole Foods?" Actually, they had a conversation once where someone was like, "If these Black people could just eat at Whole Foods," like, "Do you know where Whole Foods congregates? Because as far as I know, Whole Foods congregates in wealthy, largely white areas." So it's not as if you can, just, get that food.

JVN [00:34:33] But also, like, you can get fat as fuck at Whole Foods, like...

SABRINA STRINGS [00:34:36] And there's that, right!

JVN [00:34:37] Like, you can, like, I'll eat, like, 27 of mac and cheese at Whole Foods, like, I'll freak out on some, like, Uncle Eddie's, like, vegan cookies are whole foods. Like, there's, like, 1500 calories in there and I'll eat, like, six bags and not blink. So get out of my face!

SABRINA STRINGS [00:34:51] Exactly, like, allow people to eat the way that they want to eat and don't make assumptions about where they've gotten their food, how much food they eat

and how much. If you have no idea, you have literally no idea. And this is why Black people are facing all the time. And so as a person who is Black but also is a straight-sized ally. So in that way, I have thin privilege. I feel like it's so important that I continue to speak out about the way in which this impacts the Black community and individuals who are most marginalized within it. Because there's always some assumption that, "Hmm, if we could just educate Black people, we just teach them how to eat and exercise, we will eradicate health disparities." I'm like, "That is incorrect. That is not the problem." The problem is twofold. Largely in Black communities, there is a lack of resources. So that's first. So that even though, for example, we may not expect there to be a Whole Foods, frequently in a lot of Black spaces, there isn't a grocery store at all. There's a convenience store. Okay. So if you don't have access to fruits and vegetables, how is it that you're supposed to be eating healthy? So that's one of the major problems. And then of course, we have other issues, like, "Do the Black neighborhoods have sidewalks?" That's also sort of an ongoing thing. So there's all of these ways in which Black people and, you know, fat Black women specifically are being stigmatized and being told to, quote unquote, "do better." Whereas you can be completely healthy in the body that you are in. And to the extent that being healthy is hard, it's not a matter of your size. It's a matter of, "Do you have access to things that are going to help you lead a healthy life?"

JVN [00:36:35] So yes, I also feel like-, yes and yes and yes. And then so what about this part, though? Because, like, my brain is, like, spinning because it's, like, it's so hard because it's, like, this subject is so intersectional and it's so layered and it's, like, just hard to, like, keep it all, like, together in your head. But there is also this duality that I can't speak to but, like, that on one hand, a curvy Black woman's body can be seen as, like, sexually satiating and also, like, "too much" or, like, "not it" at the same time. That's a really confusing space to be in.

SABRINA STRINGS [00:37:21] It really is. And I would suggest that people take a look back at the Sir Mix-A-Lot video "Baby Got Back," because if you can believe it, I was actually bold enough to use that in one of my defenses as a graduate student and my committee didn't know what to do with it. Even though I loved them, they were, like, "What is happening?" But there is the segment in the introduction in which there's a couple of white girls looking at a Black woman's body. "Oh, my God, Becky, look at her butt."

JVN [00:37:46] Yes!

SABRINA STRINGS [00:37:47] Right. We forget that, I think we often forget that that happened. But what this speaks to is that there is a subtle way in which many folks in the white community like to say, "God, Black people's bodies are about excess." And then, you know, only what, 20 years later, people are, like, "Yes, how do I get a butt like that?" So, I mean, obviously, there wasn't some revolution that took place between 1991 and 2011 or whatever. What happened was that people were starting to acknowledge that we've long liked butts. You know, women like butts, men like butts. We need to stop pretending. But the pretense has to do with whether or not it was racially appropriate. But then once we started to see a

little Kim Kardashian and a little back, people were, like, "Oh, well, me too. I'll get some of that."

JVN [00:38:41] And so, like, a lot of these things can be true at once. The history is racist, it's fatphobic. Our medical system now is fatphobic. We don't have MRI tables for people that are plus size. We don't have straps that are, like, big enough for people that are plus size. Like, we, like, it's real. But I feel like I'm literally, like, broken out in sweat in my t-shirt dress having this conversation. Like, I'm profusely sweating, like, so nervous, like, having this talk, but it's, like, like our worth, our self-esteem, our ability to live, like, literally to live. It's all wrapped up in, like, body image and health. And it's, like, as a public figure and as someone who, like a lot of people, talk about this sort of thing to, I feel really flummoxed. Like, I don't know what to do, like, how to, like, make everyone feel, like, it's okay to understand the history. It's also okay to, like, want to ask for help. Like, if you feel like you have a problem and if you feel like you need help because you don't feel good, is that diet culture? How do we empower people to take care of themselves without getting caught up in the shame?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:39:49] This is, I think this is one of the crucial issues. And it is such a difficult thing to navigate because we have to acknowledge that even though there could be those relationships, the difficulty is that the doctors always want to talk to you about weight first. And so that is why we really have to rethink the way in which we're doing medicine right now. I have spoken to a lot of fat activists and I've learned so much from them. And one of the fat activists I talked to right after my book came out is a queer person who told me that their wife was recently interested in losing weight, but their, their wife was afraid to talk to them about it because they thought, "Oh, my gosh, I know that you are a fat activist, but I'm a person who thinks that I could probably reduce my, let's say, knee pain from this activity." And I thought that this fat Black queer person's response was excellent to their partner because what they said to their partner was, ultimately, "I love you and I support you for what you want to do." And I think that this might be one way in which we can think about this. It's not about all of our society telling everyone what they must weigh. That's the fatphobia that I think we can all agree is problematic and we need to move away from. But there might be individual people who had their own reasons for wanting to think about changing their body size. I mean, so that's where we can say that they have the right to investigate other options for themselves that don't come from the outside community, telling them how they need to look and what they must weigh.

JVN [00:41:32] So it reminds me kind of what my friend ALOK says about, like, it really comes down to, like, how an individual speaks for themselves and how we, like, to talk to a group of people. And, like, trying to titrate that out. But that sometimes is, like, really confusing to do. Like, like, as a storyteller, sometimes it is, like, what's yours to tell, what's someone else's to tell. Like, it's just, it really is just, like, a confusing thing. And I think that, you know, like, I don't want to be, I don't want to be thought of as, like, fatphobic. I don't want to be thought of as transphobic or, like, racist or, like, whatever. Like, at the end of the day, it's, like, everyone wants to, like, we all want to be, like, loved and, like, feel like we're good people. So, like, I

don't think anyone's, like, trying to be fatphobic, but it's, like, we are just so quick in this world of body positivity, body neutrality, like, having these conversations. And I think the other thing that I have to remember is, is that, like, hurt people hurt people.

And when you are like when you've been hurt and when you have, like, taken on all of this shit from society individually, and then when you do maybe go out to, like, express your hurt. Like, when I feel like I've been fucked over, I call her Vanessa. Vanessa comes out and she's, like, my little internal Erin Brockovich, she's like, "Miss Perez, I brought this water special from Hinkley just for you and I hope you fucking die after drinking that hexavalent chromium, bitch." You know, it's, like, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to, you know, it just came out. But that's the thing, cause I just think that it's, like, I think one thing that I want, my goal is, is to be able to, like, talk about these issues with, like, breaking into, like, a head to toe sweat without questioning if, like, I'm a bad person for having these questions or, like, like no one's a bad person—, well, some people are bad, but most people aren't. And we're trying. I think everyone's doing their best. And if we can, like, try to give each other the benefit of that doubt, I think it makes these conversations, like, more healing for people individually when they have them.

SABRINA STRINGS [00:43:25] Yeah, I think what we, what we're trying to move toward, at least it seems to me, is a situation in which we do not automatically assume weight is a problem. You know, that we don't look at a person and judge them based on their weight. So I think that that is the liberatory move that a lot of people are attempting to make. But within that, that's not to say that everyone must always stay exactly as they are, like, we still have liberty. There are going to be different people who might want to change their weight. Maybe they want to lose weight, maybe they want to gain weight. It's not for us to tell them they must never gain weight or they must never lose weight because now we're trapped again, trafficking in the same type of body policing that we claim that we want to move away from.

JVN [00:44:09] Mmm. So what do you think it'll take to dispel the racialized fatphobia?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:44:14] For me, one of the first places that we need to begin is this whole conversation about, quote, unquote, "obesity." Because I cannot tell you the number of times I'll be listening to someone and they're talking about fat people in a fatphobic way, and then they'll always sort of take the defense of, "Well, obesity is unhealthy." And so until we can move away from these kinds of claims, the individuals who want to be fatphobic will always have fuel for their flame. So that's to me, that's the very first step just because of the imminence of medicine.

JVN [00:44:43] And let's get into that for one second, because obesity, I think one of the reasons why people are so mad about that word is it's, like, on that BMI scale, wherever it says, like, "Oh, if you start here and you end here, then that means you're considered, you know, 'obese.'" It's labeling a whole bunch of people obese that in reality aren't standing at harm for, like, the real harms of someone who, like, may need to have that individualized conversation with their doctor. You know what I'm saying? Like some people may be, like, you

know, a different size or whatever, but they're not in harm of, like, a cancer or heart disease or stroke or high blood pressure, because maybe where they come from or their, like, their biology, they are fine being at that weight. And it's actually, like, not overweight in their biology, but their biologies weren't even really studied accurately because of the history of education, you know, and in the US, Europe, the UK, it was, like, only white men doing these studies for so long. So, like, we just haven't had, like, an accurate way to, like, individualize this BMI thing. Is that a better way to say that, like, that's what's so irritating about this obesity conversation is that, like, that index isn't a clear representation of everyone?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:45:52] That's one of the major problems because the population that it can best describe is white persons. And even then, it's making a tremendous number of mistakes and miscategorizing people as "unhealthy" who are just fine. And I think here's another way in which we know that the so-called "obesity discourse" is bullshit. Obesity is often used as a predictor of other health outcomes, like diabetes or hypertension, but sometimes obesity is used as the disease itself. How can a thing be both a predictor of disease and a disease? It's just, like, we want so badly to have a way to remind people not to be fat, that we're just going to put that in the end of an equation that seems right. And we can see this in so much medical research. We can't claim that the cause and the effect are the same. So what we need to start thinking about instead is looking into people's genetic profiles, family histories, understanding their neighborhoods, understanding the role of structural racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia. All of these things are having tremendous negative effects on people's health. These are real predictors. And so instead of focusing on, like, "How much do you weigh?" let's look at, "What are all the things that you're living through and how can we actually provide the resources to help you?"

JVN [00:47:07] Yes. Because I remember being, like, 12 and the doctor telling me I was obese, like, on the BMI scale.

SABRINA STRINGS [00:47:13] What? What!

JVN [00:47:14] Oh, yeah. And I remember him saying that to, like, me in front of my mom and, like, me being, like, just so traumatized, like, not, you know, so it's, like, it's just, it really is such, like, a massive problem. So who's doing that work? I mean, you're doing that work. You're doing it right now. You did in your book. Cause people a lot of times will be, like, "How can I be a better ally for the trans community?" And, like, I always have, like, a myriad of advice for that. So how can people be better allies for the fat community?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:47:43] Yeah! Yes, I think you want to start, first of all, educating yourself because I think there are a lot of people who definitely don't want to be fatphobic. But we have all been swimming in fatphobia for the vast majority of our lives, all of us. And so if we haven't started to educate ourselves then we're probably going to keep reproducing this harm. There's a number of different works to look at right now. There's Da'Shaun Harrison's *The Belly of the Beast*; you can get Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body Is Not An Apology*; Dr. Joy

Cox, *Fat Girls in Black Bodies*. Obviously people know about Roxane Gay's *Hunger*, Tressie McMillan Cottom's book *THICK*. I would say start finding out what are the real origins of these problems but then also how are they manifesting among contemporary fat persons? So I think that's the first point of entry. And then once you've done that, you can also try to consider contributing to the work of a number of different organizations, like, the NAAFA, for example. So there are many different organizations that exist that are advocating on behalf of fat persons. And if you just want to find out more about this through social media, I would suggest following Dr. Jill Andrew. She is a fat Black doctor and she is against BMI. And so she is a powerhouse individual and a font of information. So these are some ways to get started.

JVN [00:49:05] And what about you, do you like to be on the 'Gram or the Twitter? Are you, like, more active on either one?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:49:09] Well, yes, I am on Twitter and not super on social media, which a lot of people are, like, "We need to fix that." But now you can find me on social media.

JVN [00:49:18] I have to say, as someone who's gotten to spend some time with you, now that you've already, like, called yourself out and sometimes that you don't do that much watching you in person eat historical white men play be like, "Well, we're just going to do whatever," you, like, the angle of your camera right now. I don't know if you can see it, but, like, it's not like you need to, like, set up the phone, have it be kind of like below you so that you could, like, "Meh meh me." That was like, genius. It's so funny, you know, and you actually have like a major, like, comedic timing to it, which you can also like. I think there's like I feel like it's, I'm sensing like a tic tac, a higher like a TikTok consultant or something, because I think that you could really be like that tick tock star who, like, literally what if you're the one who does it? Like what if you're the one who, like, literally just dispels racialized fatphobia period. Like what if, what if it's you?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:50:07] I mean, there's definitely a village of people that I am working with, right? So I feel like I get to call on so many folks who have taught me so much whenever I do this work. And I do have a little bit of a thing to tease, which is that I do have a podcast of my own coming out. Boom boom boom!

JVN [00:50:23] When does it start?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:50:24] Oh, well, we, we're still, like, the, like, organization phases.

JVN [00:50:28] Please let us know when it is starting. We are like shouting it out. We are, like, amplifying it. We would love to do that for you. We, like, we are such a fan.

SABRINA STRINGS [00:50:36] Oh, well, thank you so much. That would be awesome.

JVN [00:50:40] Do you have a title yet?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:50:40] Yes, the title of my podcast is Hood Prof. Because I'm a professor, but I come from hood shit. So I'm going to speak the way I speak!

JVN [00:50:51] So what's been your journey researching and writing about this topic? I mean, I know it's kind of, like, a big question to, like, start to end because it's like a whole other can of worms. But, like, how did you get into researching this? You are just incredible and your work is so good. How did you get into this?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:51:05] Oh, well, thank you so much, Jonathan. And so interestingly, I came to this reluctantly because when I was in high school, my grandmother, who lived through the Great Migration, actually our family, both sides of my family made their way to Los Angeles in the Great Migration. And so my grandmother, who grew up in a context in which people weren't trying to be thin, people were just trying to eat like we're talking about the middle of the 20th century, Jim Crow. Black folks don't have a lot of resources. So my grandmother gets to Los Angeles and she meets a bunch of white women on diets and was, like, "Whattt?" And I was in high school, it was in the 1990s. She would, like, constantly try to pull me into conversations about this. And, you know, I remember I'd be like, "Well, I don't know, can I get a cupcake," whenever you bring it up, "I don't know, Grandma, can I get a cupcake?" But, you know, over time I reflected on these conversations because I was, like, "Oh, I think she's hinting at something that people haven't really taken up." And when I was in my early twenties, I was working at an HIV medication adherence clinic. And I talked to a couple of women, both women of color, who were afraid to take their HIV meds because they didn't want to gain weight. And that really just blew my wig clean off. I thought, "Oh, my gosh, people, this is so much more important than I have appreciated." I thought it was just a question of, like, aesthetics or vanity or something like that. But no, there's clearly something deeper than that going on here because people are willing to risk their lives in order to, quote unquote, "maintain their figures."

JVN [00:52:39] Yes. And another thing that was just coming up for me that's, like, three doors away. Actually it's, like, maybe five blocks away. But I just, you might be, like, "You're so fucking crazy," but it's, like, skinny people might run into, or, like, slender people can absolutely have high blood pressure, can totally drop dead of, of a heart attack, of a stroke, can get cancer, can have joint issues for whatever reason. And it's, like, we're not mean and don't have, like, some sort of like, "Oh, well, you should've thought of that before you, like, did this or that or the other thing," when it happens to someone who's slender, but if it happens to someone who's fat, all of a sudden it's like, there's this, like, cruel thing of, like, "Well, you did that to yourself." And even with, like, slender people who smoke and stuff. Yes, it's, I feel like it's less mean to that than it is to like and it's like, why are we being mean to anybody who's having, like, a health issue or like we should just do our best to make it inclusive. And it's, like, that folks are really having like the fight of their fucking lives to, like, get health care that sees them, serves them. And that's a huge issue. It's like, so, I mean maybe I was, like, a day and a dollar short for it with this, like, observation. But just as we've

been having this conversation, it's like I feel like that's important. So you have a podcast coming out. Cannot wait. Hood Prof. That's what it is, right?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:53:58] Yes.

JVN [00:54:00] Yeah. And so again, it makes you want to slow clap every time I hear it. What's next for you in your work?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:54:05] So I, I also have a book coming out next year. Contract already signed. Because I'm not so active on social media, I haven't even announced that there yet. So this is the first time anyone is hearing about it. I have a book coming out that interrogates the origin and practices of your fuckboys, because guess what? These boys, let's not call them. And these boys are ubiquitous and we're all fucking sick of it.

JVN [00:54:26] So they've been doing it for a minute?

SABRINA STRINGS [00:54:29] A minute. Yeah, we think a fuckboy isn't as new, but it just now got a label. But this has been going on for decades and so I'm giving you a little history lesson again, but this time I'm telling you about these, these boys out here.

JVN [00:54:42] Ohmigod, can't wait to have you back for that episode.

SABRINA STRINGS [00:54:45] This book is a lot angrier than the first book, so get ready for that.

JVN [00:54:50] We love you so much, Sabrina. Thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. I feel like we learned so much. We love you so much. Thank you so much for your work.

SABRINA STRINGS [00:54:57] Thank you so much. It's been great. I had a great time.

JVN [00:55:00] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Professor Sabrina Strings. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter for more things Getting Curious @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.