

2018

Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA The Diesel

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Recommended Citation

Tobin, Nina Elizabeth, "Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA The Diesel" (2018). *Senior Projects Spring 2018*. 141.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2018/141

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A Reflection on:

THICC BITCHERY

AKA

GREATEST HITS VOL. 1

AKA

SHOUTSOUT

AKA

THE DIESEL

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College

By Nina Elizabeth Tobin

Annandale-On-Hudson, New York
May 2018

Special thanks:

Bethany Nohlgren! I straight up would not be here right now without Bethany.

Jack Ferver! Jack, you are so warm. Your kind candor and acerbic wit is a gift to everyone around you.

The Old Gym Crew! (especially Macey Downs!)

Janine Rogers! Sophie Landa! Payton Smith!

Jen Lown!

Hellena Schiavo!

Julie Roberts! Alec Glass! Nat Durkin! Phoebe Hiltermann! Anna Falvey!

Conor Williams!

ZOE WOHLFELD! MY FRIENDS AND FAM!

MY WONDERFUL PROFESSORS!

Irving! Hope! Nola! Cyrus! Rosie! Otto! Mays! Odie! Nigel!

AND

REMMINGTON!!!!!!

Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA The Diesel, was structured around actions and accompanying monologues. To summarize the performance in a nutshell, I enter the space, implore the audience to help with a few things, eat and offer bacon to the audience. I monologue, rub chocolate sauce on myself, monologue with a megaphone, go over a list of 'known and notable fatties,' ask audience members to add to the list. I monologue again, share the megaphone with audience members willing to play along, monologue, make an audience member draw my naked body on my stomach, make another audience member draw a non-obese naked woman on a piece of paper, inquire what the difference is, return to the expanded list of 'known and notable fatties,' play some music, change clothes, dance my heart out, strip my clothes off and break a scale with an axe. I now realize *Thicc Bitchery* cannot be summarized in a nutshell. I am not sure it can be accurately summarized in a paper. No paper can encapsulate the negative space on the set or the tangible moments or intimate interactions in *Thicc Bitchery*.

I was very nervous going into this process because I knew the only way to create the performance I wanted to create, a performance I could be truly proud of, I would have to be entirely true to myself and hold absolutely nothing back. I would have to give more of Nina to my audience than I ever did before. My presence on stage is not so much a challenge, being silly and joyful whilst still being quite forward and serious is not unfamiliar for me as a performer. Doing all this while talking about my obese body and my journey to love that body is much more difficult. Performance consists of presenting truth. In theater the truth an actor presents is that of their character, but in performance art the truth presented is that of the actor or actors. Regardless, it is the duty of the actor in all ventures of theater

and performance to shower the audience with truth. Sanford Meisner's famous saying, "acting is the ability to live truthfully under given imaginary circumstances," points to this, (Meisner, Fife, New York Times). But what about performance art? Meisner does not account for when an actor is not performing in a set role or character but instead as themselves.

Recently I played the role of Dad, arguably the titular dreamer in the three act John Patrick Shanley play *the dreamer examines his pillow* for Alec Glass' senior thesis. This was a hard role to get into the headspace of because my lifetime of experience performing as the real character Nina Tobin is so drastically different from the fictional character of dad's lifetime of experience.

The real character Nina Tobin is 23-years-old, obese, a cisgender female, primarily a lesbian, and primarily extraverted; a feminist, 7th generation New Yorker, and marijuana enthusiast. Nina is the daughter of John and Nancy, sister of Jacob, she is a culturally Jewish, sarcasm-prone millennial, Bard College theater student and hardcore lover of animals, laughter and inclusion. The character of Dad in *the dreamer examines his pillow* is "a powerful, handsome" man in his mid to late 50's, a flamboyantly heteronormative heterosexual essentialist, father of Donna and Mona (perhaps others), widow of mom, former routine adulterer, retired alcoholic painter, Philadelphia native, Washington Heights resident, with a touch of god-like omnipotence, (Shanley, 194). I began the process of embodying Dad by identifying adjectives to describe him based on elements of personality and mannerisms found in Shanley's script.

Then I found some semblance of these characteristics within myself and forced myself to stop analyzing Dad as Nina Tobin and start analyzing Dad as Dad. Connecting with the role from the inside out. When working on *Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA The Diesel* I hardly had to work to get into the headspace of the titular *Thicc Bitch*, because I, Nina Tobin, am the real character the *Thicc Bitch* is based on. However, when it came to the actual work, performing solo and offering the audience an embodiment of the essence of Nina Tobin, was much harder and more emotionally taxing than performing as a fictional character in a cast of four. What Meisner's aforementioned quote does not account for is the vulnerability a performer must present when portraying themselves. The performer must open themselves up to the possibility of rejection on a personal level. You cannot walk away from performance art as you can with theater. Theater exists in imagined spaces, performance art exists in a real time and real spaces. This added vulnerability arises from the lack of abstract, the performer is presenting a window to their personal truth, a truth that can be totally objective and questionable but is still truth to them.

Late March, 2017 when I first proposed this project to the theater and performance department, I had neither a substantial plan to discover nor a concrete conception of the performance that would become *Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA The Diesel*. Be that as it may, abstractly, I had a vision. My goal was to cultivate the atmosphere of "a morbidly obese, yet intimate fat dyke celebration and cave." May 2018 I do believe I met that goal. The material elements in *Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA The Diesel* have never been a focal point during my process. I find the

abstract more important than the concrete. It is in the abstract points of this performance where we find the most vulnerability, where the equilibrium between the sharp edges of the *Thicc Bitch* and the plump heart of Nina Tobin is the strongest. I prioritized the abstracts, and the more practical, corporeal aspects of the performance, fell into place. The set was never a top priority in *Thicc Bitchery*. Last March I pictured a bare stage, but as the piece expanded and changed over time the stage became more crowded and the prop list grew. Although I ended up using maybe 15-20 props, I had only four major set pieces, a maroon room divider stage right, a blue chaise and a side table stage left and a desk that rolls into center stage. When I think about the amount of props I used in *Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA The Diesel*, it feels excessive, but I believe they were all justified. In March 2017 the one tangible element I knew for certain would appear in *Thicc Bitchery* was bacon. I would begin with bacon.

And I did. As the transition from Zoe Wohlfeld's set to my set begins, I start heating up a hotplate and cooking bacon behind a curtain. After a moment I turn on a fan to blow the smell of sizzling bacon through the old gym to ensure the bacon is not seen but is heard and smelled. After a moment or so I become visible to the audience, moving the curtain aside and rolling the desk onstage. On the desk is a Lego model of the yellow submarine, as well as the hotplate and various other bacon accoutrements. Other props are hidden in the sides of the desk. I am wearing sparkly pink pants and a white tee shirt with bold red lettering reading "I love Wendy Peffercorn" along a picture of Marley Shelton, the actress that portrayed the character Wendy Peffercorn in the 1993 movie *The Sandlot*. This is all

under a novelty apron that features a lifelike drawing of a non-obese female body in black lingerie.

As soon as I enter the space I solicit another human to first help me finish moving the table to its set position, and then take my place cooking while I schmooze the audience, offering bacon and eating it myself. After a few moments showcasing personal interactions, I begin to monologue. I open with my personal experience coming of age and coming to terms of my sexuality as an obese female teenager. How I did not have the courage or confidence to talk about my sexuality until several years after I became sexually active. How I was “under the impression that the people I interact with on a casual daily basis actively do not want to associate my body with corresponding sexy times. My body is associated with eating bacon or chocolate or something.” (Tobin) At this point, I take off my apron and the shirt underneath it and rub chocolate sauce all over my chest, bra and stomach and invite the audience to lick it off me. Although this moment is physically vulnerable, it is not emotionally.

The intensity of the audience – performer connection performed dwarfs any vulnerability I am presenting because the audience members that willingly lick me are being just as vulnerable. Here exists a level playing field between actor and spectator. However, this equilibrium begins to fall to pieces as I take the reins again and question the relationship between worth and BMI. I offer a few common examples of increased quantity directly correlating to increased value.

“a bar of gold is more valuable than a gold tooth,
 a handle of stoli has more value than than a vodka on the rocks,
 a five carat diamond is more valuable than teeny studs
 a master’s degree is more valuable than a BA” (Tobin)

Yet when it comes to the human body, the more quantity there is to a body, the more mass it has, the closer it is to being obese the more value is lost. Once a body becomes obese it becomes valueless. “So, the female body which has been idolized and objectified for its sexual value since the advent of culture only retains that value when the body is not obese.” (Tobin) Naturally, every rule has exceptions and this one does too.

The idea of an exceptional obese body is a liberating concept. People who can be fat and also celebrated do exist and it is possible, but it is not common. Here I introduce a list of “known and notable fatties” and pass around a pen and a piece of paper encouraging people to add to the list. The list I present includes James Gandolfini (deceased), Melissa McCarthy, Notorious B.I.G. (deceased), John Candy (deceased), Rosie O'Donnell, Chris Farley (deceased), Aretha, Oprah, Artie Lange, Adele, John Belushi (deceased), Roxane Gay, Lizzo, Roseanne Barr, Lindy West, John Goodman, Kevin James, Al Roker, Michael Moore, Kathy Bates, and Hurley (AKA Jorge Garcia) from the TV show *Lost*. The people on the list of fatties do not adhere to the usual value associated with obese bodies. Many people on this list are or were obese and valuable. Even as people on this list gain weight, their values do not decrease as typical obese persons would. The only way in which the value of a notable fattie

would decrease would be if said fattie loses a significant amount of weight and then gains it all back.

I am bewildered and encouraged by the notable fatties' ability to achieve public recognition, especially the women on the list. I have never known how to successfully sell an obese female body to the masses. There is only one tactic I can think to sell such a disgusting thing; lie about how repulsive it is. Do not admit to obesity, obesity is unfuckable and unsellable. The phrase 'obese' or 'obesity' when in reference to a female body implies there is no longer any inherent sexual value in that body. So, how does an obese body get advertised for mass consumption, "as chubby or chunky," (Tobin). Chubby, chunky, and curvy can all sell; the public can be convinced that an overweight body is desirable as long as that body has both "curves in the RIGHT places" and has not yet reached obesity, (Tobin). I crudely recapitulate what I mean, specifying what physical attributes the modern world objectively lusts after in female bodies: a "smackable booty, thick thighs and ample titties!" I then compare my own body, "I have a curvy belly and titties that would be average size for an average size person but small titties for a fat woman, which is just unfair. At least I have a smackable albeit fat ass," (Tobin). This monologue leads to one of the most vulnerable moments for me, in which I present a pressing and ominous truth for the real character Nina Tobin.

I discuss my experience going to a doctor in January of 2017 and the emotional state that accompanied the realization that I weighed nearly 300 pounds. In Lindy West's book of essays, *Shrill*, she describes being fat as "the disorienting limbo between too visible and

invisible,” (West, 77). Before I read *Shrill*, this limbo was something I was all too familiar with, but unsure how to put into words. I believe this notion permeates throughout *Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA The Diesel* as the obese caricature of the *Thicc Bitch* is not only undeniably front-and-center for most of the performance, but the real character Nina Tobin is dwarfed by the obese caricature. Her identity of the *Thicc Bitch* consists only in her obese female body. She is fat AND entertaining, fat AND clever, fat AND sexy. Any real meaning or substance within *Thicc Bitchery* comes second to the shock of an obese woman frankly exhibiting her body. I go on to offer the feelings of the worthlessness I heavily and wholly associate with this moment. I equipped myself with a megaphone I stashed in the desk and bombarded the audience with the lows of an obese body.

“an obese body is not worth anything

An obese body is not fun

An obese body is not feminine

An obese body is not healthy

An obese body is not agile

An obese body is not sexy” (Tobin)

This moment is loud and abrupt and upsetting, just as it was in real life. This is the first emotionally draining low of *Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA*

The Diesel, as it is one of the most vulnerable moments presented in this performance.

Absolutely insane to share this with an audience.

I have never been as vulnerable with an audience as I was during *Thicc Bitchery* and I am still shocked time has gone on. In the past, I have been comparably open to an audience, but I never reached this point before. However, I do reach it again a few times throughout the performance. Before that can happen, the real character Nina is still festering in a moment of great vulnerability and the *Thicc Bitch* must emerge swiftly and formidably to obscure the exposed nerves and produce another layer of armor only to later take it off again. There was no reason for this moment of absolute worthlessness to linger. Fortunately, after you hit rock bottom there is one direction to go. I make a point of getting there fast. I am a grown woman, and with my grown woman confidence I recognize how sexy I am. I again grab the megaphone and offer it to the audience members that are bold enough to validate my sexiness by actually verbally telling me I am sexy. I need this validation before I return to the the converse notion that although the real character of Nina is verifiably sexy, her body is absolutely disgusting.

From there I get to place so raw so weak so vulnerable that I not only cringe when I think I about saying this in front of an audience, but also I actively hope this is not brought up during the meeting in which I discuss this paper with professors from the theater and performance department. I talk frankly about my sexuality and experience, “sex with me is disgusting,” (Tobin). In a piece I presented at Zocalo last semester, a precursor to *Thicc Bitchery* in the style of epic theater, I ended the piece asking the audience by show of hands

who there was friends with an obese woman. As far as I could tell, everyone in the audience raised their hands. I then asked who had fucked an obese woman. Everyone put their hands down. Who would want to publicly admit to that?

I answer this question with anecdotes from both ends of the spectrum. On one end, I recount the dysphoria I experienced over a past lover that routinely fetishized my body. The dialogue for this I actually wrote in a notebook around this time in 2015 and serendipitously found and added to the script a few months ago. On the other end of the spectrum I present a memory in which a former girlfriend tells me she would find me more attractive if I lost weight while we were lying naked in bed together. That same former girlfriend attended Saturday's performance of *Thicc Bitchery AKA Greatest Hits Vol. 1 AKA Shoutsout AKA The Diesel* and I stumbled delivering this monologue. I left out lines in the script, I stared at the floor. I had to rush through with her there, I could not allow myself to be vulnerable in this moment. I could not open myself up to the possibility of being re-rejected by this person when reliving a moment in which she already rejected me. So this moment which was left soft and tender during most performances was almost bypassed Saturday night.

I finish my serious monologuing in a moment that is both vulnerable and defensive. I finish recounting the actual feelings of dread that come with being nearly 300 pounds. How there is nothing I have experienced so far that is worse than this. From here I bring up an audience member to help me break it down with visuals. I get someone to draw my naked body on my chocolate syrup covered stomach. I offer a naked picture of me to draw from showing it only to one member of the audience that has agreed to see it. Whist that person

is drawing me, I solicit another audience member to draw a healthy, non-obese naked woman on a piece of paper. Once both drawings are completed, I openly ask, 'what's the difference?' There were two memorable responses. On Friday night someone responded with 'just a couple rolls,' on Saturday night an audience member said 'one's real, one's paper.' I ask this question to the audience because it is a real question I have. One I do not know the answer to. I continue monologuing about the isolation that comes hand in hand with an obese life until I locate the new list of "known and notable fatties" that has been circulating in the audience.

Overall the audience was extremely generous with me, however upon inspection of their additions to the list of "known and notable fatties," I can see they were not as open as I had previously thought. My list contained eleven men and ten women. Hurley, the only fictional character on my version of the list is also referenced by the name of the actor portraying Hurley. Of the 21 total humans on my list, there are twelve actors and comedic actors, four musicians, one weatherman, one documentary filmmaker, two authors and one Oprah. Many of the fatties on the list have had their weight fluctuate not only dramatically, but publicly, they are real people.

The audiences additions to the list include Santa Clause (listed two times), 'Me!,' 'the blueberry girl from Willy Wonka,' 'Fat Amy from Pitch Perfect,' Daniel Zillmann (actor at The Volksbühne Berlin), DJ Khaled, 'Camryn Manheim (the Practice),' Fat Albert (also listed two times), Aidy Bryant, 'The NFL,' the Pillsbury Doughboy, Gabourey Sidibe, 'Boo from OITNB,' Fat Bastard, Winnie-the-Pooh, CeeLo Green, 'Glen "big baby" Davis' Honey Boo Boo, Honey

Boo Boo's mother—June, Abby Lee Miller, 'Jones from "Jones barbecue & foot massage,"' Mario Batali and Beth Ditto. The audiences' list of 'known and notable fatties' contain eight men, and ten women. Four are actors or comedic actors, three are musicians, one is a cook, one is a basketball player, three are reality TV personalities and six are FICTIONAL CHARACTERS. Santa is a mystical creature, Fat Albert is a cartoon, "Jones barbecue & foot massage," is a comedy sketch starring the real comedian Robert L. Hines as Jones, 'the blueberry girl from Willy Wonka' is not referenced by the actual name of the character or the name of the actor playing the character. Fat Amy is a role played by a real obese woman named Rebel Wilson, Boo from Orange is the New Black, is a role played by an openly-gay obese woman named Lea DeLaria. I ask the audience to come up with real fat people and they return to me with parodies of fat people. I feel like the real character Nina has been overshadowed by the dominating caricature of the *Thicc Bitch*.

I both point back to the initial list and the incorporate the new list of fatties, going through the people one by one and asking the audience by show of hands to demonstrate if they would fuck that person. After we go through all the names, I have a Spotify playlist containing about fourteen ready. Before the music comes on I yell to Sophie Landa, my stage manager, to turn it on and if I had forgotten any part of *Thicc Bitchery*. Twice I forgot to return to the list of 'known and notable fatties,' so I went going back to the list, collecting the momentum for the finale. The music begins to play, the song changes almost every night. I change my clothes behind the maroon room divider. I change into velvet floral shorts and a tank top over pink negligee and lingerie. I appear again in my fresh outfit holding a

scale and an axe. I push all the furniture upstage and place the scale. I dance and strip to the music before destroying the scale.

The safe execution of the scale-smashing finale was always a priority for this piece. I destroyed a scale in front of an audience three times before the Thursday dress rehearsal. Once in a Zocalo, once in Studio North and once the day before in the Old Gym. After the Thursday dress rehearsal, I got a call from Jack Ferver, my advisor, who was concerned about the safety of the scale smashing. After that phone call I revised the set of *Thicc Bitchery* and used spike tape to mark the point onstage I would smash the scale. I moved it much farther upstage. I also reached out to three audience members from Thursday's dress rehearsal and made sure to touch base with them and find out whether they felt safe in the audience. Everyone felt safe.

In the presence of *Thicc Bitchery* AKA *Greatest Hits Vol. 1* AKA *Shoutsout* AKA *The Diesel* I felt safe too. Although the audience may have put more stock into the caricature of the *Thicc Bitch* than the real character of Nina Tobin, they did believe in my truth as an actor and my vulnerability as a performance artist. I guess it is easier for the audience to accept a caricature, because real, unfiltered vulnerability is overwhelming and uncomfortable to live in. Even if the *Thicc Bitch* caricature of Nina Tobin resonated more than the real character of Nina Tobin, both made palpable connections and landed moments of powerful abstraction that would not have possible without both facets of the performer. The real character chooses vulnerability, and the *Thicc Bitch* chooses armor. Together they find success.

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