

# Black, Fat, Famous, and Loved: The Body That Transgresses and Fissures the Representations of the Celebrity Woman

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What happens when a fat black woman shows up (or is exhibited) in environments with the highest media visibility? What are the relationships built between these bodies and viewers whose eyes are accustomed to consuming more homogeneous and controlled images? In this article, we see, through the analysis of famous women of modest social origin, among them the Brazilian singer MC Carol and the American presenter Oprah Winfrey, how the presence of dark skin and fat bodies, besides the markers of poverty, is still seen as faults that disorganize the idealized scenario of celebrities. In this sense, it is noticed that there is a hierarchy of celebrities, and that getting to the pulpit of high visibility and staying there are more dramatic tasks for those who do not belong to the subjective and imaginary repertoire of celebrities. This paper examines this question drawing on the concept of Weberian status as it is used in celebrity studies, at the same time that indicates the limitations of such approach.

*Keywords:* status, celebrity, body, woman, inequality

## Introduction: The Status That Guarantees Visibility

In an essentially imaginary world, who is most seen and least seen? And what are the reasons for the asymmetries between these groups? At what points are they based upon? An overview of the publications focusing on the media famous people allows us to observe that, despite important changes caused by technology spread, skin color, origin (social and geographical), and gender are markers that determine who is or who is not in environments of high visibility. These issues remain even more prominent among both the well-known poor women and those who are able to achieve high visibility spaces. The appearance of those who carry what is considered unacceptable (and therefore extremely political) to be in the reach of many eyes is our focus here. In Brazil, funk singer MC Carol, showing the black and fat body in a sensual rehearsal, provokes scorn and contestation reactions—but goes on in her protest project and declares: “I am fat, wanted and much loved”. In the same country, another singer, Preta Gil, has her appearance constantly injured, as well as the American actress Gabourey Sibidie. She, as former hostess Oprah Winfrey, haunted the conservative imagery menu of celebrities and then resorted to bodily compliance processes to emerge in the media space. To understand how this happens, we initially rely on the concept of Weberian status, which is important in celebrity studies.

Weber, as summarized by Ollivier (2009), considered that the evaluation of superiority and inferiority has fundamental consequences for the understanding of social inequality. Defending that status could be based on any criteria that would conveniently separate groups in the sense of legitimizing privileges, he emphasized the

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arbitrary nature of status claims and their role in the processes of domination. The concept of social closure—when status groups seek power through customary or legal filtering, a practice that prevents the entry of agents located in other groups—also provides insights into how status claims result not only in inequality, but in dominations of various orders. It is an important perspective for the analysis of celebrities' social role: It understands the subtleness that unites and separates individuals by establishing that they are distinguished not only by inhabiting X or Y class but also by their lifestyles, their bodies, their visibility potentials. Says Weber:

In opposition to the “class situation,” which is determined by purely economic factors, we understand by “status situation” that typical component of human vital destiny that is conditioned by a specific social evaluation, positive or negative, of honour, linked to a certain quality common to many people. (Weber, 2004, p. 180)

The notion fits the fluid environment inhabited by celebrities, specific elite that reproduces the tensions of the “ordinary” world and whose economic power often contrasts sharply with visibility capital (with the former being almost nil). In it, social inequalities are exposed through the understanding that the performance of everyday agents, even the most prosaic, reveals cracks, often microscopic, that determine their “places” in the world. Weber summarizes: “possessors and non-possessors may belong to the same status group, which occurs many times and with very sensitive consequences” (Weber, 2004, p. 181). “Status honour” thus only requires that those who wish to be part of a given circle should conduct their life (habits, tastes, consumptions) in a specific way. The use of the sociologist's conception in the study of the media charismatics (with the Weberian analysis of charisma being vital in this process) was carried out by some authors, among them Kurzman et al. (2007). He notes that such agents are part of a specific prestige system, buoyant, more ephemeral and in which profitability is not always possible.

Compared with other types of status, however, celebrity is status on speed. It confers honor in days, not generations; it decays over time, rather than accumulating; and it demands a constant supply of new recruits, rather than erecting barriers to entry. (Kurzman et al., 2007, p. 348)

Millner (2010) analyses other status systems by comparing them to the celebrity system: He perceives similarities (solidarity between the “commons”, desire to know the intimacy of the one at the top of the hierarchy) and still differences (the role of visual media and the new visibility, the increasing mobility and instability of the contemporary system of celebrities over traditional ones). When speaking of this place, he begins to punctuate some characteristics that determine the logic of this organism. Here, the status:

- Is relatively inalienable: The status attributed to one resides mainly in the mind of the other: They cannot simply “steal” it from the celebrity; a more complex operation is necessary so that the reverence of the admirer is removed from the celebrity.
- Is relatively unexpandable: Primarily, status is a relational good that, like others, needs some rarity to maintain its position. As an unexpandable condition, status, if it grows in relation to one individual, tends to decrease relative to the other.
- Needs to conform to the rules of the group: Those who share the specificities of fame, the “charismatically qualified”, have non-institutionalized markers that limit the field of action of those who are not part of such a system. Such markers reassure the place of this elite, who shows itself—through clothing, body, accent, daily habits—more “capable” and sophisticated, more deserving of its status.
- Is socially shared: The status of something (objects, places) or someone can be relatively transferred to those who associate themselves with these recognition bearers.

A key point for Millner is the need to think of such a system in a more up-to-date and not nostalgic way, including the changes made in the last decades, from technological to behavioural. The new material conditions of culture condition systems of morality, reality, and aesthetics also generate changes in the cultural system of status. Kurzman et al. (2007) contrast with Weber (2004) and, consequently, with Millner (2010): For him the idea of a new status (a topic on which Weber, he points out, would not have carried out a deeper analysis as he wrote the text *Class, Status and Party* months before his death, when the author was very debilitated) born within the space occupied by the celebrities seriously contradicts what the German sociologist proposed in the genesis of his concept. According to Kurzman et al., Weber believed that status groups would lose strength during the social/economic/technological changes of the modern world, with stratification finally disappearing and giving rise to a new democracy, a unique society in which the idea of status would be emptied of any special privilege for individuals. In it, divisions would be located only in the sense of class: For Weber, Kurzman et al. (2007) find, every technological repercussion and economic transformation threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation to the fore. The growth of celebrity in the current scenario, however, modifies which would be one of the great “dogmas of modern social science”: the decline of status systems. It is necessary to point out, however, that Weber notes the transition to an open stratification society, in which lifestyle is imitable. It is different from the previous stratification society, in which individuals and groups acquired their ways of life through inheritance. Kurzman et al. say:

This article proposes, by contrast, that celebrity status fundamentally contradicts Weber’s analysis of status, in two ways. First, it contradicts the downward trajectory of status groups that Weber projected into the future. Second, it contradicts the genealogy of status groups that Weber projected into the past, the slow inbreeding of honour over multiple generations. (Kurzman et al., 2007, p. 363)

He suggests that celebrities should be considered members of a specific group and charged by the German sociologist for certain status, since his theory was built in Berlin at the same time that the celebrity system was gaining strength in New York and Hollywood. For Kurzman, the Weberian perspective ignores celebrity—which began their strong social influence at the time of the German author’s analyses, but would gain colossal weight only after his death—but still suggests that status systems were in decline, disappearing “under the pressures of capitalism”.

In the article “Celebrity Status” (Kurzman et al., 2007), four privileges are categorized; they denote the specificities—in terms of social differentiation—of the celebrities, a product of the marriage between capitalism and media endowed with a dynamic that reflects the conditions of the modern era. It is this system, this dynamic, that the author will call “celebrity”. In this analytical way, it is perceived that these media are endowed with an interactional privilege that transforms, for us, the audience, any encounter with them into an event (especially the unplanned ones); a normative privilege that generates respect (and consequent adherence, and consequent consumption) by celebrities and their ideas; an economic privilege that brings fortunes to these charismatics; and, finally, a publicity privilege.

In order to understand how this “machinery” works, it is necessary to observe the specificities of each one, starting with the idea of the interactional privilege, perhaps one of the most “ordinary” (in the sense of their everydayness) of the characteristics that empower the celebrities nowadays. Such phenomenon happens when famous “descends” to the world appear in the flesh before a public is accustomed to interacting with him through media equipment: the contact with this celebrity, although it does not happen in a relaxed way or even if it

frustrates the regular person and carries powerful meanings, which limit and delimit—symbolically and literally—the space between “us” and “them”: “Celebrities were once ordinary humans like us, but they no longer are. The privileges that we grant them in person help to reinforce their superior status” (Kurzman et al., 2007, pp. 355-356). Although that famous one does not interest us, his fame acts as a kind of magnet that attracts our attention—and it is precisely here, as Alberoni (2007) puts it, the power of this agent, that of capturing our gaze and our interest, the recognizing of this fame being enough. As we approach the media celebrities, we temporarily stop being “ordinary people”: “When a celebrity designs to interact with ordinary people, we consider ourselves honoured” (Kurzman et al., 2007, p. 356).

The author approaches a very significant point, although not developed in the article: the capitalization, by industry, of all the symbolic charge that arises from the encounter between “we” and “them”: There are not few shows and marketing promotions in which the great prize is precisely the encounter with a certain mediatized personality, and is precisely the possibility of raising daily experience to a more socially valued level that is instrumented here. Traveling to some destination with the promise of meeting a celebrity, having one of them at their parties, and relying on their attendance at events (which thus also gains the interest of the media) are some of the common practices performed by those who manage to administer the “magic” of that specific interaction. The second privilege that characterizes the specific status of celebrity is the “normative” one: This, one of the most powerful phenomena generated by the media, is one of the anchors of this research, in which the standardization of a determined roll of bodies and modes of existence are offered to a large community, which reinterprets and uses these models in various ways. This menu of “types” is widely consumed, making celebrities truly totems of a valued way of being in the current world.

(...) in the era of celebrity status, mimicry is routine and encouraged. We envy and desire the clichés of the elite, their clothing and their cars—aspects of their life conduct, to use Weber’s term, that are obtainable, if sometimes in low-budget facsimiles. (Kurzman et al., 2007, p. 357)

What is emphasized here is the enormous impact of what the celebrity says, especially in its extra textual aspect, what it personifies “in the real world”. A large part (perhaps the largest) of celebrity news reports rely on body aesthetics and fashion as the main thematic lines. The first phenomenon that characterizes the social power of celebrity, the Weberian charism (something extraterrestrial, unique, that has its end when it is routinized), is, according to the authors of the systematization of this specific status, associated with this normative aspect, since, for Weber, followers do not obey the leader motivated by their rational-bureaucratic aspect, but by accepting and acknowledging their “exceptional qualities or powers” (Weber, 2004, p. 358). The third aspect that distinguishes celebrities from the common world is related to the material gains related to their (famous) name: Gifts, parties, travel invitations, sponsored marriages, and free plastic surgeries are some of the goods offered to those who can associate their faces to certain products; products that suggest to the reader the idea of a good life.

Like Weber’s old high-status groups, which maintained their style of life by monopolizing particular economic niches, celebrity status also maintains itself through the exploitation of economic benefits. However, celebrity status has become its own niche: fame is lucrative. This form of status translates directly into financial benefit. The hottest celebrities are among the highest wage earners in the world, with annual incomes—not including stock options, profit-sharing, limited partnerships, and other ownership arrangements—in the millions of dollars. (Kurtzman et al., 2007, pp. 359-360)

In addition to being the “target” of a number of actions and promotions that guarantee a series of benefits, the celebrities also accumulate fortunes that seem possible only for star system participants. Kurzman exemplifies

how much such benefits have grown in recent decades by showing that Hollywood actress Julia Roberts, receiving \$25 million for the film *The Smile of Monalisa* (2003), earned more than Elizabeth Taylor, the first actress to win more than \$1 million in a movie (*Cleopatra*, 1966, for which she received \$1.8 million). Another source that generates economic power for these celebrities is the participation in publicity campaigns of diverse natures: From the sale of cars to actions in the fashion world, publicity is a niche completely related to the celebrated one. For Kurzman, this is one of the points in which celebrity status most effectively “disapproves” what Weber imagined: “Far from melting down status hierarchies, as Weber suggested, capitalism appears to demand them, for example, through celebrity sponsorship of commercial products and services” (Kurzman et al., 2007, p. 360). The last distinctive privilege of celebrities is the “right to publicity”, the fact that their names and faces guarantee a special media space: They become “someone” because they appear; they appear because they are “someone”. This right is thought and used by Nimmer to refer to “the right of each person to control and profit from the publicity values which he [sic] has created or purchased” (apud Kurzman et al., 2007, p. 361). Thus, the famous face becomes itself a good that can be negotiated, it is a “product”, and it is the value what defines celebrity, especially those who rely less on participation in films, soap operas, publicity, etc., but rather in public appearances that generate profitability. This right to publicity also has a connection with what we call the visibility capital, an important idea for the perception of the strength of celebrity in the social space.

Continuing his analysis, Kurzman notes approximations and oppositions when he attempts to juxtapose Weber’s status to the study of contemporary celebrities according to the sociologist; the two topics gather together because both involve the usurpation of honour (a process in which the most prestigious groups restrict the entry of those who come from groups of lesser social prestige); the topics also have dialogue since both guarantee particular economic benefits to the group’s high status, as well as other special privileges. There is an interesting point, too, between what Weber classifies as the last stage of status hierarchy, the group’s “ethnicization” (a phenomenon that results in the relationships that are only realized between those who are “prestigious” and thus ensuring the maintenance of status) and the passage from celebrity status to other, here a more unstable maintenance, since it is not determined by the famous itself, but by the media equipment. If this feature of celebrity-specific status no longer fits the Weberian “endogamy” so perfectly, another one is even more contradictory: Whereas celebrity status is dynamic (and unstable, as we shall see below) and may decline rapidly (it is enough that the celebrity is not focused by the lights anymore), the status of other prestige groups (politicians, entrepreneurs) develops through generations: It is founded, in Bourdieu’s terms, in differentiated capitals: political and economic.

### **Race, Weight, Gender, Social Origin: Celebrity Women and Status Instability**

Kurzman et al.’s (2007) systematization, as well as Millner’s (2010) analysis, offers us good tools for building a sociology of celebrities, but there are fundamental issues that are not addressed by both. The idea of status is also related to some specificities that can be called “primal”, structural: They are the ones that give more (or less, we will see) conditions for certain media charismatics to achieve wealth, to secure more contracts in films and publicity, in order to gain access to visibility. There is a hierarchy of celebrities, as well as media hierarchies that approach celebrities and, furthermore, a hierarchy among those who consume celebrities. It is not possible, therefore, to speak about the honor of the media charismatics without observing that, within this specific system, a series of factors establishes deep differences between the celebrities. We believe, therefore,

that the charisma and celebrity-related status are not evenly distributed among them. Here we can see the weights of specificities such as:

(1) The place from where this famous one speaks: There are two aspects which are more relevant: proximity to the “centers of power” and the social status of certain areas of culture, with an explicit hierarchy between (and within each of the “niches” below) cinema, television, music, comics, literature, theater, visual arts, etc.;

(2) The body pattern: thinking here about a specific capital of the body, remembering that it acts within a classificatory social system, and, in this sense, is privileged those who approach what Camargo and Hoff (apud Fontanella, 2008) call body-media, generated by advertising as the ideal to be achieved;

(3) Gender: Women celebrities play the dual role of receiving more space from the celebrity industry, while also being more constrained to conform their bodies to the rationality of the environment;

(4) Skin colour is also an element that establishes deep differences between celebrities, whether to visibility, to reserved roles for blacks and whites, and, of course, to payoffs for each colour. In this sense,

(5) The origin and the capital of the celebrity also have importance in the moment of demarcating the power of each of the famous. Such a division, we repeat, can also be thought of as a kind of mirror of the social world itself, where one is not part of the “great system of apparition”, formed by agents who do not hold the capital of media visibility.

Intercrossing some of these specificities, we realize that it is the famous woman who appears to be the most discredited in the celebrity system, of course that with exceptions and fundamental differences between places (in the US, black women seem to hold more power than black celebrity women in Brazil, for example). The feminine body that does not bring the capital of thinness, nor the whiteness of the skin, is easily rejected. It is clear that the patrolling and imposing of beauty on the figure of the celebrity woman reach the most oppressive levels, either by the celebrity industry itself or by the audience that analyses what is exposed in the media showcase. It is important to remember that this patrolling has high repercussion in the social world: We are talking about people who serve as models of life disseminated on a large scale, being so often emulated. Marshall reinforces our argument: “Images of the bodies of female stars provide some of the raw materials for constructing normative positions regarding the body” (Marshall, 2006, p. 777).

The maintenance or adaptation to certain criteria appears as the main theme of most weekly media. Visible names such as presenter Oprah Winfrey and American actresses Kirstie Alley and Gabourey Sidibe, as well as Brazilians MC Carol (funk singer) and Preta Gil (singer) serve to analyze constraints and prejudices (with a strong racial question) present among women in media.

The constant pressure on the shape of these personalities informs us in a substantial way how the industry rationalizes the media appearance and, more than that, watches over and punishes public figures, especially women, who must keep away from food and drink. When not, they are shown as weak, careless women whose nature overcomes the control of their own body. According to Marshall (2006), Oprah (one of the richest women in world entertainment) is essentially involved in the discourse of social representation of the body: As a media *persona*, its beauty, attractiveness, and transformations are accompanied intensely by its vast audience, which is globalized:

In the context of her place as a television host, Oprah becomes part of the discussions in which the body has been discussed. Your body image feeds a series of issues and themes; the distinctions between your program and your personality are blurred and mixed. Oprah’s body is constructed as a problem in the extratextual field in newspapers and magazines and as an object of concern in his daily program. (Marshall, 2006, p. 145)

In fact, the hostess's body serves us to think about opposition and domination, about the celebrity agency and the requirement of adequacy. When it first appeared on TV in 1986, one year after its appearance in the film *The Color Purple*, it was not within the requirements of a "positive public presentation of the female form", as Marshall says, meeting the standardization that constitutes this scenario. For the sociologist, this apparition has a social meaning: She emphasizes that those women who experience a (body) situation similar to that of Oprah, far from the mediatically privileged body, can also achieve success. "Her body has organized a discourse of defiance and independence", Marshall writes (2006, p. 145), pointing to the fact that, black and fat, Oprah has set an image of "sincerity" for audiences. Two years later, she would go on a severe diet, thinning to the point of getting into a tight pair of jeans. Her "feat" demonstrated power for her audience, who saw her body transform without the hostess performing any kind of surgery: It was the victory of "willpower" (the charismatic who overcomes adversity). "I'll never be fat again", she said at the time. In this sense, what was sincere in the discourse on opposition to the standard model, which would animate women in the same condition, came to be questioned, especially when she commented on her earlier statements, regarded as "libertarians". The corporal modification of the presenter has a specific tone, since her image, her place of celebrity, was constructed from signs that indicated her high degree of similarity with the popular one and, its "authenticity": Oprah, in brief, was and is seen as someone "of the people" (the color of his skin and his non-standard body acting strongly there).

The young actress Gabourey Sibide, who achieved a privileged spot in the media when she excelled in the movie *Precious* (2009), also had her body questioned—and discussing her body and her "non-adequacy" to the Hollywood environment is to discuss her status and the possibility of her performance in that arena. Sibide, who was 26 and 130 kilograms at the time she first toured the red carpet (March 2010), starred in a role whose content called for an actress with her physical features—including black skin. The presence of the actress in the mainstream has provoked intense debate about the corporative and racial normalization that characterizes the entertainment industry: One can say that the girl concentrates a series of elements of low status whether in the media environment as well as in "real life", not only above average weight, but also color, physical traits, and gender. It is not intended here to victimize the actress, but first of all discuss the extra textual discourse that set her success, a discourse also present in the daily lives of women who consume the culture of celebrities. One of the events that led to the beginning of Gabourey's debates and his appearance as a theme was the statement of radio broadcaster Howard Stern, who on his live show commented on that year's Oscar: "There's the most enormous, fat black girl I've ever seen. (...) She should have gotten the award for Best Actress because she's never going to have another shot. What movie is she gonna be in?"

Using a Brazilian example that compares, in the sense of the requirement and the embarrassment, to the experienced lived by the two North American artists, is the actress and singer Preta Gil. Her presence in the media showed explicit intolerance: TV shows and celebrity magazines pointed to the "strangeness" of that non-white, non-emaciated body amidst the marvel of celebrities. Young, the actress circulated—and circulates—among other charismatic media people that add the capital required by the entertainment industry to women. Several examples of prejudice were observed: A search using "Preta Gil" on the Google site showed the association between the actress and the word "fat" as among the first. The site modified such an association after the celebrity came in with a lawsuit. Then a cover of *Flash* magazine showed the images of a walk to the beach by Preta Gil and TV presenter Sabrina Sato, whose slim body is a commercial success. It is used as a "good example" of the image one should have, while Preta is used to exemplify the opposite. Color and weight are also the markers that make the funk singer MC Carol have her presence questioned in the pantheon of high visibility. While successful

in a specific (but representative: Her Facebook page has almost 170 thousand followers), she, black, has her body made a mockery in the largest publications. An example is the material seen on the site Ego (published on 08/06/2015), in which we see a photo of the funk singer lying down and with part of the exposed butt. The title says: “MC Carol sensualizes and says: ‘I am fat, wanted and much loved’”.



*Figure 1. MC Carol poses for her shooting.*

Seventy-eight comments follow the story that refers to the image posted by MC on his Facebook page. Only four of them are positive to the apparition (“Those idiot people who see defect in everything, let the people be happy”). One of them follows the same path, despite the negative note: “Is it nice to see No, but everyone deserves to be happy, people!” There are the most aggressive (“People have made the world an open sewer”), the “scared” (“I cannot believe I’m seeing this”), and those who question the very celebrity to occupy space on the site dedicated to famous people (“Ego, let’s please select the ‘celebrities’, honey”). It is the non-standard weight among women who occupy the most visible spaces that prevail as a topic of derision. Carol, Preta, Gabourey, all of them are questioned given their weight, but also because they seem “too popular” (Carol, of humble origin, mainly). They carry the markers refuted by Oprah, who seeks to lose weight and distance herself from the past image—and that, in a show of adherence and opposition to high visibility standards—is criticized for this.

The constant vigilance upon the female celebrity’s body is well exemplified through actress Kirsten Alley. At the beginning of her career, she as shown slim and later became fat and later thin again, several times, a fact that served for dozens of tabloid covers and celebrity magazines. The unease caused by Alley’s body has its specificities: The actress was part of the group of famous women “empowered” by displaying youthfulness, a thin silhouette and white skin. When fattening, it leaves, symbolically, this privileged place, where those who really deserve it circulate: Their “carelessness” is then acted upon as a moral problem, a kind of weakness of character, lack of strength, the latter generally associated with those considered above weight. A call from the cover of *People* magazine is an example of this reality: The report titled “The Saga of Kirstie Alley’s Weight” shows the actress in two moments, “sexy and thin” in 2005 and with extra kilograms in the larger photo. “Blame”, “shame”, and “repentance” are the three words used alongside the artist’s body.

The constant look upon the female body of celebrity shows us the force of the discourse of correction still strongly present in the system that gives us much of the images we consume. Despite certain media “dating” with



other possible forms of existence (advertising campaigns including fat women, for example) and struggles for greater heterogeneity of people seen in social networks, the fact is that the status of the celebrated woman suffers constant cracks when her appearance is not supported by privileged markers.

If fat women celebrities need to stay “in their places” (comedies, for example, in the case of actresses) or quickly seek to “surpass” the considered weight above the allowed, being black, this search needs to be even more urgent, as the association of the two markers relates them to an environment that cannot (yet) be part of the universe celebrated except in a folkloric way or, also a condition to be overcome, as poverty.

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