

Abstract

Title of Dissertation: BODY/IMAGE/NARRATIVE: CONTEMPORARY
RHETORIC OF BODY SHAPE AND SIZE

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The dissertation examines body shape and size from a rhetorical perspective as ethos, or character, in contemporary American culture. The analysis is primarily of narrative and visual texts that proliferated in the debate over ideal body size and shape that has emerged in the last fifteen years. By demonizing fatness and glamorizing slenderness for women and muscularity for men, our culture has rendered all bodies' shapes and sizes rhetorical. The body as material and visual rhetoric is interpretable as representative of character, with the fat body representing a lack of the virtues that seem inherent in the lean body: health, fitness, discipline, beauty. Narratives written about individual's bodies, including weight loss success stories, eating disorder memoirs, size acceptance narratives, and films that feature actors in fat suits, have the possibility to maintain or challenge prevailing views about body shape and size and the relationship between body shape and size and character/ethos.

The four narrative genres studied have emerged in mainstream cultural productions rather than what might be considered alternative media, and come from a wide variety of popular sources. These narrative genres, and also the visuals that accompany or transmit the narratives, are important pieces of the debate over

acceptable body shape and size for men and women. The last fifteen years of the debate have brought with them changes to mainstream media through challenges to the ideal body image for women, though men, particularly heterosexual men, have limited venues through which to challenge media representations of ideal male physiques.

**BODY/IMAGE/NARRATIVE: CONTEMPORARY RHETORIC OF
BODY SHAPE AND SIZE**

by

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Introduction

“Imagine, I said to myself, spending the next years of your life writing about a woman’s problem with her weight.” Kim Chernin, The Obsession

Work on this project really began in 1997 at Auburn University, in Auburn, Alabama, when I started work on a Master’s thesis in literature that examined fat female characters in short stories and novels in the twentieth century. As work progressed on that project, I discovered that many of the fat female characters had egregious levels of complacency, vast appetites for food or sex, or some other extreme characteristic that made them almost, if not actually, insane. I began to wonder whether these characters were exaggerated versions of a cultural stereotype about fat women. My curiosity led me to popular culture, to look at the only self-portraits of fat women that were widely available at the time: the weight loss success story, in which women—and men, too—wrote about what it was like to be fat, past tense. The association between fat and feeling “out of control” impressed me immediately. I soon found that I was not the first to discover this relationship between fat and control, and leanness and “control.”

During my work on my thesis project, a friend loaned me a copy of Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*.¹ Bordo’s work examines images of women in media aimed at women, and in particular examines images of women’s appetites, for food, for sex, for prominence. Bordo’s analysis demonstrates that women’s appetites are not celebrated, or rather, that limitations on women’s appetites are stringent even while “indulging” one’s desires is promoted: women in the advertisements she assesses take tiny spoonfuls of ice cream

and are satisfied with tiny portions of food with low or no calories. Bordo's reading of "the slender body"—her assessment that it is coded as sexually desirable but that its appetites are managed—and her interpretation of the anorexic body as an unconscious symbol of resistance to becoming a woman as women's bodies and behaviors were inscribed within a patriarchal system, is impressive. She also noted important changes in demands on women's physiques: not just a slender but a toned body—one with visible musculature beneath the skin—became the goal as the eighties' emphasis on aerobics yielded to a nineties emphasis on aerobics plus strength training. Bordo argued that that body shape represented restraint and strength of will. Bordo's work convinced me that finding the fictional relationship between eating (appetite for food) and other extreme behaviors, including excessive sexual desire, were not merely literary happenings—that the culture conflated appetites, allowed one appetite to symbolize others.

Kim Chernin's 1981 book, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, preceded Bordo's work but came later to me, and was equally influential on my thinking. Like Bordo, Chernin associates women's weight issues of all sorts: from the anorexic denial of hunger to the binge eater's quest for satisfaction through food. Chernin's work emerged at a time when anorexia was becoming known as a social disorder, whereas, as I argue in this dissertation, eating disorders, especially amongst college age women, are now so common as to seem unremarkable in the eyes of many of the sufferers themselves. Chernin was amongst the first to question the medical discourse associating fatness with disease, making her critical text in many ways a forerunner of what I track in Chapter 5 as a "size acceptance narrative."

Both Chernin and Bordo are indebted to Susie Orbach, whose 1978 book *Fat Is A Feminist Issue* grounded the debate over fat, appetite, eating, dieting and exercise as one that required a feminist agenda. Orbach's thesis—that women who seem to be unable to conform to the cultural ideal of slenderness were in fact unconsciously choosing their larger bodies to resist the culture's strictures on female strength and desire—made fat a political statement. I remember being struck, when I first read Orbach's work, by how each of these theorists, while writing about how the slender ideal of feminine beauty was about the discipline and control and management of female appetites, and hence female power and sense of right to power.

Some of the work in this dissertation augments and adds detail to the arguments these women have already made. In particular, my examination of what I call the “weight loss success story,” which tracks the narratives from the mid-1990's to 2002, provides greater detail and new textual evidence of the relationship assumed to exist between the slender body and “control.” Sociologist and linguists have now well documented how women and girls use the language of diets, fatness, and so on, to create communities and express anxiety. According to Mimi Nichter, author of *Fat Talk: What Girls and Their Parents Are Saying About Dieting*, explains:

The statement “I'm so fat” is actually much more than an observation about how a girl looks or feels. It is a call for support from her peers. The response she receives from her friends is an affirmation that she is, in fact, *not* fat, and that things aren't as bad as they seem. . . . Girls read cues provided by the speaker and the situation to derive the meaning of their “I'm so fat” statement. For example, when “I'm so

fat” is uttered by a girl who is changing her clothes in the locker room, the impetus for the statement may come from the vulnerability of exposing her body to the sight of others. It is then appropriate for another girl to respond in a way that mitigates the speaker’s discomfort.²

Without wishing to downplay my dismay that “fat” has flexible meanings, which might all be boiled down to “out of control,” in the language of young women, I do think that the element of bonding over body image disturbances is missing in most straight men’s repartee. In essence, men seem to acknowledge their body dissatisfaction insincerely, as if it were foolish even to be concerned. Therefore, in this project I have attempted one of the few serious looks at male and female body image disturbance across genres.

Another key difference in my project is that, while many cultural examinations have examined media messages from a top down perspective—that is, how ideal images affect readers—I have endeavored to examine also from a more grassroots level. Rather than critiquing images of slender models (necessary work but work that had been accomplished), I sought to examine what are sometimes called “real” bodies, with the “real” differentiating them from the “ideal.” The narratives I study here are rarely by supermodels, or are by models who are no longer what is called “straight size,” and who are now “plus size.” Instead, these narratives are mostly written by people whose publication on their bodies may be their only glimpse of fame. For the most part, I elude the vocabulary of “the body” in order to study, in detail and in general, the effects of cultural beliefs on individual bodies and psyches.

I have attempted to map out the debate over ideal body size, weight, slenderness, muscularity and, most of all, fat. My goal has been to look at competing testimony about the body as sign, and discover how belief in the body as sign might motivate different types of actions. I have therefore spent a great deal of time amassing evidence that debate over ideal body sizes—for men and women—exists.

When I returned to the project to develop it into an examination of non-fiction and fiction as a rhetorical theorist in 2000, I quickly discovered what was to be one of the most exciting and challenging aspects of this project: the wealth of primary text materials. Sometimes it has seemed to me that Americans talk, read and write about *fat* so much it's remarkable anything else gets done. So that *this* project would get done, I narrowed in on four genres, in part for their popularity at the time of my narrowing, and also for the way they stake out different territories in the debate. In the first chapter, in preparation for examining how the different genres marched across the cultural terrain, I attempted to survey the cultural paradigm. I wanted to find out “what fat means,” and found its meanings by exploring it as the opposite of many virtues. My survey of “fat” and its opposites appears as the first chapter.

The second and third chapters of this dissertation examine narratives that best reflect the cultural paradigm, with the second examining the textual messages and the third, the visual messages in context. These are the narratives I dub “weight loss success stories”; they recount the re-shaping of individual bodies to conform more obviously to the cultural ideal. I liken these to religious conversion narratives, because they showcase a dismal, failing “before” state, with a typically radical moment of truth that serves as a turning point and a glorious conclusion. They also

seek new converts, asking audiences to try the same fitness and diet plans so that those audiences might also see the light. The genre is so prolific that more emerge daily on the internet, weekly in magazines and on television programs as well as in the privacy of group meetings convened by organizations like Weight Watchers, monthly in still more magazines, and even in documentary and fictional films, short stories, and novels. Weight loss success stories, however brief, sell products and services from billboards and in spam e-mail messages.

I draw on what may seem an eclectic array of theorists in this work. Key among these are Kenneth Burke, Ernest Bormann, Carol Blair and Laura Mulvey. Rhetorical scholars on genre, including Carolyn Miller and Amy J. Devitt, are also especially important to my theorizing about how these genres work with and against each other. In essence, I have drawn on theories that seemed most applicable to the texts at hand, regardless of the scholarly origin. It seemed apparent that each theorist proposed that the lenses through which events and people and bodies are viewed affect both the viewer and the viewed. So, for example, Burke's framework of *ultimate terms* and *ultimate orders* that guide beliefs jives with Bormann's work, which shows how stories become archetypes from which people borrow to structure their lives and promote unity.

Kenneth Burke's dramaturgic method, explained in some detail in Chapter Two, helped me to organize the boggling array of primary texts I encountered. To attempt some obtain some degree of empiricism, I created for myself a set of columns on a posterboard, with each term of the pentad (actor, act, scene, purpose, agency) as the label of one column. I numbered over a hundred of the success stories I had

found,³ and, scrolling through each narrative, gradually filled in a partial quotation and the relevant text number under each term, until I had used up the space. So, for example, under the motive “scene” I would assign “scenic motives,” such as “college” or “Mom’s cooking.” Eventually I expanded to include co- and counter-agents, then my columns became more numerous as I located key ratios in the pentads. Predictably, there were many key ratios, and I speculated that the genre had enough flexibility to accommodate a variety of experiences while still maintaining its overall generic features. Although my use of Burke’s terminology decreases after Chapter Two, it is clear that the motives generated in opposition to the weight loss success story’s vision are often the same across the genres.

Very early, the repetitiveness of the stories struck me as a “fantasy theme,” a classic example of “symbolic convergence,” and so Ernest Bormann’s work in communication became central to my way of thinking about how these narratives work persuasively—and an answer to why there were so many of them! Bormann’s work also seems key to understanding how the genres I examine later accomplish their rhetorical tasks. My indebtedness to Burke and Bormann is clear within the individual chapters.

Carol Blair’s work on rhetorical texts as material has helped me to consider the human body as a kind of shape-shifting text, and especially one whose meaning will be negotiated by individuals affected by culture, not by individuals who share the same sense of that culture. Blair’s work effectively assisted me to challenge Burke in a push towards understanding ethos (character) in a material sense. I am also indebted to scholars who look at visuals as rhetorical. The work of Paul

Messaris in *Visual Literacy*, and the team of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, in *Reading Images: A Grammar of Visual Design*, has been enormously helpful in my understanding and argument about how visuals accompanying the weight loss success story and size acceptance narrative especially, work with and against the textual arguments.

* * *

The genres covered here—the weight loss success story, the eating disorder memoir, the size acceptance narrative, and the fat suit comedy—participate in the cultural debate over body shape and size. Each fulfills a function, radical or conservative. There are yet more genres kin to these and involved in the debate. These include a subgenre of the weight loss success story, in which subjects undergo voluntary gastric bypass surgery in order to lose weight. Narrative accounts of choosing to undergo the surgery and the subsequent recovery are widely available as magazine articles, documentary television programs and as memoirs. That genre does end in weight loss, but usually involves an even bleaker “before” picture of the subject—one bleak enough to justify an extreme surgical process where diet and exercise plans have failed. The recovery from the surgery and the adjustment to the new digestive system are key elements of this subgenre that make it strikingly different from the success story proper, and any rhetorical analysis of the subgenre should not ignore the celebrity spokespeople it has, including singers Carnie Wilson and Etta James, and television personality Al Roker.

Although my chapter on eating disorder narratives focused on testimony provided by those people who were in the process of identifying their disorder,

healing, or reflecting on the entire process, there are narratives—published illicitly on the internet and hounded and censored—by young women who claim that anorexia and bulimia are not disorders at all. Instead, they claim, the states are lifestyle choices, offering their own sets of definitional arguments and promoting methods and “thinspiration” not unlike what dieters use to motivate them. These “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” sites, and the many articles in the media that, by condemning them publicly, increase the number of young women who turn to them out of curiosity or in search of community, are also of interest to anyone who studies the culture’s glorification of thinness.

My focus has been on mainstream media, which means that authors whose work appears in alternatives to mainstream media have been largely ignored in this study. I have attempted to examine the scope of the debate of acceptable body shape and size, the way that the debate is conducted through personal narratives as argument, the way that individual bodies and souls have been affected—both empowered and repressed--by the glamorization of slenderness (for women) and muscularity (for men). But the territory covered by the debate is vast, and with more incarnations of these genres emerging weekly if not daily in popular forums, it has been difficult to find the edges of the terrain. As the culture shifts, more genres are and will be erupting, as ideas and ideals collide in the popular imagination. Earthquakes and volcanoes are challenging to the would-be mapmaker.

Chapter One: “Fat” Terminology

The material presence of the human body and its adornments—clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, cosmetics, tattoos--are connected to *ethos*, the way audiences perceive character. Perhaps as never before, American culture celebrates the symbolic power of the body and fetishizes its adornments. Appearance is strongly tied to readings of character; in essence, despite moral protestations against such judgments, how people look determines to varying degrees how others judge them, and often how they judge themselves. Rhetorical approaches to and examinations the human body, its decorations and its representations in the media, are therefore increasingly exigent, as, in Carol Mattingly’s terms, scholars “rethink what counts” in rhetoric, to include the body and the body’s decorations as material and visual “texts,” subject to interpretation by “readers.”⁴

Body shape and size are aspects of physical ethos that Americans focus on, perhaps with good reason. Americans, now known as the fattest people on earth, fear fat. Their government has officially declared obesity an epidemic, with the number of deaths related to obesity predicted to overtake the number of deaths from cancer in the next quarter century. At the same time, the cultural ideals of beauty as well as health for both sexes are lean, and the promotion of this lean ideal in fashion and advertising exerts a pressure as strong as, or stronger than, the medical forebodings to achieve and maintain a lean physique.

America's obsession with, and fear of, fat is spreading globally as its media predominates. Many industrialized nations struggle with growing health concerns as their populations become more overweight. The fear of fat is powerful and

widespread. In America alone, according to S. Hesse-Biber, author of *Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity* (1996), at any given moment, up to 65 million people may be dieting, choosing their methods from amongst the 17 thousand plus weight loss plans commercially available.⁵ In January, 1981, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on a survey of 500 Americans, in which one hundred and ninety (38%) said their greatest fear was “getting fat,” an answer that ranked higher than nuclear war in Reagan-era America.⁶ Twenty years later, *Shape* magazine asked a dozen women if they would gain twenty pounds “in exchange for a plum career opportunity--and a big raise.”⁷ One woman agreed to gain a hypothetical twenty pounds “if we’re talking a million dollars a year,” and said she’d “use the money to get a plum trainer.” Other respondents refused to gain more than ten pounds. One refused to gain any weight at all, explaining: “Gaining any weight messes with my self-image and my confidence, so unless the opportunity was something really impressive, I would pass.”

Similar testimony abounds. Rebecca Johnson reports on a conversation:

I tried [an] experiment on a friend: “If you had to choose between being 100 pounds overweight and losing your left hand, which would you choose?”

“The 100 pounds; I could lose it.”

“No,” I amended the game, “you could never lose it.”

Pause. “I guess I’d give up my hand.”

“How about 50 pounds?”

“Could I give a few fingers?”⁸

Surveys and studies in abundance have uncovered aversions to fat and fat people. Studies of school children have shown that overweight children have fewer friends and are less liked than their thinner peers.⁹ Obese women are consistently judged less desirable as sexual partners; a 1995 study by Sittton and Blanchard showed that obese women were perceived as less desirable than thinner women who struggle with drug addiction.¹⁰ The obese receive less attention from salespeople,¹¹ often receive less adequate medical treatment,¹² and suffer discrimination in college admissions and in the workplace.¹³

A recent study by Mikki Hebl, associate professor of psychology and management at Rice University, found that aversion to fat people was so powerful that thin people associating with fat people were likely to be affected. Participants in a study were told to evaluate a male job applicant by examining a strong resume and a photograph. In one photograph, the man was seated next to a woman in who wore a size 8; in the other, he sat next to the same woman in a prosthetic fat suit that made her a size 22. When seen with the thinner woman, the man scored better across the board on such characteristics as “likeability, enthusiasm, projecting a corporate image, earning potential and professional ethics.”¹⁴

A glance at the magazine rack in any bookstore or supermarket confirms the anti-fat message. Headlines command readers to “Lose Twenty Pounds of Lard,” to “Break the Fat Barrier,” to “Cut the Fat Out of Your Diet.”¹⁵ Fat remains a bogey to be feared, often a dietary item to be reduced and eliminated, a physical flaw that endangers one’s health, social possibilities and career opportunities. Even the recent low-carb, high-protein diet craze, represented in particular by the Atkins’ and South

Beach Diets, which villainize carbohydrates rather than fats in foods, are about removing fat from the body's contours.

Only a limited number of celebrities with less-than-ideal bodies are featured as cover models on magazines: Queen Latifah, Camryn Manheim, Oprah Winfrey, Rosie O'Donnell, Star Jones. Only a limited number of celebrities with less-than-ideally-thin bodies exist at all. Men with larger physiques are frequently depicted, on sitcoms like *The King of Queens* and *According to Jim*, as rather lowbrow; it seems that fat actors can play comedic roles, but they are rarely romantic leads.¹⁶ The comparative absence of the body with visible excess fat from our media highlights our desire to avoid fat in all its manifestations, and those celebrities with "fat" bodies are often famous in part for their struggles with weight or for their championing of size issues.

This chapter offers an examination the term "fat" itself, and a theoretical exploration of its power to motivate. Why is "fat" considered so bad that, in the pilot episode of the show "Fat Actress," Kirstie Alley is depicted weighing herself, then falling on the floor bawling? What prompts the fear and loathing of "fat"? How might attitudes towards fat change?

Bodily and dietary fats are necessary to life, and yet, especially in perceived excess on the body, fat is considered revolting, abject.¹⁷ This loathing and fear of fat bodies must be understood in relation to the cherishing of other bodies: the visibly muscular bodies of athletes and bodybuilders; the slender and often bony bodies of most runway models and many actresses; and the curvy but toned bodies of entertainers like Jennifer Lopez.

One way into an understanding of the relationship between fat and its perceived opposites is through the words themselves. To examine this relationship, I turn to the theories of social critic Kenneth Burke, a self-proclaimed “logologist,” or studier of words. Burke described three categories of terms: positive, dialectical and ultimate. These categories are particularly helpful in understanding the relationship between fatness and fitness, health and thinness/physical beauty.

In Burke’s scheme, *positive terms* refer to concrete items, tangible in the world. Burke’s own examples are “tree” and “ax.” (A minor difficulty with Burke’s own terminology is that the word “positive” itself has multiple meanings, so perhaps it is best to keep in mind that, in Burkean terms, “positive” does not mean “good.” Instead, it seems Burke chose the term “positive” because, in his mind, one could be certain, or “positive,” about what one was referring to when one used these terms.) While each individual may have somewhat different mental images of exactly what “positive terms” denote, most recognize them in their various physical forms. Only consider how rarely people argue over, for example, whether or not something is or is not an ax. As Burke writes, “A positive term is most unambiguously itself when it names a visible and tangible thing which can be located in time and place.”¹⁸

Many terms, of course, do not refer unambiguously to physical items, but instead refer to concepts, such as “justice” or “hope.” One cannot touch justice or hope physically, and because of this, what they refer to exactly can be, and often is, the subject of extended debate. One person’s “hope” may be another’s “delusion,” one person’s “justice” another’s “revenge.” Burke calls terms that refer to concepts instead of objects, *dialectical terms*. Implicit in the label *dialectical terms* is the

suggestion that the meaning of the terms must be the subject of some debate. It is easy, for example, to imagine people arguing over whether or not a particular court decision renders “justice.” In a *dialectical order*, Burke argues, there is enough debate over a conceptual term to allow multiple definitions to flourish, and society is not very unified in whether the concept that the term refers to is “good” or “bad.”

If groups of people begin to evaluate them in particular ways, *dialectical terms* acquire status. Despite a tenuous grasp on a shared definition, groups may hold certain conceptual terms up as ideals, while demonizing other concepts. For example, in America, the concept of “democracy” has long been valorized, as have the concepts “free trade” and “equality.” Many will argue that the United States government is a “democracy” despite more technical definitions that specify it as a “republic.” A limited minority will argue that the government is a “plutocracy” or “oligarchy;” often, these arguments are not intended to valorize plutocratic or oligarchic forms of government, but instead to critique how far from the ideal “democracy” the government is. In that case, the debate is not about whether “democracy” is a good or bad form of government; “democracy” remains an ideal used to critique other forms of government perceived as less worthy.

Conversely, “totalitarianism” and “terrorism,” which may appear to exist in opposition to the idealized concepts cited above, are guaranteed to generate negative feelings amongst most Americans in the year 2005, when the president has declared a “War on Terrorism” that is often described as “Paving the Way for Democracy.” This apparent polarity between the common American use of the terms is an example of what Burke calls an *ultimate order*: a social system in which concepts are ranked

in a hierarchy, and which therefore results in binaries, such as “democracy” versus “totalitarianism.” In essence, American society appears to agree that “democracy” is an ultimate governmental good, whereas “totalitarianism” is an ultimate governmental bad. Perhaps “plutocracy” and “oligarchy” are not generally considered so bad as “totalitarianism,” or so good as “democracy.” (Indeed, perhaps “plutocracy” and “oligarchy,” due to their positions in the middle of the hierarchy, are rarely considered at all.) In this system, few outlets are available for multiple perspectives on the hierarchy of terms itself. In essence, though there may in fact be debate over whether or not the United States government is a “democracy,” viewpoints suggesting that “democracy” is not a good political system will receive little consideration, have little sway.

Fat as “Positive” Term and Its Opposites

At last we return to the subject at hand: fat. Into which category of terms—positive, dialectical, or ultimate--should we place “fat?” Based on the discussion above, the difference between *positive* terms on the one hand, and *dialectical* and *ultimate terms* on the other, is quite distinct: tangible object v. concepts. However, I will argue that “fat” is, in fact, appropriately placed in category, which is part of what gives the term its power to inspire anger and fear.

First of all, it seems obvious that “fat” is a *positive* term, one that denotes a physical item visible and tangible in the world. Fat is a measurable physical thing, a material. In our culture it is perhaps a compulsively measured physical thing, whether we speak in terms of fat grams consumed in a lunch of cheeseburger and French fries, or fat in pounds, inches or percentages on a person’s body. When one

holds a bottle of olive oil, one is holding glass that surrounds physical fat derived from the olive fruit. Perhaps nothing seems fattier than shortening, that sticky, malleable white goop. Scoop your fingers in a tub of Crisco vegetable shortening and it seems inarguable that you are holding “fat” where it is “most unambiguously itself.” But you are also holding air that has been whipped into the fat and that will escape when the fat melts in the frying pan. Even more complex than shortening is the olive fruit: surely there is fat present in it—it could be pressed out to bottle olive oil—but there are other compounds present, as well. Our diet vocabulary tells us that there are other nutrients in the fruit, compounds we label carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, minerals, fiber. Still, many will argue that the olive is a “fatty” food.

When it comes to the human body, the presence of fat may also be pointed to: breasts, round bellies, dimpled thighs and buttocks. These contain fat. Indeed, the famous “pinch an inch” advertising campaign for Special K cereal suggests that if you can pinch a fold of abdominal flesh (or more), you are pinching “fat,” and should switch to eating Special K to get rid of it. Often when we say we have “fat” or are “fat,” we focus on body fat’s tendency to settle just under the skin on particular parts of the body, whereas we ignore its role as cushion on and between other parts. We also ignore the skin itself, the blood and blood vessels that flow through it; we focus on the “fat.” The fact that “fat” is a *positive* term explains little of the hatred of fat; instead it seems that the presence of “fat” in its physical forms is hunted out because of the hatred of fat.

One of the most striking images that makes clear the *positive* nature of “fat” is that of Oprah Winfrey, thin in 1988 after a stint on the Optifast program, carting over

sixty pounds of plastic “fat,” the amount she’d lost, in a children’s wagon onto the stage behind her at the beginning of one episode of “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” (See Fig. 1)¹⁹



Figure 1: Oprah Winfrey from *Make the Connection*

The drama of the photograph is generated not only by Winfrey's body, which is recognizably more slender than it had been previously, and her exultant expression, but also the load of "fat" that demonstrates her former heft over which she now triumphs. The fake "fat" in the wagon shows not just what was intentionally removed from Winfrey's body, but also, as she wheels it about the stage in a cart to the cheering of the crowd, how burdensome it had been, how heavy, large and unwieldy, and most of all, how separate it is finally from her thinner body. Really, the photograph suggests, this "fat" was never part of Oprah Winfrey at all; it was a material barrier to her real self, now unencumbered.

Fat's persuasiveness as a material object is illuminated by recent explorations of material as rhetorical, such as the work of Carole Blair. Specifically, Blair suggests that theories of material rhetoric must contextualize, and take into consideration not only what intended effects a text has or what its meaning(s) are, but also what it does, to, with and against, other texts. Blair suggests that texts can enable new texts to emerge, appropriate other texts for new use, contextualize other texts, supplement them and/or challenge them.²⁰ If one might read Winfrey's body as a text, and the fake fat as another, it seems clear that the two are in a combative relationship: the wagon full of fake fat proves Winfrey's triumph over the real fat now absent from her body and present only in symbolic form, which she drags behind her like a gladiator triumphing over a kill. Removing real fat allowed Winfrey's new body to emerge; the fake fat explains and contextualizes this emergence and dramatizes the antagonism Winfrey felt between her subjectivity and her body as object.

That is to say that there is a clear hierarchy in this case: fat is bad in contrast with other body “parts.” It dwells so low on the hierarchy that eliminating it becomes a cause for celebration. It is difficult to imagine someone celebrating the deliberate loss of other body “parts” in quite the same way, as if he or she had been liberated from it through strenuous effort. On the body, fat is perceived in a combative relationship with all other tissues, which are often taken as a whole and called “lean body mass.” When people visit gyms or doctors and have a body composition analysis done, the percentage of their body that is “fat” is measured against the remaining percentage, the “lean body mass.” The percentage of bone is irrelevant, the weight of the liver unimportant to weight loss goals. The focus of weight loss efforts—or what might more accurately be called body reshaping efforts—is not, of course, the reduction of muscle tissue, bone density, organ mass, or blood volume, though these may also be reduced as a person loses fat and weight. One does not see Winfrey carting about objects meant to signify these other tissues: only the fat loss is celebrated, and indeed, the wagonload suggests that *all* of the weight that came from Winfrey’s body was made up of fat, which is impossible. It is as if the body is made up of fat and then everything else, and the “everything else” seems to stay in place as fat leaves the valuable and valued body. The fact that a hierarchy is present suggests that a system of beliefs is at work behind the “positive” terms, governing how items are ranked.

Perhaps because, with fat, the most visible tissues below the skin are muscle and bone, these two body tissues seem most antithetical to fat on the body. Certainly “bony” bodies have limited visible fat, or the bones would not be as likely to stand

out. But bones are not generally seen as being under the control of the person within the body. Though women especially are admonished to eat and exercise to protect bone density, especially during and after menopause, it seems ludicrous to suggest that someone could lengthen or otherwise affect the shape and amount of bone in his or her body. They can only control how much bone is visible or invisible by controlling how much other tissue—specifically fat and muscle—cover those bones.

Muscle, however, *is* considered to be under the control of the individual, and so muscle, even more than bone, is perceived as the antithesis of fat. This opposition is especially clear in publications dedicated to fitness: “Increase muscle, lose fat,” their headlines cajole. Indeed, increasing muscle mass is supposed to lead to fat loss, because muscle uses more fuel daily to maintain itself than does fat, which boosts metabolic function. Thus muscle is not merely antithetical to fat, but it is also perceived as the eradicator of fat: it is literally perceived as its opposition.

The Ultimate Order: Fat v. Fitness and Health

The very fact that “fat” is perceived as being the physical enemy of other body parts suggests that it is not merely a *positive* term however. “Fat” and “fatness” are also concepts; in fact, the concept of “fat” is a conglomeration of negative concepts. Many scholars in many fields, including philosopher Susan Bordo, social historian Hillel Schwarz, and psychologist Judith Rodin, after studying fat phobia, link “fat” with a perceived loss or lack of control. This link makes sense if we put “fat” in an opposing relationship with “fitness,” the conceptual equivalent of “muscle.”

Theoretically, changes in diet effect changes in bodily composition: if I want to lose fat, I must change my diet to take in fewer calories, less fat, fewer

carbohydrates, or what have you. Another, equally important weapon in the war against fat, is exercise. As Susan Powter proclaims, you must “eat, breathe, and move.” What Powter means, of course, is that the *way* one eats, breathes and moves is important to body composition. (Powter teaches careful breath control in her exercise videos.) If diets control eating, exercise controls movement (for most, breathing takes care of itself). The exercise component of “fat loss” is often termed “fitness,” or at least exercise is viewed as a means to “fitness.”²¹

But what is fitness? Unlike “fat” and “muscle,” the term “fitness” has no tangible referent in the world of the concrete. It is, at least, what Burke would call a “dialectical term.” Because *dialectical* terms refer to intangible concepts, like “justice” and “democracy,” their definitions are more difficult to agree upon than *positive* terms. While we probably will not disagree over, “What is a tree?”, if pressed, we may well disagree over, “What is justice?” or, more importantly for this study, “What is fitness?” And experts do.

According to the textbook *Measurement and Evaluation in Human Performance*, 2nd edition, by Morrow, et al, physical fitness is “[a] set of attributes that people have or achieve that relates to the ability to perform physical activity.” Physical fitness, according to this textbook used often in college-level kinesiology courses, breaks down into four subsidiary measurable parts: endurance, strength, flexibility and agility. The textbook lists numerous tests of these parts of fitness and recognizes a range of fitness levels depending on various degrees of performance.

A slightly different definition is offered by the President’s Council on Physical Fitness, the group responsible for giving fitness awards to grade-schoolers. For the

Council, being physically fit means “having the energy and strength to perform daily activities vigorously and alertly, with energy left over to enjoy leisure activities or meet emergency demands.”²² The Council then breaks “fitness” down into only three subsidiary parts: Endurance, Strength and Flexibility, and offers standards for each of these as well as suggested exercises to achieve them. Having these definitions may be little help for those searching for an explicit definition of fitness. Whose “daily activities” must one perform “vigorously and alertly” to qualify as fit? Certainly a construction worker will have different daily activities from a teacher, a truck driver from a chemist, or a track star from an office worker. Both the textbook and the council list abilities that can be tested and compared. Each, however, has different ways of measuring the attributes they measure. Regardless, however, of these differing definitions, it is clear that “fitness”—the state of body—and “exercise”—the activity that yields a fitter body, are, ultimately, “goods.” In that sense, “fitness” is a kind of bodily ideal, and exists in a hierarchy with its lack; “fatness” signifies a lack of “fitness.”

“Health” is another dialectical term that often functions as an antithesis of fat. Many who write about their decisions to lose weight, in particular in the form of fat, do so stating that they want to get “healthy,” implying that fat is keeping them from a state of health, or that fat will lead to a state of ill-health. Fat is described as “a health threat,” obesity as an “epidemic.” The definition of health, therefore, requires some probing.

Whereas the definitions of physical fitness above indicate the required presence of a set of more or less specified and measurable attributes, dictionary

definitions of health stipulate merely an absence of attributes, “disease, pain and defect.”²³ If this is the working definition, health and fitness may overlap each other and be present in the same body, or may not. Presumably, healthy people may have a range of fitness levels, and a range of fatness, as well, and BMI charts and other ranges of “healthy weights” demonstrate the acknowledgment of this range by health professionals. We might also presume that some who are not “healthy” according to the above definition--people who have a diagnosed disorder or disease--may be quite fit despite their diagnosis.²⁴

However, the definition of health in our culture generally includes more than mere absence of disease. According to The World Health Organization in 1946, health is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”²⁵ Authors Roberto Mordacci and Robert Sobel more recently argued that this is an idealistic and vague description:

[H]ealth is not an ideal absolute that one either has in its entirety or does not have at all. Health and malady are mutually compatible; one can have a sickness yet be otherwise healthy. It can be remarkably difficult to answer the seemingly simple question, Is so and so healthy? Indeed, one can think of acquaintances with major congenital defects, for example, who are so whole and well-functioning despite their disability, that one does not see the defect but only their health.²⁶

Others agree, noting that “It does not help to add ‘not just the absence of illness.’ After all, there is no limit to what anything is not.” This article in the *Ardell Wellness*

Report, a quarterly newsletter promoting the wellness perspective of Dr. Don Ardell, himself a fitness proponent and distance runner, asserts that:

From the ambitious perspective of a wellness outlook, health is the willingness to take responsibility for everything that affects the quality of your life, to gain and maintain a high level of physical fitness, to dine wisely in a manner consistent with current scientific guidelines for optimal nutrition and to think critically, seek added meaning and purpose, have healthy pleasures and cultivate and sustain positive relationships, for starters.²⁷

Here we see at last the inclusion of physical fitness, which itself is defined with varying component parts, as a component part of health. But according to Carol L. Otis, head of the Women's Sports Medicine Clinic at the Kerlan-Job Orthopaedic Clinic in Los Angeles, *fitness* "is a combination of cardiovascular health, muscle health, strength, endurance, and a mental or spiritual state of being."²⁸ According to this expert, fitness includes components of "health," some of which would not be measurable in empirical terms. The inclusion of spirituality in definitions of health are also intriguing, though vague, and troubling to other promoters of "fitness," who prefer to focus on the physical aspects of fitness.

All of this debate over the technical definitions of fitness and health should leave us not with an idea that both terms are useless. Their rhetorical usefulness depends upon their power, despite or perhaps because of the imprecision of their definitions, to motivate as ideals. Not having a precise definition of "fitness" or "health" need not detract from one's desire to achieve one or the other or both. With

all the attention paid to defining them, indeed it seems likely that these are not terms existing in a *dialectical order*, in which their status as “good” or “bad” concepts is up for debate. It seems rather that they are accepted as ideals in an *ultimate order*, and that as ideals their exact definitions are exigent for application to individual bodies.

The flexibility of the definitions allows people who accept the concepts as ideals to negotiate their own adherence to them, much in the same way that valuing “democracy” motivates a number of quite different acts in American society. One person’s concept of “fitness” may motivate two-mile walks, three times a week, whereas others will do yoga each morning for an hour, and others will train for marathons, and still others will lift heavy weights several days a week. Neither the fitness walker nor the yogi nor the marathoner nor the weightlifter is likely to think their bodies “unfit” if they believe that their activity level has achieved “fitness.” Having a more stringent definition of “fitness” might actually deter some people from exercise, as the three-walks-per-week enthusiast might find “agility” and “flexibility” too difficult to achieve for a variety of reasons, including disability.

“Fitness” and its most-often listed subsidiary parts--endurance, strength and flexibility--might seem to be “positive” because physical fitness tests seem to measure something concrete.²⁹ Tests of “fitness,” for example, might measure how far or how long a person can walk or run, how many sit-ups or push-ups can be done in a given period of time, how long the body takes to resume its resting heart rate after sustained effort, or some combination of endurance, flexibility and agility skills. These tests, however, do not locate fitness in the material world so much as attempt to define the term by testing what a fit person might be capable of doing, or by

providing a range of physical responses to exercises or physical abilities and rating them from poor to excellent. Consequently, physical fitness tests vary significantly depending on who is doing the testing and on who is being tested. There can be heated debate over the need for more or less stringency when standards are challenged or altered.³⁰

We do not expect that all fit people will manifest their fitness in the same tests of endurance, strength, and flexibility; our definition of fitness varies depending on what we use to measure it and who it is we are expecting to perform fitness. This is made quite clear if we consider the titles of some popular fitness magazines: *Men's Health* and *Men's Fitness*; *Fitness, Shape* and *Fit* (for Women); *Fit Pregnancy*. *Heart and Soul* is a magazine dedicated to providing fitness and health information specifically for African-American women. What comes into focus is that the faultlines dividing fitness groups are predictably biological sex and race or ethnicity. Each of these groups, we must assume, are a different audience with different conceptions of fitness, different fitness needs and/or abilities, and all requiring different advice. The methodologies recommended for each different audience reflect this trend, with men's magazines focusing more on weightlifting and the building of muscle, and women's magazines more on aerobics, use of light weights, and flexibility training, including yoga. The very quantity of "fitness" literature suggests its importance, and the way these magazines militate against fatness on the body make clear how impossible it is to study the hatred and fear of fat without studying its perceived opposites.

While fat is an *ultimate* bogeyman, there may be other terms and concepts that lurking at the bottom of our hierarchies. This list includes “disease,” which may or may not be related to fatness, but which is clearly an opposite of health. Disease unrelated to fat cannot be adequately discussed here, but we should consider that many health officials label “obesity”—a medical term for “fatness” that itself has been subject to official definitional shifts--in America as an epidemic. This puts “obesity,” as a potential causal root of cardio-vascular and other diseases, on a par with an actual state of disease. The argument is really: Obesity is often one of several potential causes of or influences in a number of ailments, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and arthritis, to name only a few. Therefore, obesity is a cause of disease, and therefore the opposite of health, which is most typically thought of as a disease-free physical state. Obesity’s status as potential risk factor for disease is considered tantamount to disease, and fat on the body synecdochally represents poor health.

Material Signs for Dialectical and Ultimate Terms

Material bodies—those items described by *positive* terms—can serve as signs for concepts, or *dialectical terms*. That is, certain materials are associated with certain concepts so strongly that the physical presence of the material suggests the intangible presence of the concept. While you can point to a layer of fat on a steak and say, “That is fat,” it is impossible to point to a thing—a single item--and say, “That is fitness.” We *can* speak metaphorically; we can point to a picture of an Olympic athlete flying over a hurdle and say, “*That* is fitness.” But what we mean, obviously, is not that the athlete *is* the concept fitness, but rather that he or she is performing an action we associate with fitness, and probably also that he or she has a

body that “looks fit” because it has visible muscle and little to no visible fat. Visible muscularity, because it is assumed to be the product of exercise, and exercise of various types a route to “fitness,” is one sign of fitness. We might see someone with visible muscularity and assume he or she is fit, or at least strong, with strength as a component of fitness.³¹

Dialectical or *ultimate* terms may have many material and visual signs that evoke or deny their presence, and more bodies than that of the super-fit athlete can imply “fitness.” A thin smoker, seen smoking, may have a body that would otherwise be a sign of “fitness” or “health” if her action did not suggest a lack, for example. An individual sense of which sign is most apt or important will depend, obviously, on an individual conception of “fitness,” as well as on the context—perhaps the actions the person is performing or the scene in which the body appears. What is important to distinguish is that, in the examples above, the physical items--the muscle, the hurdler in action, the smoking woman--are interpreted as signs of intangible concepts: strength, fitness, health.

Whereas fitness is only measurable when fitness norms are agreed upon and the performance of fitness is gauged, the difference between fat and thin is measurable materially, visually, at a brief glance. To make this point emphatic and practical, I return to the striking image of Oprah Winfrey and her wagon full of fat. In the photograph, Winfrey's body appears tangible. We can measure her size and contours and compare these to what they previously were, and we can marvel at the “fat” in the wagon. Winfrey, in this incarnation, is no longer fat; now she is thin. But is Winfrey *fit*? Is she *healthy*? How would one judge?³² Logically, if one believes

that thinness is *a sign of* fitness or health, one might judge Winfrey to be healthy or fit, or both.

Material functions symbolically in an *ultimate order*; to put it another way, the *ultimate order* affects the way we perceive the concrete. In Burke's useful example, a church spire as a symbol of "tribute to the power of the supernatural" competes visually with taller business structures erected nearby. For Burke, the competing heights of these structures are visual articulations of competing values in the culture. He writes:

For church spires to mean anything, they must overtop the buildings that surround them....[This is] an area where nonverbal things, in their capacity as "meaning," also take on the nature of words, and thus require the extension of dialectic into the realm of the physical. Or, otherwise put, we come to the place where the dialectical realm of ideas is seen to permeate the positive realm of concepts. For if a church spire is a symbolic thing, then the business structure that overtower it must participate in the same symbolic, however antithetically, as representing an alternate choice of action.³³

In the same way church spires and business structures can be read as visually competitive objects symbolizing competitive values, fat on the body has meaning and competes visually with the leaner ideal, an ideal that ostensibly represents some qualities of physical and mental fitness and health. Fatness, then, is the opposite both of leanness and muscularity--both visually perceptible, tangible qualities--as well as of fitness, and also, for many, of health. We can literally trim fat from steak and

leave it uneaten on our plates, or we can trim the fat from our budget. But we will only trim the fat if we agree that fat is unnecessary, indeed, undesirable.

Interpreting Material Signs

What if we don't agree that fat is unnecessary and undesirable? The scheme above seems to leave little room for disagreement, for people to make up their minds outside of the ultimate order. And it seems lapse to say that no one can think outside of the ultimate order. That is why context and audience are critical to understanding how challenges to ultimate orders emerge.

A brief digression into Burke's imagined cityscape, with its skyscrapers towering over its churches, shows how context, and especially audience, complicate the notion of symbolicity. Originally, church spires were intended to prioritize the church materially and visually and suggest its connection with supernatural. The intentionality of the collective "authors" of the church—who presumably included at least a body of churchmen, city planners, architects and workmen—may have been to dramatize the relationship of the church to the supernatural as well as to the more humble buildings dedicated to other concerns in the city. Therefore the process of contextualizing the church spires in the contemporary skyline might suggest to those knowledgeable of this history that economic concerns now precede spiritual concerns in the community. But other readings are certainly plausible. The theoretical church with its spires was presumably built in an era before architectural innovations made possible the skyscraper; one "reader" might actually interpret the church's historic character and beauty as making it *more* prominent—*more* worthy of contemplation--than the contemporary skyscraper towers around and above it. Such a reading

removes the architecture of the church from spiritual concerns to aesthetic and historical concerns. Other “readers” might negotiate the difference in heights by assuming that the church’s continued presence in the cityscape suggests its continued use despite the height of surrounding buildings; this reading might venerate the church for the way its traditional appearance reflects maintained traditional values.

Each person who approaches material will negotiate it physically as material—deciding whether to enter the church, pass by slowly to observe it, or pass by quickly without observing much—as well as interpret it symbolically. This negotiation is unpredictable but likely to be based on values systems that are certainly affected by cultural rhetoric and that are encoded by the ranking of dialectical terms in what Burke calls an “ultimate order.” That is to say, church spires *do not* “mean nothing if they do not overtop” other nearby buildings, but *what they mean* is determined by audiences, not authors. Each individual presented with the theoretical but realistic cityscape described by Burke must interpret individually, and at times without a sense of the intentionality behind the “co-authored” construction of the buildings, or, indeed, the corporate authorship of the cityscape itself.

Similarly, the meanings of fitness and health are negotiated anew by each person who examines the concepts, as are the bodies that represent, or really *are interpreted as representative of*, the degree of mental adherence to ideals such as fitness, health, wellness, discipline, and so on. Part of the focus on this dissertation as a whole is an effort to find alternate interpretations of bodies fat and lean, and genres available through which authors challenge the ultimate order that vilifies fat and celebrates its opposites.

The Dialectical Realm: Fat Goes Back on the Menu

For a long time, from at least the late 1980's up to the present, the debate over what kind of diet is "healthiest" has centered on the three broad nutrient categories fat, protein and carbohydrate, and the percentages and types of these nutrients to eat. Fat was at one point the loser in these debates: research suggested that eating foods high in fats led to excess fat on the body, as well as high cholesterol, heart disease, arterial plaque, some problems with the liver, adult onset diabetes and hypertension. Carbohydrates ruled when the USDA pyramid guide to food choices suggested that Americans consume 6-11 servings of carbohydrates per day, and limit "fats" to "sparing" consumption. Hence the proliferation of low-fat and fat-free food choices now so familiar as to be unremarkable. When Nabisco first premiered SnackWell fat free and low-fat cookies in the 1990's, commercials played up the inability of the company and grocery stores to keep the product on the shelves. Female shoppers were portrayed arguing with the SnackWell representative over the lack of these supposedly healthy indulgences. The company now has little trouble accommodating audience demand for low-fat products, and has a new line of products designed in response to the low-carb frenzy: the SnackWell CarbWell desserts, with no sugar.

What still seems remarkable is the turnabout from low-fat to low-carb, which may be prompted by several factors, not least among these the fact that a decade of the promotion of low-fat eating has left dieters at least as frustrated and fat as before. Another factor is surely a cultural return to luxury reflected in the casting off of the "grunge" look and a return to luxe. Fatty foods typically feel luxurious on the palate and increase satiety, which is part of what makes them both delicious and comforting.

Believing that eating luxurious and comforting foods can lead to thinness is surely one reason for the abandonment of low-fat eating in favor of low-carb eating.

The success of such low carb plans as the Atkins' and South Beach diets is clear from a walk down the any supermarket aisle: "regular" mayonnaise, in its high-fat glory, sits beside various "low-fat" versions of mayonnaise, and is flanked on its opposite side by special "low-carb" mayonnaises for those on one of the many "low carb" eating plans. "Regular" mayonnaise itself touts its attributes as a low-cholesterol food. The official versions of low-carb diets generally valorize protein, not fat, and demonize carbohydrates, not fat. Here is the theory behind these diets in a nutshell: foods high in simple carbohydrates, especially sugars, are digested quickly, make blood sugar levels rise then fall, resulting in low energy lulls that then prompt renewed eating. As a result, the low-carb diets suggest getting a higher percentage of calories from fat and protein than do most low-fat diets, which typically suggest reliance on carbohydrates, especially fiber-rich, complex carbohydrates which are slower to digest than refined starches and sugars. Higher quantities of protein and fat are recommended because those energy sources do not cause spikes in blood sugar levels, are digested more slowly and thus make people feel fuller, longer, thereby theoretically making people eat less overall. The goal of eating less overall, however, is to lose fat on the body, so that the diet seems, paradoxically perhaps, to suggest that eating more fat will make one less fat. Such diets' effects on many people's eating habits are clear as low-carb and "Atkins Friendly" menu items show up around the country on restaurant menus in addition to the merchandise in the grocery store.

While the official Atkins' and South Beach diets emphasize high quality protein sources of food and allow the eating of vegetables and other complex carbohydrates in small portions, many people on the diet eat foods that are quite high in fat, and still claim to lose weight. One such is internet author Barbara McBeath, who reports her failure at another diet, one she terms a "strict low-calorie diet," and her discovery that she could "lose weight hour-by-hour while eating large amounts of delicious food around the clock." The foods she suggests are: "Eggs, bacon, and burger patties for breakfast...Steak au Poivre for lunch...Roast chicken and vegetables for dinner..." McBeath's free website provides suggestions on how to do the diet as well as links to free offers.³⁴ Diets like McBeath's are popularly critiqued and called "Fatkins" diets, indicating that a popular backlash against low-carbs diets has already begun, a backlash partly in response to nutritionists' speculation that over-eating high-protein foods leads to a state known as "ketosis," a liver problem. The backlash is also likely to be a result of people choosing the high-fat foods McBeath touts rather than the high-protein foods advocated by the diets. The prevailing medical belief is still that these food choices are linked to poor nutrition and poor cardiovascular health.

Other research has suggested that certain fats may be healthy, or at least more healthy than others. In essence, scientific "breakthroughs"—the discovery of more types of fat and their benefits—have introduced new *positive terms* to describe particular fats, and have opened spaces for people to reconsider the fat=bad mentality. These "new" fats include "omega 3 fatty acids," which can be found in some fish, and which the American Heart Association now recommends eating twice per week.

These fatty acids, though not conclusively shown to affect heart disease, are considered excellent for people with a history of heart disease to eat. Other than fish, such as mackerel, foods such as flaxseed, tofu, soybeans and walnuts are touted as added “good fats” to the diet. Similarly, “omega 6 fatty acids,” believed to be good for skin, eye and cardiovascular health, are found in a variety of whole grain foods, but also in olive oil and in some fish and meats.

All naturally occurring fats—even the dread saturated fat so demonized in the past for its putative connection to high cholesterol and arterial plaque—are now considered healthful foods in appropriate quantities. The one type of fat that remains un-ameliorated is “trans fat,” which is fat that has had hydrogen artificially added to it for increased flavor and shelf-life. Examples of “trans fats” include “partially hydrogenated” anything (Alas, poor Crisco!). These “trans fats” are stored by the body differently from naturally occurring fats, and although no evidence shows them to be causes of serious disease, the different digestion and storage makes them suspect in the long term. Even fast food restaurants promote their French fries and other fried goods by marketing them as having “No Trans Fats!”³⁵

Again, these “new” fats shown to have special dietary traits, both good and bad, encourage people to reconsider fat as a dietary option. They make choosing diets more complicated: it is not enough to eschew foods high in any type of fat. Special attention to getting “enough” of the “good fats” means eating not necessarily *more* but different foods. Foods that were once considered “healthy,” like margarine and other butter substitutes, are now “less healthy” than plain old butter, which may be high in saturated fat compared to other fat sources, but has no “trans fats” to worry

about. These newly discovered fats, and new research on fat assumed to be healthy twenty years ago, have yielded a climate of dietary uncertainty that makes walking down the dairy aisle a kind of litmus test for the diet. The proliferation of *positive* terms for individual fats has helped push the low-fat dietary ultimate order back into the dialectical realm.

Fat and Fit?

While some people are eating a wider variety of “good fats” for better health, and others are eliminating carbohydrates from their diets and increasing their fat intakes in an effort to reduce fat on the body, still others are maintaining that fatness and fitness are not mutually exclusive states. Between 1995 and the present, a number of articles, in health practitioner newsletters and in popular magazines, have questioned the supposed antithetical relationship between fit and fat. At least eight of these articles ask the question as the title: “Can you be fit and FAT?”³⁶ “Can you be fat and fit?”³⁷ “Fit or FAT,”³⁸ “Is it OK to be fat, as long as you’re fit?”³⁹ and so on. The dubiousness suggested by the titles typically yields to an affirmative answer when specific individuals are detailed in whom fatness and fitness are both present in some measurable form. An example is in *Runner’s World*, where David Shull, whose body weight is 22 pounds over that accepted as healthy according to Navy regulations, but who routinely runs half marathons (13.1 miles) at a brisk 7 minute and 16 second per mile pace. This trend towards “fat acceptance” or “size acceptance” is not an embrasure of unhealthy lifestyles, but rather a movement that severs the fat body from its role as sign for poor health and lack of fitness and discipline.

Similarly, in March of 1998, *Men's Health* ran a lengthy story on Dave Alexander. They called Alexander "The World's Fittest Fat Man." At 5'8" tall, and 250 pounds, Alexander says, "According to the charts, I'm 100 pounds overweight." This weight, however, is no impediment to his level of fitness: "In a typical week, Alexander will ride his bicycle 200 miles, run 30 miles and swim 5 miles. During the last 15 years, he has finished 262 consecutive triathlons, including one super-human event in Hungary that spanned 3½ days. And yet," the author, Joe Kita, continues, "look at him." The conclusion of the article is that, modeling themselves on Alexander, readers should "redefine[e] fitness to meet [their] personal needs."⁴⁰ For many who sought to redefine fitness to include the possibility that one could be both fat and fit, Cheryl Haworth, the Olympic weight lifter who, in the 2000 games, astonished watchers with her dexterity and strength, was similarly a role model.⁴¹

These examples show how the antithetical relationship between fatness and fitness can be disrupted by impressive examples, but in the general population, as well as in the medical and fitness industries, the associations between the fat body and a lack of fitness and health have yet to be undone. Many of the articles that query the relationship suggest, by quoting "experts," that it is still better to be lean. In the article, "Can Heavy Be Healthy," (*Walking*, July/August 2001), JoAnn Manson, a Harvard endocrinologist, sticks to her guns: "Overall, fit and fat is better than unfit and fat. But it is not as healthy as fit and lean." These articles debating fat and fit emerged as a genre at about the same time that people, especially women, began writing "size acceptance narratives." These are detailed in the fifth chapter.

Conclusions: What Does Fat Mean?

Fat is a stable physical substance, a dense form of energy, whether found on the human body or in plants and animals. A single gram of fat contains nine kilocalories, commonly referred to simply as calories. A single calorie is the amount of energy required to raise the temperature of a gram of water one degree Celsius. From a physics perspective, fat means energy, heat, fuel.

The cultural meanings of fat are obviously not so pragmatic. *Fat* makes its way through the value-laden culture, and so the simple, stable material “fat” is loaded with meanings that often contradict each other. As a material, fat is generally perceived as “bad,” the opposite of highly desired lean muscle, though it also exists in a relationship with other bodily tissues such as bone. As a food source, in addition to having a relationship with protein (not coincidentally often lean animal *muscle*), it also exists in tandem with carbohydrates (and alcohols, the only other fuel source that provides as much energy, nine calories per gram). Foods low in fat relative to other “nutrients,” especially vitamins, minerals and fiber (an indigestible form of carbohydrate thought to be beneficial), are called “nutrient dense” foods, as if fat is not a “nutrient” at all.

Fat is also perceived as the visible, physical evidence that a body is likely to be unhealthy, unwell, unfit. If the anecdotal and tabloid evidence is to be believed, to be fat is to lack confidence, sex appeal, a starring role in a drama. If sociological research is to be believed, to be fat is to be scorned, to cause associates to be doubted, to be poor, to be the last one chosen as a partner, an employee or even a client.

Attitudes about fat prompt social actions. As Kenneth Burke has it, attitudes are “incipient acts,” acts waiting to happen. Believing that fat is “bad” causes people to act in particular ways towards their own and others’ bodies. Fear of fat, hatred of fat, motivates people to diet, to exercise, to doubt their abilities and worth, to doubt others’ abilities and worth, to scorn themselves and others.

In 1978, Susie Orbach declared that *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* in her groundbreaking book. Over a quarter of a century later, fat remains an issue that affects women emotionally, economically, medically and politically. But fat also affects men and children, all genders, races and ages. Fat—in our food, out of our food, on our bodies, burned or sucked from those bodies, derided or excoriated, excluded by or mocked in our media--is one of the key rhetorical issues of our time.

Chapter Two: The Weight Loss Success Story

To understand the fear and loathing of “fat” more explicitly, we must understand what drives people to “lose weight” in the form of “fat.” What is desirable about thinness, or leanness, and what is undesirable about fatness, that motivates? Losing weight is an action, or really a set of acts tending toward the goal of reshaping the body to decrease weight overall and weight in fat in particular, and increase the visibility of lean tissue.

One source of information about why people want to reshape their bodies are personal accounts—narratives--by people who write about their own body reshaping accomplishments: their experiences with their bodies, fat and lean; their anxieties about too much fat and/or too little muscle; their failures and successes at reshaping their physiques; their reasons for wanting to transform their bodies; and the benefits they hoped to gain by losing weight. Not only do the authors describe what it felt like to be fat, they also describe their methods for reshaping their physiques, and how it feels to be thin, or to be fit, or healthy, or muscular, or whatever results they articulate. Magazines often call these stories “Reader Success Stories,” models for other readers to emulate. I call them “weight loss success stories.”

This name may be perceived by some as less than apt. I am aware that many people undertake fitness efforts to gain weight in the form of muscle as well as perhaps lose weight in the form of fat. However, what these authors have in common across gender and race is most obviously a desire to “lose weight,” and, as I have suggested in the first chapter, the fact that it is *weight in the form of fat* that people want to lose, they still tend to articulate the loss in terms of *weight* of any kind. An

analysis of these stories will yield additional information about the term “fat” and its relationship to other *ultimate terms*.

These weight loss success stories sound and read not like individual experiences, but like a collective invention: change the name of the heroine or hero, and the story remains pretty much the same. It seems a fairy tale with the same villains--the protagonist’s own fat chief among these, of course--the same obstacles, and a hero or a heroine who is, quite literally, a recognizable figure. And of course, the happily-ever-after: the thin butterfly emerges from the fat cocoon ready to soar. In essence, the accumulated stories begin to sound like what Ernest G. Bormann describes as a “rhetorical vision.”⁴²

Bormann’s research in small group communication suggested to him that such groups were motivated to action when they developed “fantasy themes,” dramas they intended to enact for the future, or similar events in which they had all participated in the past, that created a bond amongst group members by providing them with a sense of shared history and/or shared vision of the future. Bormann extrapolated from this research that the charismatic nature of these dramas, or fantasy themes, in small groups were analogous to stories shared in larger cultural groups, which he calls “rhetorical visions:”

A rhetorical vision is constructed from fantasy themes that chain out in face-to-face interacting groups, in speaker-audience transactions, in viewers of television broadcasts, in listeners to radio programs, and in all the diverse settings for public and intimate communication in a given society. Once such a rhetorical vision emerges it contains

dramatis personae and typical plot lines that can be alluded to in all communication contexts and spark a response reminiscent of the original emotional chain.⁴³

To share a rhetorical vision, we must share--or believe we share--similar experiences and attitudes with others, which, to translate into Burke's terminology, is similar to saying that one must participate in a shared ultimate order, or that one must "identify" with someone else's story.⁴⁴ To respond positively to, to be motivated by a story, to identify my interests with yours, I must believe that we have something in common from our past, some similar goal or vision of the future, or some principle or belief in common that inspires action. Retellings of the story--my version, your version--can be just as effective as the original story to provoke empathy and motivation in future audiences. The more compelling the story and the more people it motivates, the more the story's values are repeated and re-inscribed. These stories reinforce systems of values like ultimate orders while relying on them.⁴⁵

The weight loss success story genre demonstrates how these stories both rely on and perpetuate norms. If we did not evaluate fat negatively and leanness positively, we might as a culture remain relatively unmoved by stories of weight loss or gain. But we do have a complicated set of values about body size, and so many of us struggle with the application of these cultural values to our own bodies that one person's narrative about successfully reshaping his or her body is a narrative to which others may relate with hope and excitement. Those others then may undertake similar reshapings, tell and/or write their own narratives to motivate others, and the chain of narrative inspiration continues. Particularly invested and charismatic people

broadcast their own stories loudly and sell their stories and their methods: fitness books, websites, videotapes, products. Groups, like Weight Watchers, provide forums for people to discuss their body reshaping goals and achievements. All forms of media are used to broadcast the stories and the value systems they dramatize.

A number of the authors of these success stories indicate directly in their texts that they were influenced by others' narratives, and that motivating still others is a purpose for their writing. A number of people who write these narratives become celebrities, through the course of their physical transformation, or leaders in the fitness industry. Porter Freeman, writing his body reshaping narrative for inclusion in Phillips' *Body for Life*, says: "[Phillips' program] taught me a lesson that I now try to teach to anyone and everyone who will listen: *Anyone* can do what I, and thousands of others who have followed the Body-For-Life Program, have done."⁴⁶ Jimmy Reyes, Jr., writes: "Last May, I graduated from college with a degree in kinesiology and have since become a certified personal trainer."⁴⁷ Mickey Messina, published in *Shape*, writes: "I was especially inspired by weight-loss success stories: I knew that if other people could achieve their goals, so could I....I'm majoring in psychology and plan to help other people who are suffering from eating disorders and fighting to become fit and healthy. Battling my weight and being victorious is one of my greatest accomplishments--and I want to help others fulfill similar dreams."⁴⁸ In a final example, Tonya Dyson emotes: "My hope is that one person will read my story and connect and begin to change her (or his) life. Life is filled with so much joy and happiness and all of us truly deserve to live life to the fullest and be in the best

possible shape.”⁴⁹ As these stories demonstrate, the accomplishment of weight loss is often a conversion experience.

Audience response to the success stories published in these larger texts is manifested in grateful reader letters, such as the one written by Joy Finkel and published in the January, 2002, issue of *Fitness*: “Thank you so much for ‘They Did It: 10 Women Who Lost 20+ Pounds Share Their Secrets’ [November 2001]....I particularly liked the tip “visualize success,” because imagining the way I look at my ideal weight helps me stick to my diet and exercise plan.”⁵⁰

The context of these stories is important and reflects the capitalistic nature of health and fitness advice. Non-fiction weight-loss success stories are very rarely published outside of larger publications or advertisement sources that intend to sell or promote fitness and weight loss as methodologies, or at the very least as a healthy principle. Success stories exist in symbiosis with these larger genres: without the enclosing purpose the other genre (advertisement or magazine or book or website) provides, the weight loss success story would have few publication venues. But the success story offers proof and motivation for the larger genres, augmenting and supporting them. In other words, the narratives serve publications, programs or purveyors that advocate or sell methods or products, and in so doing, cannot escape their function as advertisement.⁵¹ We must not lose sight of the fact that, while the medical community may ground the communal desire for weight loss by implicating fatness as a pre-condition for a number of diseases, the machinery of capitalism is also responsible for creating the desire for the slender body through its infinitum of advertisements. Ultimately, the thin body is sold, over and over again, as a necessary,

desirable and purchasable commodity, and the weight loss success story, though written by authors who may or may not have the intention of selling a product, is a tool for sales.

In order to motivate, weight loss success stories not only demonstrate that weight/fat loss measures can be undertaken successfully and how, they also assume audience belief in the ultimate order and reinforce the ultimate order's values via dramatization: such reshaping of the body can *and should* be done. They tell how and justify why, and both the how and the why are of crucial importance in assessing their role from a material perspective. Carole Blair suggests that such a perspective will ask how the text acts on persons, what actions it suggests or demands:

Rhetoric of all kinds acts on the whole person—body as well as mind—and often on the person situated in a community of other persons. There are particular physical actions the texts demands of us: ways it inserts itself into our attention, and ways of encouraging or discouraging us to act or move, as well as think, in particular directions.⁵²

The weight loss success story genre demands that readers believe in the possibility and value of reshaping the body to conform to cultural ideals, and also motivates its readers to act, to modify eating behaviors, to increase physical activity, to attempt to reshape the body, to promote particular attitudes towards the body as material and symbol by mentoring others towards body reshaping.

While it may be of historical interest to ascertain when this type of success story first took the forms it assumes now, that is not my goal.⁵³ I therefore offer in

the remainder of this chapter an exploration of the current manifestations of this genre--this success story rhetorical vision as it has existed in the last decade or so--as well as a description of its essential components and significant variations on its themes, and evaluation of its effects on our shifting attitudes towards fat and its opposites. After an overview that discusses the proliferation of the genre and the material conditions that prompt its proliferation, I will examine the philosophy underlying it before examining the motives for weight gain and loss, and the processes chosen to achieve a reshaping of the body. Finally, I'll identify differences in the genre according to gender and race.

The Weight Loss Success Story: An Overview

The shortest of these narratives are quite simple: perhaps a person in an advertisement claims to have lost a given number of pounds or clothing sizes or both, using the product or program advertised. This type of testimonial is familiar. The series of Subway advertisements featuring Jared Fogle, who purportedly lost 245 pounds while enjoying what the accompanying portion of song calls Subway's "six different subs with six grams of fat or less," is a prominent example. According to the advertisement series, Fogle's original success, announced in the earliest of this series of commercials, led others to attempt a similar method. Later ads show these people's weight loss as inspired by Fogle and, of course, made possible by Subway's sandwiches.⁵⁴ Interestingly, some of the ads show Fogle leading an increasingly large group of people behind him as he walks to a Subway store, a bandwagon advertising tactic that also literalizes Bormann's description of narratives "chaining out" and inspiring others.

The ad series and Fogle's subsequent fifteen minutes of fame serve as excellent examples of how powerfully these narratives constitute a rhetorical vision that spreads and motivates. Fogle's narrative as told by the advertisements was expanded on by other, textual narratives about Fogle, often told in a combination of third and first person, published in newspapers and magazines as articles, not as advertisements for Subway, in the U.S. and Canada. Fogle has also done a number of celebrity appearances, including a spot on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and a brief appearance as a motivational speaker in Morgan Spurlock's famous documentary, *Super Size Me*. Presumably, the retellings of Fogle's story inspire and help others achieve their own physical transformations.⁵⁵ While celebrities like Oprah Winfrey motivate others to weight loss success, non-celebrities like Fogle can achieve a degree of stardom by losing weight and telling their story. The act of losing weight and its documentary narratives is clearly one to be celebrated: Subway maintains a link to "Jared's Incredible Story," a story that begins with the exclamation "Everyone knows Jared Fogle!" in its "All About Jared" webpage, which also invites online readers to write or email Subway with their story.⁵⁶ To put Bormann's theories on the proliferation of a compelling vision together with Blair's query about what texts demand of readers here is to see how this particular rhetorical vision, in this specific manifestation, demands reader response. In Subway's case, the invitation to write to them is given in imperative tense: "Write Us!"

Success stories like Fogle's appear as regular features in magazines devoted to fitness, weight-maintenance and weight-loss, such as *Weight Watchers Magazine*, *Fitness*, *Fit*, *Men's Fitness*, *Shape*, *Men's Health*, and *Heart and Soul*. These

narratives are generally solicited by the magazines; some magazines offer incentives other than mere publication. *Fitness* offers \$250 per publication, and *Fit's* chosen selections are entered in a contest for which the prize is a week at a spa. In addition to providing models of success stories in each issue, some magazines also include brief instructions for writing them. *Fit's* "FinallyFit!" contest form (Fig. 2) encourages readers to, "[t]ell us how you've changed both physically and psychologically, and share your secrets of success. Include clear, close-up "before" and "after" color photos (wear activewear in the "after" photos), then send them with this completed model release..."⁵⁷

Frequently, serial publications that do not have physical fitness and/or weight loss as a primary purpose, like *People*, *McCall's*, *Marie Claire* and *Woman's Day*, will run these success stories as feature articles.⁵⁸ Other women's magazines, like *First for Women* and *Woman's World*, feature these stories on their covers nearly every issue. Similar narratives also appear on websites promoting fitness and weight loss, and in several of the best-selling fitness and weight-loss books of the last ten years, including Susan Powter's *Stop the Insanity* (1993), Bill Phillips' *Body for Life* (1999), and Bob Greene's *Make the Connection* (1996), which features one of Oprah Winfrey's weight loss narratives and sections from her journal as an introduction. While most book-length programs do not offer prizes or awards for successful completion of the program, Phillips' program was begun as a competition, the prize being his "blood-red Lamborghini Diablo."⁵⁹ As suggested by the Subway advertisement series, the narratives need not be print-based: television commercials,

FinallyFit! Reader Contest

You've worked hard—don't you deserve a vacation? We agree. That's why we're sending one "Finally Fit!" winner and a guest on a five-night getaway to one of the luxurious spas highlighted in our "FitSpa" column. Our winner will enjoy one daily personal-training session, unlimited fitness classes, one daily spa treatment, three daily spa-style meals and participation in the spa's walks, meditation sessions and nutrition classes. To enter, type a one-page essay explaining your healthy weight-loss (or gain). Tell us how you've changed both physically and psychologically, and share your secrets of success. Include clear, close-up "before" and "after" color photos (wear activewear in the "after" photos), then send them with this completed model release to: **Finally Fit! Reader Contest, Fit magazine, 419 Park Avenue South, 18th floor, New York, NY 10016.** Two readers per issue will receive \$100 and a chance to win the spa trip (which will be announced in our February 2002 issue). For more information on the contest, write to us in care of FIT.

entry form/model release

NAME _____

DATE OF BIRTH _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

DAYTIME PHONE NUMBER _____

SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER _____

PRESENT WEIGHT _____ HIGHEST WEIGHT _____

HEIGHT _____

HOW LONG HAVE YOU MAINTAINED YOUR CURRENT WEIGHT? _____

I, _____, do hereby authorize *Fit* magazine (**FM**) and its assignees the right to use my name, likeness and story in the **Finally Fit! Contest** without consideration. I agree to release **FM** from any liability arising from use of photos and accompanying story. **FM** and its assignees shall have the right to display and reprint these materials, to crop and edit photos, and to edit copy pertaining to them. I waive the right to inspect use of photos and copy. I hereby represent that I have read the authorization and release prior to signing, and that I am at least 18 years of age.

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

Figure 2: *Fit* Magazine's FinallyFit! Entry Form

infomercials, and even full-length programming may be dedicated to tracking someone's body reshaping.⁶⁰ Oral testimony is given daily around the world during meetings of groups dedicated to weight loss and maintenance, such as "Weight Watchers."⁶¹ Samples of weight loss success stories from each of the sources listed above, with the exception of oral narratives transmitted in private group meetings, are included in the analysis in this chapter.

Structure and Content

The bare bones of the success story are these: an individual does not have control over how his or her body is shaped; she or he feels self-conscious, ostracized, depressed, out of control, ashamed and unhealthy, and possibly fears death. The individual experiences a moment of revelation that determines her or him on a course of weight loss. A method--sometimes linked to the moment of revelation and generally one including *both* a reduction diet and an increase in physical activity, and possibly also a particular weight-loss product or dietary supplement--is implemented, sustained, and adjusted for additional rigor when necessary and plausible. Success at molding the body into a more desirable configuration leads to success with the other problems described, for with the desired revision of body size and shape come dramatic increases in self-confidence, pride, social acceptance, happiness and health.

The narrative covers three essential time periods: the before, during and after stages, and the first and last temporal stages contain radically different descriptions of the subjects' mentalities. The "before" stage contains a narrative of how the subject became fat, and the articulation, explicit or implicit, of the motives that prompted her or him to embark on a body reshaping quest, culminating in a turning point that

provided the last motivation necessary for change. There are specific sets of turning point moments that appear repeatedly. The “during” stage describes both the subjects’ chosen methodologies and moments when the subject realized progress towards his or her goal was occurring, resulting in increasing motives for sustaining the methodology. Setbacks and lapses in the process are also noted. The “during” stage contains the most variation in content because the methodologies chosen are themselves so varied. As such, it is the least formulaic of the written sections, but also often the briefest. Correspondingly, although there are “before” and “after” photographs, there are rarely “during” photographs, though many “after” photographs show or suggest the new athletic activities of the subject.⁶² Often, it is in the “after” stage that the subject makes a point of addressing her or his audience directly and attempting to motivate them towards the accomplishment of similar body reshaping goals. This structure is fairly explicit in the “FinallyFit!” reader contest form, which also suggests authors address the important connection between the “physical and psychological” aspects of weight loss.

Other features of the genre include its confessional and conversational tone. Most are first person accounts, presumably edited by those in charge of publication. Others are written as third person accounts with heavy quotation, and often the title of these is a direct or paraphrased quotation of the success story subject. The *Men’s Health* “Belly Off Club” asks readers to email their success stories to the editors; presumably readers send in first person accounts, but the finished narratives published in the magazine and on the website are third person accounts with liberal quotation,

which suggests that an editor is restructuring the narrative, metaphorically to fit the genre and physically to fit the page space allowed.⁶³

When magazines publish solicitation forms, these often ask writers to provide a list of “tips” for weight loss, which are then often arranged in text boxes, charts or bulleted lists to the side of the narrative; in this way the visuals function as supplementary, condensed how-to texts. All of the visuals accompanying the texts—the photographs and charts—are of crucial importance to the genre’s persuasive power, so much so that an analysis of them demands considerable space, given in Chapter Three.

The Rhetorical Vision of “After”: Control the Body, Control the Life

Implicit in the success story is the belief that controlling the size and shape of the body essentially equals controlling the life. While this belief is articulated late in most weight loss success stories, it is the foundation upon which weight loss efforts are built; therefore it seems logical to start with the end before examining the beginning in the case of the weight loss success story. Believing that changing the body to symbolize control over it will effect a change in the entire life colors every aspect of this genre, from the portrait of the subject “before” as “out of control” through the ellipses of a long and arduous process to the rapturous completion. As Bill Phillips articulates this life-body equation in the first chapter in *Body for Life*: “When you gain control of your body, you will gain control of your LIFE” (emphasis his). An inability to control the body’s size and shape is assumed, reciprocally, as an inability to control other aspects of life. I quote at length here from Phillips, who elaborates on these two equations:

...I firmly believe that a strong, healthy mind resides in a strong, healthy body. That, my friends, is a fact. When I see men and women who are out of shape, I see lives not fully lived. I see lost potential. I see people who need someone to help than realize they *can* look and feel better. That's what I see.

You simply cannot escape this reality: Your body is the epicenter of your universe. You go nowhere without it. It is truly the temple of your mind and your soul. If it is sagging, softening, and aging rapidly, other aspects of your life will soon follow suit.

I just don't believe that anyone in this world sets out on a journey to become fat and unhealthy, just as no one decides to become lonely or poor. What happens is, somewhere along the line, slowly and gradually, without even being aware of it, we give up. We give up our values and our dreams one at a time. When people let go of their bodies, it is, quite simply, the beginning of the end.⁶⁴

While Phillips is not writing his own narrative here, his words summarize the belief system--which he quickly reverts to calling "fact" and "reality"--consistently implicated by other authors of the genre.⁶⁵ We should notice that Phillips' articulation of the problem of fatness explicitly links the state to being unhealthy and failing to live according to one's values, but also implicitly links fatness with being "lonely" and "poor." Chapter One documented some studies which have shown that fat people *are* more often overlooked both socially and as work associates. As we

will see later, the fear of ostracism and career impediments can be an important part of the motivation for losing weight.

Most success stories demonstrate the widespread resonance of the same rhetorical vision. Oprah Winfrey's story at the beginning of Bob Greene's 1996 bestseller, *Make the Connection: Ten Steps to a Better Body--And a Better Life*, demonstrates how the body-mind relationship articulated by Phillips works in a description of the before stage. Winfrey's account opens with a vivid depiction of Winfrey herself at the Daytime Emmy Awards show, waiting to hear who had won in the category she for which she was nominated, feeling uncomfortable in the outfit she had chosen, a skirt that was "much too short for a fat woman." Winfrey won the award, but her feelings about her body made her acceptance of the award a moment of defeat rather than glory:

I was 237 pounds, the fattest I'd ever been. The weight was consuming me. Even at what was supposed to be one of the most fulfilling and rewarding moments in my life, being honored...by my peers and the public for a job well done, all I could think about was how fat I was and how glamorous all the soap stars looked.... I felt so much like a loser, like I'd lost control of my life. And the weight was symbolic of how out-of-control I was. I was the fattest woman in the room.⁶⁶

Winfrey's narrative demonstrates that she, like Phillips, judges overall success in life at least in part by measuring the control of the body's appearance, its shape and its size. Winfrey's narrative subsequently backtracks, relating her career success through the 1980's and 90's, but more emphatically tracking her lack of success at controlling

her weight. Despite her own preoccupation with her size, she makes clear throughout that it was not a barrier to her career success, though she feared it would be:

When I heard there was an opening in Chicago for a talk show host, a lot of people, including me, thought I wouldn't get the job because, first off, I was overweight, and second, I wasn't blond.... I was sitting in Dennis Swanson's office...auditioning.... He was telling me what a gem of a talent he thought I was and how he wanted to hire me right I away. I was thrilled, but...I wanted to set the record straight. "Well, you know, I'm overweight and black." I declared. "Yeah," he said. "I can see. I'm looking at you. No one in here is going to complain about that." He rubbed his somewhat rounded belly and chuckled.⁶⁷

Twice, as Winfrey lists the possible objections to hiring her, she places possible exclusion for being overweight before possible exclusion based on racial prejudice. Yet, though not an actual barrier to her particular career, Winfrey's comments show that her perceived lack of control over the contours of her body have made her fear that she will face prejudice in our culture.

The body-mind relationship delineated by Phillips and Winfrey is seen from a reverse angle at the conclusion of success stories. The authors' descriptions of themselves *after* they realize their goals show that taking control of the body's contours has finally enabled them to feel the opposite of what Winfrey describes herself feeling at the Emmy awards above, weighing 237 pounds. Winfrey's own narrative concludes: "...[T]aking care of my body and my health is really one of the greatest kinds of love I can give myself. Every day I put forth the effort to take care

of myself. And there's no question I'm living a better life."⁶⁸ If the weight loss success story is a kind of twentieth century conversion narrative, analogous in many ways to religious conversion narratives popular in previous eras, it is interesting to note that the person who converts to this philosophy concludes by loving her- or himself more, rather than loving God and others more, and seeking opportunities to do charitable acts. Or, we might consider that these converts consider the publication of their methodology and inspiration story as, in itself, a charitable act.

A few other examples should demonstrate the resoundingly successful, if vague and dreamy, life outcomes that authors attribute to reshaping their bodies. Mary Voorhees writes in her narrative for *Shape*: "...I realized I didn't want to be overweight and that I could take control of my weight....A year later, I was happier than I ever had been. I had adopted a healthy lifestyle that would be with me forever. I graduated from high school at a toned 130 pounds and was ready to soar."⁶⁹ In the same magazine, Teri Lind equates a dramatic change in size with equally dramatic mental changes: "In December 1995, I bought a pair of size 16 pants. In April 1996, I bought the exact pants in a size 8. I am in the best shape of my life. I also feel mentally fit. I have more confidence, higher self-esteem and less stress."⁷⁰ Michelle Smarz Miller, the winner of *Fit* magazine's "FinallyFit!" contest for the year 2000, writes:

We only get one vehicle in life (our bodies) and we need to do the best we can for them. This is no rehearsal. We only do this once, so lets [sic] be happy with ourselves while we're here.

I might have won the spa trip, but I've really felt like a winner ever since I took control of my life. I used to let my extra weight control me and now that's in the past.⁷¹

Smarz Miller's assessment of her experience offers a different metaphor for the body-mind connection than Phillips', but her account suggests a similar relationship between the two. Her conclusion is also similar to the beliefs articulated by both Phillips and Winfrey, as she emphasizes the equation between control of the body and success, and failure to control the body and lack of success. Ryan Kirby's final remarks on his body reshaping venture in *Men's Fitness* echo the Phillips' description of the body-mind connection as well as the others' results:

Over the past few years, I've uncovered the solid, sturdy structure of a life that had been buried by low self-esteem and lack of conviction. I'd long known what I wanted my body and my life to resemble, but reaching that particular promised land always seemed beyond my capacity: The tone and definition I longed for escaped me despite what I thought were my best efforts. But in the two years [since], I've become happier and more content than ever.⁷²

Kirby's narrative is particularly interesting for the way in which he seems to write literally about his body and metaphorically about his life simultaneously, as in his assertion that he was searching for "tone and definition," and his success in uncovering a "solid, sturdy structure." For Kirby and the other writers, the body is the most obvious symbol and measure of the mental state of the person residing in the

body, and lacking control over the appearance and contours of one is the indication that “tone and definition” are lacking in the other, less tangible area.

These conclusions, however dramatic and however styled in mixed metaphors and clichés, make sense with the ultimate order in a kind of reciprocal causality: If you live in a culture that demonizes fat and in which fatness is read symbolically as a “deformity” and a “behavioral aberration,” then you are likely to experience prejudice, which means you are likely to feel aberrant and unhappy, wish to escape such a state, embark on a fat-loss scheme, and find that success in such an endeavor leads to less experience of prejudice, and therefore greater acceptance, confidence, and so forth. In the weight loss success story, the culture in which fatness is demonized is unquestioned, as the results are the desired, expected ones.

At this point, it becomes clear that being fat (without challenging the *ultimate* order that excoriates the fat body) is to experience an “out of control” feeling, as if being unable to make the body’s contours conform to the thin ideal is to feel “out of control” both mentally and physically. Synonyms for out-of-control, such as “lazy” and “undisciplined,” as well as metaphorical terms like “out of shape,” are therefore synonyms for “fat.” These terms are used broadly in our culture, as for example in the Oscar-winning Disney song from *Beauty and the Beast*, the lyrics of which assert that servants in the Beast’s castle were “flabby, fat and lazy” before Belle, the Beauty, came to challenge their hospitality skills and spur them to action. So “fat” is the opposite of “control” and “discipline,” and equivalent with laziness and being “out of control.”

The “Before” Stage

Here a reminder that within the success story narrative there are really *two* acts depicted is useful. The after stage that offers evidence that controlling the body has led to mastery of the life also concretizes the relationship between the appearance of the body and the inner self. The act of being (or becoming) fat is depicted in the before stage, and the subsequent act of losing weight is depicted in the during stage. In the before stage, the reasons the subject became fat and the reasons he/she wanted to lose weight are intertwined. The tangle of motives can usefully be pulled into individual motive threads, but the intertwining—the fact that so many motives can coalesce in favor of a single act—is of crucial importance for the rhetorical power of the genre, for the simple reason that having many reasons to do something is a greater guarantee that it will be done if only one or a couple reasons are offered.

Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic method provides a useful division of motives to pull one thread at a time from the tangle. According to Burke, “any complete statement about motives will offer *some kind of* answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose).”⁷³ The five terms--collectively known as the dramatistic pentad--in Burke’s method are those in parentheses in the quote above: act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. Burke expands the pentad somewhat by including within “agent” the counter- and co-agents, who impede and assist agents’ activities respectively.

Combining these dramatistic terms into “ratios” provides a means to examine motives as they work together and to show which may be emphasized most strongly

in a given account. For example, a description that emphasizes the role that the scene played in a given act is called the scene-act ratio. Putting the term “scene” first indicates that the scene forcefully motivated the act. Anyone who has ever heard the phrase, “He was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” is familiar with the attribution of motive to scene. In this commonplace, the scene--the location and the time--is, if you will, the principal reason the act that occurred.

In the weight loss success story genre, several ratios, with similar content, recur time and again, which demonstrates that the weight loss success story as a “rhetorical vision” offers would-be agents a set of motives to choose from. The variety of “set pieces” provides a repertoire of (already interpreted) experiences from which authors can select what seems to fit their lives most accurately. This variety accounts, in part, for the wide proliferation of the genre, as it allows for many people and their different-but-similar experiences to partake of the rhetorical vision. What follows is a brief look at the ratios of motives most commonly occurring in the “before” and “during” stages of the weight loss success story genre. The ratios are put into the broader cultural context when possible.

Scenes of Weight Gain: The Scene-Act Ratio

Scenic motives are important to many who research the causes of weight gain, loss and maintenance, and the importance of scene is investigated heavily as a result. American culture comes under scrutiny frequently as a scene in which eating is unregulated and daily exercise impeded by our wealth of technologies and fossil fuel resources. Most Americans drive cars instead of walking to work, for example, and

even simple tasks are made easier by the use of such conveniences as garage door openers and remote controls.

Psychologist Paul Rozin's work compares French eating behaviors and rituals with those found in America, to attempt to discover why, though Americans are far more likely to embark on reduction diets and engage in fitness behaviors, the French are, on the whole, thinner. In this case, the "act" of being or becoming fat is evaluated in scenic terms. The scene of French culture--including the social restrictions on snacking and the traditionally well-prepared but high-fat food served in moderate portions--are compared by Rozin with the scenes of American culture.⁷⁴ In *Fat Land*, Greg Critser similarly compares French culture with American culture, discovering that French mothers don't allow their children to "graze," or snack, throughout the day.⁷⁵ Other studies compare the traditional Japanese or Mediterranean diets and the apparently related longevity of the population adhering to them with the typical American diet and the apparently related "epidemic" of obesity.

Of course, even within American culture, subcultures can have radically different eating and exercise behaviors⁷⁶ as well as different attitudes towards ideal and acceptable body sizes. Economic factors may also be significant; Critser, in his essay, "Let Them Eat Fat," notes that the "...poor, and their increasing need for cheap meals consumed outside the home, [have] fueled the development of what may be the most important fast-food innovation of the past twenty years, the sales gimmick known as 'supersizing.'"⁷⁷ Thinness is, then, a class issue.

Much of the research into scene, when it is reported for lay audiences, participates in the cultural edict of weight loss and fitness by ending with suggestions

for personal change based on an understanding of the corruption of the scene. The rationale of these articles, including Rozin's "Why We're So Fat (and the French Are Not)," might be stated in dramatic terms in this way: Understanding the scenic motive allows agents within the scene either to change their local scenes, or (in the case of broad American culture which is difficult for single agents to alter) to develop an agency, or system of agencies, that will negate the problems inherent in the scenes for the individual agent. Researchers and writers generally presuppose that most or all Americans will have the same purposes: to be healthy and fit, to be lean, and not fat. They write about the importance of managing portion size or food choices from these cultural examples, hoping that their readers as agents will be able to adjust their habits: choose smaller sizes, eat less than what is given at restaurants and take the remainder home for a later meal, and/or share entrees.

Research into scenic motives suggests that, with a scene inhospitable to their ostensible purposes, Americans must alter agent and agency in order to complete the desired act of losing weight. As a result, agent and agency--specifically the agent's knowledge and discipline in developing agencies that counteract the pervasive scene--are stressed despite, or rather because of, the emphasis on scene. In other words, though scenic explanations might seem like an excuse for fatness, on the contrary, because a person must heroically overcome scene, the glory accruing to agents who implement agencies that are successful against the hostile scene is great.

Scene can be as broad as the cultural comparisons discussed above, but also much more limited. It is extremely rare for success story authors to cite "American culture" as a scenic explanation for weight gain. The stories' emphasis on the

overcoming of a personal battle doesn't seem to have scope for such broad cultural critiques. However, scene on a smaller scale is often mentioned as a contributing force in the act of gaining weight.

One scene that may seem an unlikely foe in the act of losing weight is the gym. A number of weight loss success story subjects indicate that their size kept them from feeling comfortable there, making access to exercise equipment and the camaraderie of exercise classes difficult. After finding a typical gym unappealing, Janice Clayton “joined a gym that catered to overweight people. ‘I felt comfortable there,’ she sa[id.]”⁷⁸ Other weight loss success story subjects indicate similar discomfort with “the gym.” According to Sue Hertz, Sandy Schaffer, who lost 100 pounds, was “intimidated by sleek skinnies in lycra,” and chose instead a “tiny gym in New York City’s Murray Hill, one of the few fitness studios in the country dedicated to ‘Plus-Size Exercise,’ where she was “surrounded by rows of other large women.”⁷⁹

Susan Powter, of *Stop the Insanity!* infomercial fame, aimed her program specifically at people who feel like fitness outsiders. In her videos, for example, exercisers at many fitness levels and of many shapes and sizes participate. Antonia Losano and Brenda A. Risch, authors of “Resisting Venus: Negotiating Corpulence in Exercise Videos,” find that, unlike the videos by Powter and her compatriot Richard Simmons, most exercise videos, which seem to envision gym-like spaces, typically avoid showing truly fat women in the ranks of exercises.⁸⁰ Perhaps Powter’s own strongest appeal is as an ex-fat-person who became a fitness expert, designing exercise programs that assist those who feel threatened by difficult dance

choreography, and instilling in her workout videos “modifications” of movements that accommodate different age and fitness levels.⁸¹ Her own story includes a lengthy dramatization of her visit to a gym when she weighed 260 pounds. The narrative offers these conclusions:

I never went back....other than the insulting “fat people only” classes, there is nothing available for fat people.

There are no modifications being taught.

If you can't keep up, for whatever reason, you are out.

If you're gasping for air, oh well.

If you don't want to be Baryshnikov...later for you.

If you have any physical considerations...too bad.

And if you are not coordinated enough to keep up, to hell with you, they will steamroll right past you.

I never went back, because my fitness experience left me feeling humiliated, physically hurting, and embarrassed. I ended up sitting in the parking lot sobbing.⁸²

While Powter, as promoter of her own “at home” fitness program, has more at stake from making gyms seem inhospitable than others, the gym remains a place towards which many weight loss success story authors indicate ambivalence if not outright dislike.

The scene of “college life” is often blamed for the gaining of the proverbial “freshman fifteen.” That is, after they leave the regimented breakfast-lunch-dinner schedule at home and arrive at college, students are more likely to cook faster but less

healthy meals, eat poor quality take out food, consume more high-calorie alcoholic beverages, and so on, resulting in weight gain that may exceed the “freshman fifteen.” The “freshman fifteen” is traditionally associated more with women than with men. Correspondingly, many narratives written by or about young women emphasize this scenic change as a motive for weight gain, including the narrative about Stephanie Moreau, published in *Fitness* in February, 2001:

In 1991, Stephanie entered the State University of New York at Stony Brook. There, her eating habits got worse. In addition to indulging her sweet tooth with doughnuts and ice cream, she spent weekends binging on the usual college fare of fast food, chips and beer. ‘I didn’t gain the freshman 15,’ she says. ‘I was closer to the freshman 40.’”⁸³

Denise Flachsbart’s narrative reads similarly:

I played on my high-school tennis and basketball teams, and...was always fit. Once I started college, though, things changed dramatically. Away from my mother’s cooking, I ate high-fat, high-calorie meals without much nutritional value. Social gatherings kept me on the go and I sustained myself with candy bars and soda. I made feeble attempts to exercise at the campus gym, but defeated the purpose by rewarding myself afterward with candy, cookies and soda. By the end of my first year, I’d gained 25 pounds and barely fit into my size-14 clothes.⁸⁴

The attention to the scene, however, does not take the guilt from the agent. Both of these quotes demonstrate how, despite outside pressures and the apparent typicality of the act given the scene, both women take responsibility for their weight gain.

A similar scenic phenomenon is often found in narratives written by young men who go to college as athletes. In their narratives, the culture of the college athletic life--particularly, it seems, football--encourages the accumulation of girth, which is subsequently difficult to lose. Matthew Zuppichini's testimony exemplifies this: "My two passions, eating and playing football, seemed to go hand in hand. Eating temporarily relieved the stress of college life and put on the extra weight that gave me power during games. But success on the playing field didn't necessarily mean success in other endeavors."⁸⁵

In many more cases, authors of success stories emphasize the scene's effect on the agent and her social milieu, consisting of co-agents and counter-agents. The authors of success stories believe in the fit-fat ultimate order and pass on the rhetorical vision that supports its values by writing their stories. Weight loss subjects are likewise affected by others in their culture who share their values but are not adjusting their habits to correspond to their values; these associates, maintaining "good intentions" or otherwise, may sabotage the agent's attempts to lose weight. In Courtney Rubin's ongoing "Weight Loss Diary," she lists, from month to month, various co- and counter-agents who assist or impede her progress. Her May, 2001, column, shows the difficulty of relying on others:

I shared a cab home [from a party] with the friend I was supposed to run the race with the following morning....During the cab ride, my

friend decided she didn't want to get up early. Translation: She didn't want to do the race. She suggested we run ten miles later in the day, but I knew that wouldn't happen....I got angry. Not so much at my friend (although I was that, too), but at myself. Why did I immediately assume that because my friend wasn't doing it, I couldn't, either?⁸⁶

As in this case, what always seems to happen in a weight loss success story is that blame or responsibility is quickly shifted to the agent, regardless of which ratio is being assessed.

Scene and Agent, Co-Agent, Counter-Agent

Co-agents in the act of gaining weight may become counter-agents in the act of losing weight, or may instead convert their attitudes and habits to become co-agents in the act of losing weight. Others are counter-agents in the act of gaining weight or being fat, and can become co-agents in the act of losing weight or becoming thin.

One way to be a counter-agent in the act of gaining weight is to ostracize or rebuke the person in question. Many writers indicate in the before stage that they felt ostracized by others, especially potential sexual partners, based on their weight and size, a feeling not unsubstantiated by research into prejudice against fat people. Sometimes, outright disapproval from family members and friends, authority figures, especially those in the health and fitness professions, and even scoldings from strangers, contributes to the subjects' desire to reshape their bodies. For example, Laura J. Hansen-Brown indicates that her parents and physician indicated their concern over her weight:

Throughout my childhood and teen-age years, I had an extra 10-15 pounds on me. My parents, worried that I might not outgrow my weight problem, cautioned me about having seconds at mealtimes and eating dessert. Even my pediatrician told me to limit myself to three meals a day, avoiding all snacks. Resenting their comments, I ignored their “advice” and remained plump.

Her use of quotation marks around the word “advice” as well as her overt statement about resentment, shows that she felt their concern as a rebuke, making them, at least in the short term, significant but ineffective counter-agents (and therefore in fact co-agents) in her act of being, in her terms, “plump.” That her pediatrician, presumably a health expert, encouraged her to moderate her diet, is a healthful warrant for Hansen-Brown’s later weight loss, making her apparent need to lose weight more than an aesthetic and social problem.

Counter-agents can be far less tactful than Hansen-Brown suggests hers were. Strangers, acquaintances and beloveds, all can provide feedback about the subject’s body that provokes weight loss from feelings of anger, shame and embarrassment. For example, in addition to receiving what she calls “gentle hints” from her brother that she ought to embark on a weight loss venture, Nikki Rutherford was insulted by a stranger:

[She] was on the bus on her way to work when she heard the cruel words: “You’re too fat to share a seat.” She stared in horror at the man who’d said them, then burst into tears. “When I got off the bus I said to myself, ‘No one is EVER going to say that to me again,’ and that was

the start of everything. I was very, very upset at the time but now I wish I could meet that man again and thank him, because without him this might never have happened.”⁸⁷

As she articulates her experiences, her brother and the stranger are both counter-agents in her act of gaining weight or being fat, and co-agents in her reformation. Rutherford’s eventual gratitude towards the stranger whose cruel words upset her demonstrates how her values are in conflict. On the one hand, Rutherford, like most people, values the kindness--or at least tolerance--of strangers, but finally her participation in the ultimate order leads her to accept his rudeness as a beneficent act. The result is a justification of fat prejudice from a formerly obese person wounded by persecution, and shows the power of the ultimate order to outbalance other ideals. Loved ones, though often more tactful than strangers, can and often do have equally powerful modes of persuasion. Kim Carvalho-Faucher’s body reshaping narrative demonstrates this:

...[W]ithin two years, her weight had ballooned to 179 pounds. That’s when her boyfriend (now her husband) confronted her. “He said that I had a beautiful body and it was painful for him to see me doing this to myself,” she says. He’d noticed that she’d gained weight but was mostly concerned that she was abusing her body by eating to such excess. His words, delivered in a loving way, forced her to change her unhealthy lifestyle.⁸⁸

Though the emphasis above is on health rather than size, the same assumptions that visual excess weight is negative--the exaggeration of the word “ballooned”⁸⁹ and the

statement of 179 pounds as the moment of confrontation--remains a force to be reckoned with in the background, as does the implicit possibility of becoming unattractive to one's sexual partner. As we see repeatedly, being thin in order to become or remain an object of sexual desire is no small motive in the quest for weight loss. Carvalho-Faucher's desires to be attractive to her partner recall Susan Powter's desire to be "sexy and pretty." Powter records her mother's advice on how to retrieve her straying husband: "My mother sat me down one day and said, 'Look at you! Maybe if you lost some weight and got yourself together, you might get him back.'" I find this advice interesting for the way that it, too, corresponds to the control-your-body-control-your-life philosophy in a colloquial pairing that equates "los[ing]" with "getting together."⁹⁰

Sometimes authors indicate that others' attempts to be counter-agents in the act of gaining weight caused an opposite reaction. A narrative about Carl Kanefsky reveals that, "For 10 years, his wife urged him to lose weight--but he retaliated by eating more."⁹¹ It is typical for wives and girlfriends to be overt critics of the fat male body and instigators of weight loss schemes, whereas women often receive more oblique hints from male romantic partners that weight loss would be desirable. A cartoon from *Good Housekeeping* attempts to make "light" of the function female family members seem to have as counter-agents in the act of weight loss (Fig. 3). The man's astonished and/or disappointed expression dramatizes the way comments from a counter-agent prompt reconsideration of the self, or turning point moments.

The "scene" of weight gain and loss is often created by the society of people who adhere to the ultimate order. Like Oprah Winfrey in her *Make the Connection*



Figure 3: Cartoon From *Good Housekeeping's* Light Housekeeping, Dec. 2001

narrative, success story authors list being perceived as fat as a career barrier, another scenic motive that gets its force primarily by the scenic conditioning of co- and counter-agents to react to thin people in one way and fat people in another. Craig Cohen writes: “Within the rather lean world of rock musicians, I was something of an anomaly. Image is such an important part [of] a musician’s life that being fat proved unacceptable--on more than one occasion I was denied gigs because of my size. I just didn’t fit in.”⁹² Like Winfrey, Cohen indicates the special emphasis on the idea of image in the world of show business. Other careers, however, also have weight requirements, as Vaughn Lasit’s narrative shows: “As a corrections officer, part of my responsibility is to drive transport buses; to remain licensed, I have to pass a physical every two years. In ‘97, heavier than I’d ever been and hypertensive, I almost failed. [I was g]iven only a one-year contract, with the stipulation that I increase my medication and get my blood pressure under control...”⁹³

Lasit’s situation is perhaps less likely to spur audience outrage than Cohen’s or Winfrey’s, because his, and his employers’, concerns seem primarily related to health, and Lasit’s particular health as it relates to social safeguards, rather than to aesthetics. The contrasting emphases on aesthetics and health demonstrate once more the power of the various ultimate terms towards the same ends.

Grade school is a scene in which the agent’s sense of persecution for her or his fatness begins. Traci Peck felt the sting of notoriety as a child: “As a kid, I always felt like the largest person in my class. My belief was confirmed in fourth grade when my teacher weighed each of us and recorded our weight on the chalkboard. At 125 pounds, I was the heaviest one in my class, and I was mortified.”⁹⁴ In her case,

the ultimate order is obviously present, both in her own emotional reaction to the discovery that she was the heaviest person in her class, and in the teacher's decision to publicize the students' weights. Again, if weight and size were not an issue in our society, the weight chart would have little meaning for Peck, her teacher or her peers. Mary Z. Zic's childhood experiences are similar to Peck's: "Because of my size, I wasn't energetic and often stayed on the sidelines in PE classes. I also was teased mercilessly by my peers and often turned to food for comfort. By the time I was in eighth grade, I weighed 190 pounds and suffered from an extremely poor self-image."⁹⁵ As in most other cases, Zic's ostracism for size/fatness is linked implicitly with other ultimate terms, health and fitness, which are demonstrated not to be present by Zic's assertion that she lacked energy and failed to participate in physical activities. But the root problem appears to be the ostracism, so that a scene-counter-agent ratio impedes Zic in the implementation of an agency designed to help her achieve the supposedly healthy, socially acceptable goals of losing weight. In Zic's case especially we see how counter-agents in the act of gaining weight are described as failing and succeeding at once; while they enforce the power of the ultimate order by, as she says, teasing her mercilessly, and mightily instill in her the desire to lose weight, her immediate coping behavior is to "turn to food for comfort." This particular behavior--feeling driven to eat to console oneself for the rejection involved in being fat--is often mentioned. As a result, many weight loss plans focus on the motives for eating, including turning to "comfort food."⁹⁶ We might elaborate on the terminology supplied by Burke and call turning to food for comfort a counter-purpose

in the act of losing weight. I suggest below that psychological inquiry into why people became fat often uncovers such counter-purposes, or “hidden motives.”

Just as counter-agents resisting the act of becoming fat often turn quite seamlessly into co-agents in the opposite act, so co-agents, that is instigators, of the act of gaining weight may become counter-agents in the agent’s attempt to alter his or her scene and/or agencies. Mom’s insistence that her offspring clean their plates, regardless of one of the child-agent’s determination (purpose) to lose weight by restricting food intake, is one threat. Gary Kozak, for example, cites the scene of his family background, and his mother’s cooking, as a major factor in his pre-weight loss eating habits: “Coming from a Polish family in which big, hearty meals were served every day, I downed my fair share of kielbasa and pigs-in-the-blanket. I was always sent off to school with a lunch big enough for two people, and at the dinner table, the feast was equally impressive.” Later, in the process of losing weight, he notes that “The biggest obstacle [one] summer was moving home and having to face my mother’s cooking again....I also started cooking my own meals. Fortunately, my parents were very supportive; my mother even did her best to accommodate my low-fat requests.”⁹⁷ Husbands, wives, co-workers and friends may support the agent’s weight loss, or may be indifferent or hostile to the efforts. Some may offer support that doesn’t come through. In any case, part of the change of scene is often overcoming the resistance of these co-agents in the weight-gain act become counter-agents in the weight-loss act.

Many subjects of success stories fear and perceive others as counter-agents in the acts of gaining weight or being fat, even when no specific counter-agent is at

work. The fear of disapproval, not its actuality, led, in part, to Marty Edwards' weight loss efforts. One night in 1998, a dream led him to change his behaviors and body: "...I dreamed I was back among some friends from college. The last time they'd seen me, I weighed 185. Now they were seeing me with who-knows-how-much extra weight. They didn't laugh. They just stared. They told me they were disappointed."⁹⁸ While Edwards' dream is a unique manifestation of the fear of rejection and feelings of isolation based on the cultural adherence to the ultimate order, many more subtle manifestations are present in body reshaping narratives.

Particular scenes are microcosms that focus the subject on his or her perceived physical flaws: the beach in summertime, unsurprisingly, sometimes plays a key role in these narratives as a scene which increases the subject's sense of inadequacy, as well as his or her sense of being observed, because his or her flesh is more exposed. All of the quotes above demonstrate the intertwining of scene with real and perceived counter-agents, as well as the withdrawal of the agent from perceived contempt. Whether this fear is legitimate or paranoid, the fat agent's imagination is peopled by counter-agents, as if for those who believe themselves overweight, the world is a panopticon, full of would-be judges and tormenters.

Purpose-Act: Aesthetics as Purpose

Thinness and muscularity may be desirable for aesthetics rather than fitness, health or social reasons, though again, the importance of any one of the array of ideals is negotiable. Those who desire thinness aesthetically may value that aesthetic above all other values, including health. For example, some may begin smoking or resist quitting smoking because they believe that the habit inhibits weight gain or that

breaking the habit leads to weight gain.⁹⁹ Others may find that healthful benefits are a happy side effect of achieving weight loss motivated by aesthetics.

Although published weight loss success stories don't often confess to purely aesthetic motives, some do. One weight loss success story that particularly highlights aesthetics is that of Karl Lagerfeld, who designs haute couture (Chanel/Karl Lagerfeld) as well as a younger line of less-expensive clothing for H&M. Of his weight loss motives, he writes:

One morning I woke up and didn't like my looks any longer. I wanted to dress differently. I wanted to wear the clothes designed by Hedi Slimane....But for that kind of fashion—which was shown at his collection on very, very skinny boys (and not men my age), I had to lose 90 pounds—even a little more if I could.

I decided to become a perfect 135-pound, five-foot 11-inch hanger. My desire to lose weight was only about clothes—not about health problems or because I wanted to be more attractive to others. I admit my reasoning is considered superficial by some, but I think fashion—for women as well as for men—is the healthiest motivation for losing weight. What is important is that you take the superficial and use it in a creative, productive and finally self-preserving way.¹⁰⁰

According to Lagerfeld, the weight loss' healthy effects—and he does list several—were not so much goals in themselves than a fortuitous confluence of results.

Lagerfeld's logic throughout is certainly questionable, as he seems to assert that it's healthiest not to think of health as a motive for weight loss. At one point in the article

quoted above, he suggests that one should not “diet because [one] want[s] to change [one’s] life;” three paragraphs later, he says, “Take your time; *there is no deadline for a new life!*” (emphasis his). It is as if the change-your-body-change-your-life rhetorical vision overrides Lagerfeld’s specific desire to refute it as a motive. He also divorces losing weight to wear clothing from beauty (“or the hope of beauty”), which he calls “a very dangerous motivation.” Ultimately, for Lagerfeld, it seems that turning the body into a perfect “hanger” allows one to choose clothing that expresses the inner self’s artistic vision by choosing the clothing designers/artists creations that best accord with the inner self, money being no object. From the designer perspective, the body is only useful as a backdrop for the clothes.

Lagerfeld is not alone in the fashion industry for defending aesthetic motives for weight loss that creates bodies so slender they make excellent hangers. In “The Body Myth,” published in *Vogue* in September, 1996, Rebecca Johnson writes:

I don’t go to the gym three times a week and forgo foie gras in order to live longer. I do it to look better. It’s just a happy coincidence that vanity and health should go hand in hand—or is it? Could hostility to thinness be nothing more than sublimated envy for the promise of prolonged life? Maybe the art director at his light box picks the shot where [model] Trish Goff looks her thinnest because he’s responding to some atavistic knowledge that to be thin is to live longer? Probably not. To him, as to the designer, it’s aesthetic. Clothes hang better on thin women. When fat settles in, it renders the body formless, amorphous, like a landscape blanketed in snow. In athletes and very

thin people, the endoskeleton, the ligature, and the striae of muscle become visible, reminding us of what a wondrous piece of machinery the human body is.

Pieces like this one ignore the social construction of aesthetics, as if finding the “very thin” body attractive is universal, whereas aesthetics are social constructions bound to time and place, or “scene,” than universal human criteria, and ample research shows that cultural aesthetics idealizing “very thin” bodies, especially for women, are rarer than not. Indeed, Johnson herself illustrates that aesthetics shift earlier in her own article, when she points out that periods during which fashion requires thin physiques tend to correspond to periods of greater independence of women.¹⁰¹

One might wonder why haute couture and other clothing is designed to “hang better” on thin people. Judging only by Lagerfeld, an admittedly small sample, one might suppose that the designer’s aesthetics dictate the fashions, and that to wear such fashions, one must bring the appropriate body. To preserve its elitism, high fashion reduces the number of people who can wear—much less afford to purchase—its designs, but defending this as a pursuit that happens, luckily, to correspond to better health certainly seems a bit of a stretch.

Agent-Act

Possibly as a result of the multiple negative evaluations that result from being larger than is considered desirable, many success story subjects list few or no motives for losing weight other than a declaration of their former size. That is, the motive for losing weight or fat is the subject’s perception--seen through our cultural lens, as it were--that there is “excess” weight or fat on the body, and the judgment that such

“excess” is negative. I call this an agent-act ratio, because the perception of failure in the agent represented by size leads to the act of weight loss. When authors discuss their degree of perceived overweight, they focus on their weight in pounds and/or size in clothing; rarely do authors supply a ratio of fat to lean body tissue, their “BMI” or Body Mass Index number, or other form of measurement, perhaps because these measurements are newer and have yet to take root in the culture, and perhaps also because these measurements, because they involve more calculation to discover, seem less clearly related to visual impact than the others.¹⁰² The following excerpts are typical of “overweight” or size as motive in and of itself:

As a 10-year-old, I weighed 190 pounds. In seventh grade, I was 235. By my sophomore year of high school, I weighed 300 pounds, and on the day I graduated, I tipped the scales at 345. By February 1994, I weighed an eye- and button-popping 455 pounds. The circumference of my waist (five feet) was closing in on my height (six feet two).¹⁰³ Janice gained a whopping 80 pounds while pregnant, and after her son Brandon was born she gained 10 more, bringing her up to 220.¹⁰⁴ Tami, who’s a petite 5’3”, has weighed as much as 160 pounds. And although that was obviously too much for her small frame, she had begun to accept being overweight as her fate.¹⁰⁵

The argumentative structure of these narratives, then, is enthymematic: the major premises of such arguments are unstated value statements about whether it’s good or bad to have excess weight, and even about how much weight constitutes excess. Verbal stress is put on the quantity with adjectives. For example, Demangone’s 455

pound before weight is “eye- and button- popping;” Janice’s 220 before weight is “whopping;” and Tami’s before weight of 160 is “obviously too much.”

While each author implies in the text that height and weight ought to have a sort of proportion or ratio, this ratio remains unspecified, and there is little difference in terms of emphasis on a desirable weight loss of 40 pounds versus 200 pounds. As the *Shape* survey quoted earlier demonstrates, it is often as if any quantity of perceived overweight has the same psychological effects as a great mass of overweight. Susan Powter agrees. She writes:

“There is no difference between an extra 10 pounds of fat on someone’s body or an extra 100 pounds.” That’s a big statement coming from an ex-260-pound woman who had to face changing a very fat, unfit body instead of just losing a couple of pounds.

Physically there’s a big difference. Emotionally it seems to be exactly the same.¹⁰⁶

In this we return to our *ultimate order*: any movement downwards in the order--or in our case, upwards in terms of size and weight measurements--is automatically understood as bad or negative.

Purpose-Act I: Health

While many narratives mention health concerns peripherally, if they mention them at all, there are of course a number of authors whose primary cited motive was to improve their health. Symptoms of disease and the fear of death appear in weight loss success stories, again regardless of the amount of overweight. Kevin M. McKinney and John Wells, both published by *Men’s Fitness*, start their narratives’

“before” stages at quite different weights, yet have similarly severe health threats. McKinney writes of his before stage, at nearly 400 pounds: “...at age 30 I was a borderline diabetic and I was suffering from hypertension that required daily medication. The prospect of death didn’t frighten me as much as living with the blindness or the loss of limbs that diabetes can bring. And it was all due to my weight.” Wells writes:

A routine visit to my doctor showed that, even though I was only about 30 pounds overweight at 187 (still porky enough to fit the clinical description of an “obese” person), I had extremely high serum-cholesterol levels--I was over the 255 mark, and my “bad” LDL cholesterol was way up there....my doctor got pretty blunt... ‘John,’ he said, ‘you’re on a fast track for a heart attack by the time you’re 40.’

The words hit me like a sledgehammer.¹⁰⁷

Often, as in these two passages, the revelation that subjects’ weight, and their related eating and exercising habits, are threatening their health is delivered by a doctor (purpose-co-agent ratio). As we have seen throughout, doctors make regular appearances as co-agents in the act of losing weight. Curiously, however, while doctors are frequently the bearers of bad tidings, they are infrequently co-agents in the act of losing. Once their doctors have delivered the bad news, subjects generally appear to turn to other sources of information on weight loss to develop an agency or set of agencies for weight loss.

Material Representations of the Body as Agency

The culmination of the weight loss success story “before” stage is a turning point moment. These can be motivated, as above, by a fear-inspiring realization that the subject’s health is seriously threatened by her or his former acts, or by confrontations with strangers or loved ones. These moments of revelation also often involve props: mirrors, mirror substitutes such as windows, and photographs. In a typical narrative, the writer measures her need to lose weight after receiving a visual confirmation of *body size* in the form of seeing a photograph. Hansen-Brown writes: “My turning point came when I saw photos from my sister’s wedding and didn’t even recognize myself. I looked overweight and out of shape. Pictures don’t lie and I realized I needed help.”¹⁰⁸ The suggestion is that the agency, or method, of obtaining confirmation that she is “overweight and out of shape,” is reliable.

Tami Colby’s *Weight Watcher*’s narrative is also a good example once more: “One day, about three years ago, Tami got her new driver’s license in the mail, and her photograph stunned her. “I thought, ‘That’s not me.’ I had always felt I was attractive, but I had never weighed that much before. Reality hit me in the face, and I said, ‘That’s not me because I’m not going to let it be me.’” Colby’s narrative is intriguing for the way that she conflates her image in the photograph with her entire self, which is to say that what she looks like is what she *is* in her assessment.

Mirrors sometimes function in the same way, especially when the mirrors are come upon unexpectedly, and therefore generate a surprise, or when the agent is examining her or him-self in the mirror in order to determine the extent of her or his lapse from perceived acceptable weight. In such cases, the agent seems

predetermined to view the body negatively, possibly because in a mirror the connection between self and body has so long been associated in popular rhetoric. As Janice Clayton says, “One day, I looked in the mirror and said, ‘How in the world did I let this happen? This is not me.’”¹⁰⁹

In most of the accounts that cite a visual image of the self as the climactic moment the subject decided to lose weight, there is a distance between the subject’s mental image of him or her self and his or her physical appearance in the photograph. Just as the agent has both real and perceived, or imagined, counter-agents constantly reminding them of their size, the photograph involves the agent in a perceptual split. The element of unreality forces a crisis: the fat body is somehow both not real and too real; the agent has perceived her- or him- self as more attractive, better, more under control, thinner. Colby’s “that’s not me” reaction is standard. The following quotes from a variety of body reshaping narrative sources should drive this point home:

Susan Koegel thought her June 1999 wedding was perfect-- until she got the pictures back from the photographer. “I almost didn’t recognize myself,” says [Susan]. At 257 pounds, Susan knew that she was overweight, but it took seeing a photo of herself in a tight bridal gown to jolt her into action. “I realized there was a whole different person underneath all those extra pounds--and at that moment I decided I would try and find her.”¹¹⁰

In July 1995, I saw a picture of myself taken at a...party, and I was appalled at what the image showed: There I sat, sunk into a couch, looking like a beached whale.¹¹¹

Some people experience a defining moment--a point at which life splits into before and after....I was looking at a photograph taken at my brother's wedding on October 9, 1993. In the photo, I'm dancing....Even though I'm smiling, I'm far too aware that all 263 pounds of me fills much of the camera frame.¹¹²

For success story authors, the physical image of the body is the (exterior) location in which the “positive” or material, and the dialectical, come together. They know their weight in pounds--the empirical or positive measurement which, impacted by the ultimate order, is judged negatively when higher than the subject would like--but their *feeling* of requiring change comes from the knowledge of the number *and* the visual image or material representation. It is in the confrontation with the photograph or mirror that the numbers become meaningful enough to prompt action.

Whether we describe these mirror or photographic images as part of agent or as agencies through which the agent becomes aware of a need/desire to change, these are at least as often the “turning point” motives as reprimands and chidings from other people. These photographs provide the would-be weight loser with a view of their body from the outside, as if they can, with the aid of the photograph or mirror image, see themselves as others see them and judge accordingly. Photographs, and mirrors come upon suddenly, allow people to see themselves when they are not consciously maneuvering their faces and bodies, so that the intention of the body's posture and the face's expressions interferes less with the subject's interpretation of the posture and expressions' effects.

Purpose-Act III: Hidden Agendas

In the overview of the success story's before stage, which corresponds to the act of being or becoming fat, we saw that authors often described themselves as “out of control.” The relationship between agent and purpose is crucial to understanding this description. Many Americans struggle with weight issues, yet live in a scene researchers have discovered is both psychologically unfriendly to fat people and contradictorily encourages people to become fat by providing nearly unlimited access to a wide variety of high calorie foods and requiring limited physical exertion. If we assume that these people share the similar purposes described above, then it rapidly becomes clear why the agents feel “out of control”: their purpose or desire to become thin are distinctly at odds with other motives, including other purposes.

Perhaps to account for this dramatic purpose-versus-all-the-other-motives split so apparent in the before stage of the success story narrative, many emergent self-help programs on weight loss insist that there are purposes, or hidden reasons, people subconsciously choose to be or become fat. These hidden purposes the fat person must reveal and defuse before she or he truly engaging in the (enlightened) struggle to lose weight.

One example comes from the famous book, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*, by Susie Orbach, first published in 1978 and reprinted with its sequel in 1997. In her *Anti-Diet Guide for Women*, Orbach suggests that women have a variety of reasons for choosing to be fat, such as avoiding sexual attention from men, or asserting their right to take up space—to have “substance and strength”—in a culture that expects women to be “one the one hand, decorative, attractive and an embellishment to the

surroundings and on the other hand, that they should do the hard concrete work of raising the children, running households, while at the same time maintaining jobs outside the home.” Orbach concludes that “for many women the physical model of the shy, retiring flower, demurely smiling beneath lowered lashes, is too frail and insubstantial to accomplish the daily tasks of living that are their responsibility.”¹¹³ In Orbach interpretation, although fat has negative consequences for women as it suggests they are resisted cultural norms, its material presence is a reason women choose not to be thin, subconsciously derailing their weight loss attempts.

Similarly, according to Dr. Phillip C. McGraw, known popularly as “Dr. Phil” from his appearances on Oprah Winfrey’s talk show as well as from his own subsequent talk show, identifies several key factors necessary for long term weight loss. Along with the predictable need to “control the environment” so that when dieters “rebel” they have structures in place to keep them from overeating, McGraw highlights the need to assess what psychological patterns make people overeat as a coping strategy for stress. In an issue of *O*, Winfrey’s magazine, McGraw uses “Sandra” to highlight how people subconsciously choose to overeat:

Sandra, a former patient of mine, was a clear example. At 5’2” and 195 pounds, she professed to be desperate to lose weight. Consciously, she hated her appearance and feared for her life, knowing she was at high risk for a heart attack or stroke. Yet despite repeated attempts at dieting, she would put the weight back on every time she got close to her goal.

It was clear to me that Sandra was getting some kind of payoff for this self-sabotage. Somehow, somehow, she unconsciously felt uncomfortable giving up her obesity....[After discussing how her uncle molester her] Sandra and I began to see that remaining overweight insulated her from the opposite sex.¹¹⁴

Stories like this are fascinating from a rhetorical perspective because they offer alternative “truths” and alternative narratives with which to frame the apparent “failure” to maintain a weight loss. Providing people with a narrative of using fat as a means of self-preservation and/or self-expression gives them a sense that, however unconsciously, they have been *purposeful* all along. The “hidden motive” for remaining fat functions as a way to build the confidence of the would-be weight loser and enable their conscious will to choose weight loss and maintenance.

While uncovering one’s ‘hidden motives’ might be useful in the fight against one’s own weight gain. As a form of counseling for an individual, the technique suggests that the subconscious will has been stronger than the conscious one. It offers a narrative explanation for a presumed failure—a different form of symbolic convergence, a different story that works to motivate. Yet, the “hidden motive” theory still inherently insists that the fat person is “out of control;” indeed, so far out of control that not only is the fat agent unable, despite her best intentions/purposes, to be thin and healthy, she does not even know what her real intentions are.

Purpose-Agency: Pregnancy Weight Gain

Pregnancy is a reason to gain weight that is actually encouraged for most women. During pregnancy, women “of normal weight” are often advised to gain

between 25 and 35 pounds. This method, or agency, of weight gain originates in the desire to gain an appropriate amount of weight to have a healthy infant. However, weight loss success story subjects who complain about pregnancy-related weight typically gain many more pounds during pregnancy than those recommended. Typically, the agency overtakes the desired purpose: as we saw earlier, Janice Clayton gained 80 pounds while pregnant with her son. The difficulty of losing this weight, even several years after giving birth, especially if the woman has another child before returning to pre-baby weight, is often cited.

Agency-Act: Injury and Illness

Injury and illness feature as often as pregnancy as a motive for gaining weight, though the weight gain is rarely at all desirable. Lynn Lingenfelter's somewhat lengthy success story, published as a third-person account with heavy quotation in Bill Phillips' *Body for Life*, showcases how injury and illness both work as agencies for weight gain that make the agent feel out of control and that must be overcome for weight loss to occur. Lingenfelter, who received HIV from a blood transfusion after a shooting accident in 1983, said:

‘I basically dropped out of life. I was in denial, then I was angry, then I hit rock bottom. I was very depressed. I’d sleep 15 hours a day. Sometimes I wouldn’t leave the house for a week. I drank beer and ate junk food and watched a lot of TV.

In no time at all, Lynn ballooned to 230 pounds. He tried stemming the tide, but there was no stopping it.¹¹⁵

Accounts of injury and disease as a motive often use the physical and mental pain surrounding these events to justify the depression that leads to making unhealthy food and activity choices that lead to weight gain, authors generally don't use these events to excuse their behaviors or make the agent motive any less important. Lingenfelter continues: "One morning...[I] looked at myself in the mirror. I looked like crap. I felt like crap. And I told myself I had to change. It was time to take the bull by the horns." Lingenfelter applauds Phillips for teaching him "a frame of mind, which inspired me more than all the preachers, teachers, doctors, and counselors who had tried to get through to me before." Illness and injury are well-known motives for depression; they often necessitate lower activity levels or even inactivity. Little makes one feel so "out of control" as when the body is painful or unresponsive. It seems fitting, therefore, that so many people choose to lose weight after suffering an injury or being diagnosed with a physical illness or disorder. Lingenfelter's acknowledgment of Phillips' rhetoric shows how the "control the body control the life" philosophy inherent in most weight loss endeavors can be especially persuasive to those who have felt physically, not just emotionally, out of control of their bodies.

Purpose-Act IV, or, Oh What a Tangled Web

I have already suggested at some length that the ultimate order, with thinness, health and fitness at the top and fatness and corresponding lack of those other ultimate terms, impart the purposes for the act of losing weight. I also suggested that these purposes, while necessarily separate from each other, might be confused and conflated because of their similar rankings in the ultimate order. The fitness success story does suggest that all of the motives are a tangled web, weaving fear of rejection,

real rejection, poor health, hatred of one's own appearance, economic and career concerns related to the fear of rejection, etc., into a long list of reasons the author-agent wants to lose weight. An extended quote from Susan Powter, explaining how she became fat and failed to lose weight, evinces this entanglement:

I started eating enormous amounts of high-fat foods and stopped moving--the exercise I had begun to please my [husband] ended. I was isolated, angry, lonely, scared, angry (did I mention angry?), eating, not moving and planning the death of [my husband and his girlfriend]....One day I woke up out of a fat coma, and I was a mess. I was fat. I couldn't move without feeling exhausted. I had every ache and pain in the book. My self-esteem was in the toilet. I hated the way I looked and felt. I was 260 pounds, and I felt as if my life were over.¹¹⁶

Critical to an understanding of how body shape functions rhetorically in our culture is seeing these purposes blending together in these narratives. It is not enough to think of the desire to lose weight merely as an aesthetic goal, or as a healthful pursuit, or even as a desire to gain “control” over appetite or the body as our culture demands for different genders. The major success of the “control the mind, control the body” rhetorical vision narrativized in the weight loss success story derives from this confluence of purposes, scapegoating fat by making it possible to pin many of life's awkward and painful moments on fatness.

The “During” Stage

The “during” stage of weight loss success stories features the subject’s transformations and a description of the motives that continued to propel the subject on the quest to reshape her or his body. It is at this point that the agent’s discovery or creation of co-agents in the act of losing weight becomes important.

Agent/Co-Agent-Act

Jerry Mosher’s wife became his partner in weight loss; his “tip” to other readers is: “Make it a family thing. We bring the kids down to the basement with us while we work out.”¹¹⁷ Others are recruited to work out by friends, co-workers, and parents.¹¹⁸ Weight Watchers in particular bills itself as a supportive set of co-agents in the act of losing weight, and many subjects of weight loss success stories published within the organization’s magazine credit the leaders and members of the group meetings with engendering their participation in the program and contributing to their ultimate success.

The Discovery Health Channel’s “Body Challenge” series dramatized the gray area between co- and counter- agent status. The “Body Challenge” pitted contestants against each other: six challengers competed to see whose body *and mentality* changed the most by the end of the program and to win a prize. Mere weight loss was not enough to win: the judges of the contest also examined the mental changes that had occurred to determine a winner, and extolled the “attitude” of the selected winner in addition to her weight loss by the end of the series run.

The producers apparently assumed that co-agents were necessary for change; each participant in the “Body Challenge” was given a doctor’s prescription diet and a

personal trainer. One participant fired his trainer and asked his fitness-expert friend to assist him instead, claiming that his personal trainer was not accommodating his goals and chosen methods. An intriguing and tense camaraderie developed amongst the competitors: at weigh-ins, they cheered each others' progress, but the spirit of rivalry led one competitor, Juan Carlos, a pastry chef, to deliver baskets of high-calorie, high-fat treats to the other "Body Challenge" entrants.¹¹⁹ The intended victim refused to eat the goodies, expressed anger about the planned sabotage and vowed to defeat the would-be saboteur. While no other combatant went to such lengths to impede the others' progress, the uneasy partnership made it clear that members of a group conspiring to lose weight might be co-agents in part by being counter-agents. In this case the competitors all wanted to "win" the prize offered to the person whose progress—not necessarily represented by weight or inches lost—was most impressive to an expert panel. But in many cases, jealousy over who's the "biggest loser" can become a powerful motive.¹²⁰ Another reality television program that aired later and on public television instead of cable was even called "The Biggest Loser."

A final comment on helping and hindering weight loss: giving assistance to another in a weight loss endeavor is a vexed maneuver: you can try to help someone only to have your advice rejected and that someone gain more weight to spite you; you can try to sabotage someone only to have them try even harder to lose weight...to spite you. The line between being a co- and counter- agent is fine indeed.

Agency, or How-To

As we have seen again and again, alterations to agent and agency to accomplish the agent's purposes really propel the narrative forward, as changes in

these are the most easily accomplished by individuals within hostile “scenes,” or with limited allies in weight loss. The agencies discussed in the weight loss success stories are usually the predictable: change of diet and increase in physical activity. The narratives as published always indicate the behaviors that led to weight loss, and these correspond, in general, to the publication source and its modus operandi. Success stories published in *Weight Watcher’s* magazine and on the organization’s website indicate that one of the organization’s programs was the agency, or method, necessary to overcome fatness; fitness and health magazines publish narratives in which authors claim to have used a wide variety of fitness and healthy diet modification behaviors; advertisements feature spokes-models, sometimes celebrities, sometimes not, for their products. And so on. The agency changes the success story very little despite the wide variety of behaviors changed and modified, so that whether the agent became a weight watcher or loses weight with apparent ease using a dietary supplement, the out-of-control, shame-faced fat person is finally remade into a lean, confident person ready to meet the world.

Ultimately, the very variability of agency is an important part of the rhetorical impact of the success story as a genre. There is significant debate over “what works” and whether it is truly “healthy” or not, and the debate over the merits of the Atkins’ Diet exemplifies this debate.¹²¹ Though success stories all maintain that losing weight is a key life change, the stories compete in that they often suggest agencies that are incompatible. Many suggest limiting carbohydrates and eating food from which the calories come mainly from protein, others suggest eating a diet deriving at least half of all calories from carbohydrate sources.¹²² Some programs focus on

dietary fat reduction while some focus on limiting overall caloric intake.¹²³ Because agencies or methodologies for weight loss are sold commodities in most cases, and the weight loss story will reflect the larger publication's advertisement goal, the agencies are necessarily at odds.

Weight loss subjects often mention the failure of so-called “Fad diets,” or “crash diets,” in their previous weight loss efforts, something that is jarring in the context of the whole magazine. Janice Clayton asserts: “The broth diet, the lettuce diet, even starving myself--you name it, I tried it.”¹²⁴ The same magazine contains advertisements for “fad diets.” For example, on page 92 of the February, 2001, there is an advertisement for “The Hollywood Diet.” While the magazines need not overtly endorse the “fad diet” in its editorial pages, such competition at the level of agency is widespread across the culture. Generally, the testimony supplied in the success story is supposed to be the “honest” average person’s testimonial that makes advertisements and other publication sources appear reality-based. This “honesty” is in part why the success story’s visuals are so important, as, presumably, you can not fake physical weight loss as substantiated by photographs. As a result of being a part of a market system, the success story as a genre is extremely flexible on agency.

Compression of Agency/Process

Though the “during” stage of the weight loss success story can be as long as the “before” stage—that is, it can take up as much material space on the page as the “before” stage and even take as much time as weight gain—usually it is compressed into a smaller space on the page. The division between the “during” stage and “after” stage is also much less pronounced than that between “before” and “during.” There is

no “turning point” or powerful moment of motivation that clarifies when “during” has yielded to “after,” in part because the activities begun in the “during” stage necessarily must continue or even intensify through the “after” stage, or the effects of those activities will evaporate. Once “during” has begun, it is usually up, up, up towards the ideal physical and mental changes that culminate in the “after” stage.

The quantity of how-to information within the textual narrative varies significantly from text to text. Each individual author’s methodology differs from that offered by other authors while sharing at least two general characteristics. The first is reducing and/or altering dietary intake, the second is increasing physical activity. In the case of dietary supplement advertisements, use of the product begins, usually in addition to other methodologies, as one learns from the fine print.

Differences in the Genre I: Men and Women

Significant differences occur along the predictable gender faultline: narratives often differ substantially depending on whether men or women write them since fitness magazines are specifically tailored to gendered audiences. Pregnancy is motive for weight gain is one major and obvious difference, resulting from the biological difference between the sexes that has already been discussed. Two other differences emerge. One is a stylistic difference in the verbal description of the fat “before” body. The other is a difference in methodology; men tend to choose weight training over cardio, and women vice versa. This difference, however, is rapidly disappearing, as the benefits of weight training for women are more widely publicized.

Fat Styles: Understatement v. Hyperbole

Women writers are less inclined to elaborate on their textual “before” images, whereas men elaborate freely on their former size. Women writers tend to speak almost euphemistically about their, or their subject’s, size pre-transformation. As if using the term “fat” outright were impolite, or an impossible concession, women often choose substitutes for the term—euphemisms--when they describe their former body size. Laura J. Hansen-Brown, for instance, writes that she “remained plump,” and eventually “looked overweight and out of shape.”¹²⁵ Some other examples from women’s narratives follow:

1 After a while, I thought I was destined to be *heavy*.

2 All my life I was considered “*big boned*” by friends and family.

3 ...I was conscious of how much *heavier* I was than all of my girlfriends. They would always say, “Oh, you’re a *big girl*, that’s just how you are.”

4 I made halfhearted attempts to lose weight with fad diets, but of course none of them worked and I remained *overweight*.

5 I often ate cheeseburgers, pizza, chips and other junk food, which kept my weight *on the high side*.

6 The transition from *big-boned* and *chubby* to sleek and fit took me time and effort.

7 As a child growing up in Brooklyn, Linda was always *chubby*. “No one ever picked on me because of my weight,” she says. “But people used to describe me as *big-boned*.”¹²⁶

These euphemisms appear regardless of final weight loss quantities; women whose narratives track greater weight loss are generally no less discreet than women who lose far less; amongst the women quoted above, the weight loss totaled between 38 and 95 pounds. Women writers tend to allow the measurements on the scale or in clothing sizes to describe themselves pre-transformation. The photographs they provide also show their size “before.” Their descriptive terminology is often limited to overweight, heavy, chubby, plump, big and big-boned, and out-of-shape. Though all desire not to be fat, fat is the one word none wants to mention.

Men, on the other hand, generally describe humorously and with figurative verve what women handle more tentatively. Even when they use the same terminology, male writers frequently write exuberantly about their former size and habits. For example, in a narrative given the title, “I Was a POW,” Chuck Grachanin writes:

I was fat from Day One. My parents were heavy, my brother and sister were heavy, everybody around me was heavy. Even my pets were fat....The local hangout was a new McDonald's, and I think I ate the first one million burgers served there....I was addicted to eating: I wasn't satisfied until I had gorged myself to the point where I was sick. I was a POW--Prisoner of Weight.¹²⁷

Other examples are equally descriptive:

It was standard practice for me to wine and dine potential customers, and never in a health food restaurant. These caloric suicide missions took place on a daily basis, and I liberally stuffed my body with fat

and empty alcohol calories. After a few short years, my expense account had helped to push me to a very porcine 215 pounds--quite a load for a 5'9" frame.

...my body consisted of 245 pounds of flaccid poundage--most of it in full view around my middle.

...I was a prepackaged Big Man On Campus--in fact, I was probably *the* biggest man on campus....My waist was a belt-busting 49 inches at the equator.

I went from eating too much as a pudgy little fat boy to eating too much as an obese adult. Through the years, I steadily accumulated blubber until I topped 400 pounds and had a 52-inch waist.

Although I'd always been heavy--and had gorged my way to an additional 55 pounds in college--I now felt suffocated by my own mass.

...everything I was into was "Big" with a capital "B": Big college, Big-league football, having a Big body and, most of all, Big meals....I felt and looked like an ox cart rumbling along the beach.¹²⁸

The strikingly different descriptive strategies reveal striking differences between levels of acceptance of size and size anxiety for women and men.¹²⁹ The general feminine reluctance to describe size and the masculine tendency to emphasize both size and appetite corresponds to what Susan Bordo writes about our cultural expectations for different gender relationships with size and appetite:

Men are *supposed* to have hearty, even voracious, appetites. It is a mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively, and manliness is a frequent commercial code for amply portioned products: “manwich,” “Hungry Man Dinners,” “Manhandlers.” Even when men advertise diet products...they brag about their appetites, as in the Tommy Lasorda commercials for Slim-Fast, which feature three burly football players (their masculinity beyond reproach) declaring that if Slim-Fast can satisfy *their* appetites, it can satisfy anyone's.¹³⁰

Women, Bordo argues, are depicted in advertisements for food products and in women's magazines quite differently. They are supposed to have less voracious appetites; the feminine function is to provide nourishing and often indulgent food for their families while restraining their own appetites, or indeed merely maintaining what is “naturally” a more delicate appetite, so that they may remain slender.

Susan Powter, writing for markedly different purposes in *Stop the Insanity!*, offers much the same assessment of the difference in the acceptability of fat between men and women: “Our society judges a fat woman much differently than it does a fat man....A fat man is a ‘big guy’ who ‘probably played some ball in high school’--a redwood of a man who is strong and can hold his own. A fat woman is an undisciplined, lazy, emotional wreck.”¹³¹

This difference in putative cultural acceptance does not suggest, however, that fat is wholly acceptable for men. The jocular descriptions of former fatness offered by male writers seem as uncomfortable, in their way, as the feminine reluctance to admit to “fatness” outright. Indeed, humor reinforces value systems: to mock

something is a form of critique. The masculine tendency to elaborate to the point of the ridiculous may reflect two dissonant cultural attitudes: a first that suggests that any overweight is inherently negative, and a second that suggests that a man who is preoccupied with his appearance is effeminate and silly. These two combined put men in a precarious position when they discuss or write about their bodies, and weight loss success story subjects therefore may feel the need to make their former size the butt of their own joke instead of allowing their dedication to maintaining their leaner physiques be the inadvertent locus of humor.

The broader cultural context suggests that men should be appropriately lean and muscular, but also that worrying about having that physique is effeminate and silly. Male models and actors tend towards leanness with a few notable exceptions. Fitness and health magazines for men feature cover models with defined musculature, if not downright muscular bulk. It has been well publicized that G.I. Joe action figures for boys have, over the years, become more obviously muscular. At the same time, commercials in which men voice “typical,” “feminine” complaints about maintaining their “girlish figure” make the concerns seem ridiculous. In one women’s magazine, a male reporter investigated how people would respond if he asked strangers in New York City if they thought his butt looked big, as if a man worrying about the appearance of his rear were an absurdity that would generate interesting if not funny responses. Similarly, in “His Body, Him Self,” an article printed in [X woman’s magazine], a man discovers and laments his weight gain, hires a personal trainer, and emotes about the conflicting feelings he has about caring about his physique in the first place.

These conflicting cultural pressures put men in a difficult position, with few sanctioned outlets for discussing their feelings about their bodies seriously, but with plenty of reasons and opportunities to measure, compare and become anxious. It is unsurprising that hyperbole is a general tactic. Hyperbole imitates the bulk and allows for the expression of anxiety while also generating humor.

Agency: Strength Training v. Aerobics

The same difference between masculine and feminine attitudes towards body size and appetite is revealed in the types of exercises the two tend to use and their stated goals at the end of the narratives. Both genders often use a combination of cardio-endurance exercise (aerobics) and strength training in their weight loss programs. However, men often indicate that their goal is to build muscle for the sake of building muscle and possessing a physique that takes up space. In essence, for men the crucial issues are often not how big they are in terms of pounds, but what makes up their body, fat or lean muscle mass. In a narrative typical of the male discussion of fat loss and muscle building, Alan Tudanger indicates satisfaction when his weight loss decreases, because he is building muscle tissue: “Encouraged by my progress, I bought a set of free weights and started lifting three or four days a week, in addition to the five days a week on the treadmill. The weight loss slowed down, but I could feel the muscle replacing the fat on my body.”¹³² By contrast, Elaine Reed was initially discouraged from adding weight training to her exercise plan because, as she writes, the trainers at her gym “thought that the build up of muscle weight would discourage me.” Reed added weight training to her regimen herself over a year later.¹³³ Other female authors also report vexed decisions to add weight

training to their routines. For example, Danielle Lynch writes: “[When] I met my current boyfriend, [he] introduced me to weight training, something I had always wanted to try, but lacked the courage.”¹³⁴ And Denise Flachsbart writes, “At first, I was skeptical about weight training and thought I would get big and bulky.”¹³⁵

Phillips' *Body-for-LIFE* provides an interesting example of the difference between men and women's comfort levels with size and weight, demonstrating that women are less inclined to enjoy claiming they've gained weight, even in the form of muscle. In Phillips' book, which emphasizes muscle building via weight training as a central technique, the difference becomes clear in a comparison of the texts of the narratives. The first edition of *Body-for-LIFE* includes fifteen narratives. Of these, three are written by or about couples who embarked on Phillips' program together, five are written by women and seven are by men. With the exception of one woman, all of the women's narratives emphasized weight and/or fat loss but did not indicate the amount of muscle gained. The following four quotes show their exact phraseology:

In only three months, I lost 21 pounds of fat.

I've lost over 30 pounds, and I'm still making progress.

Now, I've lost 25 pounds of ugly fat and gained muscle tone and strength.

I lost 14 pounds and gained energy, muscle tone, and confidence.¹³⁶

The one woman who did celebrate her gain of “seven pounds of muscle” is unique among the women for being physically disabled. The women did describe

developing “muscle tone,” as an achievement, but the delight with which their male counterparts detail the development of muscle in their physiques is notably lacking.

Among the men, while three write about a decrease in body fat, only one discusses the same in terms of pounds. He does so in a paragraph that emphasizes first the increase in muscularity he noticed: “Within a few weeks, my muscles began to change and grow almost on a daily basis. They began to become more defined as the layers of fat disappeared. I lost 19 pounds of fat.”¹³⁷ The other two men who describe the changes in their bodies in part by describing fat lost do so in terms of fat to lean ratios:

I lowered my body fat from 27 percent to 12 percent.¹³⁸

I ended up reducing my body fat from 25 to 8.5 percent.¹³⁹

These narratives mention the weight of the author before the fitness program was instigated, but the final weight loss is never mentioned, yet other measurements, such as waist size and the afore-mentioned fat-to-lean ratios are, as if the exact amount of weight lost is less important than the inches, ratios and increase in muscularity. Two other male authors specifically mention weight gain in terms of pounds of muscle:

After 30 days, I’d already gained 10 pounds. It was already working!

I was gaining confidence and feeling stronger. I ended up gaining 26 pounds of muscle.

In just three months, I broke through my lifelong plateau, gaining over 30 pounds of muscle. As an example of the increase in strength, my bench press went from 215 to over 300 pounds.¹⁴⁰

Ultimately, the key verbal difference between men and women's narratives, as well as the content difference that shows a difference in choice of methodologies, highlight the cultural fact that, for women, weight loss is desirable; the body is to be remade smaller all the way around.

While deliberate weight gain is exceedingly rare among success stories written by women, women often indicate in their narratives that they intend to continue to lose more weight and also the time frame in which they'd like to lose it. Tonya Dyson is one woman who concludes her narrative in this way, stating, "My goal weight is 125 pounds and I will achieve this in the coming months."¹⁴¹ Writers who advocate weight lifting for women often address the issue directly as a myth that must be dispelled. Here is Bill Phillips again:

Myth: If women lift weights, they'll get "bulky."

Fact: Resistance exercise helps women create lean, toned bodies.¹⁴²

Articles in magazines targeted at women, however, consistently include light weight-bearing exercise techniques and use "reader models" to demonstrate many of these. Even Phillips does not suggest that women will become "muscular," choosing instead the adjectives "lean" and "toned."

As Phillips' book reveals, women want to create bodies without fat, but also without "bulk." Men celebrate the "bulk" they build; their enhanced muscularity corresponds to enhanced confidence. A marketing mailer from Gold's Gym illustrates the way that the difference between becoming smaller by losing weight is marketed to women by example, while men are encouraged to add muscle. In it, the woman is listed as having "lost" pounds, inches and body fat, while the man is

described as having “gained” muscle and inches. Women’s comfort with weightlifting is approached carefully, as if women remain afraid of taking up space in any form, and must be persuaded gently to gain weight deliberately. For men, taking up space is more acceptable, especially if the space they take up is taken up by muscle.

However, this difference in method is changing. This Nike advertisement (Fig. 4) shows that weightlifting is a methodology more women are using to lose

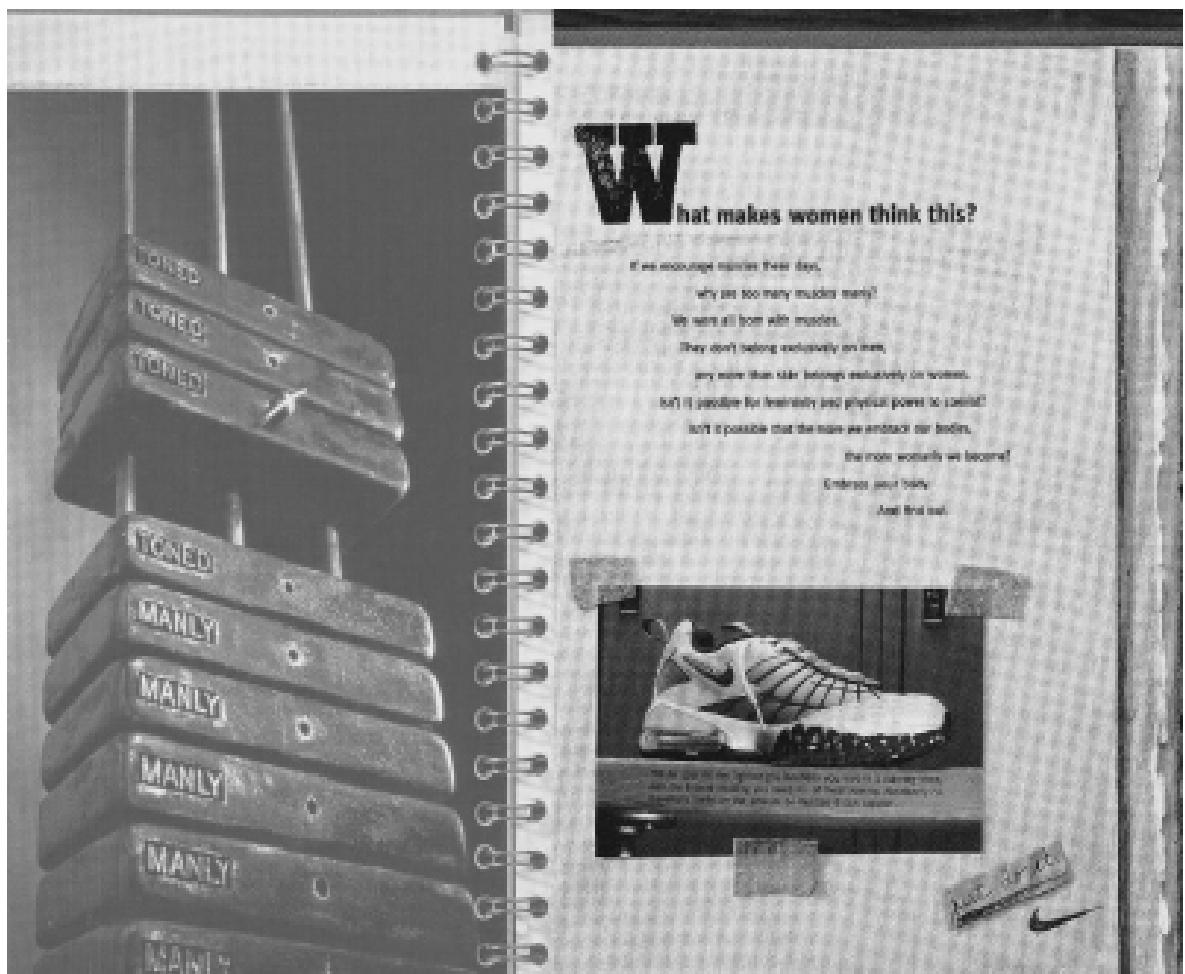


Figure 4:Nike Advertisement, *Glamour*, April 1999, p.60-1

weight while suggesting the older prejudices. A new fitness magazine for women, *Muscle and Fitness: Hers*, typically teaches women more uses for both free weights and resistance machines, and features fitness models who are more muscular than in more typical magazines that target women. The cultural shift towards using “resistance training” has left some people questioning, “Is Cardio Dead?”¹⁴³

Differences in the Genre II: Race, or *Heart and Soul*

Racial and ethnic minorities are, perhaps predictably, less often published in mainstream fitness magazines and books. In particular, Latin and Asian Americans rarely publish weight loss success stories in *Fitness*, *Fit*, *Men’s Health* and *Men’s Fitness*, though Latinos and Latinas publish more frequently than Asian Americans. African Americans publish with greater frequency, and are more often featured as “fitness models” in these publications (books and magazines), but less so in advertisements for gyms and weight loss products. In those mainstream sources of weight loss success stories, there is little discernable difference in the published narratives across ethnicities.

However, in two magazines targeted at African American women, there are some differences in motives that appear repeatedly. *Essence* magazine, which recently began to incorporate more information on health and fitness aimed at promoting weight loss, publishes occasional weight loss success stories. *Heart and Soul*, a magazine for African American women interested in health and fitness, also includes two or more weight loss success stories per issue. A sample of success stories from these two publications show three differences that might demonstrate differing ethnic views on weight and body shape.

The primary difference in motives relates to co-agent. Involvement of co-agents is especially pointed in many of the narratives by African Americans. *Heart and Soul* publishes at least two “My Body” success stories each issue, but publishes only six issues yearly. Between 1998 and 2000, authors cited numerous co-agents in their quest to become fitter; most of these co-agents were women: sisters, mothers, daughters, friends. This greater inclusion of helpful co-agents may reflect greater emphasis on community in African American life. Perhaps because the Weight Watchers group focuses effort on providing co-agent assistance, more African Americans, including men, publish their success stories in that organization’s magazine than in the other publications that do not make race an explicit element of their audience.

Religious experience is often folded into these narratives as well, by including God directly or indirectly as a co-agent inspiring and helping the subject maintain changes in habits. This co-agent relationship can be almost an aside or a kind of set phrase that marks people as belonging to a community of believers, as in “Thank God I was smart enough not to take [fen-phen],” but often religion is central to the narrative. An example is the narrative “Losing Weight Through Spiritual Gain,” in which Denise Whimper writes:

God became my motivator, personal trainer and dietician all rolled into one. He taught me about nutrition through His writings as well as about myself. Three years ago, food was my comforter. When I committed myself to God’s teachings, He became my comforter and

food was reduced to what it really amounts to—fuel. The Bible provides nutritional guidelines for health and long life. Genesis 1:29 says, “And God said, ‘See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food.’” As a result of this guidance, I have adopted a vegetarian lifestyle.¹⁴⁴

Narratives like Whimper’s are exceedingly rare in other media, but highlight the relationship between the weight loss success story and the religious conversion narrative by offering both in one.

A second important difference between the weight loss success story as a whole and those published by African American women is in the desired end. While they are included in this study as weight loss success stories, and weight loss seems an implicit goal given the before and after measurements that routinely show up, the narratives suggest a resistance to sculpting “thin” bodies. Instead, a diversity of body shapes is accepted and celebrated as part of the cultural heritage, as when Sonya Harris indicates that she has “accepted the fact that I will never be pencil-thin. Who wants to be?...As beautiful Black women, we should be proud of our full bosoms, big legs, and ample hips. I am thankful for being me, and proud of what nature has blessed me with.”¹⁴⁵ This diversity is reflected in a piece run in the April, 1998, issue of *Heart and Soul*, entitled “What a Fit Body Looks Like.” The article features five women in workout clothing who range in height from 5’4” to 5’11”, and in weight from 103 pounds to 175, all smiling and representative of fitness. The text of the article argues forcefully that “fitness should not be a one-size-fits-all proposition.”

This is a critical issue for Black women because so few of us look like the lithe little models and dancers used to advertise health clubs, for instance. Does that mean we belong there any less? The truth is, health clubs are for everybody, and because almost half of us are heavy enough to be considered obese, we belong there even more.¹⁴⁶

Essence also uses statistics that suggest that African American women need more and better health and fitness advice as exigence for its new commitment to provide it. As a fashion magazine, *Essence* typically uses a wider variety of body shapes and sizes for regular features than do magazines that are not aimed at a specific racial or ethnic group, and articles about famous African American women, like Jill Scott, focus on beauty issues related to race, including body shape and size, as well as skin tone. It seems as if magazines published for African American women are more accepting of a variety of shapes and sizes, reflecting greater openness in the subculture and greater resistance to the mainstream's pressure towards the ideal.

A final difference is that many more of the narratives written by and published for African American women focus on illness and injury than is typical. During the same time period cited above, authors of "My Body" stories in *Heart and Soul* discussed how healthy lifestyle changes in diet and exercise had helped them cope with, manage or overcome asthma, lupus, multiple sclerosis, drug addiction, birth defects, cerebral palsy, Hodgkin's lymphoma, and gall stone surgery.

Conclusions

Differences in the genre are important to understanding how gender and diverse backgrounds can affect the degree to which people adhere to the broadest

norms of the culture and the ways people will attempt to achieve normativity. Yet the flexibility in the genre is also indicative of its general success: the rhetorical vision at its root is powerful and adaptable. I have attempted, in this chapter, to provide material that suggests both how the genre essentializes individual experiences into routine patterns and also how it offers readers enough variation to accommodate individual experience.

While the rhetorical power of the belief that manifesting control over the body will lead to control over the life is important and impressive, the “before” stage is critical to the success of the genre. Readers of fitness magazines are assumed to be en route to their desired body shape or already there; the diet and fitness advice, and reader models, provide tips for making workouts *more* effective, and for adding foods and recipes to an already healthy diet. Articles can also emphasize losing “the last five” or “the last ten” pounds. Few articles provide tips for losing all—forty, eighty, insert number here—pounds desired. Enter the weight loss success story. Therefore, for readers with far to go before they reach their own goals, the opportunity to identify with the “before” picture is critical; it is also clearly a critical marketing device for the books, programs and magazines, and one of the few places the fat body is pictured. Willing readers may see success stories as opportunities for identification—“If someone like me did it, I can, too.” Compressing process is also an important strategy, one that reflects the market-driven nature of the genre but also a sort of wish fulfillment for the reader. Focusing on leaving one state behind and achieving another, happier, state, is far easier than focusing on the long process,

the daily choice of what to eat and what activity to perform and for how long. The genre encourages readers to “keep their eyes on the prize.”

It is easy to be suspicious of a genre that uses the experience of marginalization and emphasizes ends rather than means to motivate adherence to a cultural norm, but we should give the devil his due, as well. As Foucault, that greater thinker on power, suggests: “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes,’ it ‘represses,’ it ‘censors,’ it ‘abstracts,’ it ‘masks,’ it ‘conceals.’ In fact, power produces: it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.”¹⁴⁷

It would be foolish to ignore how the ultimate order that “excludes,” “represses,” and “censors” the fat person is at work in the weight loss success story genre, and how this genre paints a uniformly grim portrait of what it is like to be fat, and also how that portrait—offered as truthful, uncoerced testimony from formerly fat people—generalizes the lived experience of being fat into a negative stereotype.

Still it seems important to acknowledge that the people who write these stories really feel *empowered* by their experience of weight loss, that learning that they can achieve a difficult goal does make them feel like they can tackle other goals and achieve them. The weight loss success story’s participation in a market economy, and its inescapable use of power to cast a shadow on others’ lack of success should not blind us to its brighter side: as a social act, writing a weight loss success story and publishing it are attempts to enable others by modeling behaviors and attitudes.

Chapter Three: Weight Loss Success Story Visual Rhetoric

Granted that Americans are now considered the fattest people on earth, most of us are likely, in our daily lives, to see many fat people, or at least, a range of sizes from slender to muscular to fat. The very ubiquity of the weight loss success story should suggest that there are many Americans walking around with bodies that do not conform to the lean ideal. Yet fat people appear far less frequently in mainstream media representations than people with slender, lean or muscular body types, which is of course one manifestation of the hatred of fat.

Media representation offers bodies for observation, framing that observation to skew audience response responses to the images. Given the limited representation of fat bodies, two things are important to keep in mind in an interpretation of the visuals and their framing. First, and obviously, the image itself—its inherent depiction of the fat person—is critical. Second, the ways in which the immediate visual context prompts reader-viewer attitudes towards those images are also crucial to understanding how the representations foster or debunk stereotypes about fat persons.

Outside of the weight loss success story, where images of the fat person “before” weight loss are standard fare, few genres routinely include the fat body.¹⁴⁸ One such is the documentaries or reports about the “obesity epidemic:” the broadcast news, articles, films and television programs that are designed to showcase the extent and degree of Americans’ fatness. This generic form might be part of a larger program, such as a television news broadcast, or might exist in its own right.

What type of representation do fat bodies receive in this genre? According to Le'A Kent, author of "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women," even in articles meant to concentrate on issues related to fatness or obesity, images of fat people are missing. Kent writes:

In an issue [of *Life*] supposedly devoted to fat, the largest photograph of an actual fat person is a two-by-three-inch thermogram of a fat woman next to the story description in the table of contents. This thermogram, a visual representation of the temperature of various parts of the body...is, in effect, a brightly colored pseudoscientific, psychedelic blob...[T]he thermogram is significant as an example of the fat body as sign, and always sign of the same thing—lack of self-control, leading to disease. The medicalizing filter shaping that representation makes it difficult to read this body any other way.¹⁴⁹

Another typical representation of the fat body suggests that fat people are social criminals and must protect their identities. The face of the fat body may be blurred, or a bar might be superimposed across the face, or the head that belongs with the body might be cut off by editing or use of cinematography. The documentary *Super Size Me*, by Morgan Spurlock, provides two examples (Fig. 5 & 6). These images appear early in the film, during which Spurlock's voice-over narration discusses the obesity epidemic, and are of two people, one male, one female, at the beach. The man's face is blurred, the woman's head not shown, presumably to avoid revealing their identity. No such treatment is afforded to bodies in the film other than in this section. The suggestion, of course, is that it is embarrassing—if not criminal—to

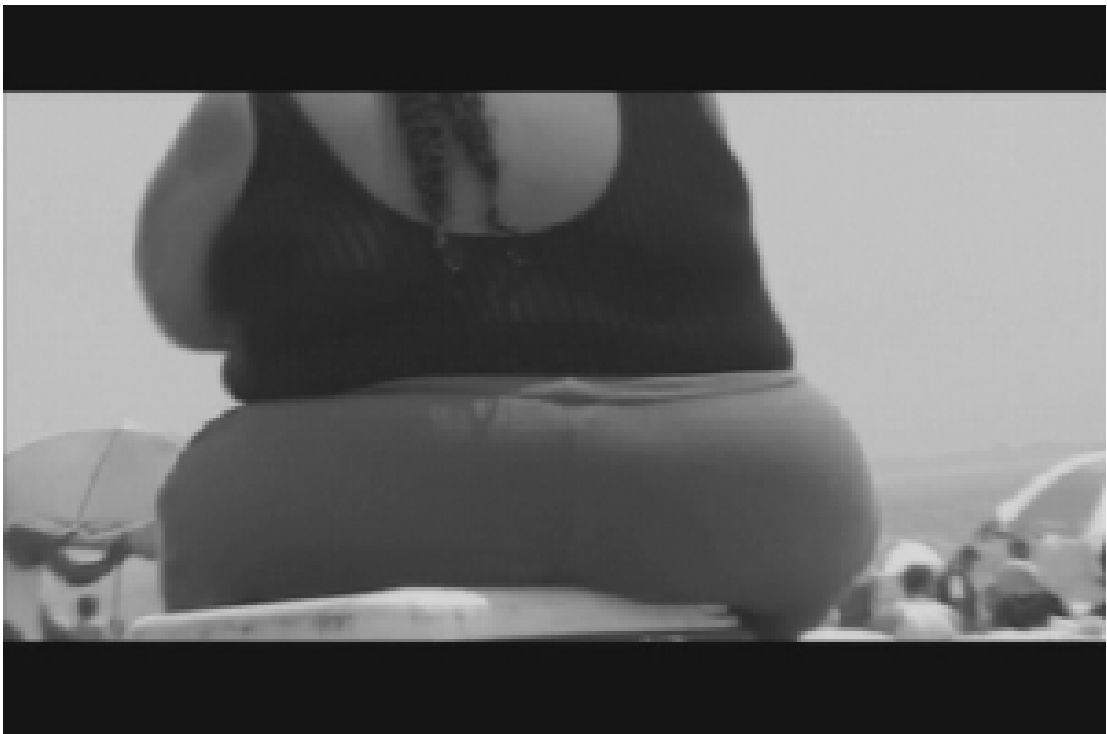


Figure 5-6: From Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me*

possess and display such a body, that the people to whom those bodies belong would not wish for others to see the bodies and know whose they are. This suggestion is ironic considering the text is about how many such bodies exist and especially considering that the people on film have apparently revealed their bodies at a public beach quite voluntarily. The gesture of covering or distorting the face, in addition to suggesting shame, makes the bodies more object than subject, more material to be examined as evidence than person to engage emotionally.

Other representations are similarly discouraging, in the sense that the mode of representation will discourage audiences from fatness by presenting the fat body and the mental state it represents unpleasantly. For example, for an article in the September 2004 issue of *Marie Claire* entitled “When Did Fat Become a Crime?” a naked woman is photographed lying curled up on a disheveled bed in a shadowy room. Despite the extreme shade, some visible rolls of fat are visible. Her face is covered by her hands: she apparently represents how confined and gloomy one feels as a fat woman in the United States.¹⁵⁰ Perhaps the photographic setting (the shadowy room and disheveled bed) also suggests that this woman is lazy and sloppy, or that her depression over being fat has led to her inability to get out of her bed and make it. It is unlikely, however, that a viewer will consciously “read” that deeply into the visual, which makes the extreme shade, suggestive of shame and isolation, and her posture—reclining, covering her face—the most noticeable elements of the photograph.

Sometimes, photographic representations of the fat body explicitly compare that body to a thinner one. For an article on teen obesity, *People* contrasted a young

woman, looking sadly into a mirror, with the posters of Britney Spears' lean physique on her bedroom walls. A *George* article of June 2000, explaining to men why "Women [We]re Dying to Look" as good as their cover model, Gisele Bundchen, was accompanied by the photograph (Fig. 7).¹⁵¹ In it, several large women in black lingerie and heavy make-up kneel or lounge on the floor or against a back wall, eyeing Bundchen wistfully. The model, known to many men for her work on the Victoria's Secret lingerie catalog, poses against a wall on the far left side of the photograph, engaging the viewers' eyes with her own.

These poses accomplish many things: Bundchen's position is in what Kress and van Leeuwen (*A Grammar of Visual Design*) would call the "given" spot, of the "given/new" arrangement, in which what is previously known (Bundchen) is placed on the left so that the western logic of reading left-to-right can take in what is familiar before moving on to what's unfamiliar (fat women in a men's magazine).

Bundchen's gaze is what Kress and van Leeuwen call a "demand," as it encourages readers to engage her reciprocal gaze; the others, by looking at Bundchen herself, are "offered" for the viewer to look at. By inclining their heads in her direction, they create "vectors," suggesting that she is what is to be looked at, not them. Bundchen's bent knee itself is a vector, pointing towards the woman who might most easily be described as being the "central" figure, though she is slightly right of center. Really, this woman seems to have pride of place, but her posture defuses her power—she is on her knees with her head turned and her gaze obviously focused on the (seemingly) oblivious supermodel. Of the fat women, this model seems dressed (or undressed) to be the most revealed of the large women, as her black lace negligee reveals more



Figure 7: *George Magazine*, June 2000, p. 57

flesh than most of the others, and detail of the lace in the fairly stark picture calls attention to it visually. The contrast between the woman's pale skin and the teddy is severe, so that the places where the lace reveals her skin seem vast, and the lace up that "ought" to be straight reveals a curve or bulge at her stomach, which might suggest to readers that the garment is inappropriate to her figure or at least ill-fitting, too small. Bundchen is also wearing black, but her skin is tan, and so there is less contrast between garment and skin, and her outfit fits well. Her pose is similarly suggestive of confidence. Thus, especially by virtue of contrast with Bundchen, and their postures and costumes, the larger women are both spectacle and spectators in the photograph.

It is not entirely clear what these other women are meant to be doing: they are clearly looking at her, possibly as a source of inspiration, and many of them seem partially to have adopted her pose though they seem to be falling at her feet in the process. Surely they are meant to portray, to some degree, what the title of the article claims: they are "dying to look as good" metaphorically, while the article, which focuses on deadly and painful plastic surgery procedures, uses the phrase more literally. Their emulation of the supermodel, however, is prominently incomplete: Bundchen's midriff is bare, whereas the larger women have at least partial if not full midriff coverage. Her makeup is less extreme; by contrast, the larger women, especially the women on her knees in the center of the photograph, seem tawdry. Their lingerie is certainly less glamorous; it seems unfashionable, outdated. And whereas Bundchen's famous wavy hair cascades into a feathery stole wrapped around her shoulders, the other women's hair is mostly short and/or slicked back. For the

readers of *George*, the photograph, like the one of a bikini-clad Bundchen on the cover, argues that Bundchen herself is glamorous and to be looked at, while the other women are unable to emulate her and also gaze upon her, sadly and perhaps enviously, as the rightful heiress to the spotlight. To some, the photograph might suggest that Bundchen's role is that of a dominatrix with her slaves gazing mournfully and adoringly up at her from the floor while she engages still another viewer—the male reader-viewer.

Photographs like this are rare in contrast with those “documenting” obesity, and yet this photograph speaks of the metaphoric relationship supermodels purportedly have with the women who admire them: the supermodels are more glamorous and confident, with their eyes firmly on men; the other women train their eyes on the supermodel, attempting imitations that fall flat. The reason their imitations fall flat—and so do they in some cases--seems to be excess fat, as that is the clearest difference between Bundchen and the other women. The fat female body is not depicted as sexually desirable or desiring in a hetero-normative fashion; instead, the fat female body is slumped, badly dressed, staring longingly at the image they presumably will never match.

Outside of the weight loss success story genre, the few images available of fat people, and women especially, suggest that the marginalization of people with fat bodies is extreme. Within the weight loss success story genre, the imagery is typically no less dire. As Le'A Kent observes, in this genre “the fat person, usually a fat woman, is represented not as a person but as something encasing a person, something from which a person must escape, something that a person must cast off.

The fat body is...caught up in a narrative of erasure....To put it bluntly, there is no such thing as a fat *person*.”¹⁵²

“Before” and “After” Photographs of Weight Loss

It is exceedingly rare that weight loss success stories appear unaccompanied by these “before and after” photographs--or, depending on the media, moving images--of the subject. Indeed, it is difficult to tell, in the case of the weight loss success story, whether the printed text is illustrated by the photographs, or whether the photographs tell the story and are supplemented by the printed text. Roland Barthes suggests in “Image--Music--Text” that photographic representation routinely supplants textual depiction as the locus of meaning:

...[T]he image no longer *illustrates* the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image....in the relationship that now holds, it is not the image which comes to elucidate or ‘realize’ the text, but the latter which comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image.¹⁵³

There are a number of reasons to assume that his assertion applies to the image-text relationship in the majority of those narratives. The photographic evidence alone can not only tell the “before and after” story of weight loss success, but also, by virtue of their compare and contrast propositional structure, communicate the sum of the textual arguments about the differences between fat people and thin, fit people.

Some critics maintain that visual images, or “pictures,” cannot be arguments because they lack certain properties traditionally associated with the definition of the term “argument.” In particular, David Fleming asserts that the conception of

argument as a verbal structure with two parts, claim and support, cannot be duplicated in a visual without text.¹⁵⁴ J. Anthony Blair concedes that visual argumentation is possible, but likewise lists amongst the criteria for a putative visual argument that the visual must include both a claim or assertion and a reason for the claim.¹⁵⁵

Ultimately, Blair finds a dearth of visuals that actually accomplish this two-part structure, but he alights on an advertisement for Benetton that he contends *is* “a powerful, multi-premise, visual argument against racism.”¹⁵⁶ However, Blair’s choice of an adequate visual argument is, in reality, not a single image or picture, but a series of visual images, each, as he interprets the advertisement, offering several verbally expressible reasons to accept the anti-racism claim or assertion of the advertisement as a whole.

In the case of the success story “before and after” photographs, we likewise have a sequence--pairs of photographs. (A limited number of published narratives present more than two photographs demonstrating the process of weight loss) These pairs are accompanied by often ample text. The pairs of photographs offer compare and contrast arguments, and often also less overt causal arguments, by relying on a range of contextual clues well known to viewers of visual images in contemporary American culture, and these cues suggest the compare and contrast and causal arguments. The photographs’ argumentative import duplicates the textual evidence offered in the narratives about what it is like to be fat, then thin. That is, the photographs indicate that “before” weight loss, the subject was “out of control,” etc., and that “after,” the undesirable qualities in the subject, formerly present, have been eliminated.

Sequences of images, rather than single, text-less images, are often analyzed by critics as evidence that visual argumentation is not only possible but rampant. Paul Messaris, for example, offers at least four methods of argument that can be accomplished by editing together series of images. What he calls “propositional editing” includes the common topic arguments comparison or analogy, contrast, causality, and generalization.¹⁵⁷ According to Messaris, a series of images in one advertisement can be articulated verbally in several ways:

Editing for the purpose of implying a generalization, which usually entails the concatenation of a number of related images, may be relatively distinct from the other three varieties, but within that group of three I do not think it is possible to make any reliable formal distinction....it is up to the viewer (assisted, perhaps, by a voiceover narration, a printed slogan, or some other verbal device) to figure out whether the content of the juxtaposed images is consistent with an interpretation of analogy, contrast, or causality.¹⁵⁸

Within the individual weight loss success story, we are free of the “concatenation” of images that would suggest a generalization, except that the repetitious use of these photographs within the (ubiquitous) genre is itself a form of concatenation. The photograph of Gisele Bundchen with fat women sprawled around her suggests that she is singular while generalizing about them. One might also think of the typicality of presentation of fat people—slumping across beds, faces obscured or cut—to represent the “sad” and “shameful” fact of obesity in general.

“Before and after” photograph pairs offer viewers the opportunity both to compare and to contrast—not Bundchen with the fat women, but one person, fat then thin--making them what Messaris would call both analogical arguments and contrasts. Because the photographs are of the same person, the pairs will necessarily contain more or less obvious similarities, and viewers will notice how the person in photograph one is like the person in photograph two. But it is the contrast, or rather the contrasts, between the two photographs that are most important to the pairs’ argumentative work: “Look how different the same person is now from the way he or she was before,” the pairs might be said to claim. Or perhaps: “Look how much *better* the person is now.” Each difference between “before” and “after” is a reason that supports the proposition that the person in the second photograph is an improvement upon the person in the first.

While it is clear from looking at a pair of “before and after” shots that something or someone *caused* a change to occur from one photograph to another, the causal argument is less obvious in the case of these photographs because often no specific cause is implied by the visuals themselves. Yet the cause of the weight loss--the methodology--may be suggested in a number of ways, some more and less obvious. For example, in some advertisements, the method or product will be featured in tandem with the before and after photographs. A pair of before and after photos will be featured with a image of the product claimed to be at the root of the transformation. Less overt causal connections are implicit in the FIT Finally Fit! Reader contest form discussed in Chapter One: “after” photographs should show the subject wearing activewear. That is, the subject should be certain that he or she is

wearing clothing that suggests *activity*, presumably at least a portion of the methodology a FIT reader would use to transform herself from fat to thin. Many of these fitness photographs suggest activity more powerfully by featuring the subject not only wearing activewear but literally engaging in a fitness activity, such as jogging, hiking, biking, stretching or lifting weights. Not only is the “after” person is more active than the “before,” corresponding to textual claims that the subject has more energy, it also seems obvious that “during” the transformation, the subject engaged in these activities in order to produce the change, an inherent causal argument.

For example, photographs of weight loss success story subject Kristin Calpino (Fig. 8) shows her “before” on the top right and “after” on the bottom left of the page that publishes her textual narrative. Her “before” photograph shows her gesturing towards something behind her, as if asking a question about it: she looks confused, possibly anxious, unsure about *how to act*. Her “after” photograph is quite a contrast: it has her wearing street clothes, yet kicking her leg out to the side and smiling. Clearly she knows how to act in this picture; she seems happy. A caption helpfully cements readers’ assumptions that the action or exercise she is demonstrating is the cause of her transformation: “Kickboxing helps me burn calories and beat stress.” .

In “Toward a Theory of Visual Argument,” David S. Birdsell and Leo Groarke emphasize the consideration of context in interpreting both visual and verbal arguments, and also list three types of context that are crucial for interpreting visual arguments:

fitness/feat smart

"I did it!"

EATING SIX MINI MEALS A DAY HELPED KRISTIN CALPINO shed 80 pounds

For most of her life, Kristin Calpino's weakness for junk food stood between her and a healthy lifestyle. "An open bag of chips quickly became an empty one," says the 32-year-old disc jockey from Nashville. "Now I have a better outlook on food."

Kristin's parents never kept junk food in the house, which only made her crave it more. "After school, I'd smuggle chips and candy into my room and just inhale them," she says. "Then, no matter how full I was, I'd eat a normal dinner with my family to

hide my bingeing." By age 13, Kristin was five feet five and weighed 165 pounds. Despite playing basketball throughout high school and college, she reached 200 pounds by age 21. She gave up sports after graduation, and her weight climbed to 230.

Kristin was finally motivated to make a change when she got a job at a radio station and moved to Nashville. "It was the start of a new phase of my life, and I wanted a new body to go with it." She cut back on fast food and began using the treadmill at the gym in her office building. Next, she added weight training, and she dropped 35 pounds in four months.

She stuck with her routine over the next year and lost another 15 pounds. Kristin realized, though, that she had to take a harder look at her diet if she wanted to lose more weight. "I ate less bread and more vegetables," she says. But the most effective change Kristin made was to eat several small meals a day. "It kept my hunger level steady so I was less likely to binge." At the same time, she started taking kickboxing and step aerobics at the local YMCA. Her increased efforts paid off: Within six months, she'd reached 155 pounds.

Today, Kristin teaches kickboxing, boot camp and sculpting classes at the Y. "I'm a totally different person. I have more energy and confidence—I feel better in my thirties than I did in my twenties!"

—CHARLOTTE LUTFALH



Me, at over 200! Best!

HOW SHE DID IT

AGE: 32
HEIGHT: 5'6"
WEIGHT: 155 pounds
POUNDS LOST: 80

MONTHS AT CURRENT WEIGHT: 18
THE DIET: For breakfast, Kristin eats oatmeal with fruit; she has a mid-morning snack of fruit, granola and yogurt. Lunch is a salad with chicken or a low-fat frozen meal. A few hours later, she has popcorn or cottage cheese. Dinner is chicken with vegetables, followed by an apple with peanut butter before bed.

THE WORKOUT: Kristin does a combination of cardio and weight training for an hour five days a week.

BIGGEST TEMPTATION: Ben & Jerry's Chunky Hobbit ice cream.

"I don't keep any in the house, but I treat myself occasionally."

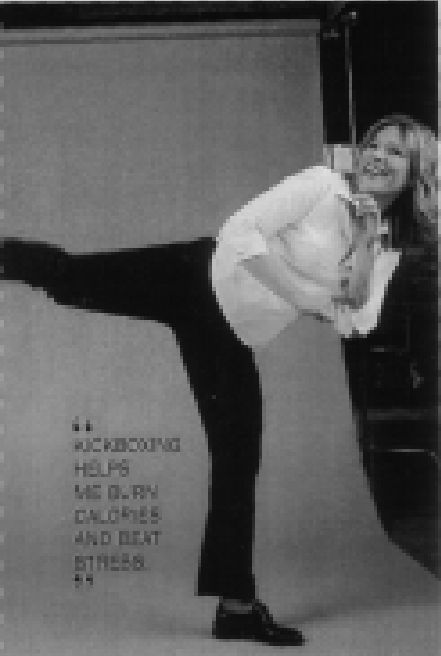
WHAT SHE COULDN'T WAIT TO WEAR: A shoulder-baring evening dress she bought for a wedding. "I never would have dared to go strapless before, but it looked fantastic!"

BEST COMPLIMENT SINCE LOSING WEIGHT: "When I gave Mooni recently, the technician took my pulse and said, 'Wow, you must work out!' because my heart rate was so low. I realized I was a lot healthier without the extra weight."

STICK-WITH-IT TIP

Don't be a slave to the scale. "I learned to measure my success by the way my clothes fit instead of how much I weighed."

ATTENTION READERS: Did you change your body? Put us your tale of transformation! Don't forget to include your photo number and before and after photos. We'll give you \$250 if your story is published. We regret that we cannot return photos unless a \$200 U.S. postage order to "I Did It!" FITNESS magazine, 15 East 30th Street, New York, NY 10010-3002.



44 KICKBOXING HELPS ME BURN CALORIES AND BEAT STRESS.

Figure 8: Fitness Magazine, April, 2002, p. 96

We do not expect words (at least not all words) to have solid, unassailable meanings of their own. Instead, we look to companion sentences and paragraphs to ascertain contextual meanings which may or may not be corroborated by dictionary definitions. The word “well,” standing alone, could refer to my health, my skepticism, or the municipal water supply. If you read the sentence, “I am well, thank you,” then the context makes it clear that the first meaning is intended.... ‘Context’ can involve a wide range of cultural assumptions, situational cues, time-sensitive information, and/or knowledge of a specific interlocutor.... At least three kinds of context are important in the evaluation of visual arguments: immediate visual context, immediate verbal context, and visual culture.¹⁵⁹

According to Birdsell and Groarke, the “immediate visual context” includes the sequence of images as well as the visual environment surrounding the visual image itself. In the case of weight loss narratives, the environment surrounding the visual would include the other visuals present on the page and in the magazine itself. “Immediate verbal context” allows the text(s) surrounding the image to provide contextual information against which the visual can be scrutinized; this portion of Birdsell and Groarke’s formulation is similar to Messaris’ admission that textual clues may help to determine what type of argumentation a visual is making.

Finally, “visual culture,” say Birdsell and Groarke, “provides the broad master narratives of design which are the background for more specific visual (or for that matter, verbal) texts which perpetuate or challenge those narratives.”¹⁶⁰ In our specific case, the broad narrative is the relationship between any before and the after photos recognizable from our wider culture. “Before and after” photographs accompany far more than weight loss success stories; many stories of transformation feature such pairs of images, whether they show the transformation from dirty shower stall to clean shower stall, from stained carpet to cleaned carpet, from baggy under eye circles to circle-free eyes, or from fat to thin. The weight loss “before and after” photographs borrow from the larger “before and after” image pairing structure, or grammar, widely used in visual argumentation in our culture. The “before and after” structure has become so widely used, in fact, that variations on the visual layout in weight loss success stories are almost as common now as the more standards “given/new” or “left/right” structure. Calpino’s success story discussed above is an example, putting the “before” picture on the top right and the “after” below. Weight Watcher’s television advertisements have depicted thin people stepping out from behind full-size cardboard photographs of their fat selves. One Hydroxycut advertisement in *Glamour* magazine depicts a woman literally tearing an enlarged version of her “before” picture in half, she is both destroying the image and shedding it like a snake sheds its skin (Fig. 9). Discussing a similar image from a weight loss advertisement, Le’a Kent remarks parenthetically that “[a] radically fat-affirmative reading [of the image] might note the similarity between this image and the science fiction standby of the alien bursting forth from its human host.”¹⁶¹

Don't just get a new bathing suit ...

Get a new bathing suit BODY!

Angelique's 3-Week Transformation

HydroxyCut Fat Loss Support Formula

Supports Weight Loss
Increases Energy
Boosts Metabolism
Water Retention

Multi-Supplement 280 Capsules

www.hydroxycut.com

GNC

*A study conducted on the primary ingredient in ephedra-free HYDROXYCUT (ephedra-free extract) led to 48% reduction from German omelette diet. 100 subjects had an average of 10 pounds (4.5 kg) weight loss by combining it with a 2000-calorie per day diet and 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise, 5 days per week. Individual fat loss influenced, blood sugar level and capacity to burn calories. Do not use if pregnant or lactating. Regular exercise and proper nutrition are essential for achieving your weight-loss goals. © 2000 MuscleTech P&O, Inc. All rights reserved.

Figure 9: HydroxyCut Advertisement

Ultimately it should be clear that viewers of “before and after” photographs, whether or not these are printed with accompanying verbal narrations of weight loss or without, do not see them in a vacuum. I have previously argued that the weight loss success story is a rhetorical vision widely recognizable from its ubiquitous presence in our magazines and on our televisions. To that end, I have tried to offer proof that it is extremely formulaic, both formally and content-wise. If I am correct, the pair of “before and after” photographs alone can tell the story without text; they are verbally interpretable as stories of reformation, at least towards the cultural ideal of thinness, and often, due to the aforementioned selection of “activewear” clothing and the assumption of exercise postures in the “after” photographs, of fitness and health, as well. These are contextual clues to the interpretation of the data provided by the photographs. Members of our culture “know” that fat is undesirable and can generally recognize more and less ideal body types. Members of our culture will also recognize “activewear” for what it is, and be aware of that such garments imply exercise.

The photographic pairs emphasize the dramatic change from “before” to “after;” the detailed process of transformation is, visually, not as important as the drama of the contrast of the two photographs that depict the extremes. In still media, such as magazines, visualizing a process is not as easy as reproducing images of before and after the process occurred. Commercials depicting weight loss via a workout program, eating program, or supplement, also use still photographs to document change. Even on such television programs as the Discovery Channel’s

“Body Challenge,” a series of photographs records change for viewers to assess: at the end of each installment of the series, each challenger’s initial photograph is compared with photographs taken at subsequent weigh-ins. The “before” photograph remains on the left half of the screen, while the subsequent photos alternate on the right half. For this reason, the process of losing weight is depicted as a series of before and after moments in addition to the program’s demonstration of participants’ activities (cooking, exercising, etc.)

The gaps between the two extremes of before and after shots can be filled with whichever product, program, or combination of product+program is purported to be the cause of the transformation. An advertisement for Hydroxycut dietary supplement illustrates (Fig. 10) this point; it stretches across two magazine pages in the December 2001 issue of *Men’s Fitness*.¹⁶² On the left side of the page, against a black and white background of a man’s muscular torso, are four textually brief examples of body reshaping narratives. Three men and one woman are depicted in pairs of before and after photographs. The before pictures are labeled on their top left hand corners, are in black boxes, and are smaller than the after pictures. The after pictures are cut away from their original backgrounds and set directly over the black and white torso. Because they are in color, they contrast sharply with the background. Under the pairs of photographs are brief textual messages, each affirming that weight lost occurred thanks to the Hydroxycut. Across the top and bottom of the page run two captions, “Lean Abs” at the top and “Results You Can Measure!” across the bottom. On the right page of the full ad, is a textual description

Lean Abs

BEFORE **AFTER**

**"HydroxyCut was so easy to use. I quickly lost 30 lbs of bodyfat and got into the best shape of my life."
— James Sterling**

BEFORE **AFTER**

Using HydroxyCut, 41-year-old Joe Barnett reduced his waistline by six inches and was able to lose an extraordinary 29 pounds.*

BEFORE **AFTER**

**"I've always been ridiculed for being overweight, but with the help of HydroxyCut, I quickly lost 45 pounds and 5 inches off my waist. I always knew I would get the last laugh."
— Carl Skutt**

BEFORE **AFTER**

**"HydroxyCut helped me shed 30 pounds of post-pregnancy weight. I lost so much bodyfat with HydroxyCut. It's amazing!"
— Maria Duncan**

Results You Can Measure!

Figure 10: HydroxyCut Advertisement

of the product, including a full-sized image of a bottle of the supplement and a graph presumably designed to show the product's effectiveness versus a placebo. The top of the right hand page completes the phrase begun by "Lean Abs" on the left: "Lean Abs in 28 Days!" A slogan printed below that reads, "Burn up to 6 Times More Fat!" The text beneath it is black and white, divided three times by larger red-lettered inserts. This black and white text appears "scientific" in some ways: it borrows from scientific presentation footnotes referencing an article from the Journal of American College Nutrition, and the aforementioned chart.

The photographs, as in so many success stories, are arranged in a "given-new" pairing.¹⁶³ In such a formulaic given-new pairing, neither of the pair of images is perfectly centered, so taking over the focus of the pairing completely. It is crucial that the images aren't identical to each other or nearly so, which would be mere repetition--a kind of given-given relationship a la Andy Warhol, which may tell its own type of ironic story, but isn't tremendously useful in the transmission of narrative information. The given-new arrangement is obviously quite logical for the before and after, or transformation, narrative.

A quick overview of the before photographs in the Hydroxycut advertisement tells us that they are unlike the after photographs, and not simply because the subjects' bodies are different in the two. First, as I noted earlier, the before photographs are labeled and set into boxes, both of which treatments have a kind of setting-apart function. This is curious, as the "before" tag is seemingly intended to unify the photos and create a narrative feeling by clearly demonstrating that one is before and one is after. However, I argue that the effect of the before tag is twofold:

it does unify and create narrative cohesion, but by suggesting that a viewer would not already know these were before and after shots of the same person, they call further attention to the differences between the two. Thus, the before label--the use of text--unifies and separates. The implication is that you would not recognize the two photographs as depicting the same people without the assistance of the label. It also adds a box to the already boxed photograph, making its layout cluttered.

The “before” photographs are unlike the “after” photographs, both in their content and their presentation, but they are also unlike each other. The backgrounds of the photos of the three men are at least all nearly a plain white--though different shades of white--but the photograph of the woman shows her in front of a naturalistically colored wooden door with a white frame. The difference in backgrounds is not the only clumsy aspect of the four photographs’ presentation.

Upon closer inspection, we see that despite the fact that the “before” photographs accomplish their putative goal--that is, that the subjects are dressed and posed to show the size of their physiques--the photographs are slightly *off* somehow. In the first photo of James Sterling, the lighting is poor, and his body in profile, while clearly outlined against the stark white, appears in shadow. In the photo of Joe Barrett, Barrett’s body is *not quite* centered, and his left arm is partially cut out of the frame. (To make the photo appear centered, the photo need only be re-cropped to cut off a minimal portion of Barrett’s other arm, a maneuver that could easily have been accomplished if the makers of the advertisement had so chosen.) He also appears to need a shave, and, in contrast to his after photograph, is unsmiling. The photo of Carl Stull suffers from the same poor lighting as Sterling’s: Stull’s face is heavily shaded

in contrast to his torso. In fact, the shading in both Barrett and Stull's photographs calls attention to the stomach because the lighting on that area of the body is brighter than on the rest of the body. One might legitimately wonder where the light source is in these photographs. Stull's photograph also suffers from a similar defect as Barrett's: Stull's right arm is more outstretched than his left and is even more dramatically cut off than Barrett's, and he also appears unshaven. His dark shorts are bunched and appear to fit poorly. Marla Duncan's before photograph is, as previously mentioned, the only one of the four with a non-white background. Her hair hangs into her eyes, obscuring her face (as Sterling and Stull's faces are also partly obscured by hair). Her attire can also only be described as unusual: Bathing suit? Workout clothing? Underwear?! The before photographs all seem to show people who not only lack muscular definition in their abdomens, but who display degrees of slovenliness: slouching, unsmiling, unshaven, tousled, even possibly dressed in their underwear.

These *off* qualities--shadowiness and obscurity, and the lack of centering and proper posing--even when we don't pause to study their specific defects, contribute to our sense that something is awry in the four "before" photographs. While it may take time for us to analyze *why* a picture is "bad," we know it is "bad" fairly quickly, and these are indubitably "bad." It is not only, though this is an important point to re-emphasize, that we are only accustomed to seeing bodies with imperfectly defined muscles and excess fat deposits in the pages of magazines as cautionary "before" images, but also that the photographs themselves have foibles recognizable from our own "bad pictures." All of us have snapshots of ourselves and our loved ones in

which, Oops!, someone blinked or shifted expression or posture at the last second, or the photographer caught us at moments of less than auspicious grooming, or the photograph simply “didn’t turn out well,” by which we often mean that the lighting is less than ideal. These amateurish qualities mark the “before” photographs in the Hydroxycut ad to a strong degree, especially in contrast to the “after” photographs.

The “after” photographs are larger than the “before,” despite not having boxes around them, and despite the leanness they intend to demonstrate. This disparity in size is somewhat paradoxical given the desired import of the pair of photographs: if we are supposed to notice the now reduced size of the subjects’ waistlines, it might seem logical to present a direct comparison. But the emphasis is on the leaner bodies presented to the right of the given-new pairing, and ultimately this emphasis makes perfect sense considering the underlying goal of demonstrating the importance of having a lean physique. Indeed, though leaner the physiques seem more muscular and bulky—at least the men’s do. Each pair of photographs is grounded by a blocked portion of text that spans across the two photos; the texts, in Kress and van Leeuwen’s terms, *mediate* the photographs and tie them together. Note that, in each case, the larger photo of the lean body is closer to the center of the grounding text than the before photograph, also adding to the visual importance of the after photographs. The shading present in the after photographs appears not to be the result of slovenliness, or of the photograph simply “not turning out well,” but rather of an artistic attempt to render the new muscularity more striking. The shadows fall in desirable hollows, highlighting what the huge letters at the top of the page scream: “Lean Abs.” It is much more difficult to argue that the photographs are “bad

pictures.” Perhaps more importantly, the subjects are now all well groomed, and two are smiling; they look less sullen, less unkempt.

Ultimately, the design of the page indicates the comparative status of the two images, and by extension the comparative status of the two people--though they are the same person--in the two photographs: the “before” photographs are necessary evidence, but in every way are less presentable than the “after” photographs. As the text of the advertisement expresses, the people on the right have bodies that are “the focal point of attention.” Whereas the photographs’ narrative intent is to show the literal weight of the subjects being reduced, the photographs’ presentation signifies the metaphorical weight *given to* the subjects once they have leaner, more idealized physiques. The page leaves no doubt that the leaner bodies are more admirable, more artistic, worthier of contemplation than those pictured before.

The “before” photographs in this advertisement, like those printed with most weight loss success stories, with their “off” qualities, show people who are “not in control” of their self-presentation. Or, if they *are* in control, they are choosing to emphasize qualities that are rarely considered desirable in our culture: sullen demeanor, awkward posture, and lack of grooming, in addition to the body fat.¹⁶⁴ In sum, the photographs argue via visual what the text states quite explicitly: that the subject of the success story was out of control, was depressed, lacked confidence--all the motives we discovered in the textual “before” picture other than, perhaps, obvious lack of health. The “after” picture shows a person who is not just thinner, but more “in control” of her or his self-presentation. The photographs show a confident, happier, altogether reformed version of the subject.

A few more examples are necessary to prove the point. Once again, I return to Oprah Winfrey, in part because Winfrey, as a celebrity, has, thanks to publicity, many more photographs of herself to choose from, so that her choices for publication are presumably less haphazard. In the *Make the Connection* success story, a pair of before and after photographs appears on pages 2 and 3 (Fig. 11 & 12). These correspond to the Emmy award “before” moment quoted in Chapter Two, and to a subsequent award Winfrey won “after.” Here again is Winfrey’s description of her feelings “before”:

“‘And the winner is Oprah Winfrey.’ I was stunned. Stedman and my staff were cheering. I wanted to cry. Not because I won, but because I would now have to stand before this audience of beautiful people and be judged. And not for being a winner.

I felt so much like a loser, like I’d lost control of my life. And the weight was symbolic of how out-of-control I was. I was the fattest woman in the room.”

The photograph that appears above this text represents Winfrey’s emotional state in many ways. Winfrey appears, standing on the red carpet, holding her Emmy in her right hand. Winfrey is not looking at the photographer who took this photo, but is looking, apparently, in the general direction of a group of photographers and/or celebrants. She holds her award out to the right; her left hand is outspread, palm up,



Figure 11-12: Oprah Winfrey “before” and “after” from *Make the Connection*

towards her viewers. Her mouth is wide open in a face that may indicate excitement and surprise, but is not at all a smile of happiness. Her posture appears more defensive than celebratory.

The photograph is even more strikingly not a depiction of celebration or glory in contrast with its partner, printed directly to the right in another “given-new” pairing, on the following page. In this second photograph, a more slender Winfrey’s mouth is also open, but she is indubitably smiling. More significantly, Winfrey appears to be posing deliberately: her award statuette is aloft in her right hand; she appears to be spreading her skirt to show its fabric or to curtsy--a flourish. The photograph, with Winfrey’s torso in a far more revealing white dress with spaghetti straps, emphasizes Winfrey’s more slender waist by contrasting her white-clad waist with a royal blue background. The photograph of Winfrey is far more clearly one of victory: this Winfrey has triumphed. In the “before” photograph, Winfrey appears more vulnerable, less pleased, less “in control.” While Winfrey does not describe the award show appearance that corresponds to her “after” photograph on page 3, the definitive contrasts between the two photographs suggest the body-mind connection she articulates: the “before” and “after” photograph pairing does symbolically what the text explains by depicting a fat person out of control versus a thin person enjoying a moment of victory.

Body-for-LIFE has already received considerable attention in these pages, but I return to it because, of all success stories, those published in it in particular revolve around the “before” and “after” photographs. As part of initiating the twelve-week program, *Body-for-LIFE* participants are encouraged to take photographs of

themselves “before,” as I indicated above, for motivation. These photographic subjects, therefore, know explicitly beforehand that their photos may appear in a publication detailing success stories. The numerous potential reasons success story “before” photographs might be “off”--the subject only had a certain limited number of “before” pictures to select from that showed her or his size, etc.--are reduced. These subjects are taking “before” pictures in the same way that others take “after” photos: they wear revealing workout clothing or bathing suits like bodybuilders or fitness models seen in magazines; they assume “workout” or “bodybuilding” postures designed to detail muscles; they have the opportunity to attempt to compose their faces deliberately; and they have foreknowledge that preempts the “Oops! The photographer caught me in a moment of less than stellar grooming” effect.

Here it should be noted that many pairs of photographs appear in *Body for LIFE* that *do not* correspond to published text success stories, which is to say the photographs appear alone. Or rather, not alone, but side by side with other “before” and “after” photographs. These images, which do indeed begin to seem like a concatenation and rather Warholian in their variations on a theme, appear on the inside covers of the book as well as on a strip that runs around the outer cover (Fig. 13). This use of the photographs in the book design allows them to serve as evidence for the successful methods presented within but without dedicating pages to the textual narratives, which have been rendered somewhat unnecessary by the photographs and their commonplace status.

The “before” photographs that do accompany text, rather than standing in for text that is missing but presumably similar enough to what is already available as to



Figure 13: Frontispiece, *Body for Life*

be unnecessary, overwhelmingly depict unsmiling subjects who are, compared to their “after” photographs, less polished, less well-groomed, again altogether less presentable than their “after” images. Those who *are* smiling “before” are smiling more broadly “after.”¹⁶⁵ Laurie Hochheimer, whose “before” and (two) “after” photographs without text will appear in or on the forthcoming book promoting the Body-for-LIFE specifically for women, remarked on her decision not to smile in the “before” photo by reflecting, “How would you feel if you looked like that and had to have a picture taken in a bikini? I just wanted to get it over with.”¹⁶⁶ Hochheimer’s husband took the “before” photo in their home; for the “after” photos, Hochheimer made an appointment to have a salon apply self-tanning lotion evenly--and booked a professional photographer.¹⁶⁷

Pages 188-9 of the first edition of the original *Body-for-LIFE* book show 29 black and white success story “before and after” photographic pairings. Of the 29, 19 depict men, 7 women, and 3 couples; 7 are duplicated from larger photographs published with textual success stories. Of the couples, two photographs show couples who are completely unsmiling “before” yet who grin in the “after” photos. Of the women alone, in the “before” photograph, five are unsmiling who are depicted smiling in their “after” photographs; another smiles only slightly in her “before” picture but smiles widely “after.” Nearly all the “before” photographs on this page show dramatic “improvements” in hairstyle for both men and women “before” and “after”: two of the women go from wearing their hair severely pulled back from their faces “before,” to having long, styled hair in the “after;” three of the women are also noticeably blonder. Among the men, there is frequently a noticeable increase in tan-

ness, and a decrease in body hair. These men appear to have adopted the personal grooming habits of bodybuilders. Three of the men wear glasses in their “before” photographs that disappear in the “after” image, an apparently minor change, but I think a telling one: all “weaknesses” in personal appearance disappear as the image shifts to “after,” even weaknesses completely unrelated to an increase in muscularity and decrease in fatness. In the entire book, two more men discard their glasses for their “after” appearances. Granted that the *Body for LIFE* program and book were developed by a bodybuilder and promote exercises and eating habits designed to create physiques that mimic bodybuilders, it is clear that all of the photographs are designed to imitate photographs of bodybuilders, which in fact most of the participants, if not all, appear to have become. Their “before” photographs are so strikingly “off” in part because the “before” photograph convention required by the program calls on non-bodybuilders to adopt the photographic conventions most often associated with bodybuilders. This process will obviously not fail to impress upon a potential *Body for LIFE* participant how inapt his or her body is for such a set of conventions, nor does it fail to impress the viewer of these “before” photos.

Bodybuilders in photographs, we know from exposure, are visibly muscular and pose to enhance the appear of muscularity by “flexing” said muscles, wearing outfits designed to reveal their musculature, tanning and oiling the skin and removing body hair to emphasize the same, and smiling. Bodybuilders don’t wear glasses. While the “after” photographs conform to these conventions, the “before” pictures fail in every regard except that most of the subjects attempt to arrange their postures in a bodybuilding “flex” pose. In other words, not only do the photos depict less-

than-ideal physiques displayed in revealing outfits, they depict the *wrong* physique in a particular genre designed to accentuate a spectacularly different physique. The “before” pictures show men and women in the wrong genre of photograph for their physiques. As a consequence, they cannot help but appear, as the texts relentless reveal explicitly, “out of control.”

Before, “During,” and After Photos

As the genre of the weight loss success story continues to proliferate, many versions of have begun—perhaps for variety--to incorporate “during” photos, which provide visual representations of the body at intermediate stages of weight loss. Some advertisements provide a mid-point. In an advertisement for Hydroxycut, for example, the model/user (Angelique Teves-Aiwahi) of Hydroxycut appears to wear the same pink bathing suit in each picture. As in the examples above, her hairstyle changes, but subtly; from the first image to the last in the series of three, and certainly looks more carefully styled as the photographs progress. One subtle but still significant change is the parting of her hair, which is loosely down the center in the first photograph, then shifts to being parted further to her right hand side, and then shifts over to the left side in the final photo. Three things are remarkable about this apparently minor change: one is that she appears more decisively groomed in the two “after” photos because the part in her hair is more defined; another is that the change in parts in the “after” photos covers an unevenness in the line of her hair around her face by covering it; finally, hair parted to the side shifts the perspective on the face, making it appear leaner.

She similarly appears to get tanner over the course of the three photos. That, combined with the lighting, however, is again enough to highlight her musculature for the final photo. She is smiling in the “before” photo.¹⁶⁸ Her smile becomes wider, as if her level of happiness being photographed in a bikini is rising. The lines from her nose to her mouth are more visible, as are more of her teeth, in the two “after” pictures, than in the first or second.

A set of “before,” “midpoint,” and “after” photographs only of her bikini-clad buttocks also appears. What’s curious about these photos is twofold: first, although the textual narrative published below the set of “before,” “midpoint,” and “after” photographs indicates that she “couldn’t fit into any of [her] clothes” after having a daughter, she appears to be wearing the same bathing suit in each photograph. In the first photograph, the suit appears paler than in the second, and appears to cover less flesh. Just the opposite is true as in a contrast between the “midpoint” and “after” photographs, in which the bathing suit appears to be much smaller, especially the bottom portion. Closer inspection also reveals a second curiosity: that the photographs show more of her body vertically in the final photograph than in the first, in progressive order. So that in the first photograph, Teves-Aiwahi appears only from the very top of her thigh, which is also partly concealed by her hands, in the second her hands are still touching her thighs but seem not to cover them, and more of the length of her thigh appears, and in the third, the same effect. Strangely, however, the level of her shoulders does not appear to change much from one photograph to the next, so that more of her supposedly-27-pounds-lighter body appears in the third photograph, in a smaller bathing suit that also reveals more of her flesh. As a result

of these differences, the final photograph shows more of her body but in the same space, and the frame of the shots—the white background—appears wider in the final shot. Ultimately, the final photograph literally has more white space surrounding it, making the “before” and “midpoint” bodies appear, to different degrees, to take up more space. In the first two, her hands touch her thighs, an overlap that suggests the quantity of space those thighs take up, but could have as much to do with deliberate hand positioning. In the “after” photograph, her arms do not touch her waist, hips or thighs, suggesting that there is less body to touch.

The presence of close-up photographs of her buttocks is somewhat unusual. While Hydroxycut and other supplements sometimes feature these close-ups of body parts, they appear less frequently in the genre as a whole. Of interest, again, is the bathing suit. In the first photograph, the bikini bottoms seem both inadequate in coverage and perhaps uncomfortable, suggesting that the bathing suit is, as the narrative suggests, too small for its wearer. The “after” photograph, however, shows bikini bottoms that appear to cover only the same amount of flesh, however there are discernable vertical wrinkles in the suit. These wrinkles may be intended to show that the bottoms are now baggy. It is also conceivable that the bikini Teves-Aiwohi is now wearing is a smaller size, and the wrinkles may result from a deliberate attempt to reveal more of the “smaller” body by pulling the bikini bottoms in towards the center. That means that more of the “thinner” buttocks are revealed. We might helpfully recall Oprah Winfrey suggesting in her “Introduction” to the *Make the Connection* book that it is socially acceptable for smaller women to reveal more skin than larger ones. The “smaller” bikini on Teves-Aiwohi, as well as the arm positions

and the retreating figure, in the “after” photos overall mean that more of the thin body is revealed, which do suggest increased confidence and acceptability.

Simultaneously, as a result of these visual manipulations, the difference in the size of her body between the three photos is less clear, rather than more. Viewers are unlikely to find the large “after” photo much more helpful if they are carefully scrutinizing her body for differences. The shot has Teves-Aiwohi face forward, but with her lower body turned and the visible hip concealed by her wrist and hand. Ultimately, without a close inspection, her body appears to change dramatically, but once the various covering ups and perspective shifts are revealed, it is difficult to determine how much different her body is from “before” through “midpoint” to “after.”

Of course the goal of the Hydroxycut ads is to encourage viewers/readers to purchase the product, and the selling point—other than the results depicted—is the ease and speed with which the product, “add[ed] to [the] diet and exercise plan,” creates weight loss. According to this advertisement, Teves-Aiwohi lost “27 pounds in just 8 weeks!” Presumably half of the weight was gone after 4 weeks, when the “midpoint” photo was taken, and the other half by the time the “after” photo was snapped. Despite showing a “midpoint” body, these photographs focus no more on the process of weight loss than did the others. Adding a “midpoint” photograph suggests short-term and long-term *results*, not an ongoing, difficult process.

Difficulty is the exact opposite of what the advertisers wish to suggest.

The series of weight loss success stories published in *Allure* has the same effects. In this fashion magazine (*Allure* bills itself as “the beauty expert”),

participants embark upon a year-long “makeover” that ostensibly focuses on weight loss. Judy Matz, the first woman to undergo *Allure*’s “Total Makeover,” commented on her experience with the “before” photographs this way:

I signed on for the makeover on a Thursday, and by Saturday, I was standing in an ill-fitting black swimsuit under the unforgiving lights of a photo studio. I didn’t think about what my “before” shots would actually look like; I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

Makeover reality hit me when I snuck a peek at the layout before the first issue went to press. I was totally unprepared for what I’d see—no warning, no Valium, no nothing. The cellulite, the bulges of fat, and the arrows pointing to my obscene measurements made my stomach lurch into my throat. I ran to the bathroom and locked myself in a stall, where I was instantly transformed into a crying, hyperventilating mess....

No matter what I did, that photo would be seen by more than 4 million *Allure* readers; I could either use this massive humiliation as a motivator, or prepare to see the exact same photograph 11 months later—as an “after” shot.¹⁶⁹

Just as in Body-for-LIFE, the taking and viewing of the “before” photograph is part of the motivation for continuing the weight loss success, but what becomes apparent from Matz’s testimony is that the photographic process itself is intimidating, and that the “before” photograph must necessarily be the subject’s first go-round with being photographed for the purposes of assessing size. The resulting increase in the level of

discomfort—not only am I being photographed, but so that I can be a “before” picture, which means the negative judgment about my physique is being recorded, possibly for a large number of people to look at—adds to the awkwardness of the photograph itself.

It is intriguing that Matz calls her measurements “obscene,” as the word literally denotes something that should happen “off stage,” something that should not be seen. What Matz, like Oprah in her textual “before” narrative, implies is that the fat body is not to be seen, is to be covered. All of the photographs that reveal the fat body, then, violate an unwritten taboo stemming from the shame surrounding fatness: if you are fat, you are somehow obligated to keep such fat as much under cover as possible. The photographic representation of the “before” picture can, as with Teves-Aiwahi, hint at discomfort by posing the “fat” person as covering up subtly with her hands, or can force the fat body to be relentlessly revealed, as in *Allure*, where the specified pose in the bathing suit appears to be “no covering up,” a specification likely to create visible tension in the photographed body.

Matz’s summary of her makeover ends with yet another set of “before” and “after” photos (Fig. 14 & 15). As if to prove how terrible her “before” photos were, the one selected shows her awkwardly holding up her t-shirt, a measuring tap hanging from her waist down to her knees, her expression difficult to decode as anything other than confused and discomfited. She looks as if she is not sure what she is doing with the measuring tape. A caption printed on the top left-hand corner of the photograph reads, “I was so uncomfortable with my horrible ‘before’ photos that I rarely mentioned the project to my friends.” On the opposite page, a grinning Matz, hands

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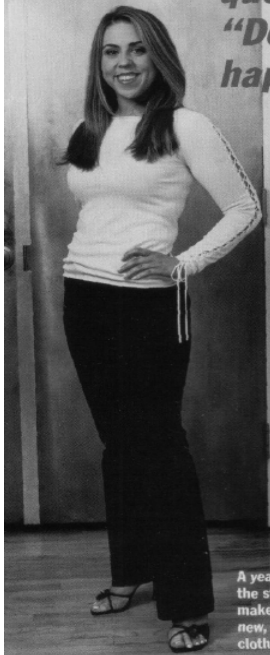
Strangers pointed at my tofu stir-fry and asked, "Can you eat that on your diet?"

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Figure 14 & 15: Judy Matz, *Allure*, January, 2004, p.64-65

on hips, appears, with the caption: “A year after the start of her makeover, in new, form-fitting clothes.” This caption ignores the fact that the other photos actually reveal more skin, showing Matz in a sleeveless t-shirt, pulled up around her waist, and form-fitting black pants; smaller photographs, that look like a page from *Allure* (one that has been crumpled up and flattened out again) show Matz in the “before” photo in a bathing suit. It is as if the taboo about showing the fat body leads the editorial staff who applied the caption to Matz’s after picture to assume that Matz had not been wearing form-fitting clothes before, despite probably having the photograph right in front of them.

Now finished with its second year, *Allure*’s feature had two participants, one its own writer, Sasha Charnin Morrison, the other, Abigail Einstein, a chef. Both women were initially photographed in bathing suits for their “before” picture; their measurements were taken and a fitness program and diet plan were prescribed for them based on their previous habits. In each subsequent issue, an “after” shot is published, which become “during” shots, labeled by month, up to the final photographs. All of these photographs are full-length and show the participants from the front. However, the “before” photograph is the only one taken in a bathing suit, and neither Charnin Morrison nor Einstein is smiling in their “before” photo. In the “before” photographs, both women appear uncomfortable. They are posed so that their arms, unlike Teves-Aiwahi, are clear of their bodies. Each of the “during” photographs, on the other hand, shows a smile; the women appear to have been able to choose their own clothing, and they also relax a bit, so that some of the photographs show them with bent legs, pointed toes, hands on hips, etc. In essence,

they look more active, more confident and happier. Predictably, their hair styles, though they change, look more deliberate in the “during” photos, as well. In essence, what is provided is not really “before,” “during” and “after,” so much as a series of “afters,” all suggesting the same thing: any movement away from the fatter body is rewarding.

Similarly, though the magazine follows the women from month to month, an impression that the weight loss process is more fully documented is somewhat misleading. In one issue, the focus of the texts is celebrating birthdays. Charnin Morrison comments on the importance of turning 40, and how she wanted to use her body-in-progress to “be as Monica Bellucci as possible,” which included wearing a snug designer dress.¹⁷⁰ Einstein comments on her outfit, too:

I wore this short, black crepe dress with a deep V-neck. Everyone said it looked good—they thought I was crazy for thinking it was too short. I’m not used to wearing clothes that are so revealing, so I felt a little uncomfortable in it. But it was exciting, too—I held that dress up in front of me thought, Wow, this actually fits.¹⁷¹

Her quote reflects on the clothing she wears in the series of “after” photos, too: it is immediately clear that as she has lost weight, her clothing has become both more form-fitting and more revealing, though certainly not so much as the bikini worn by Teves-Aiwohi.

The textual focus of Charnin Morrison and Einstein’s “total makeovers” shifts from month to month, so that October was birthdays—each noted how differently they ate at their parties than they previously would have—and other months cover

such things as makeup advice and eyebrow grooming. While apparently emphasizing process, these “during” narratives really focus on results from month to month and de-emphasize the difficulty of the process (the near-daily workouts, the more-than-daily adjustment of diet) in part by featuring different aspects of the makeover each month. The “Body Update” paragraph and charts are the section most focused on the actual work of exercising and dieting, and they consume, for each woman, a very small portion of the page. Charts are firmly focused on recording empirical “before” and “after” numbers, which similarly emphasizes the progress already achieved during the month rather than the methods behind the progress towards the goal. The presence granted the “during” stages is notably limited in a series supposedly dedicated to tracking the “during” stage over the course of a year, with these items relegated to peripheral status. Predictably, the chronicle turns into a series of “before” and “after” stages, marked by small changes and smaller, monthly goals, and the photographs duplicate this continued emphasis on “after.”

Charts and Compression of Process

The weight loss success story, as designed to fit the specific format of the larger magazine, book, website or other context, typically contains at least one chart or text box. Charts show empirical measures, such as pounds, inches and clothing sizes lost (or inches or pounds of muscle gained, in the case of many male narratives). The text boxes diverge from the narrative to offer how-to information on process as well as some other information that has not been narratized. While these textboxes are often merely text separated from other text by page design and “mode,” they play an important role in the compression of process.

They particularly de-emphasize diet challenges. Realistically, the difficult aspect of a diet is not choosing food for a day, but daily, for each meal. The text boxes and charts address this constant difficulty typically by suggesting one or two “sample” meals for a sample day’s worth of three meals plus a snack or two. “The Diet” published alongside Patti Noble’s success story in *Fitness* (August, 2002) suggests: “Breakfast is cereal with skim milk and banana slices and seven-grain toast with peanut butter. Lunch is a salad with fat-free dressing or a vegetable sandwich and a piece of fruit. Dinner is a vegetable stir-fry with tofu or pasta. Patti snacks on microwave popcorn, pretzels and low-fat ice cream and cookies.”¹⁷² It is clear that the emphasis is on specifically “low” or non-fat foods. The choices she provides between two sample meals for breakfast, lunch and dinner seem to mean that, while these are typical meals from an ideal day, they are not her only choices for those meals, and not what she eats every day. “The Diet” blurb in the text box, however, makes no comment on the limitation of choices, leaving the exact interpretation—are these typical choices, or the only choices?—unclear. In its specificity about what *kind* of products and also in the suggestion that there may be only two options per meal, the text box reduces the sense that choosing what to eat is a struggle. Similarly, what may be a couple of hours per day worth of exercise gets reduced to a single sentence: “Patti runs five to seven miles six days a week and lifts weights four times a week.” We should note that the only time that duration—the amount of time committed to body shaping daily—is mentioned is at the outset, when Noble is said to lift weights and do “20 minutes on the stair machine four days a week.”

A nod to the continuing challenge of choosing to do these activities and make time for them, as well as choosing the “right” foods, is offered in the “Biggest Temptation” slot. There, Noble confesses to craving “Jamoca almond-fudge ice cream,” about which she says, “When I get a craving for it, I have a low-fat ice cream sandwich instead.” While acknowledging that choosing the “right” foods is difficult, Noble seems to have little emotional difficulty making the choice. Her “biggest temptation” is dealt with in a single sentence, as if insignificant. The next item in the text box? “What She Couldn’t Wait to Wear.”

Another weight loss success story, this time one focusing on the use of vendors to deliver Atkins’ friendly foods, also provides two “sample days” worth of breakfast, lunch, snack and dinner. The author offers one way to expand and one way to limit the dietary options she samples. She writes, “There’s even greater variety if you don’t exclude certain foods,” and “To cut saturated fat, I used very little of the butter included with the meals.” These two comments seem to suggest choice but really reveal the valorization of greater abstinence, as well. To get results similar to that of the author, perhaps it is necessary not only to be on the Atkins’ Diet, but to “exclude certain foods,” and “use very little of the butter included.”¹⁷³

Some diets are so specific that each daily meal is laid out for the would-be weight loser for a full month. This reduction of choice, while seeming to show the wide variety of foods that might be consumed in any given diet, suggests that when dieters are allowed to choose whatever they want, they choose against the diet’s guidelines. Constant monitoring is obviously necessary for any weight-loss diet to work, so elimination of error by elimination of choice, or variety, seems to be the

strategy at the heart of the how-to sections, represented in chart form, in weight loss success stories.

Of course, the “before” stage of the weight loss success story often tracks patterns of behavior and societal response over years, and the “after” stage is written as if the subject will not regain weight, slack off on the methods, or otherwise fall prey to the well-documented attrition rates of dieters. Perhaps it makes narrative sense for “during” to be contracted to a snippet: a chart or text box. After all, as I concluded in the second chapter, the decisive victories are more dramatic than the small, daily, smidgeon by smidgeon, choice by choice changes that must be made in the process. In that sense, the visuals emulate the texts’ narrative inertia, cutting out the humdrum to make space for the nadirs and the zeniths.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the visuals that accompany the weight loss success story do a hefty portion of the persuasive work on the genre overall. With some admitted variation, the presentations of the “before” body typically offer a visible image of someone not quite in control, not quite right. In the context of other representations of the fat body as condemning the fat person to solitude, sadness and shame, they resonate with the cultural belief that to be fat *means* to be alone, unhappy, scorned and justly so. By contrast, the “after” photographs—and the “during” photographs that are in some ways “after” a portion of the process has been undergone—glorify the more active, confident, groomed and poised subject.

Examining visuals is, as the theorists on visual argumentative point out, a somewhat less concrete business than examining text. Words have, or seem to have,

rather stable and precise meanings. Interpreting facial gestures, hairstyles and clothing requires interpretational strategies that differ from those required for texts. There is more margin for error in interpretation of authorial intention in photographs, for example, as there are usually multiple authors who may have competing intentions: the model and the photographer and the stylist may be at odds, even as the model may have competing intentions internally.

Still it is possible to claim that routines of reading and generic formats work together to allow the images to portray, especially for audiences steeped in the culture, fat people “before” as one personality type and thin people “after” as another. In some cases, as in the images of Teves-Aiwohi, the difference readable as “personality” between “before” and “after” is less marked than in other cases. It seems striking that the difference in her physique is similarly less dramatic than in other cases. In other words, physically she doesn’t start off that far from her goal in contrast with many subjects of the genre, so it makes a kind of sense that she would not appear as mentally different either.

Chapter Four: Eating Disorder Narratives

If genre is “social action,” as Carolyn Miller and others theorize, the weight loss success story covered in the previous chapters is a genre that endorses the belief, rampant in American culture, that to control the body—manifesting control by becoming thin and/or muscular—is to control the life.¹⁷⁴ An additional rhetorical function is to condemn the psyche that cannot manifest control of the body and the fat body as the symbol of the faltering psyche. I have suggested that the weight loss success story is a conversion narrative, in which the subject laments their former, unconverted behavior, celebrates the conversion, and exults in the results it brings, such as increased confidence, greater social acceptance and physical attractiveness, and better health. These stories call for others to convert to the philosophy and adopt the body shaping behaviors. Thus, though as I have attempted to demonstrate they certainly share formal characteristics, weight loss success stories are fruitfully defined as a genre by their function as calls to action.

However, as social actions, genres are motivated by previous actions. The weight loss success story genre is maintained not merely by its own proliferation, but also by other texts and social actions. Likewise, other genres emerge, in part as counters to the weight loss success story and its underlying arguments about what *fat* and *lean* bodies mean and symbolize. As Ralph Cohen asserts: “A genre does not exist independently; it arises to compete or to contrast with other genres, to complement, augment, interrelate with other genres.”¹⁷⁵ If the weight loss success story complements and augments the larger texts in which it typically appears—

advertisements, diet and fitness books and programs, magazines—other genres compete with it, challenging its legitimacy and dominance.

One such competitive genre is the eating disorder narrative. This chapter examines the eating disorder narrative genre in the context of the weight loss success story. After reviewing information on the occurrence of eating disorders and defining them, I focus on analyzing the argument strategies of the texts and comparing and contrasting this genre's assessment of the relationship between the body as sign and the psyche with the weight loss success story's assessment.

Eating Disorders Defined

Interest in and concern about eating disorders in girls and women has been prevalent since at least the early 1980's. This interest was driven by popular culture events, such as the made-for-television movie starring Jennifer Jason Leigh and Eva Marie Saint, *The Best Little Girl in the World*, which appeared in 1981, and which was based on the 1978 novel by Steve Levenkron. In 1983, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, a book that combined personal narrative with cultural critique, was published by Kim Chernin. Possibly the most riveting event that prompted concern over eating disorders was the death of popular singer Karen Carpenter of heart failure in February of 1983 after years of suffering from anorexia.

More than twenty years later, eating disorders remain a cultural concern, concentrating media scrutiny on the figures of famous women: in October 2004, articles reporting the institutionalization of actress Mary-Kate Olsen for anorexia covered popular culture magazines like *People* and *Us*, and speculation about her

relapse began quickly after her return to college in New York, as paparazzi photographed what appeared to be an increasingly frail Olsen. Conjecture about the physiques of other stars, such as Renée Zellweger, and the possibility that their “dieting” is too extreme, has also made tabloid headlines.¹⁷⁶

Celebrities, however, do not write the texts sampled in this chapter. Few celebrities publish book-length memoirs about eating disorders; one exception is Cherry Boone O’Neill, eldest daughter of singer Pat Boone, who achieved moderate fame as a member of the Boone family of singers and who wrote her memoir, *Starving for Attention*, in 1982. While celebrity stories—especially secondhand reports and speculation—obviously exist and motivate interest in eating disorders, most published accounts of individuals’ eating disorders appear in four other forms: in book-length memoirs by non-celebrities; in articles that excerpt or promote those book-length memoirs; as portions of self-help books; as portions of books intended to analyze and critique the culture that glamorizes thinness, especially for women; and as articles or portions thereof that call attention to how widespread the disorders are and profile individual sufferers. These works, especially the book-length memoirs and self-help books that include a great deal of personal reflection from the author, might therefore be seen as a genre related to both the weight loss success story and the confessional autobiography or biography that portrays a particular mental illness.

The psychological community generally recognizes anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating as eating disorders. New research, principally conducted by Pope, Phillips and Olivardia, suggest that “the Adonis complex” (also called “bigorexia” to provide a name that suggests its kinship with the two most often

discussed eating disorders) is another.¹⁷⁷ Anorexia nervosa is defined by four symptoms: “Resistance to maintaining body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height; Intense fear of weight gain or being “fat” even though underweight; Disturbance in the experience of body weight or shape, undue influence of weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of low body weight; Loss of menstrual periods in girls and women post-puberty.”¹⁷⁸ Bulimia nervosa is defined by three principle symptoms: “Regular intake of large amounts of food accompanied by a sense of loss of control over eating behavior; Regular use of inappropriate compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting, laxative or diuretic abuse, fasting, and/or obsessive or compulsive exercise; Extreme concern with body weight and shape.”¹⁷⁹ Binge eating disorder, related to bulimia nervosa and often called an “eating disorder not otherwise specified,” is characterized by: “Frequent episodes of eating large quantities of food in short periods of time; Feeling out of control over eating behavior; Feeling ashamed or disgusted by the behavior; There are also several behavioral indicators of BED including eating when not hungry and eating in secret.”¹⁸⁰ The “Adonis Complex” affects men; while women may perceive themselves as “too fat,” sufferers of the “Adonis Complex” frequently see themselves as “too small,” lacking the desired degree of musculature, and may spend hours exercising daily in order to increase their size, in addition to eating specific weight-gain foods, and taking steroids. They may also feel too fat.¹⁸¹

Although the definitions of the eating disorders seem discrete, there is less separation in eating disorder practice than psychological theory. Anorexics may periodically binge and purge, or abuse laxatives, alcohol or other drugs to numb their

hunger pains. Some sufferers alternate between bouts of anorexia and bulimia (bulimarexia); binge eating disorder can lead to bulimia. The excessive exercise typical of anorexic and bulimic behavior is a key component of the “Adonis complex.”

Statistics on the number of eating disorder sufferers are limited; sometimes they are derived from reportage of medical practitioners, and sometimes they are the results of self-reportage on the part of sufferers. That means that only people who are already receiving medical attention or who acknowledge their own disorder report, which suggests that the numbers are lower than the reality. Studies suggest that 1 out of every 100 women are anorexic, and 2 in 100 bulimic. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, between five and ten million girls and women are affected by these disorders, and approximately one million boys and men. Male patients account for between 10 and 18% of all eating disordered patients.

Comparatively little research has been done on what are often called “sub-clinical eating disorders.” Many people who often or sometimes engage in eating disordered behaviors and have symptoms of eating disorders do not seek treatment; some sufferers seek treatment but are denied insurance coverage of some treatments because they do not have the symptoms described in the DSM-IVR, such as, for anorexia, the loss of a certain percentage of body weight and cessation of menses. Some people with full-blown eating disorders, who chronicle their experiences in memoirs, never seek or receive professional treatment, another reason that the statistics on eating disorders may be low. Aimee Liu, whose memoir *Solitaire* details her anorexic history, recovered without the aid of psychiatry. Letters from recovering

eating disorder sufferers also appear in fitness magazines: “I’m 22 and have had bulimia since my early teens, but feel ready to get over it and move on with my life. Do I really need professional help, or can I simply make a conscious decision to move past the issues that have led to these destructive behaviors?”¹⁸² While the expert *Shape* consulted recommended professional help to this letter-writer, the letter itself suggests that many closeted eating disorder sufferers eventually find their own cures.

Onset: The Scene of Culture as (Partial) Cause

Though researchers continue to seek genetic and chemical etiologies for these disorders, it is no great secret that a culture obsessed with dieting, fitness and weight loss has played a major role in what Richard Gordon calls a “social epidemic” of eating disorders. Narratives about eating disorders published in print, whether autobiographical or biographical, cannot escape the question of etiology: the narratives are expected to supply a motive, or set of motives, for the disease. Why, audiences seem to want to know from the anorexic’s text, do some people lose weight and then hold steady at a healthy weight, while others do not? As a result, the “before” stage of the eating disorder memoir is full of overt and implicit commentary on what caused the disease.

It is impressive, therefore, that so many eating disorder cases are begun as diets. Narratives written by (or recorded from the testimony of) sufferers suggest that “dieting” and “fitness” goals and behaviors precede the abnormal behaviors defined as eating disorders. Again and again, in memoirs and commentary on the origins of their troubles, eating disorder sufferers reference the diets they attempt to follow. Aimee Liu indicates that, after her grandmother says, “My, you’re a chubby little girl,

aren't you?" she began to question the acceptability of her size, and finally asked for a scale and diet books for Christmas from her parents. What happens in Liu's memoir and in other accounts is that a counter-agent in the act of being fat motivates dieting behavior just as is often described in the success story, calling attention to the similarities in motivation behind "normal dieting" and "eating disordered behavior." And although few medically sanctioned diets call for participants to take in fewer than 1200 calories per day, and an anorexic might typically consume considerably lower than that, there is often no clear line between acceptable "diet and fitness" behavior and "eating disordered" behavior. How much exercise is too much? A dancer or athlete might be expected to exercise several hours a day, but who decides when exercise for someone not training for an art or sport becomes obsessive?

It is also clear that the people—often the women—whose attitudes and behaviors promote the "dieting" that motivates eating disorders are themselves influenced by the cultural scene. Lori Gottlieb, whose memoir *Stick Figure: A Diary of My Former Self* was published in 2000, shows this trend quite clearly:

[W]e all went into the dining room for dinner. That's when I found out that I...eat much more than Kate does. Kate and her mom took tiny helpings of everything, and just like Mom does with Dad and [my brother] David, they said they'd taste Lou's dinner. I wasn't about to go tasting someone's dinner, though, so I took normal helpings. That's when Kate said, "You must be really hungry," but she didn't say that to David even though he took the same amount of food I did. "You must be really full," I answered, since all Kate had on her plate was a

small piece of chicken and a spoonful of rice. But then Kate's mom laughed again, even though I wasn't trying to be funny.¹⁸³

What young Gottlieb discovers is that women and girls are "supposed" to have smaller appetites and take less food than men and boys; that is, her mother, aunt and cousin, all of whom claim restricted eating patterns while sanctioning unrestricted eating for their male relations, have been socialized to do so, and form a community who likewise socialize Lori. The male participants at the meal do not attempt to criticize the gendered modes of eating.

Marya Hornbacher's *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* also contains a number of images of culturally sanctioned diet and fitness behavior that she remembers observing in her early life, which she then compares to her own behavior as an anorexic later in life:

...I remember the women's gym that my mother carted me along to....The inside foreshadowed the 1980's "fitness" craze: women bopping around, butt busting and doggie leg lifting, sweating, wearing that pinched, panicky expression that conveyed the sentiment best captured by Galway Kinnell: "as if there is a hell and they will find it."

I remember watching my mother and the rest of these women's bodies reflected in the mirrors that lined the walls. Many many mad-looking ladies. Organizing them in my head, mentally lining them up in order of prettiness, hair color, bathing suit contraption color, and the most entertaining, in order of thinness.

I would do a very similar thing, some ten years later, while vacationing at a little resort called the Methodist Hospital Eating Disorders Institute. Only this time the row of figures I lined up in my head included my own, and, bony as we were, none of us were bopping around. We were doing cross-stitch, or splayed on the floor playing solitaire, scrutinizing one another's bodies from the corners of our eyes, in a manner similar to the way women at a gym are wont to do, as they glance from one pair of hips to their own. Finding themselves, always, excessive.¹⁸⁴

Hornbacher, like other eating disorder memoir authors, links the behaviors of anorexics--whose behavior is medicalized and viewed as symptomatic--directly to the behavior of "normal" women, whose behavior is sanctioned in the success story. It also becomes clear from reading eating disorder narratives that body reshaping efforts provide material for discussion, especially for girls and young women, so that joining the discussion of body dissatisfaction, dieting and fitness is a way to establish membership in the social group. Hornbacher's experience at a school for the performing arts describes the typical lunchroom conversation:

There were an incredible number of painfully thin girls at Interlochen, dancers mostly. Whispers and longing stares followed the ones who were visibly anorexic. We sat at our cafeteria tables, passionately discussing the calories of lettuce, celery, a dinner roll, rice. We moved between two worlds. When we pushed back our chairs and scattered to our departments, we transformed. I would watch girls who'd just

been near tears in the dorm-room mirrors suddenly become rapt with life, fingers flying over a harp, a violin, bodies elastic with motion, voices strolling through Shakespeare's forest of words.¹⁸⁵

As this passage shows, the response of young women to the anorexic body is sometimes envy. The conversations about food and calorie counting are exercises in group establishment but also a jockeying for position, an exercise in one-up-manship, so that, at least initially, social prominence increases as the prominence of the bones increases. After Gottlieb began to lose weight, her friends came to her for diet advice. In her diary, she recorded:

I guess it's worth it, though, because at lunch everyone at our table noticed I was losing weight and got pretty interested in how I did it. "What do you eat for breakfast?" Leslie wanted to know. "Exactly nineteen flakes of Product 19 cereal, with two ounces of nonfat milk," I said, but I made it sound like it was no big deal. "Doesn't it taste watery?" Tracy wanted to know. You can tell Tracy wouldn't last five seconds on a diet. Everyone in our group started drinking Tab instead of Coke this year, but Tracy still drinks Coke. I guess that's why she also takes her mom's diet pills sometimes. "No, it actually tastes good," I said. The truth is, it tastes pretty gross, but lately I show off when all the popular people pay attention to me.¹⁸⁶

Most of the "diets" begun by girls who will eventually develop eating disorders arise from the same motives that lead to success stories: feelings of control, feelings of confidence and social acceptance. However, it is important to remember that the

most widely published eating disorder accounts are about anorexia and bulimia, and that the typical age of onset for anorexia is early teens, for bulimia slightly later. For few people is adolescence an easy stage of life; the conflict between being a child and being an adult makes many teens feel out of control emotionally, just as the lengthy physical and sexual maturation processes can make youth feel out of control of their bodies. All of these problems seem to make people at that age especially vulnerable to the pervasive idea that one must diet, exercise, and be slim in order to be attractive, at a period of time when being attractive to peers seems especially important.

The causal connections between dieting and eating disorders are not unknown to experts attempting to prevent and treat the disorders. On the cover of *It's Not About Food*, a self-help book for victims of anorexia, bulimia and binge eating by Carol Emery Normandi and Laurelee Roark, a fascinating set of bulleted imperatives read: "Change Your Mind, Change Your Life." These imperatives are clearly a reworking of the change-your-body-change-your-life philosophy printed on the cover of several diet and fitness books, present behind the weight loss success story and dramatized by its narrative conclusion. Consciously or not, by substituting "mind" for "body" in those lists, the book designers or authors hit at the heart of the philosophy that assumes that the body's shape signifies the state of the mind. They cut out the middleman, so to speak, so that changing the body is not conceived as a substitute for addressing mental issues. Normandi and Roark expend great energy and space in their book condemning what they call the "diet mentality." The National Eating Disorder Association maintains on its website a page entitled "kNOw dieting," supplying interested parties with information about the amounts of money and time

Americans spend preoccupied with diets, the typical long-term failure of the same, and the need to nourish the body rather than deprive it.¹⁸⁷ The site also features information for coaches of athletes, who may be especially vulnerable.

Onset: Exploring Normal Dieting

Scales

Like so many weight loss success story authors, many eating disorder sufferers are motivated by their weight as recorded by scales. Former anorexic Aimee Liu writes about the effects of a post-Christmas party encounter with her scale early in her memoir:

The scale in the bathroom tantalizes me. I know I'll regret it if I succumb, that this is not the time to confront myself with the old monster, that it's Christmas, after all, and why don't I simply enjoy myself. But the temptation overwhelms me. Gingerbread, eggnog, fruitcake, and all, I step onto the scale and watch the needle prance upward of 130 pounds. I can't believe my eyes. I know I've indulged and overindulged, but God! This is far worse than I'd imagined. I weigh nearly as much as my mother!...How can I have done this to myself? Do I really detest myself so? I'm ashamed....The hell with holiday cheer. I return to the party and teach myself to drink my coffee black.¹⁸⁸

It should be clear that the number on the scale--the seemingly empirical measurement--is the motive for renewed attention to restrictive eating. It seems a good moment to remind ourselves that the number on the scale would mean nothing

to Liu without the negative associations derived from culture; Liu, who admires Audrey Hepburn, is particularly upset by weighing nearly as much as her mother, with whom she has a predictably vexed relationship.

While for Liu and others, the number on the scale prompts restrictive eating, for others, a number perceived as too high can prompt even more eating. The logic seems to be: “I’ve blown my diet, I’ve failed, I may as well eat and eat and eat. Then I’ll start a diet again tomorrow.” Having “blown” a diet can lead to binge behavior, and binge behavior can lead to the purging and laxative abuse characteristic of bulimia nervosa.

Betsy Lerner, who eventually coped with both binge-eating and manic-depressive disorders, writes of her former eating patterns:

I strived constantly to stay within a certain range on the scale. Everyone who struggles with weight has a fighting weight, a range they consider acceptable if not ideal. For me, fighting weight is anywhere from 140 to 155 pounds. I found that within this range, I could be of the world. I wasn’t so distracted by food. I had enough concentration to work. And while I didn’t overtly flirt when I was at my fighting weight, I did interest certain kinds of men...I managed to stay within this range for all four of my years as an undergraduate at New York University. I achieved this by going back and forth between bingeing and total abstinence. Four days on the program, three days off. Three weeks on, one week off. I was always gaining

and losing the same 15 pounds. I never got my weight under control, but I refused to believe it was because I had manic depression.

Lerner's text sounds like the "before" stage of a weight loss success story: the ups and downs, the "fad" diets that fail only to be attempted again. Like success story authors, she judges her control by the weight on the scale. It is also curious that she equates "total abstinence" with being "on the program," equating dieting with not eating. This association between extremely restrictive eating and virtue is congruent with the success story, in which feelings of virtue and control derive from maintaining a preset intake.

Weight on the scale functions as continued motivation for "Bill," a case study whose testimony is included in *The Adonis Complex*. Bill says:

I was really ashamed, because I felt that it was a female thing to have eating problems like that. I'd never heard of a man with an eating disorder. I got more and more worried about being too fat. When I was younger, there was a time when it got to the point where I would weigh myself four or five times in a day. Sometimes if I gained even a pound, I would go to the gym or go running because I thought I was getting fatter. But then, half the time, I'd get hungry again, and then I'd go on another eating binge and be right back where I started....¹⁸⁹

Bill's situation includes the same on-again, off-again patterns as Lerner's above:

At first, Bill binged only occasionally, but gradually he became drawn into a cycle of binge eating, dieting, working out, and binge eating again. This cycle seemed to keep the depression at bay, but

increasingly, he became preoccupied that he was getting too fat. He began to weigh himself and look at himself in the mirror more and more often. Soon the thoughts of food, body weight, exercise, and fat came to consume virtually all of his day.¹⁹⁰

It seems from binge-eating disorder sufferer's testimony that the self-monitoring encouraged by the health and fitness industries becomes an obsession rather than a healthy habit, but again, it is difficult to explain where the healthy habit ends and the obsession begins. Bill's fear of fat echoes that present in the weight loss success story, except that Bill, whose eleven percent body fat makes him "far leaner than an average American man of his age," has a fear of fat that persists despite empirical measurements that suggest he's not visibly fat.

Here we encounter a causal loop: Wanting to feel in control and manifest control by becoming lean are culturally sanctioned goals, and a fear of fat is the necessary corollary. What if, however, one does not feel "in control" even after losing weight, perhaps because other life problems are not solved by losing weight as one believed they would be? To put it simply, if you believe that you will feel in control of your life when you have lost weight, but the feeling of control never arrives *or* you discover that the only thing you feel able to control is weight loss, you may continue to lose weight beyond what is healthy in search of the promised results of increased confidence, better relationships, greater appreciation, and so on. Or, perhaps a different interpretation would have it that the obsession with losing weight, because it is the thing that *can* be controlled, masks dissatisfaction in the life as a whole.

Making this cycle more troublesome is that, as a result of so much social and medical emphasis being placed on weight in pounds, even minor weight gain can be viewed as a terrifying precedent for massive weight gain. Attentiveness to the scale can mean ignoring normal weight fluctuations that occur, not simply over the course of several days or weeks, but throughout the day. Consider that drinking 16 ounces of water is the equivalent of gaining that same amount in weight--approximately two pounds. There would be no increase of fat on the body, but the scale would change.¹⁹¹ Anorexics are keenly aware of water weight, however; their testimony, once their condition has been diagnosed and weigh-ins become part of a recovery program, confirms their habit of drinking extra water to appear to have gained weight for a medical check-up. Anecdotal evidence suggests that dieters will also refuse to drink even water before a weigh-in, preferring to schedule these early in the morning so that they can avoid eating or drinking beforehand.¹⁹² It should be no surprise that sports in which athletes are classed by weight, such as wrestling, have high incidences of dehydration and eating disorders.

Calorie Counting and Safe Foods

Attempting to monitor how many calories one consumes is a well-known diet behavior. Counting calories to lose weight derives from a simple equation: one pound of human body fat has approximately 3,500 calories, so to lose one pound of fat one must use that number of calories as fuel without taking them in as food. Would-be losers of weight are told to take in fewer calories and exercise to use more calories in order to “burn” the desired number of calories of existing body fat and lose weight. Exercise “burns” fewer calories than some might wish, however. For many

women, fitness walking requires fewer than 10 calories per minute, so that fitness walking for an hour five times per week may only use 2,400 calories—or, in other words, the woman in question may lose less than a pound of weight in fat per week. Cutting dietary calories is less time-consuming, and is perceived by some to be less physically strenuous, than adding exercise. For a woman whose resting metabolic rate (RMR), the number of calories burned daily by the body simply to maintain normal function, is 1500 per day, taking in that amount or fewer of calories is a way to “burn” calories, ideally in the form of fat. A woman whose RMR is 1500 per day, on the lowest dietary intake sanctioned by most doctors (1200 calories per day), can theoretically lose a pound a week or more, depending on activity levels, without adding exercise to her plan, and more if she does add or intensify her exercise.

That is calorie counting in theory. A lot of “diet” advice suggests that rigid counting of calories is critical. Articles and diet advice that address women’s failure at weight loss often suggest that women are failing to count critical calories. The “calorie counting” mindset, then, can lead to refusal to eat foods whose caloric content cannot be assessed. And this is “normal.” Girls and women who are entering eating disorders enter into the tricky calorie counting mode. Aimee Liu explains:

For Christmas, at my request, my parents give me diet books and my personal bathroom scale. I pore over the books and start weighing in every morning. One expert advises that the dieter keep a daily listing of everything she eats. I buy a special notebook for this purpose and proceed to enter my daily intake down to the mouthful. If I can’t locate a food’s calorie count in one of my five calorie counters, I refuse

to eat it. My plan is to keep the daily total below one thousand. The books warn me for health's sake to maintain a daily minimum of twelve hundred, but I'm more easily influenced by the idea that the less you eat the faster you lose.¹⁹³

Part of this under-indulgence is rooted in the fact that many people long to lose weight for other than health-related reasons—that is, they value weight loss for other motives (control, attractiveness, acceptance) over health. Another reason eating disorder sufferers may be more likely to consume fewer than 1200 calories from the beginning is their youth: few young people are swayed more by health concerns than by the anticipation of becoming a part of the culture and achieving a sense of self-mastery. Aimee Liu's narrative shows how vulnerable she was as a young woman to popular culture's plethora of diet and exercise advice, as well as their promise of self-control:

Fad diets titillate me. The protein plan is all the rage right now. I subscribe to it immediately on hearing about it. Nothing but meat, fish, eggs for a week. Horribly dull, but it promises instant results. The days drag by, lengthened drastically by the constant attention this regime demands of me. I must not cheat or forget for an instant my pledge to succeed at this, my first totally independent exhibit of power. I conjure nightmarish visions of myself as a fat lady, stock them in the back of my mind as ammunition against temptation. Unpleasant as the undertaking is, however, it has its rewards. By the middle of January I've dropped fifteen pounds. The sense of accomplishment exhilarates

me, spurs me to continue on and on. It provides me a sense of purpose and shapes my life with distractions from insecurity. Calisthenics, modern dance, calorie counting, and schoolwork keep me occupied. I walk the two miles home from school whenever possible and horde issues of fashion magazines that offer new diets and exercises....[My mother] can't dissuade me from my ultimate goal. There are other diets, other ways to make myself thin, and I intend to try them all. The constant downward trend somehow comforts me, gives visible proof that I can exert control if I elect to. It is the greatest satisfaction in my life.¹⁹⁴

Liu's narrative reveals of how all of the things which ground the success story also ground the eating disorder narrative. Here are present the "nightmarish" fear of becoming fat, the subscription to the control-the-body-control-the-life philosophy, the mother as counter-agent in the goal of weight loss, the sense that success can be measured by a literal measuring of the body. At this point, still in the "before" stage, Liu's narrative sounds eerily like the conclusion of a success story. She feels everything she is promised she will feel as a successful loser of weight. Few non-eating disorder sufferers can immediately relate to the self-starvation strategies invoked by anorexics; reading Liu's testimony, it becomes easier to see how the sense of self-control dieting, exercising, and losing weight bring can be addictive, especially for a young person. Like Liu, Lori Gottlieb's "diet" is abetted by diet books and articles:

I know a lot about calories because on Monday, when I was walking home with Julie, we went into the bookstore and I bought a bunch of diet books with all the allowance money I'd saved up. One of them is called *My Calorie-Counting Companion*, and it lists the number of calories in every food in the universe. The reason it's called your "companion" is because you're supposed to carry it with you everywhere you go, just in case you suddenly need to look up how many calories something has....It says things like, "If you take in fewer calories than you burn up each day, you're bound to shed pounds." Duh.¹⁹⁵

What Gottlieb's wry tone indicates is that, in our culture, it is well known that calories are the enemies of thinness. What's perhaps most troubling is that, when she wrote that telling "Duh" at the end of the passage, she was eleven years old. Diaries and memoirs demonstrate how early young people in our culture absorb what Normandi and Roark call the "diet mentality," and how quickly they learn and seek out strategies for weight control, even as they are still growing, and especially as young women develop the curves associated with sexual maturity. Motivated by calorie counting, anorexics may have a personal list of "safe foods," foods with low or no calories that they allow themselves to consume, including diet soda, coffee and broth, celery, carrots and cucumbers.¹⁹⁶

The Process is Endless, or, The Disease is Dieting

Eating disorder memoirs and weight loss success stories diverge from each other in content after the onset of dieting. While the process of weight loss tends to

receive less attention than the “before” and “after” in weight loss success stories, for sufferers of eating disorders, the process, or really processes, adopted take over the life. Either by excerpting testimony from a variety of eating disorder sufferers, or by detailing one person’s disordered patterns over and over, the genre conforms to a narrative norm of repetition of the same process with some content and linguistic variation. It is as if sufferers are compulsively recounting their sins in a confession designed partly to deter others from committing the same and partly to shock readers in order to impress upon them the seriousness of the disorder and the myriad ways the obsessive behaviors take up the life.

Normandi and Roark’s eating disorder self-help guide suggests that readers, who are assumed to be eating disordered, consider how much time and energy *thinking* about eating and exercising—in addition to *actually* eating and exercising—takes up in their daily life. They use this exercise to allow readers to explore how obsessed they are, and offer “Tina’s” story as an example of how the exercise highlights the problem:

...[W]hen Tina started becoming aware of her thinking about food, she could not believe how much time in her day it consumed. The first thing she thought up when she woke up was how much weight she either lost from dieting the day before, or gained from bingeing before she went to bed. She would make a promise about what she would or wouldn’t eat that day. She’d calculate exactly how many fat grams she could have. Before each meal she would make sure she drank liquid (a dieting rule) and all day at work she would refill her water

bottle to make sure she was drinking enough (another dieting rule). At the birthday luncheon for her coworker, all she could think about was how she was not going to let herself eat a piece of cake because of the number of fat grams it contained. She realized she spent the whole luncheon obsessing about the food, and wasn't present. Often when she came home at night she would restrict her eating based on what she ate that day, and if she binged she would spend the whole evening planning her diet for the next day to make up for the binge...By the time she climbed into her bed at night, she realized that most of her day was spent thinking about food.¹⁹⁷

Similar accounts in *The Adonis Complex* detail men whose obsession with their food intake, exercise and size takes over the bulk of their time, men who give up other successful careers to become personal trainers so that they can spend more time in the gym, men who spent great quantities of time planning, buying, preparing, eating and recording the consumption of food, men who lose relationships because they invest their energies into their body shaping and maintenance. Similarly, Peggy Claude-Pierre records long passages from the writings of anorexics and bulimics who use diaries to record their thoughts and feelings while at the Montreux Clinic, some of these take up a page or more of the book-length text.¹⁹⁸

Rather than enabling a successful “after,” process becomes its own after: quickly, the search for “control” gets “out of control.” Marya Hornbacher marks this break with the culture that promotes the success story distinctly in her memoir:

The anorexic body seems to say: I do not need. It says: Power over the self. And our culture, in such a startlingly brief period of time, has come to take literally the idea that power over the body has a ripple effect: power over the body, over the life, over the people around you, power over a world gone berserk.

We are about to watch one person's systematic, total loss of any power at all.¹⁹⁹

The memoirs become detailed accounts of the progress, or process, of the disorder punctuated by life events that ease or intensify that progress. Authors and interview subjects describe ever-more-restricted and/or secret eating, tricks for concealing how much or how little is consumed, tricks for concealing when food is being purged, tricks for making sure that enough exercise is done, and ritual eating of "safe foods" and predetermined meals and snacks.

Each eating disorder memoir published as a book, and each book that explains or advises people about eating disordered behavior, contains many examples of such habits, obsessively described. Because each example is lengthy, and multiple examples would and do cover a number of pages, I have chosen to provide in what follows only one example for each of the major eating disorders defined above.

The Anorexic Process

In addition to subsisting on a starvation diet, anorexics typically exercise compulsively. Caroline Knapp, author of *Appetites: Why Women Want*, explains her anorexic regimen repeatedly throughout her book: she ran miles as exercise, and ate only a plain sesame bagel for breakfast, a coffee-flavored yogurt for lunch, and an

apple and a cube of cheese for dinner. Knapp's book is like Chernin's *The Obsession*, as it uses Knapp's experience to explore broader cultural limitations on women and the symptoms that manifest women's perception of those limitations, emphasizing eating disordered behavior but also other behaviors that can become compulsive, such as sex and shopping. Like other confessional accounts of anorexia, it does include speculation about etiology, descriptions of the anorexic process and of Knapp's battle to heal. Because several of the passages above depict the start of the "diet" that will eventually become anorexia, I have chosen a passage from Knapp that details her ritual eating:

I sat in my room every night, with rare exceptions, for three-and-a-half years. In secret, and with painstaking deliberation, I carved an apple and a one-inch square of cheddar cheese into tiny bits, sixteen individual slivers, each one so translucently thin you could see the light shine through it if you held it up to a lamp. Then I lined up the apple slices on a tiny china saucer and placed a square of cheese on each. And then I ate them one by one, nibbled at them like a rabbit, edge by tiny edge, so slowly and with such concentrated precision the meal took two hours to consume. I planned for this ritual all day, yearned for it, carried it out with utmost focus and care.²⁰⁰

The detail with which Knapp documents the dinner she ate for over three years—the pauses created by the interruptive clauses surrounded by commas—suggests the very slow and meticulous behavior she exposes. The amount of time thinking about and consuming the food suggests that the name *anorexia nervosa* (etymologically “a

nervous loss of appetite”) is a misnomer. To that end, Knapp writes, “To say that I ‘lost’ my appetite during those years would be a joke. On the contrary, I ate, slept, and breathed appetite. I thought about food constantly, pored over food magazines and restaurant reviews like a teenage boy with a pile of porn, copied down recipes on index cards: breads, cakes, chocolate desserts, pies with the richest fillings, things I longed for and wouldn’t let myself have.”²⁰¹

The Bulimic Process

Marya Hornbacher’s account of bulimia showcases the compulsiveness behind the disorder:

[O]ne day in early November, you will be standing in the kitchen. Your brothers are home, everyone is home. People are eating. Your stepmother will hand you something, you don’t remember what now. She’ll say: Try this. You, terrified—when the hell am I going to have a chance to puke, with all these people around?—will try it. You will eat a pretzel, a carrot stick. You will become increasingly, noticeably agitated. Finally you’ll leave, take a bus into town on the pretense of going to the library. You will walk, fast and hard, down the street, breaking into a run, it’s a brisk day, it’s sunny. You rush through the drugstore, thinking: ipecac, ipecac, ipecac. It’s a syrup used to induce vomiting, that’s all you know. You’ve never used it before, you don’t know how it works, you don’t give a fuck, you have to find it. You pace the aisles, pulling at the cuffs of your shirt, your hands rough and cold....

[After purchasing the ipecac y]ou walk, casually, out the door, duck behind the building, and swallow the entire bottle of vile, gag-inducing syrup on an empty stomach.

The label reads: One spoonful, to be followed by eight ounces of water or milk. *Do not administer the entire bottle.* In case of overdose, call your poison control center IMMEDIATELY.

You stroll down the sidewalk, calmer now. You have visions in your head of stopping at the gas station, leaning over, throwing up like you do every day. This is under control. This is fine. You'll be fine.

You can't stand up. It's sudden. You reach for the wall of a storefront, the sun is spinning horrible crazed circles in the sky. You think: I'm dying. I'm having a heart attack. You try to walk, but you can't. Passersby stare at you. You try not to care, you try to breathe. You stagger into a little café, order a bowl of soup, thinking, maybe I didn't have enough in my stomach for this to work....Soup comes, you take a sip. Shove back from the table, napkin on your mouth, push people aside on your way to the bathroom. You don't even get the stall door shut. You vomit in insane, ripping heaves, blood spattering on the seat. You throw up a carrot stick, a bite of something, a pretzel, quarts of water, blood. When you're done, you pull the door shut and get down on your knees....You sit on the floor, shaking, for an hour.

By narrating portions of her memoir in second person, she dramatizes how separate from the self the eating disorder sufferer can feel—how the eating disorder sufferer so often seems to be speaking from outside the self to the self. Even within the second person narration, she counsels herself: “This is under control. This is fine. You’ll be fine.” And it seems no accident that what she counsels herself is about control, for this compulsive behavior is related to hoping to gain control over the situation by controlling food intake by purging.

The second person narration also forces readers to imagine themselves doing the behaviors she describes. Authors often comment on how anorexia is in some ways more acceptable than bulimia because the former appears to involve tidy starvation and discipline whereas the latter imposes discipline after an untidy binge and through decidedly messy, violent physical purging that provokes disgust. By requiring her readers to imagine themselves engaged in bulimic behaviors and driven by her compulsions—compulsions that, in this passage, the second person voice allows her not to claim--she asks them to identify with the behavior even as she makes little attempt to conceal its painful, messy results. In other words, it is as if someone else (the reader?) will be, or is, doing these things, not the author.

The Binge Eating Process

Geneen Roth’s self-help book, *When Food Is Love*, is interwoven with personal narratives about her struggles with binge eating. Narrative portions of the text that track binge eating are printed in italics to mark them as separate from the self-help text, but narrative portions that explain her life outside of the disorder. Like Hornbacher, Roth often writes sections of past process in second person. Binge

eating disorder is, again, related to bulimia, in that both tend to consume surprising quantities of food, certainly more than is required to “feel full.” Binge eating, as the exact opposite of sanctified dieting and the tidy starvation of anorexia, is, like purging, generally perceived as “disgusting.” In other words, because restrictive eating is considered a “good” behavior, starving as a behavior is not disgusting from the perspective of an audience influenced by the culture of dieting, though the anorexic body may provoke disgust because of its skeletal thinness. Binge eating, in stark contrast, provokes disgust at least in part because cultural norms suggest that restrictive eating is healthy and appropriate. It then makes sense for Hornbacher and Roth to adopt second person narration to separate themselves from the behavior and to encourage audiences to imagine themselves engaging in the behavior. For Roth’s readers, however, who may seek the book for coping strategies with their own binge eating, such a tactic is likely to be perceived differently, as a point of stronger identification, as they are likely to remember their own history of binge eating as she details hers in second person:

You wake up in the morning confident that today will be a two-pounds-thinner day, even better than yesterday, when you lost 1 ¼ pounds; you put on your in-between pants, not the smallest size that’s hanging in your closet but not the largest size either. You notice that they zip easily... You eat your poached egg on dry toast for breakfast, your apple for your mid-morning snack. For lunch, you eat a piece of cold broiled chicken without the skin and three slices of tomato, all the while congratulating yourself on how good you are being, how much

weight you will lose. You reward yourself for the deprivation you feel by the vision of the thin you entering a room. All heads turn as unsuspecting people are practically knocked off their chairs, so startled are they by the magnificence of your smile, your eyes, your lithe body. Today would be a good day to go shopping....So you get in the car and begin driving to your favorite store, but as you come to a stoplight, you realize that something is wrong. Something is gnawing at you. You can't put it into words, but as you sit there, it grows more and more oppressive until you feel you'll suffocate under the weight of it. You're having a hard time breathing, the anxiety is rising and you want it to stop. All you care about is having it stop, and you begin to think about the éclairs in the bakery next to the clothes store. Suddenly you are relieved. Something will take this feeling away. You don't have to come apart. You will not suffocate. With the determination of a samurai, you steer the car to the parking lot, click click click go your shoes on the pavement....You want the food. Then you are standing in front of the glass case, hearing yourself order not one but four éclairs, five cookies, and a marzipan cake. You mutter something about having a party...Click click click on the pavement, the sound of the car door opening, the thud of its slamming shut and finally, finally, you are alone with your blessed relief. Quickly, frantically, without tasting them, you inhale two éclairs. At a more leisurely pace, you eat a third. Your stomach is getting full; you can

feel the whipped cream sloshing against your ribs, can feel your pants getting tighter. Oh shit. You've blown it. You've fucking blown it. You were doing so well, sixteen days of eating dry toast and skinless chicken and you blew it in one afternoon. Ten minutes. Ten lousy minutes and sixteen days are ruined. Ten lousy minutes and your whole *life* is ruined. One wrong move....You knew it really wasn't any use trying to lose weight, you knew if all the time, you shouldn't even have tried. You can feel your skin stretching right now, this second, your stomach is getting bigger, it's no use trying to get your weight under control, you might as well give up. Just the way you give up on everything.²⁰²

The issues of size and weight control and their equation with virtue and social acceptance, even admiration, are clear in this passage. Roth articulates the process of attempting to control the body in an effort to control other life events, the sixteen days of being “good.” She also articulates, at the end, a different philosophy, what might be called a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” that she should give up because attempting to “get [her] weight under control” is impossible, but then blaming herself for failing to do what she argues is impossible. The nameless anxiety that Roth appeases by eating compulsively, not taking pleasure in the food, she relates to her past, her unhappy childhood in which she felt like she couldn't make “one wrong move” around her mother. The textual echo of “one wrong move” is powerful: readers can see and hear how her childhood trauma prompts the anxiety she can't explain in the passage about binging. Roth later comments: “The one-wrong-move syndrome is about the

fragility you carry in your body, the belief that if things are going well, it is an illusion....You were prepared for the worst. You knew that things could fall apart at any moment, but you never stopped hoping....”²⁰³ Like the Freudian repetition compulsion, Roth argues that binge eating is a re-enactment of other experiences during which, because food is literally nourishment and figuratively comfort, food substitutes for and calms the binge eating in lieu of emotional nourishment and comfort. Hence her title, *When Food Is Love*.

The “Adonis Complex” Process

The term “Adonis complex” is not a medical term; it is the term principle researchers Harrison G. Pope, Katharine A. Phillips, and Roberto Olivardia have given to the male version of body dysmorphia, a disorder in which people cannot discern their true size and obsess about perceived flaws, whether those perceived flaws are excess fat or insufficient muscle development. When *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession* was published in 2000, book reviews and other articles responded by reporting on the authors’ findings and critiquing the evolution of G.I. Joe dolls from ordinary male to hyper-muscular talismans, as well as the publications supposed to promote men’s health and fitness pursuits.²⁰⁴ The same year, Arnold E. Andersen published *Making Weight: Men's Conflicts with Food, Weight, Shape and Appearance*, a book with a similar agenda that made a smaller impression on the culture. Four years after the books’ publication, however, very few books and articles have been written about what the namers of the “Adonis complex” seem rightly to call a “secret crisis.”

In March of 2001, *Ironman* magazine published an article entitled “Fried Liver,” suggesting that new steroids were less damaging to the liver, and highlighting symptoms of steroid use that should make people on a cycle of anabolic steroids desist.²⁰⁵ That article made use of steroids appear quite common. In contrast, little has been published on the complex as a negative trend.

One such is a piece *GQ* published in May of 2001, John Sedgwick’s uncomfortable “The Adonis Complex.” Sedgwick reveals discomfort with the very notion that men would obsess about their bodies: “American men are increasingly thinking and acting like teenage girls.”²⁰⁶ Sedgwick profiles Kim Miller, a man whose behavior corresponds to that described by Pope, Phillips and Olivardia: working out obsessively and eating carefully. Intriguingly, Sedgwick asks Miller if he ever “uses” his muscles, and Miller responds negatively, as if perplexed by the question. Later, Miller asserts that he views his physical size as an asset in the office, where, he says, since intellects are assumed to be equal, his size offers him the opportunity to be physically intimidating. The dialogue between Sedgwick and Miller reveals how body size has in a sense lost its usefulness as physical force and yet gained rhetorical force.

As noted, Sedgwick’s article is a rarity. In March of 2003, *Men’s Health* ran an article on the abuse of steroids by “ordinary men” (as opposed to body builders), and the March/April issue of *American Fitness* published an article for women who may know or be romantically involved with someone suffering from the “Adonis complex.”²⁰⁷ These are amongst the very few articles published in the popular press on the topic since the year of the book’s publication, and while they describe the

behaviors associated with the disease and provide examples, only the *GQ* article contains narratives of those whose behavior might qualify as “disordered.”

Therefore, the best source of narrative testimony for this disorder remains the Pope, Phillips and Olivardia text, which provides many third person accounts of men and boys who were interviewed by the authors after signing up to assist them in their research. Because it is the authors’ intent to prove the extent of the disease, the narratives are often conveyed briefly—or at least more briefly than the narratives of female eating disorder sufferers, whose texts are published as books and full-length articles. It is, however, still possible to see the emphasis on process in passages from *The Adonis Complex*:

The men with muscle dysmorphia described an almost limitless number of strategies to deal with their insecurities. One man held his body rigidly in a certain posture to try to look bigger. Another spent three hours a day on his diet—planning what he would eat, shopping for food and supplements, weighing his food, and painstakingly apportioning exact amounts into small plastic bags. Variations on the compulsive exercising theme were also common. For example, Mike, a handsome, muscular young man who worked as a cook, grabbed every possible opportunity to exercise while he was at work. He always insisted on carrying heavy beer kegs, compulsively performed chin-ups on a rack in the kitchen, and repeatedly and rapidly lifted huge stacks of heavy dishes—all in an attempt to build up his muscles while on company time. He even sneaked into the bathroom at work

to quickly do fifty or so push-ups before anyone came in. “When people came into the bathroom and saw me doing push-ups on the floor, or when they saw me lifting the dishes, I was totally embarrassed,” Mike told us. “I felt like an idiot. But I *had* to do it—I couldn’t stop? I was so desperate to build myself up.”²⁰⁸

Mike’s embarrassment is not uncommon, and conveys a similar discomfort with expressing concern about body image that men who write weight loss success stories often reveal through their jocular, hyperbolic descriptions of themselves before body reshaping. Advertisements for supplements and weight gain powders printed in many issues of men’s fitness and bodybuilding magazines suggest that suffering in order to achieve a better body is expected, and glorify the effort required to build massive muscles. One such advertisement for “Lean Body” nutritional supplements advocates preparing for “grueling workouts,” another, for NitroTech supplements, suggests that men “Attack the weights with a fury and vengeance befitting a Viking warrior,” admonishing, “There can be no failure on your part, no room in your mind for thoughts of giving anything but your best.”²⁰⁹ Because so much attention has been paid to eating disorders as a feminist issue, it is almost impossible to imagine an advertisement suggesting that women should be obsessed enough with their diet and fitness routines to work out to the point of physical exhaustion in the quest for a slender body, yet for men, glorifying such behavior is a marketing strategy. That strategy is pushed even further by an advertisement for Animal Stak, an “Anabolic Pak,” which appeared in *Muscle and Fitness* in January 2002. The text of the advertisement suggests a sort of dialogue, in which an “individual” quote—possibly a

quote lifted from the actual testimony of Joe DeAngelis, who is depicted in the advertisement lifting weights—is “answered” by text that confirms and endorses the “individual” quotes:

“Screw the pain...gotta’ [sic] lift.” That’s your motto. You work through the pain, the puking, the nausea. It’s enough to make a grown man cry. But you’re not an ordinary grown man.

“People look at me like I just got off the mothership.” You’ve been called a freak. A monster. Even worse. People turn away in fear.

You love that. And you want more. More intensity. More size. More freakin’ mass.²¹⁰

Clearly, the text here relies on two strategies: dissociating the reader from the “ordinary grown man” and encouraging, through identification, the extreme behaviors that the reader may engage in: ignoring obvious physical signs of fatigue, illness and injury, and ignoring and defying the responses of others to the behaviors and the physique they create. While the text of this advertisement suggests that bodies like DeAngelis’ are not readily accepted in the mainstream, it does seem clear that there are a number of ways that men can receive material promoting behaviors that may reflect body image disorders if not eating disordered behavior, and that means of expressing those problems are, conversely, not widely available to them.

Conclusions

It is clear that the powerful “change the body, change the life” philosophy that motivates “successful” body reshaping in the form of weight loss and muscle building also motivates eating disordered behaviors. The differences in the narratives suggest

that people who develop what are called “eating disorders,” but what also include excessive exercising, become more invested in the process of reshaping their bodies than in the results, as control over the life becomes more elusive as the obsession with controlling the body, its appetites and physical limits, grows. While the culture sets up and endorses the belief that visibly-apparent control over the body represents control over the mind and the life, it is still obvious that additional factors lead to the obsessive-compulsive routines adhered to by eating disorder sufferers. However, despite the fact that there connections between diets and disorders exist, those who study and write about eating disorders are careful to indicate that the culture is not solely responsible for eating disorder development. There seem to be several key reasons for this careful separation.

First, it is obvious that not all the people affected by the culture develop eating disorders, so while the culture is clearly a powerful influence, logically the culture cannot be the sole, necessary and sufficient cause of eating disordered behavior. In 1995, Rebecca Johnson, researching the relationship between the glamorization of thinness and eating disorders in women for *Vogue*, found the “not just the culture” argument in Richard Gordon, whom she quotes as saying “...it’s a complex, multi-determined disease. It’s too simplistic to say, ‘It’s the culture.’ For an anorexic, the goal of thinness is not to be attractive. It’s more about being in control. It comes from family experience, mood disorders. Even sexual abuse can be a factor” (48). Sufferers of anorexia interviewed by Johnson affirmed the conclusion that “skinny models” weren’t enough to trigger eating disorders. However, in his own revised 2000 text, *Eating Disorders: Anatomy of a Social Epidemic*, Gordon devotes a

lengthy chapter to analyzing the similarities between culturally sanctioned dieting and its potential for predicting eating disordered symptoms. After reviewing the evidence, he concludes that “The disease is dieting.”

A second reason experts on eating disordered behavior and authors of narratives argue that the culture is not solely responsible for eating disorders: to preserve the individuality—and hence, the autonomy--of eating disorder sufferers. The narratives of eating disorder sufferers themselves, again and again, indicate that the culture, filtered through role models and received as a backdrop to other life events, is critical to causation. Yet few authors of eating disorder memoirs seek to be token representatives of other sufferer’s experiences, and self-help books, like Normandi and Roark’s *It’s Not About Food* and Claude-Pierre’s *Secret Language*, also try to preserve the individuality of eating disorder sufferers so that the diagnoses and treatments they recommend are typical but adaptable. Witness Hornbacher, in her introduction, both admitting to being representative while refusing the same role: “So I get to be the stereotype: female, white, young, middle-class. I can’t tell the story for all of us. I wrote this because I object to the homogenizing, the inaccurate trend in the majority of eating disorders literature that tends to generalize from the part to the whole, from a person to a group.”²¹¹ Claude-Pierre assesses each eating disorder as a manifestation of what she calls the “Negative Mind,” a kind of obsessive-compulsive voice almost exterior to the sufferer’s “Actual Voice,” that commands eating disordered behavior as a punishment for failing to be perfect. Despite such across the board theorizing, she asserts: “Each case of anorexia is different. But all hear the same language and display the same inherent kindness.”²¹²

Finally, while recommending that eating disorder sufferers (anorexics, bulimics and binge eaters) participate in the same group workshops and attempt the same individual exercises for healing, Normandi and Roark suggest that while the details are different, and importantly so, the underlying problems are the same:

In our group and workshops we have heard story after story of women using food, and the obsession with food and weight, to cope with stressful situations as children, adolescents, or adults. The stories are different for everyone. For some it's because at an early age they were taught that how they looked was who they were, and they had to be thin to be okay. For some it might have been serious physical, emotional or sexual abuse.....What the exact story is doesn't matter. What matters is that we learn to listen to our own voices and hear our own stories.²¹³

Normandi and Roark's rhetoric is notable for the way they create group cohesion while preserving the uniqueness of the group members. The initial "we" that is Normandi and Roark hearing the individual stories that are so similar they can be grouped into general categories, becomes a "we" that includes all of the female sufferers, the individuality of whose stories has been acknowledged even while the similarities have been shown to be sufficient to create group identification.²¹⁴ In essence, Roark and Normandi show how the eating disorder self-help book works towards symbolic convergence.

A third reason for experts on eating disorders and authors of recovery narratives to separate the cultural and its ideals from the disorders is to argue for the

significance and depth of eating disorder motives. Because eating disordered behavior *is* so akin to culturally sanctioned dieting, people who suffer from, study, or write about the two may fear that audiences will trivialize eating disorders, viewing them as excessive attempts to achieve ideal beauty standards.

This dismissive attitude seems particularly important for men, who may feel less “masculine” for obsessing about their bodies, compounding their anxiety about not being “masculine” enough to conform physically to idealized, hyper-muscular male icons. The ideal male physique is presented to them as childhood toys, in cartoons,²¹⁵ through cinematic heroes and superheroes,²¹⁶ and in health and fitness books, magazines, advertisements and websites. In other words, some potential audiences may dismiss eating disordered behavior as the manifestation of excess vanity—a desire to be aesthetically pleasing that overrides common sense approaches to health. Sheila Macleod, for example, in *The Art of Starvation*, explicitly denies that “slimming” towards a cultural ideal is similar to anorexic behavior. She writes:

Although the slimmer and the anorexic are both to some extent governed by anxiety, there is an important difference between them. Slimming is a conscious process; anorexia nervosa (being more than non-eating) a largely unconscious one--at least at the outset. In observing the behavior of the slimmer and the anorexic, we may read the same text, “I want to lose weight.” But the sub-texts differ. Whereas the slimmer’s reads, “I want to be a sexually attractive woman,” the anorexic’s reads, “I want to shed the burden of

womanhood.” Slimming is basically a matter of vanity. Anorexia is much more a matter of pride.²¹⁷

Peggy Claude-Pierre develops a similar argument in the book, *The Secret Language of Eating Disorders*:

The deification of thinness is dangerous, but where eating disorders are concerned, it can be misleading. Indeed, this is a much more complicated issue than appears at first glance, and if a connection exists between the cult of thinness and anorexia, it is far deeper than mere vanity. There is a difference between becoming thin for the sake of fitting into society's expectations and becoming thinner and thinner and thinner for the sake of dying....Society's emphasis on looks clouds the more important issue that children are dying because they are trying to achieve impossible standards of perfection.²¹⁸

The argument that eating disorders are not about “vanity” is perhaps a compelling reason for some audiences to pay more and more careful attention to the disorders, as it paves the way for other motives than achieving beauty to be explored. It is important to establish that eating disordered behavior are, indeed, not merely about beauty, so that treatment can aim more carefully for alternate causes than an excess of vanity.

But the dichotomy between the motives for “normal dieting” and “eating disorders” is a false one, for, as I argue extensively in the preceding chapters, the “control the body, control the life” philosophy behind what MacLeod calls “slimming” indicates that “normal dieting” is not about “mere vanity” either, and is in

fact prompted by a complex web of motives and is “about” achieving the feeling of empowerment. While attractiveness is certainly one motive for reshaping the body towards the ideal, it is not the sole motive, and many benefits other than increased attractiveness are argued--in the success stories and the material that genre augments--to flow from achieving leanness. In defense of the seriousness and complexity of eating disorders, sufferers and experts sometimes wrongly trivialize the motives behind what is called “normal dieting.” Thus arguments attempting to portray the seriousness of eating disorders inadvertently valorize the eating disorder sufferer by ascribing to her motives that are present in most, if not all, dieters. In his comments to Johnson in 1995, Gordon suggests that, unlike what is presented in the culture about achieving slenderness, eating disorders are “about control.” My analysis indicates that *both* “normal dieting” *and* “eating disorders” are about control.

Chapter 5: The Size Acceptance Narrative

In 1995, Leslie Lampert, writing in *Ladies Home Journal*, asked, “Can a Woman Be Fat and Happy?” as if the likelihood of the twain meeting was seriously debatable. Though feminist scholars and other writers on “the body” had critiqued media representations of the human body, and the female body in particular, for over twenty years, and though alternative publications, such as the lesbian journal *FatGiRL*, emerged in the early and mid 1990’s, cultural beliefs that to be fat was to be unhappy, unhealthy, unfit, unattractive, unaccepted, and unsuccessful had yet to undergo sustained, serious challenges in the popular press. Perhaps predictably, one woman featured in Lampert’s article answered “yes,” the other “no.”

But change was in the air.

In September of 1996, *Vogue* published Rebecca Johnson’s defense of the use and idealization of skinny models, partly in response to readers’ changing their tunes—the article opened with an excerpt from a sample letter from a previous decade celebrating the motivation she got from seeing the thin models in the magazines pages, and an excerpt from a more recent letter, chastising the publication for using models who were very thin.

The media began a self-examination: why were so many female celebrities so thin? A backlash against the super-skinny began. By the fall of 1997, when the Fox network debuted the overnight hit *Ally McBeal*, the trio of the show’s of very-thin female stars (Calista Flockhart, Courtney Thorne-Smith, Portia De Rossi) bore the brunt of much of the scrutiny.²¹⁹ Supermodels like Kate Moss and Jodie Kidd, singers like “Posh Spice” (Victoria Beckham), and other actresses, such as Courtney

Cox-Arquette and Lara Flynn-Boyle, were also inspected.²²⁰ Sometimes they were accused of having eating disorders, sometimes only of promoting them.

The spring of 1997 saw the publication of *Mode*, a fashion magazine dedicated to “Style Beyond Size.” Initially slated to be issued quarterly, *Mode* quickly became bi-monthly, then nearly monthly, as it found a readership ready and willing to embrace its philosophy that “women of size” could be beautiful and had as much right to fashion and beauty tips as their thinner sisters. In 1997, the drama *The Practice* aired on ABC, with Camryn Manheim starring as Ellenor Frutt. Manheim would win an Emmy in 1998 for her work on the program, announcing as her acceptance speech: “This is for all the fat girls!”

In December of 1998, *Titanic* was released, a film that starred Kate Winslet as the female lead. Winslet’s beauty, noted by many to be “curvier” than the majority of Hollywood starlets, was touted and debated. Rumors—denied by Winslet—that the film’s director, James Cameron, had nicknamed her Kate “Weighs a Lot” during filming fueled the controversy over her figure: Was she thin? Was she fat? Was she just right? By February of 2000, *Glamour* magazine could publish on “The Great Kate Weight Debate,” featuring women commenting on the merits of the figures of Kates Moss, Winslet and Dillon, the latter of whom frequently graced the cover and pages of *Mode*.²²¹

The debate over the ideal body shape and size for women prompted responses from celebrities and non-celebrities alike. Associations between thinness and eating disorders were made more frequently, as were association between fashion and plus-sizes. In response to an e-mail inquiry, Lesley Jane Seymour, the editor of *Marie*

Claire, affirmed that the magazine responded to reader demand to publish more articles on size acceptance and on fashions for fuller figures. She also affirmed that advertising dollars from emergent plus-size designers and retailers made offering magazine copy on fashions for a variety of body shapes possible.²²²

As articles promoting size acceptance began to appear in mainstream media, so did narratives of size acceptance, which offered a challenge to the idea that fatness necessarily meant unhappiness. Like authors of eating disorder memoirs, authors of size acceptance narratives offer a different interpretation of the relationship between the body and the ideals of health, happiness, discipline and acceptance. However, unlike authors of eating disorder memoirs, who attack the control-the-body-control-the-life rhetorical vision by showing how strict control over the body using “weight loss” methods can lead to dangerous obsession with controlling the body (that is, the shift to an emphasis on scene and agency), authors of size acceptance narratives interrogate the very notion of controlling the body, suggesting that manifesting control over the life need not necessitate reshaping the body and maintaining a slender physique. Authors of size acceptance narratives²²³ separate weight loss from the ideals the weight loss success story connects it to, and offer alternative ways for readers to achieve personal ideals that do not depend on weight loss. In other words, they shift to an examination of purpose and agent.

These narratives are exercises in what Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca call “breaking links” between associations. Their theory, published first in *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, is that some arguments are associations—the linking together of two concepts or the maintaining of established

links between concepts.²²⁴ Size acceptance authors must break the links between “fat” and all of the negatives associated with it in, for example, weight loss success stories. Authors and interview subjects in these narratives reject the idea that something is wrong with the fat person and that fat symbolizes the problem. They separate the appearance of health or fitness, usually the symbol “thinness,” from the reality of health and fitness, in part by suggesting that “thinness” can represent semi-starvation and poor health. They suggest that fatter bodies can be and often are healthy, forging a new association. The genre also rejects the idea that healthy diets and exercise levels will necessarily *cause* thinness, especially the model-thin ideal, and refutes the idea that thinner people are inherently happier, healthier, fitter and more successful than their larger counterparts. By arguing for new associations for fatness and breaking the strong links between health, normalcy and happiness from thinness, they create an alternate rhetorical vision to the weight loss success story.

After a look at the types of publication venues that emerged for the genre, the bulk of this chapter contains an analysis of the argument strategies used within it, which include the following:

- negotiations with the use of the word *fat* or its less pejorative synonyms;
- resistance to the seemingly-empirical numerical measurements, such as weight in pounds and clothing size;
- breaking associative links between thinness from health;
- assertions that larger bodies—bodies with “flaws”—are in fact natural and normal and to be appreciated;

- breaking associative links between thinness from happiness, in particular by judging worth by acts instead of the body's appearance, and by evaluating thin women's behavior negatively;
- forging associations between size acceptance and discipline by arguing that self-love requires not just a one-time attitude shift, but prolonged work.

Finally, I analyze the visual representations that accompany the size acceptance narrative. The transition from weight loss behaviors to size acceptance is often difficult, a difficulty present in many SANs as a lingering ambivalence about the size and shape of the body. Perhaps because of this ambivalence on the part of many authors, and perhaps also because accepting the larger body is easier if the body is not actually visually or materially present, the photographs that accompany many size acceptance narratives reveal the same lingering ambivalence.

A New Rhetorical Vision: Who and When

Women write an overwhelming majority of the size acceptance narratives published in the popular press. The fact that most of these narratives are written by women underscores how comparatively few outlets men, especially straight men, have for discussing their anxieties about body shape and size. The first three chapters of this study suggest that a growing number of men experience mild to serious dissatisfaction with their bodies and take steps, sometimes quite dramatic steps, to reshape them; however, publications that target men do not often publish articles about this anxiety or about “accepting” the body without reshaping it.

An exception to this exists in gay male subcultures, where reactions against the lean, “pretty” ideal for men—as icons to desire physically and possibly also to desire to emulate—include both the “Girth and Mirth” and “Bear” movements. Both celebrate being and desiring men who have heavy bodies and body hair, and who may be older than the typical male model.²²⁵ Indeed, the “bear”-like title character from a classic tale of gay erotica, *Mr. Benson*, is in some ways an icon of size acceptance. The images of men in media for and by these groups call attention to the absence of mainstream media images of men desiring fat women.

The desiring heterosexual male gaze is, mainstream images suggest, firmly fixed on the slender or athletic female form. Though there are articles published for men about appreciating fat women, these are few and far between, and are generally accompanied by few photographs, and even within these limited few, the photographic representations are typically of women whose bodies may be larger than waifish models, though few might call them “fat.” An example is “Kate Winslet, Please Save Us,” by X in *GQ*. Also XXX.

Just as in the success story, most women’s acceptance narratives track the subject’s weight fluctuations through youth up to the present. Few size acceptance narratives are written by those who have never dieted or exercised with weight loss as the desired end. Actress Mo’Nique (*Skinny Women Are Evil*) is a notable exception; she writes: “...[T]he only way I’ll ever wear a size six, or even a sixteen, is if you add them together. That’s right. I wear a size 22. And I’m proud, because I wear it extremely well. I’ve never had a problem with my doubles: double chin and double belly. I’ve also never had a battle with the bulge.”²²⁶ However, the more typical

author admits to previous weight loss attempts, often attempts that have been successful but only temporarily. This genre therefore has a strong relationship to the weight loss success story, and authors use evidence from their weight loss struggles to support arguments against it, as the results of their weight loss attempts did not match those claimed by authors of the success story. Because many authors of size acceptance narratives struggled so urgently in their previous attempts to lose weight, the genre also shares affinities with the eating disorder memoir, as authors often engage in “eating disordered” behavior to lose or keep off weight. SANs can seem something like what the eating disorder memoir might be if its author could escape the idealization of thinness.

Initially, authors who would write size acceptance narratives faced a scarcity of publication venues that weight loss success story authors did not, as those stories were and still are generally sought after. However, as the rhetorical vision continues to catch on, more publication venues appear as more readers of mainstream magazines demand “size acceptance” from their editors and the success of “size acceptance” self-help books and novels impresses publishing houses. Already having a platform from which to speak publicly helps, of course, which is probably one reason so many of these narratives are celebrities’ stories. Models and actresses, whose celebrity status seems in part dependent on beauty and the requisite body shape and size, are considered experts on both beauty and success. The celebrity-authored narratives make up a majority of those published in mainstream formats, especially women’s magazines, and include the actresses Camryn Manheim,

Mo'Nique, Courtney Thorne-Smith, Cybill Shepherd and Charlize Theron, and the models Carré Otis, Karenbeatrice, Jodie Kidd, and Christie Brinkley.

Some activists in the cause of size or fat acceptance also achieve publication, or publish themselves on the internet. Foremost among these, and a pioneer of fat acceptance, is Marilyn Wann, who began a small magazine (or 'zine) and a website, both entitled "Fat!SO?", and subsequently published a book by the same title. Wann's fame derives in part from her activism: in 1999, she led a successful protest against a gym billboard in San Francisco. The gym put up a sign that said, "When [the aliens] come, they'll eat the fat ones first." Wann and others marched, holding signs that said, "Eat me!" The protest contributed to making discrimination based on height or weight illegal in that jurisdiction, a legal precedent that has already helped at least one woman keep her job as an aerobics instructor.²²⁷ Interviews with Wann, and summaries of her experiences, were featured in magazines for women, beginning in the late nineties and continuing, including *Mode*, and *Rosie* (for the magazine's "Big Fat Weight Issue"). Acknowledging Wann as an important figure in the size acceptance movement has become reflexive in the crop of size-acceptance literature, including the books *Fat—A Fat Worse Than Death*, by Ruth Thone; *Appetites: Why Women Want*, by Caroline Knapp; and *Body Outlaws: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity*, edited by Ophira Edut.²²⁸ Reader reviews of Wann's writings, and similar books, are also likely to contain very small, personal size-acceptance statements, made possible through reading Wann's work. One terse author, reviewing the book on amazon.com, writes: "Wow! This book was such an

eye-opener for me. It made me realize that I can live my life how I want to right now, just as I am.”²²⁹

Women who are neither famous nor formally associated with acceptance movements also achieve publication. This is especially true since the rhetorical vision of size acceptance has led to special issues of women’s mainstream magazines that focus on helping readers of many shapes and sizes learn to love their bodies and dress well to accommodate their size and shape. Two examples are *In Style*’s issue for January 2004 (which sported Beyoncé Knowles and the headline “Love Your Body!”), and *Glamour*’s May 2003 “Body-Love Issue,” dedicated to showcasing many body shapes and sizes: tall, short, thin, athletic, pregnant and curvy. This last is, as we will see later, often, though not always, an ameliorative synonym for larger figures. In these special issues, women with corresponding body types are represented; many actresses and models, and also non-celebrities, appear in photographs and fashion spreads. Personal narratives and interviews are published, and, of course, fashion tips are provided to help readers achieve current fashion statements that maximize the benefits and manage the perceived flaws supposedly inherent in some shapes.²³⁰ The March 2004 issue of *Marie Claire* features an article designed to help women use current runway looks to camouflage such “problems” as large thighs but also, for thinner women, to create the appearance of greater curvaceousness, and for petite women, to create the illusion of greater height.

Lifetime magazine offered a special “Love Your Body” issue as one of its debut issues, in which several non-celebrity size acceptance narratives appeared. Tellingly, however, actress Kristin Davis (“Sex and the City,” HBO) graced the

cover. On the cover, a headline reads: “Why Kristin Davis refuses to submit to Hollywood’s insane pressure to be shockingly thin.” However, within the magazine, readers learn that Davis herself is a size “2 or 4.” She may not seem to readers to be “size acceptance” material—even the headline suggests that she’s thin, just not “shockingly” so. Davis herself seems to have a realistic view of her comparative thinness out of “Hollywood.” She is quoted as saying:

I was at an event recently and someone from another magazine said, “We’re doing an issue about how curves are in, in Hollywood, and we want to talk to you.”...Their real agenda is to talk about the three of us who have hips. I’m a size 2 or 4...in Hollywood, that’s called “curvy.” You turn on the TV and all the girls on the new shows are emaciated. I went to the Emmys this year and you can’t believe how rail-thin they are. There are a total of three people in our business who have some curves. And all of those people are working out like fiends. I think there is no one more beautiful than Jennifer Lopez, but the amount of discussion about her body proves that nothing has changed. And she is a little person. Everybody is. Salma Hayek is a little, tiny person.²³¹

Hence, one of the problems that has plagued the size acceptance narrative is that the “Hollywood” ideal is so slender, even slender women like Davis, Lopez, Hayek, and other SAN authors Charlize Theron and Jodie Kidd, can represent size acceptance and a more accommodating ideal. When Jennifer Lopez’ physique is touted as a new acceptance of “larger” figures, a consequence is that what is average (in America, a size 14/16) still appears unacceptable despite the ostensible message that size

acceptance is becoming more prevalent. Kidd (Fig. 16), is, like Davis, a strange model of “size acceptance.”

Size acceptance is also a trend in fiction for women, sometimes called “chick lit.” Novels featuring “curvy” or “bountiful” heroines have recently become popular on both sides of the Atlantic. These include: *How to Cook a Tart*, by Nina Killham; *Asking For Trouble*, by Elizabeth Young; *Bad Heir Day* and *Simply Divine*, by Wendy Holden; *Hunger Point*, by Gillian Medoff; *Jemima J*, by Jane Green; *Good In Bed* and *In Her Shoes*, by Jennifer Weiner; and *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, and its sequel, *The Edge of Reason*, by Helen Fielding, the success of whose work was door-opening. Bridget Jones does not come to a size acceptance...quite. In the movie sequel, she says, “I’ll always be a little bit fat.” However, readers may be struck by her ability to attract the sexual interest of at least two male characters, maintain an active social life, and change and advance her career, despite being the same weight at the end of the novel that she is at the beginning. Renee Zellwegger, who played the eponymous heroine in the movie and was, as of February 2004, gaining weight for the sequel, was nominated for an Oscar for her first portrayal. As she gained weight, articles discussing the transformation predictably began to appear. As the sequel’s release approaches, Zellwegger, showcasing her former thinness, is on the cover of a variety of women’s magazines, such as *Elle* and *Glamour*. Each interview discusses body image with the star.

Exploring the “F” Word

Many of the women who write size acceptance narratives begin quite logically with a definition of *fat* and its negative associations. In the definition stasis, they may



Figure 16: Jody Kidd, *Elle* (British), May 2000, p 54

spend time revealing when they learned that they were considered fat, when they learned that fat was “bad,” why fat is considered “bad” in our culture, what other cultures--both contemporary and historical--think or thought of fatness, especially in women, or even at scientific definitions of fat as physical object. Or they may do some combination of the above. These sections, while individual, allow readers to reflect on their own associations with the word *fat*, and so create identifications with readers by reflecting shared experiences, identifications that may carry readers through the breaking of associations authors done later. What is often involved is the author’s decision to use the word *fat* or one of its less pejorative synonyms, like “bountiful” and “curvy,” or even the words that female weight loss success story seem to prefer, like “big-boned” and “heavy.”

Saying the “F” Word

Actress Camryn Manheim’s pre-*Practice*, one-woman stage show was entitled, “Wake Up, I’m Fat!” After a successful run with her play, and after winning the Emmy for her work on the television show, Manheim’s memoir appeared with the same title in 1999. She has this to say about her title and the use of the word *fat*:

You just don’t use the word “fat” in polite company.... [P]eople struggled mightily to get the name of my play right. I’d get message like, “Hello, I’d like two tickets for *Excuse Me, I’m Fat!*,” or “Yes, may I please reserve four tickets for *Watch Out, I’m Fat.*” But my all-time favorite was “Good evening, I would like to reserve six tickets for the Friday performance of *I Woke Up and I Was Fat.*”²³²

Just as in the weight loss success story, the use of the word *fat* remains problematic in size acceptance narratives. Manheim's list is intriguing because of what the variations in the title suggest about social constructions of fatness, as if it must be apologized for (excuse me) or as if it is a hazard (watch out) or as if the realization suddenly dawns on one (as it apparently does in some weight loss success story turning points).

Few SAN authors are as comfortable with the term *fat*, especially as applied to themselves, as Manheim, activist Marilyn Wann, actress Mo'Nique and model Carré Otis are exceptions. Each attempts to develop reader comfort with the word, and lead by example, applying it to herself readily. Manheim concludes a chapter by stating: "Look, I don't mind being described as fat. In fact, that's the whole point."²³³ Wann is the most straightforward about her goals in using the word "fat" and encouraging others to do so; she makes attempts to pussyfoot around use of the term seem laughable. Wann argues that "reclaiming the word fat is the miracle cure you've been looking for," and, by treating the difficulty as if it were a linguistic challenge, writes: "Some people can't pronounce the word nuclear. But the f-word is straight out of Dick and Jane. Cat, bat, rat, sat...fat. See how easy? Try sneaking up on it. First, say something easy. Try infatuated...."²³⁴ Wann frowns on the terms overweight ("[O]ver whose weight?") and obese ("This is a doctor's fancy way of saying, 'I'm looking at you, and I find you disgusting.'").

Wann's devotion to reclaiming the word *fat* extends to the material object: she spends some time in her book examining fat cells, which she claims are so "stable" that there are few images of them available from the scientific and medical

communities because they don't require study. This interesting approach to the definition of *fat*--through external, microscopic, medicalized object instead of through connotation and application to a visible body--helps her defend *fat* as healthy as a material presence. She and other fat activists have adapted the gay rights movements' cry and now proudly proclaim, "We're Here, We're Spheres! We're Fat. That's That."²³⁵ Wann is also one of a very few who refuse to shy away from the visual presentation of fat bodies and body parts. Her irreverent website uses black and white photographs of naked buttocks as clickable icons, and the book *Fat!So?* has a chapter on "Anatomy Lessons," in which photographs of many body parts from "normal" people are displayed.²³⁶ Images of Wann in women's magazines show her in clothing and poses designed to display, rather than conceal, her size. (Fig. 17)

Mo'Nique (formerly of *The Parkers*, Fox), in *Skinny Women Are Evil*, uses another visual-textual argument tactic to approach the word "fat" and its synonyms gleefully. In her book, the words "fat," "big," "large," "thick," "heavy," "plus-size," and "chunky" all appear in capital letters, bolded, over and over, so that the words are easy to see and in a state of permanent exclamation. Again, this technique is a reminder that many fat people feel invisible because of their size; Mo'Nique's choice of textual presentation is a visual argument that **FAT** should not be ignored out of shame.

Mo'Nique's text is different in many ways from the majority of SANs. She takes fat acceptance as a fait accompli and claims to be more interested in expressing anger against snobbery in thin women than in building up size acceptance in her



Figure 17: Marilyn Wann, *Rosie Magazine* July, 2002

readers. She also objects openly to the “before” descriptions of fat women as the status quo:

Contrary to popular belief, we’re not all interested in losing a **TON** of weight--some of us are happy at 250 pounds, shit, 300 even. We aren’t all sad, depressed and lonely. Most of us have a **FULL** belly, a **FULL** refrigerator, and our fill of men.

So...If you bought this book expecting a guide to love and acceptance, sorry to disappoint you, because this ain’t it. Love and acceptance are qualities you’ve got to get on your own. But **BIG** girls, if you’re ready to beat skinny bitches at their own game and take your rightful place in the spotlight, then [this book is] for you.²³⁷

Of course, to tear down the perceived opposition is to raise up one’s own side, so Mo’Nique’s text will fulfill size acceptance goals.

Euphemisms for *fat* are also subjects of interest in the SANs of Mannheim, Mo’Nique and others. Mannheim lists synonyms for *fat* that have been used to describe her in film and theatre reviews, including “buxom,” “big boned,” “generously proportioned,” “hefty,” “matronly,” “couch potato,” “zaftig,” “wide-ish,” and “ample.”²³⁸ It becomes clear from Mannheim’s writing as a whole that the use of the “F” word daunts not just fat people but others who would describe them.

Mo’Nique’s aggressive tactics have her turning the tables, to demonstrate the possible pejorative descriptors for thin women. She lists: “toothpick, beanpole, anorexic, bulimic, hungry, weak, starved, famished, gaunt, slender, trim, sinewy, and tiny,” and her “all-time favorite, skinny bitch.”²³⁹

Carré Otis, whom perhaps few would describe as *fat* outside of the world of straight-size modeling, is also comfortable with the term *fat*, or professes to be. In an interview, she says, “Call me fat, whatever you want, it’s fine...I don’t call myself anything. I’m normal, average size.”²⁴⁰ Her interviewer’s phrasing suggests less comfort with the term. He writes: “As far as dress sizes go, she is a British 16 to 18 (that’s 14 to 16 Canadian). In modeling terms that is, well, fat...” Cynthia McFadden, who interviewed Otis for *PrimeTime*, also showed more discomfort applying the term than Otis herself: “She may look beautiful to you today at 155 pounds, but to the fashion world she’s--well, she’s fat.”²⁴¹

Synonyms, Euphemisms

Wann, in typically whole-hearted mode, decries the euphemisms used to describe the pleasantly plump. “Heavy, large, voluptuous, zaftig, big-boned--you only need a euphemism if you find the truth distasteful,” she opines.²⁴² Aside from Wann, Mo’Nique, Otis and Manheim, however, few SAN authors published in the popular press are comfortable with the term *fat*. Plus-size model, and former straight-size model, Karenbeatrice “had some emotional adjustments to make after she ‘got big,’” according to an article that puts her choice of euphemism in quotes, “[but] she now feels comfortable at her current weight.”²⁴³ Sallie Tisdale, whose article “A Weight that Women Carry” was an early exemplar of the genre, published in *Harper’s* in 1993, demonstrates the unease most feel with the term: “When I say to someone, ‘I’m fat,’ I hear, ‘Oh, no! You’re not *fat!* You’re just’—What? Plump? Big-boned? Rubenesque? I’m just *not thin*. That’s crime enough.”²⁴⁴

While comparatively few women embrace the term *fat* there is no agreement on what other term or terms are more desirable. Wendy Shanker, in “Name That Size,” explores “plus size,” “queen size,” “zaftig,” “overweight,” “big-boned,” “Rubenesque,” “thick,” and “real,” before prematurely concluding, “Call me whatever you want: I’m taking ownership of the language! It can’t hurt me now. I’m large and in charge: a plus-size girl, a queen-size lady. I’ve got a full figure and I’m big-boned.”²⁴⁵ At last, she wonders, “How come I don’t feel any better?” None of the words she considers applying to herself, however, is *fat*. These publicized internal debates over terminology show how difficult it is to reclaim a word from the pejorative once it is established as an ultimate term, and return it to the realm of the dialectic, where multi-valenced definitions can prosper more easily. Even though these authors want it to be “okay” to be *fat*, they are not sure whether they want to be *fat* or to choose a different label. Much as the word *queer* had to be taken up as a chosen word to describe homosexuals, which involved them confidently applying the term to themselves until the word lost much of its negative force, women are (slowly) learning apply *fat* to themselves. Currently, however, the word still appears to hurt, even when applied by the self.

I Am Not a Number

One prevalent argument in the SAN is that numbers--on the scale and on clothing tags--are not what should be counted as important in the life of a person. This argument is a significant departure from the weight loss success story, in which the before and after numbers are often in bold print next to photographs. Tisdale’s

piece begins with her refusal to check her weight on the scale, despite her admission of feeling a constant desire to do so:

I don't know how much I weigh these days, thought I can make a good guess.... By the time I was sixteen years old I had reached my adult height of five feet six inches and weighed 164 pounds. I weighed 164 pounds before and after a healthy pregnancy. I assume I weigh about the same now; nothing significant seems to have happened to my body, this same old body I've had all these years.²⁴⁶

Similarly, at the end of her SAN, appropriately entitled "Good bye Scale, Hello Gorgeous," Asha Bandele says: "I couldn't tell you what I weigh or even what size I am since my clothes run the gamut between 6 and 10, depending on the designer. I still watch what I eat, but I haven't obsessed about the numbers on the scale since the day I learned I was pregnant."²⁴⁷ By showing how variable the numbers are, authors remove the scientific preciseness a comparison of weights seems to convey.

According to Carré Otis, "[W]e must all remember that 'size' is just a number that hangs on a label and that label and cut vary greatly, not only from designer to designer but geographically as well. The size you find on the East Coast may be different from the West Coast, believe it or not."²⁴⁸ Such unreliability allows Otis and others to encourage readers to separate their feelings of accomplishment and confidence from the numbers.

Another author disconnects the scale from her self-esteem after many years of equating them: "Self-esteem and weight have always gone hand in hand for me. Since I was a young girl, I've thought my extra pounds somehow disqualified me,

made me less of a person.... Then two months ago, on a friend's advice, I decided to give it up.... The idea of not stepping on the scale was terrifying. Sworn enemy and closest friend, it told me who I was, what I was worth. But something told me that if I didn't try, I would never have a chance of being free, of finding out how I might feel about myself separate from The Number."²⁴⁹ Firoozeh Dumas does not list current numbers at all--clothing size or weight in pounds--though she does admit to gaining 20 pounds after two pregnancies and losing it gradually through dance. This refusal to list or obsess about measurements that, in the success story, gauge the degree of the subject's success, and arguments that the measurements aren't reliable, as in Bandele, are key tactics in many size acceptance narratives.²⁵⁰

Perhaps no one is more outspoken about resisting the seemingly empirical, numerical evaluation of human bodies than Marilyn Wann. According to her, "If you're really interested in numbers that say something about your health, try blood pressure, blood sugar levels and cholesterol readings. Those are much better predictors of how healthy you are than your BMI ever will be. People with the same height and weight could have radically different fitness levels, nutrition habits, blood pressure, blood sugars and cholesterol numbers. They would have the same BMI, but totally different health profiles."²⁵¹ As she suggests, body shape and size and the numbers used to calculate those, are unreliably related to health.

Diet Agencies Under Fire

Often the definition of *fat*, traced through the woman's experience of her fat-loathing culture, yields a new assessment of the methods used to attain and maintain thinness, and an interrogation of whether the *means* used to pursue the *end* of thinness

are healthful ones. By breaking links between the *means* and the *ends*, these authors break powerful connections between the symbol “thinness” and the ideal “health.” In essence, they argue that diets, manic exercise plans, and other weight loss agencies, in Burkean terms, are detrimental to the agent, if not disconnected from the act of be[com]ing healthy.

Like others, Tisdale pursues the definition of fat in our culture by exploring her own understanding of it through the behavior of her grandmother and mother:

I’m not sure when the word “fat” first sounded pejorative to me, or when I first applied it to myself. My grandmother was a petite woman, the only one in my family. She stole food from other people’s plates, and hid the debris of her own meals so that no one would know how much she ate. My mother was a size 14, like me, all her adult life; we shared clothes. She fretted endlessly over food scales, calorie counters, and diet books. She didn’t want to quit smoking because she was afraid she would gain weight, and she worried about her weight until she died of cancer five years ago. Dieting was always...there in the conversations above my head, the dialogue of stocky women. But I was strong and healthy and didn’t pay too much attention to my weight until I was grown.²⁵²

This passage exemplifies the SAN for several reasons. First, as in many eating disorder narratives, the size acceptance narrative focuses on the hereditary nature of body size and shape (a biological agency), and just as importantly, attitudes towards them. As in eating disorder recovery memoirs, the way the mother and other role

models feel about their bodies and food is a powerful influence on how the child will eventually perceive her own. The passage implies genetics at work: If Tisdale is the same size as her mother, and her grandmother was the only thin woman in her family, the suggestion is, of course, that some people will be larger than others as biology dictates.

Wann draws a more obvious connection between genetics, body size and shape, and health: “I’m a healthy, happy, 5-foot-4 inch, 270-pound woman. I’m my mother’s daughter. We look exactly alike, except she’s 78 years old and mows the lawn every week. Go, Mom!”²⁵³ By providing personal testimony that she has inherited traits (biological agencies) from her mother, whose fitness and longevity are apparent, Wann provides an important counter-example to the prevailing view that fatness decreases quality of life and life span, both signals of good health. By presenting the “reality” that body shape and size are in part determined by genetics, Wann, Tisdale and others subtly refute the control-the-body-control-the-life vision at the heart of the weight loss success story by challenging the idea that body shape and size are under the control of the individual. Sometimes, agencies under the agent’s control are feeble against agencies outside the agent’s control: one might go so far as to say that biology, or genetics, are counter-agents in the act of weight loss, and such powerful counter-agents that no amount of action on the part of the agent can defeat them.

Significantly, Tisdale’s narrative contains latent arguments that echo the eating disorder narrative: attempting to diet and lose weight--and the behaviors, such as smoking, that so often accompany these efforts--can result in poor health when

doing so goes against biology. She cements the connections between dieting and other unhealthful behaviors by admitting to taking diet pills that “made [her] feel strange, half-crazed, vaguely nauseated,” and to developing “rituals and taboos around food, [eating] very little.”²⁵⁴ Tisdale’s essay also contains a less-autobiographical passage dedicated to debunking the “predominant biological myth of weight” that thin people have greater longevity, a central argument in support of the weight loss success story. She writes: “The truth is far more complicated. (Some deaths of fat people attributed to heart disease seem actually to have been the result of radical dieting.) If health were our real concern, it would be dieting we questioned, not weight.”²⁵⁵ Wann also questions the idea of dieting directly:

I question the goal of losing weight. Diets don’t work. According to the National Institutes of Health, 90 percent of people who lose weight on medically supervised diets regain it all within three years. If aspirin failed to ease your headache nine times out of ten, would you blame your head or the aspirin? Yet we blame our bodies for their natural shape and keep on trying faulty, even dangerous, cures (like drugs and surgery--yikes!). Estimates based on data from identical twins suggest that up to 80 percent of a person’s weight may be genetic.²⁵⁶

Many SANs argue forcefully about how much money is spent on diet and exercise products, asserting that the industry requires constant dieting and even relapse to maintain itself. The system is not, they charge set up to help the dieter, but to require continued economic input from a frustrated but continually motivated--in part by self-esteem crushing advertisements--consumers. Here the agency (diet programs) are

revealed to be not co-agents, as was supposed, but in the hands of counter-agents, who trick the agent into having a false purpose and an inadequate agency.

Also significant is Tisdale's description of her own body as a child: "I was strong and healthy." She makes a claim that many SAN authors make, that a body whose size is not consciously moderated can be healthy, may be *more* healthy, than the bodies of women who do monitor their size. This is a near-universal claim in the SAN: you can be "overweight" and healthy, and you can eat carefully and exercise but still be overweight. Part of Tisdale's closing self-assessment is the argument that her "nourishment is good--as far as nutrition is concerned, I'm in much better shape than when I was dieting."²⁵⁷ Similarly, Crescent Dragonwagon, in a narrative published in *Mode* magazine entitled, "Pushing the Belly Button," argues that the *appearance* of muscularity and thinness are not required for muscle to be present in reality, and that even exercise may not increase the *appearance of thinness*, though it is being done. Her realizations are supported by her medical practitioner (a co-agent in size acceptance), so that her dissociation argument is supported with expert testimony:

...I'd stopped working out post-hysterectomy, beginning again about five weeks after...At the six-week checkup, the surgeon, palpating the plumpness at my middle, said casually, "Oh, you've started exercising again." "How on earth can you tell?" I ask, since I was visually as far from washboard abs as a mop bucket is from Niagara Falls.

"Easy...the abs are a strong set of muscles, very responsive to exercise. You don't see them because they're under the fat, but you can feel

‘em. Fat deposits there are natural, by the way, for a woman.

Estrogen virtually tells your body fat to settle there.” The light bulb over my head gave a brief, tentative, slightly dubious flash: You can have strong, powerful, healthy, worked-out abdominal muscles--but still have a belly. In fact...you’re supposed to.²⁵⁸

Just as Dragonwagon asserts that, despite not having “washboard abs,” she has strong abdominal muscles from exercise, nearly all SANs feature the author’s description of her healthy routines, routines that include the weight loss success story methods of healthful eating and exercise. According to a profile in the SAN-abundant source *Mode*, Cybill Shepherd’s moderate weight gain from her youth, when she was quite slender, makes her a model of size acceptance. In that profile, her healthy routine is listed: “These days, Shepherd’s having fun. She runs. She bikes. She swims. She hikes. She plays tennis. She dances—‘swing, country-western, anything.’”²⁵⁹ Carré Otis condemns her former diet dedicated to maintaining a low modeling weight and now claims to exercise and live healthfully: “‘I didn’t want to be on a seventeen-year diet any longer,’ she says.... ‘I don’t want to do that anymore. Whatever my weight is, I want to eat like a normal human being.’...Otis has a formula for keeping fit and centered. Up at five a.m., she meditates. She goes for a run or spins. She does some weights; she does some yoga.”²⁶⁰ The technique of associating healthful activities with higher weights than accepted in mainstream fashion and fitness magazines is critical to the success of the genre and the rhetorical vision it promotes.²⁶¹

Like Tisdale, who recounts that her mother smoked in part because she was afraid quitting would cause weight gain, other authors assert that smoking as a control

of appetite is common. The stereotype of the straight-size model is that they at least smoke, and probably do other drugs. Otis supports this by confessing in nearly every SAN published by or about her that she had a serious addiction for which her ex-husband, actor Mickey Rourke, encouraged her to commit herself to a rehabilitation clinic. Famous “waif” Kate Moss has also had a much publicized trip to rehab, and was also photographed smoking while visibly pregnant, a fact that outraged many.

Describing previous attempts at dieting and exercising for weight loss as unhealthful, eating-disordered and dangerous behavior—and so severing ties between the end of thinness and the means of healthful patterns—is a crucial aspect of many SANs. These claims, repeated across many SAN texts, are a key ingredient in separating the ideal in beauty from health ideals. As singer Candy Kane recalls, “I’ve gone on so many insane diets and then exercised like mad and actually ended up hurting myself. When you’re on a strict diet, it makes you weak, and I think that’s an effective way to keep women down.”²⁶² Former straight-size model Crystal Renn, now a plus-size model, reports, “I spent every free minute exercising and not eating. My hair started falling out and my skin was so ashen and dry. I literally looked like a skeleton. I was seeing black spots, having dizzy spells and feeling really sick.” And Carré Otis declares: “The only way that I have ever been a size 10 (British) was when I starved myself. Or I was doing huge amounts of cocaine, or just drinking and not eating. That’s the only time I have ever been really skinny.”²⁶³

Healthy, Natural and Normal

Closely linked, as the quotations from Dragonwagon and Otis above demonstrate, to exploring the definition of *fat* is a focus on what is “normal” or

“natural,” what a woman’s appetite is *supposed* to be and what a woman’s body is *supposed* look like. The vocabulary of “naturalness” in this rhetorical vision seems to inspire; a letter to the editors of *Mode* praises Dragonwagon’s piece, and describes the letter-writer as now refusing to “suck in,” instead “forc[ing] her belly back out to its round, voluptuous, *natural* size” (emphasis added).²⁶⁴ The feature done on Otis on ABC’s Primetime of July 18, 2002 was entitled, “A Natural Woman.”

The argument in favor of normal and natural extends laments the techniques That camouflage “imperfections” in models in magazines. As Tisdale points out, even supermodels don’t look like supermodels without assistance:

When I berate myself for not looking like--whomever I think I should look like that day, I don’t really care that no one looks like that.... I want to look--think I should look--like the photographs. I want her little miracles: the makeup artists, photographers, and computer imagers who can add a mole, remove a scar, lift the breasts, widen the eyes, narrow the hips, flatten the curves. The final product is what I see, have seen my whole adult life.²⁶⁵

Phrased this way, though it is clear the magazine images are persuasive, they are revealed as artificial, un-natural. This is in sharp contrast to Tisdale’s verbal self-portrait: “I looked in the mirror and saw a woman, with flesh, curves, muscles, a few stretch marks, the beginnings of wrinkles, with strength and softness in equal measure.... That first feeling of liking my body--not being resigned to it or despairing of change, but actually *liking* it--was tentative and guilty and frightening, because it was the way I’d felt as a child, before the world had interfered.”²⁶⁶

Like Tisdale, many women who write size acceptance narratives evolve arguments that accept not just “extra” weight, but the “natural” consequences of extra weight, childbirth and other life experiences that cause changes in the skin. Asha Bandle pronounces, “When I stand naked in front of the mirror now, I see beauty, stretch marks and all.” When author Vanessa McGrady, writing for *The Seattle Times*, observes other women who have assembled to be photographed in celebration of size acceptance, she finds that the body as symbol of the personality is better if it *really* gives clues about personality and lifestyle, rather than corresponding to the thin, airbrushed ideal:

Barbara and Colleen compare hysterectomy marks, and I realize that everyone’s body is full of stories. Stretch marks tell of bearing and feeding babies. Scars are indelible reminders of accidents. Tattoos are symbols for what was important at a particular time. Cellulite and butt pimples disclose a career behind a desk. Even the delicate spider veins in my legs won’t let me forget a long-gone decade of waiting tables and tending bar. I think of picture-perfect Cindy Crawford, so smooth, so airbrushed, and I feel sorry for her. How boring. How sad that a blank slate is the feminine ideal.²⁶⁷

This kind of argument equating experience with the body’s appearance is interesting when contrasted with the “before” text in the weight loss success story. While success story authors sometimes argue that “there’s a thin person inside” waiting to get out, the SAN embraces the idea that the person “inside” is represented already by

the exterior: the size, shape, colors, textures, scars of the body, post-childbirth especially are validated as testimony to lived experience.

Pregnancy, one of the key reasons women in weight loss success stories claim they gained the weight that made them so unhappy, becomes a key ingredient of the SAN, as well, although in this genre pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood are experiences that teach women what is important beyond beauty and size. While hints of this appeal show up in previous quotations, many women overtly cite pregnancy and motherhood as the key elements in their overcoming problems with self-image, or, as a *New Woman* article calls the process, getting “over [their] weight weirdness.” In that article, Suzanne Gleason says: “After having a baby, you don’t imagine yourself on a beach with lifeguards bouncing quarters off you. You’re way too busy.”²⁶⁸ Jenny Chan notes: “During my second trimester, I suddenly realized that I hadn’t thought about what I’d eaten or how much I’d exercised in three entire days. Giving birth helped, too. I had a lot of fears about whether I would be able to make it through labor. I always thought of myself as a bit of a wimp. When I actually did it, I felt strong and proud of what my body could do.”²⁶⁹ Pregnancy is turned from an accidental weight gain process into an opportunity to develop self-appreciation physically and psychologically.

Thus, what is “natural” for a woman’s body to do both builds women’s confidence and leaves physical marks of the experience behind, in addition to forcing women to spend time on things other than obsessing about their size and working to maintain or change it. Size acceptance articles are usually written by women in their thirties and beyond, though there is a collection of teen’s stories published in the

Chicken Soup for the Soul series, edited by Kimberly Kirberger, and punningly titled, *No Body's Perfect*. However, the SAN genre as a rhetorical vision accepting women's bodies "as is," with no reshaping or airbrushing required to "improve" them, celebrates the marks of experience related to age, including the accumulation of fat, wrinkles, and stretch marks.

Happiness: What's Beautiful, What's Important

The scene depicted again and again in the weight loss success story implies that the world will be kinder to the thinner person, yielding more social acceptance, better relationships, and happiness. It also suggests that thinner people, because they are happier, will be more productive of happiness in others. While few SANs focus on comparing social interaction--dating, developing and maintaining friendships and familial relationships--before and after weight (re)gain, there is a kind of inverse argument that women on diets are unkind, and/or, as the title of Mo'Nique's memoir has it, that *Skinny Women Are Evil*. In essence, they argue that the agency controls the agent: an agency-agent ratio of motives in the act of losing weight.

Many SAN authors who have been thin--either through what we might call ordinary dieting and fitness or by developing eating disordered behavior--discuss their own former personality traits. Often, such digressions focus on ways in which working to be thin, and criticizing others about their size as a result of their obsession, made them physically more ideal but less beautiful mentally and emotionally.

Model Karenbeatrice, for example, says: "I was 110 pounds and wouldn't let people weigh me. I was a bitch and I was miserable."²⁷⁰ Tisdale reflects on her

evolution to size acceptance by commenting on her rejection of her past behavior, as well:

Finally I realized I didn't just hate the diet. I was sick of the way I acted on a diet, the way I whined, my niggardly, penny-pinching behavior. What I liked in myself seemed to shrivel and disappear when I dieted. Slowly, slowly I saw these things. I saw these things. I saw that my pain was cut from whole cloth, imaginary, my own invention. I saw how much time I'd spent on something ephemeral, something that simply wasn't important, didn't matter.²⁷¹

Observation of other women can lead SAN authors to size acceptance, too. Jodi Guber, writing about her experiences as a plus-size woman in a world of "youngskinnygirls" in Hollywood, describes them from her perspective:

When I became a talent agent at William Morris, I was privy to the real torment that many of these 'youngskinnygirls' experienced. To cut their weight, some actually starved themselves, used drugs, or became bulimic. So many were not only unhealthy, but desperately unhappy. Everyone knew their names, but no one really knew them.

Once I was able to separate the appearance of happiness from the reality, I began to see myself in a new light. I started to have pride in who I was, how I felt about things and how I interacted with people rather than how I looked.

Thus being a woman, or interacting with women, whose appearance, according to the weight loss success story vision, symbolizes happiness, but whose lives are miserable,

teaches some SAN subjects—and through them their readers--that the weight loss success story equation of happiness with thinness is a myth, and enables them to seek out different sources of happiness as part of reevaluating the importance of thinness in their lives.

Manheim's *Wake Up, I'm Fat!* contains the actress's alternate means of assessing social worth and self-love. She provides a "simple quiz," that asks such questions as:

1. Are you a kind person?
5. Do you give friends a ride to the airport without complaint?
11. Even if it seems impossible, do you fight for what you believe in?
12. Do you stay up late doing the laundry so your kid's hockey uniform will be clean for the next day's game?
20. Do you teach your children to do all of the above (worth 5 points)?²⁷²

Questions like these force readers to examine whether the appearance of happiness and worth (thinness) is an accurate gauge of the "real thing." In an interview, author Jennifer Weiner focuses on her purpose for writing the size acceptance novel that made her famous:

Fat women might be punch lines in the movies or on TV, but in real life, we have jobs, and babies, and lovers and husbands, and not all of us are going to end up size two's. When I set out to write *Good In Bed*, there was no question that [the heroine] was going to be my size-- and there was no question that her reality was going to reflect my

reality. I wanted to encompass the unhappiness of living in a plus-size body, but also show that it's not pure, unadulterated, 200-proof misery. I wanted to show the whole scope of things--professional success, rewarding friendships, a loving, if vexing family, a weird little dog, great meals, great adventures, and love, and self-acceptance at the end.²⁷³

Her comments on the “misery” that comes from living in a society in which her body type is condemned resonates with other authors’ attestations that size acceptance is not a letting go of discipline, but rather a state that requires discipline, constant maintenance. That argument will be addressed more fully later in the chapter.

Skinny Women are Evil?

Often it seems necessary for women to detail or create other women—the “youngskinnygirls” or Mo’Nique’s “skinny bitches”—whose misery, cattiness or other meanness show that thin women are not necessarily morally better or happier. The recent spate of novels that engage in the ideal body/body image debates use this play of opposites a great deal. In Weiner’s second novel, *In Her Shoes*, a younger sister, Maggie, and an elder, Rose, are physical and emotional opposites. The younger, thin sister, Maggie, sleeps with the elder’s boyfriend. When Rose discovers the betrayal, she calls her sister, whom she has rescued from homelessness, both stupid and heartless. Maggie responds by saying, “Fat pig.” Her sister laughs and finally says, “You’re my sister...My *sister*. And the worst thing you can say about me is ‘fat pig’?”²⁷⁴ The contrast between their behaviors shows how minor a character

flaw it is, if indeed it is a character flaw at all, to be fat, compared with other more significant flaws.

Much of the new “bountiful fiction” contrasts curvaceous heroines against the thinner, stereotypical beauties in this way. *How to Cook a Tart* features a female cook, whose husband loves her cooking, but prefers the physical ideal in the form of the title’s “tart,” a student in his acting class who takes as her lovers two other women’s husbands. Bridget Jones is also the victim of a cheating lover, and when she discovers the other woman, naked, in his bathroom, the woman says of Bridget, “I thought you said she was thin.”

Interestingly, most of the heroines in these novels are journalists, struggling to succeed at fashion magazines. The work setting concentrates the effect of media images on the heroine, for, whereas someone who works outside that environment could simply refuse to buy fashion magazines, a heroine involved with the production of such magazines lives in a world dominated by women, a world in which fashion is livelihood, if not life. Part of the reason these novels are so often set fashion publications’ offices is that the authors themselves are often ex- or current journalists who have done time in one. The settings of the novels then open up the mysterious and glamorous world to readers—through the heroines—but also allow critique, and so function as both fiction and exposé. The heroines frequently struggle literally to fit in, learning to borrow and/or buy expensive clothes and lose weight to fit into them. Typically, the novel begins with the heroine’s merits unappreciated at her job. Her lack of glamour masks her superior intelligence and kindness, and this Cinderella

goes unappreciated by a wicked stepmother editor figure and the many drones that work in the offices.

These drones are often key figures of comparison for the heroine. Just like the evil stepsisters from the Cinderella tale, or the unkind ducklings who reject the cygnet in the “ugly duckling” story, office mates and co-workers tend to be interchangeable. In *Simply Divine*, heroine Jane finds herself surrounded by co-workers named Tish, Tash and Tosh, and a myriad of magazine employees who all “looked exactly the same, which was to say, different from her. Not only did they have identical clothes—tiny white T-shirts revealing brown navels, skinny black trousers and high-heeled boots—they had symmetrical features, too....Everyone had a tan, a delicious little nose, cheekbones higher than the Andes, glossy hair and pert little breasts. They all wore minimal makeup and that type of dark nail polish that made their fingers look as if they had been trapped in the door.”²⁷⁵ Contrasting herself with these “clones,” Jane feels pudgy and shabbily dressed, among other things. Yet the way these women are presented clearly makes their physical attractiveness less than enviable considering the feeble fashion-following behavior and general insipidity that accompanies their interchangeable beauty. It becomes obvious as Jane gradually takes over the running of the magazine that she has new and better ideas for features and cover images.

A similar phenomenon occurs in *The Devil Wears Prada*, in which the heroine, Andrea Sachs, not described as overweight to begin with, is a new hire at *Runway* magazine. Her “wicked stepmother,” the editor Miranda Priestly, is a tiny woman whose size 0 clothes give no indication of her eating habits—Andrea and her

coworkers starve to get their work done and wear the trendy clothes expected in the office, yet Ms. Priestly routinely eats steak and other high-calorie foods in the privacy of her office. Andrea's coworkers are more individualized than Jane's in *Simply Divine*, but the office mates share the same fashion uniform, specifically little white T-shirts and pants with high heels. On one of Andrea's first days, the nearly indistinguishable people she meets are described by her enviably, and yet vapidly and purposelessness pervades the description:

The women, or rather the girls, were individually beautiful. Collectively, they were mind-blowing... In and out, in and out they walked gracefully on four-inch skinny heels, sashaying over to my desk to extend milky-white hands with long, manicured fingers, calling themselves "Jocelyn who works with Hope," "Nicole from fashion," and "Stef who oversees accessories."... All weighed less than 110 pounds.²⁷⁶

Andrea quickly begins to call these co-workers "Clackers" for the way their heels sound as they "sashay" around the office on a tile floor, and this name reduces all of these "individually" beautiful women to a noise based in a painful accessory—the shoe—one so critical to the Cinderella story.

The settings of the novels often yield one important or dominant evil stepsister, who fulfills the novel's tacit implication that the prettier you are, the dumber and crueler you are. In the case of *Simply Divine*, this character's name is Champagne D'Vyne, who is beautiful, and whose slender but busty figure, long platinum blonde hair and green eyes are repeatedly described for the heroine (and

reader) to envy. However, her behavior is predictably execrable, forcing heroine Jane to do a great deal of difficult work, and always making the chipper but unglamorous heroine feel bad about her own body. Jane becomes Champagne's ghost writer in the magazine, though Champagne of course claims and receives the credit for the incredibly popular columns. When first they meet, Jane is "made up" by professionals so that she can do a lighting test for Champagne, who is supposed to be modeling. She is, however, on the phone down the hall, persuading her boyfriend to take her to Paris in his blue jet instead of his red jet (the red one clashes with her fingernail polish). When Champagne discovers Jane in front of the camera in her place, she sneers, "I didn't realize this was a shoot for Evans the Outsize," "outsize" being a Britishism for "plus-size."²⁷⁷ This crack is one of the few witticisms Champagne is allowed in a novel that relentlessly puns and quips through the mouths of all its other characters. Otherwise, Champagne is beyond stupid. She tells reporters that she "works out 370 days a year," and celebrates when billboards featuring her in a push-up bra cause four accidents, one fatal, because "it proves the ads are working."

One of the novels dramatizes the breaking of links between becoming thin and achieving success. *Jemimi J's* eponymous heroine loses weight (through what a narrative voice suggests is extreme diet and fitness measures) and takes on the new identity of "JJ," becoming the ideal temporarily and leaving her home in England to meet, in person, a man she met previously online, a gym owner in California. Though she expects a golden romance as a highly-desirable thin woman, she discovers that her expected "Prince Charming" is secretly in love with his plus-size

assistant, though he thinks “JJ” is better for business, considering her ideal appearance. Jemima returns to England, gains back some of the weight, and moves on.

Exploring the lives of thin women who struggle despite being thin is, then, another trend related to size acceptance. SANs use information about unhappy, unhealthy and especially unkind thin women to bolster their assertions that thinness guarantees nothing the weight loss success story promises it does

The Work of Self-Love

The quote from Jennifer Weiner, suggesting the many roles women play and the happiness possible for large women despite the misery inflicted upon them by the fat-hating world, demonstrates in brief how maintaining a “body positive” attitude in the face of condemnation requires support and work. At times, SANs authors show that the struggle towards self-acceptance, though facilitated by some key experiences like finding a romantic partner who accepts you “as is,” or pregnancy and motherhood, remains a process very much as mentally demanding as a weight loss endeavor, requiring discipline and steadfastness. This argument lodges itself against the idea that people who consciously choose not to lose weight are undisciplined or lazy. Just as important as proving that physical health is present, the SAN genre must show that mental fortitude is required to withstand external and internal monitors, if it is to countervail against the weight loss success story rhetorical vision.

Wann endures criticism from many sources during her public appearances, and her rehashings of that criticism and responses to it indicate that it is painful to her. Her role as leader in the fat acceptance movement similarly makes her a target

for those who would dispute its aims: “When I do radio interviews, people call in on their cell phones while driving 80 miles per hour and yell, ‘You’re fat, and you’re gonna die! If you stopped eating doughnuts, you’d be thin.’ Do these people really care about my health? Or do they just enjoy feeling superior?”²⁷⁸ These counter-agents in her size acceptance are revealed to have wicked purposes in stark contrast with the success story, which can feature people thanking cruel strangers for similar comments if those comments brought about turning point moments.

Similarly, Manheim, another public crusader for fat acceptance, recounts negative public feedback she received from Kathy Smith, a popular exercise advocate whom Manheim calls a “fitness guru” and who must necessarily be a counter-agent in the act of size acceptance. Manheim concluded her Emmy acceptance speech by exclaiming, famously, “This is for all the fat girls!” Smith subsequently wrote an article, “If Fat Becomes Hip, We are in Extreme Trouble,” that condemned the fat acceptance movement and criticized Manheim as a forerunner of the trend. Manheim recounts this episode in her memoir with some anger. Manheim also narrates a post-self-acceptance encounter with a friend who had recently lost weight, during which the friend tells her she should “lose some weight.”²⁷⁹ She must also defend her fatness against questions from a young nephew, and from herself. She writes:

...[S]omewhere along the line, you destroy your spirit, make the necessary changes to love yourself, *or* accept yourself the way you are. Try as I might, I couldn’t destroy my spirit. And try as I might, I couldn’t change who I was. I was left with what to me seemed to be the most difficult option: loving myself just the way I am. It didn’t

happen overnight. It was a long haul, so I would never presume to suggest that it's simply a matter of waking up one morning and declaring, "From now on, I love myself."²⁸⁰

By structuring her argument so that, at the climax, the *most* difficult thing is self-love, Manheim makes it seem as if the weight loss success story triumph of self-alteration is, in fact, less difficult than refusing to attempt to do so and developing an appreciation of the self that does not associate only thinness with success.

The voices of others are not all that must be ignored; vigilance against the self's own lingering desire to be thinner is also required. It is, according to these narratives, difficult to live in a world that is everywhere promoting slenderness and condemning the slightest appearance of fat without periodically almost capitulating to its edicts and assessing the body negatively. The panopticon vision of the world of the fat person, feeling eyes constantly judging them, is difficult to let go of. Susan Segrest laments, "We all do this. We have great days when we remain rock solid about ourselves and our shapes, and other cursed days when our bodies just make us suffer. But several years ago I decided I had to stop treating those feel-good moments as fleeting, and instead I needed to figure out how to keep the joy around for a while."²⁸¹ According to Cheryl Peck, author of *Fat Girls and Lawn Chairs*, "Being fat and naked in front of other women is an act of courage."²⁸²

Ambivalence and Visuals

Despite the passionate arguments offered that size acceptance has occurred, the visuals that accompany many SANs seem to reflect the lingering ambivalence about the "fat" body these quotations reveal. Although authors and subject seem

confident that accepting the body without weight loss is important and supported by a number of rational arguments, enduring the scrutiny of the world—and their own scrutiny through the world’s gaze—makes it a tough choice and a difficult position to maintain for many. The difficulty that makes self-love without body reshaping a challenge—one they can argue requires at least as much mental discipline as body reshaping entails—may contribute to ambivalence that vexes the photographic representation. Very few photographs of larger women actually allow the body to be seen in the way that photographs of Marilyn Wann often do. Many of the photographs accompanying size acceptance narratives either block or do not contain significant portions of the body, or include lighting and/or draping of fabric that fulfills the same concealment. Asha Bandele is photographed standing partly behind her daughter, who is sitting in a chair, a photograph that both dramatizes her textual description of accepting her size through her pregnancy and role as mother, and also limits the viewer’s ability to assess her size by covering her silhouette. Firoozeh Dumas (Fig. 18) is standing under a tree with weeping branches, and the branches are draped around her upper body. On the cover of *People* to promote debut of her show, *Fat Actress*, on Showtime, Kirstie Alley is reclined and covered with a long swath of green fabric. Even the cover of actress Mo’Nique’s book has her leaning forward from behind a sofa, her lower body invisible.

One of the obstacles to the persuasive work of SAN genre is that only one or two photographs of women truly larger-than-a-straight-size-model (i.e., larger than a size 6) usually appear in a magazine. In contrast, 50 or more extremely slender women’s bodies usually dominate the other pages of advertisements, and fashion and



Figure 18: Firoozeh Dumas, *Rosie Magazine*, July 2002

exercise features: the visual presence afforded the slender body is overwhelming. Counter-acting the proliferation of images of thin women visually is also made difficult by the appearance of those “curvy” actresses and models, like Theron and Otis, who, even heavier than they may have been at one time, are in reality thinner than many American women (Fig. 19). In a fashion spread for “Sizing It Up” in *YM*, the selected models’ physiques are dubious representatives of larger teens (Fig. 20). Jessica Simpson, the latest incarnation of the ditzzy blonde, whom *Self* magazine cheered as cover model in June for refusing to accede to the music industry pressure to weigh 102 pounds, but rather, at 5'4", is happy with herself at a whopping 110 pounds. The magazine details her weight, which “shot up” to 128 before she regained “control” and brought it down to 110.²⁸³ The negotiation of Simpson’s weight and the celebration indicates that the size acceptance trend is in danger of being compromised to make size acceptance possible only for women who are still of average or below average size.

A striking example of all of these phenomena occurs in the February, 2004, issue of *Jane* magazine, on the cover of which is actress Charlize Theron. The caption reads, “Charlize Theron 30 Pounds Heavier: ‘If I lose my career, I’m fine with it.’” The article on Theron--excerpts from a sort of diary kept during the making of the film *Monster*--focuses on the weight she gained, and other methods used, to transform her into the character of Aileen Wuornos. Several pictures of Theron as Wuornos appear from the making of the film, as does one photograph of Wuornos. Theron is photographed as her (new) self in a bathing suit but beneath a translucent a shawl, which, combined with the soft-focus lighting and the fact that her legs are



Figure 19: Carré Otis in *Mode Magazine*



Figure 20: “Plus Size” *Teen* Model

crossed left over right, obscures her size. She does not, however, appear to be what most would think of as “fat.” The fashion spread following the article on Theron, however, includes a very slender model, as does the next, in which the model’s sinewy upper thighs and forearms are clearly visible. If Theron represents “curvy” women in the one full body shot of her--and perhaps she may not appear to even after gaining 30 pounds--then twelve to fourteen images of two hyper-slender young women follow, the idea of size acceptance from a reader-viewer’s perspective might be undercut by evidence that size acceptance has not really occurred.

All of these issues—the apparent discomfort about exposing the large body without some visual equivalent of “hedging,” the use of women of less than average size to represent “larger” bodies, and the contextual glut of extremely thin women—lead to the development of a lament: Why don’t magazines show “real” women. Writes SAN author Sally Tisdale: “A fashion magazine recently celebrated the return of the ‘well-fed’ body; a particular model was said to be ‘the archetype of the new womanly woman...stately, powerful.’ She is a size 8.”²⁸⁴ Though women may clamor for more photographs of truly plus-size women, their reactions to those requested images are ambivalent, suggesting that the verbal message that size acceptance is important and good is working, while the visual representation of “women of size” remains vexed. Camryn Manheim discovered this when she wrote an angry letter to Lane Bryant, a chain of stores for plus-size women, asking them why models in their advertisements were sizes 10 and 12, when Lane Bryant’s clientele range in size from a 14 to a 28. She received a response that included this paragraph:

In early January we ran a newspaper insert ad in various regions of the country selling one of our most popular shirts. Half of the inserts used a size 12 model and the other half used a larger size model.

Everything else in both was identical. The final result showed that the ad with the size 12 model sold 50% more merchandise than the ad with the large sized model. This response was not a surprise. Similar tests conducted during the past few years have yielded similar results.²⁸⁵

Books and magazines that focus on larger-sized women and size acceptance may obscure or block the complete figure of the larger woman so that the image and the text are not competitive arguments. Perhaps writers, editors, photographers and advertisers recognize that the textual message of size acceptance can be, in part, defeated by the visual representation of a full-figured woman, especially when that representation is lonely in a sea of svelte models' images. The total context of the magazine, combined with the cultural context including the total media experience that still shows mostly thin women, seems to be a too-overwhelming contrast: more unapologetic images that suggest comfort with and love for the larger woman's body are necessary in this debate over body shape and size.

Heroines of novels therefore may have more persuasive power through identification than their authors. No photograph of the heroine can be produced, and the covers of "chick lit" novels, especially those that feature a heavier than ideal protagonist, frequently now depict only portions of a woman's body, such as feet and legs, or women's "accessories," such as shoes. Not being able to see the heroine

allows women to identify with her struggles to accept her body without comparing and contrasting an actual body to any ideal. A case in point: Jennifer Weiner is the author of two novels, both of which contain heroines who struggle with weight issues and ultimately accept their larger size. When Weiner appeared in an interview in *Figure*, a fashion magazine dedicated to showcasing a variety of sizes, shapes and ages, two photographs of the author were included. Both demonstrate the ambivalent presentation of the larger woman's body: One showed Weiner lying down; only her arms and face are visible, and she is wearing a loose-fitting blue shirt and holding her novel in front of her chest. In the second photo, she appears from mid-bust up. It is clear that she is larger than a straight size model, and Weiner is described as a "raven-haired beauty" and as "gorgeous" by interviewer Joanna Goddard. But the photographs suggest that these statements about her beauty do not cover her body below the bust. The textual message of size acceptance in the article includes Weiner's purpose statement. She says:

I want women not to be so hard on themselves, not to constantly compare themselves to the ever-more-emaciated actresses they see on TV. I want women not to feel like they've failed if the number on the scale isn't what they think it should be.... I'm so happy every time I get an e-mail from a teenager telling me that one of my books made her feel a little better about herself or more at home in her own skin. I feel as if I've done my job.²⁸⁶

Her novels and their characters, because they have no bodies present to the audience, can promote size acceptance more powerfully than the photographs of her that avoid showing what she looks like from the waist down.

Conclusions

It has been less than ten years since Leslie Lampert posed the question: “Can a woman be fat and happy?” and already hundreds of narratives, written by women, and published in mainstream magazines, books, novels and on the internet, argue that women who are fat can be and *already are* happy. It seems obvious that the rhetorical vision offered in the textual messages of size acceptance narratives found an audience ready to adopt it—women who have spent their lives struggling to feel good in a culture that depicts bodies like theirs only in “before” photographs in transformations, or only as bodies exemplifying the “obesity epidemic.” It is also clear that audience demand for better representation of a variety of women’s figures, the thousands of letters and emails that condemned the use of wafer-thin models and requested more images of larger women, has created cultural change. The quantity of magazines for women of all ages that now include regular features on fashion for the plus-size figure, special issues dedicated to promoting “body love” for all shapes and sizes, and articles suggesting that women focus on health and fitness rather than thinness, has increased dramatically over the last ten years.

The result has not been total size acceptance. Instead, what seems to have happened is that bodies of average size or slightly smaller are now represented far more often, but bodies larger than average still rarely appear in mainstream media. When they do appear, their rarity in the context of many, many smaller bodies may be

potentially disconcerting from the reader-viewer's perspective. Few "supermodels" are plus-size, and few plus-size supermodels routinely grace the *covers* of magazines for men or women, or appear in men's magazines at all. Models who are a size 8 or smaller still dominate the runways and fashion spreads, as actresses smaller than a size 8 dominate small and silver screens. Icons of sexual attractiveness for both genders remain quite slim, if the popular press is any indication. In November, 2004, *Esquire* celebrates the opposite sex in its annual "women we love" issue. Angelina Jolie is on the cover, and none of the women photographed on any of the magazines pages have any claim to the label "plus-size." The same month's issue of *Allure*, a fashion magazine for women that calls itself "the beauty expert," has Jolie on the cover and photographs of the actress in its pages. The article on Jolie follows others on fashion, one depicting a slender woman in designer clothing who poses near and with two lean men with obvious muscular definition.

Yet the ideal is compromising. Perhaps inroads and slow change are what should be expected. As with any "do as I say, not as I do" edicts, in the size acceptance narrative, the textual and photographic messages need to accord with each other to model the genre's rhetorical vision more persuasively, which means taking on the challenge of portraying the fat body confidently to an audience perhaps unprepared to view the large body favorably even despite being able to identify with the textual message of acceptance. To that end, if magazines that publish size acceptance narratives, to be true to the message of acceptance for all figure types, would include more bodies of larger women throughout their pages and across their issues, then the immediate visual context would not undo the work of "body love" for

all figure types. Maybe as reader demand continues, they will.

Chapter 6: The Thin Gaze, Fake Fat, Real Pain

Fat people rarely appear on silver screens or small screens in lead dramatic roles, with notable exceptions like Kathy Bates, Camryn Manheim, John Goodman and a handful of others, who are the exceptions that prove that “thin” rules. Comedies offer more opportunities. Most large actors became famous in roles highlighting their “ordinary guy” nature: witness John Goodman as Roseanne Barr’s blue-collar husband and Richard Dreyfuss’ grouch-with-a-heart-of-gold pal in *Always*; Drew Carey’s frustrated, middle-managed everyman; and the late John Candy’s numerous performances as slightly befuddled, slightly unkempt, perennially good-natured guy’s guy. When thin actors gain weight for a role, it is often to assume a similar “everyman,” or “guy’s guy” persona. Consider Sylvester Stallone adding fat to his famously muscular physique for the film *Copland*, about which the actor comments:

[Y]ou look at a fellow like [the one I played in the movie] and I purposely wanted to be the most un-physically dominant person in the movie, that anyone there could easily just flick me aside. And he knows it. When you look at him, you say, "What a geeky, bag of nothing person." [He's] the kind of person we dismiss, but that kind of person can surprise you and do a very, very heroic thing because they deal with a thing I call non-physical courage, which is the most extraordinary courage.²⁸⁷

Thus actors with literal guts have a different sort of metaphorical guts from the physically intimidating Rocky and Rambo that made Stallone famous. Visible fat

demotes an action superstar to mediocrity, though he is still a man with the possibility of extraordinary heroism.

Actresses face greater limitations. Thin actresses can gain weight to assume an “Everywoman” persona: when Bridget Jones, played by Renee Zellweger, half-strides, half-limps through her life in the middle of the film, “I’m Every Woman” plays not-so-subtly on the soundtrack. Zellweger, however, has infamously lost the weight she put on for the role—twice—very quickly, appearing on the covers of magazines to promote the films as a thin actress once more. Few fat actresses have or have had television shows in which they are the central or titular character, as did Roseanne Barr, and as will Kirstie Allie beginning in the fall of 2005 on “Fat Actress.” Barr’s character was in many ways an Everywoman, dealing humorously and often ironically with economic, social and family issues from the disadvantaged perspective of a fat, working class woman. However, though *The Drew Carey Show*’s “Mimi Bobek,” played by Kathy Kinney, is, like “Drew” on the show, stuck in a seemingly dead-end job, which makes her in a way an Everywoman, she is also his nemesis and sometime sister-in-law (married to a transvestite older brother). Mimi delights the show’s audience as a harpy with bizarre hair, makeup and wardrobe. Manheim’s character on *The Practice* is indeed exceptional: a fat character who has a high-paying career and a romantic life, but Manheim’s behind-the-scenes role in these plots is clear from her memoir, *Wake Up, I’m Fat!*, in which she notes that she had to persuade producers to allow her character’s love scene to be on screen, and use the doughnut she’d been handed as a prop to feed her male co-star,

as if her character, Ellenor Frutt, were not eating what had been intended for her to eat by the production designers.

Attitudes towards Black and Latino actresses and their figures seem somewhat different. It might be argued that Black actresses are already an exceptional group in Hollywood, as there are fewer of them who have starring roles in films. Queen Latifah is one of the few amongst the already limited group who wins roles in films while being larger than the ideal; she is also one of the few Black, plus-size women who frequently graces the cover of women's magazines. When she appeared on the cover of *Glamour* in May of 2004, the magazine proclaimed: "Enough with the unreal cover girls! Curvy, proud Queen Latifah." In this "Body Love" issue, the editor's note by Cindi Leive indicates that having a plus-size model on the cover was readers' idea, and a response to "thousands [who over the last three years] e-mailed *Glamour* to ask: If women of all shapes and sizes can be beautiful, why does only one shape and size grace our (and our competitors') covers?"

Queen Latifah has an hourglass silhouette, as does Jennifer Lopez, another ethnic minority whose figure is notoriously celebrated for its difference from the media norm. These musician-actresses are "exceptional" from a Hollywood perspective in more ways than having body types that are atypical for stars. Their "ethnicity" seems part of what makes it "acceptable" or even "sexy" for them to be "curvy." Perhaps since these women are ethnically 'other,' their supposed physical "excess" is both surprising and unsurprising, becoming an asset.²⁸⁸

The Rise and Fall of the Fat Suit

Given the relative scarcity of roles for fat actors and actresses, it may be somewhat surprising that so many movies about fat characters, from the mid-nineties to the early years of this century, featured thin stars in so-called “fat suits,” prosthetics that allow thin actors to portray fat characters. The surprise wears off with the realization that the roles are of a thin person who transforms into a fat person (and often back again repeatedly) as the plot unfolds.

In the nineties, three such films won awards for best makeup effects. *Death Becomes Her* (1992) won a Golden Globe for best special effects, partly for the transformation of Goldie Hawn into a depressed slob by application of prosthetic fat. *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) and *The Nutty Professor* (1996) both won Oscars. Robin Williams also won a Golden Globe for Best Actor in a Musical/Comedy for his performance as the title character of *Mrs. Doubtfire*, while Eddie Murphy provoked wonderment as nearly the entire cast of *The Nutty Professor*, playing Sherman Klump, the titular “nutty professor,” and also almost the entire Klump family: Sherman’s mother, father, grandmother, and brother, all of these characters requiring fat suits and other makeup.

The popularity of these movies and the increasingly realistic fat suits contributed to a trend. In 1999, Mike Myers donned a fat suit to portray the Scottish boor, Fat Bastard, in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. In 2000, *The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps*, was released, as was *Big Momma’s House*, in which a fat-suited Martin Lawrence appeared as the eponymous “Big Momma.” In the fall of

2001, *America's Sweethearts* and *Shallow Hal* were both released. The first featured Julia Roberts, the second Gwyneth Paltrow, both in roles that required some appearances on screen in fat suits. The fat suit phenomenon also carried over onto television comedies, reality programs and documentaries, and a smattering of magazine articles featured thin reporters wearing fat suits to see how it felt to be fat in the cruel world.²⁸⁹

However, by 2000, when the sequel to *The Nutty Professor* appeared, the reception of the “fat suit” comedies was less overwhelmingly favorable. Though the movies still enjoyed varying degrees of critical and box office success, the inevitable love-hate relationship with sequels and copycat plots took its toll. As importantly, many viewers and critics had become more uncomfortable with thin stars masquerading as fat for laughs. The continuing debate over representations of the body, the female body in particular, in the media reached a zenith in the late nineties, as a backlash against so-called “waifs,” like Kate Moss and Calista Flockhart created the opportunity for the renewed assessment of “curvy” figures like those of Jennifer Lopez and others listed above. Increased activity of size activists (especially the NAAFA)²⁹⁰ and increased media coverage of their activism generated pre-emptive negativity to the new crop of fat suit comedies, as well.

The movies’ depictions of the central fat characters flung wide the door to condemnation. While ostensibly promoting sympathy for fat people, the movies instead objectified the (fake) fat bodies and portrayed their fat characters stereotypically and often crudely. These films presuppose a thin audience with some prejudices against fatness. Camera angles, editing--and a steady stream of fat jokes--

encourage the audience to laugh at the (fake) fat body and at some stereotypical behaviors, while at the same time creating the fat characters mainly as protagonists encouraged audiences to feel ennobled for their sympathetic response to the fat character. In essence, the audience gets to have its cake and eat it, too, enjoying the spectacle made of the fat body while feeling virtuously tolerant.

In this chapter, I cover two related filmmaking strategies that contribute to this dualistic approach to the fat-suited protagonists. First, camera angles routinely objectify the fat-suited bodies, much in the same way that Laura Mulvey, writing on classic film, noted that the camera in those films objectified women's bodies to a "male gaze." Also, the fat characters routinely act in stereotypical and/or grotesque ways, moving clumsily, dressing badly, eating voraciously and suffering digestive difficulties as a result. The films under particular scrutiny are the two *Nutty Professor* films, and *Shallow Hal*. Chronologically, that means scrutinizing one of the first films featuring a fat-suited actor to do well at the box office, a sequel to that film, and the last movie that featured a fat-suited actor, in this case Gwyneth Paltrow, who, as a woman famed as much for her slenderness and beauty as for her Oscar-winning talent, created a great deal of intrigue and outrage by putting on a fat suit in the first place.

Camera Angles and Editing: The "Thin Gaze"

Eddie Murphy's vehicle, *The Nutty Professor*, is a remake of the Jerry Lewis original, in which neither the professor nor his alter ego were fat. The presentation of Sherman Klump's body in films is disturbingly representative of the fat suit comedy genre: he is presented both as object of humor and as sympathetic protagonist, as the

camera indulges viewers with lingering pans of his form from the point of view of other characters, often without forcing viewers to confront Klump as a person by making them look into his eyes or even at his face. While the filmmakers' desire to show off the fat suit as realistic art form surely accounts for some of the extensive shots of Klump's body, most of the motivation must lie in their desire to garner as many laughs as possible.

The audience's first glimpses of Klump are a kind of reverse striptease: Klump's body/the fat suit is shown briefly and in pieces, wearing an undershirt and boxer shorts, as he dons an antiquatedly professorial suit complete with suspenders, pocket protector and bow-tie. First the midsection is visible in profile, next the midsection up to the chin as he zips his pants and buckles his belt, then the large hand smoothing his pens down in his pocket and closing his suit, and finally the upper body in the mirror with the chin. Each of these shots seems designed to detail the extent of Klump/the fat suit: its width from front to back and from side to side, its inclusion of extremities such as the oddly puffy fingers, its realistic jowls. Klump is shown first of all, therefore, as fat-suit/technology and object, not as a subjective human being. This objectification takes the form of a near complete surveillance of his dimensions, his (fake) fat.

The scene shifts: a fleet of hamsters is depicted invading a college campus and causing some implausible havoc. One hamster escapes to wriggle up a young man's trouser leg at an inopportune moment when he is flirting with a young woman; two others get sucked into a leaf blower and blown out—one into a woman's shocked-open mouth. Later, audiences will learn that the hamsters were loosed from Klump's

lab when he bumped unwittingly into gears that open their cages. Several jokes in the film depend on Klump's inability to assess and control his girth, as if he is unable to sense or prevent his contact with objects, another way the film suggests that Klump's body is more object than animate.

Klump is then shown walking onto campus, oblivious to the mayhem he has unleashed, smiling merrily. The camera pans up from his feet slowly to his face as he booms, "Good mornin'!" to acquaintances. (It seems Murphy decided that Sherman Klump's thick throat would create a lower voice, as he adopts this voice for Sherman, but when he chucks the suit and appears as "Buddy Love" later in the film, Murphy's "voice" is "natural.") Then Sherman appears to pass through the camera. The camera pans up his back again from feet to head, lingering on his behind as he struggles up a set of stairs, an act that showcases his lack of aerobic conditioning. Finally, he notices the hamsters and gapes. From the beginning of the movie, the audience gets titillating glimpses of Klump, then, after a delay as the campus scene is set, another long survey of his form. One result is that, rather than appearing as an "Everyman" character, Klump becomes an object of unusual visual interest. He is not someone one could brush aside or ignore; he is a spectacle.

Klump's body is presented in such a way as to highlight what Laura Mulvey calls "to-be-looked-at-ness." Mulvey's architectonic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," argues that the presentation of the female body in classic cinema (Hitchcock, Sternberg) is problematic from a feminist perspective. In particular, the techniques used to present the female body--such as lingering views of portions of the body and the use of the camera to correspond solely to the gaze of male characters--

make the female body a spectacle to be enjoyed and controlled from a male point of view. This presentation is enhanced by the scene of the theater: As Mulvey writes:

At first glance, the cinema would seem to be remote from the undercover world of the surreptitious observation of an unknowing and unwilling victim. What is seen on the screen is so manifestly shown. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on the voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover, the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world.

Her analysis of the ways in which narrative films create woman-as-object is helpful in understanding how the visual presentation and pleasure derived from observing Klump's form makes him an object with pronounced qualities of "to-be-looked-at-ness." The audience—presumed to be thin or forced by the camera angles to view Klump from the point of view of thinner characters—is made to "gaze" at the fat body as spectacle and object. Whether or not an audience member is thin, he or she is forced by the cinematic apparatus to view the fat body as if through a "thin gaze," one

that sees the fat person as other, object, non-person. Klump's non-person status derives not merely from the fat character's perceived difference from the audience, but also from the fact that the body being looked at is created synthetically and with artistic skill. It is *something* to be assessed for realism. It is already material, and seeing Eddie Murphy in that material, maneuvering it around as if it were a real body, is part of the fascination of the film, which compounds that interest by having the same star in a variety of getups for the various roles. If people who are fat often feel as if "there's a thin person inside waiting to get out," this is literally true in the fat suit movie, where Murphy's grace and clumsiness in the suit is imitative of the perceived relationship between fat body and interior self.

Though Klump is presented through the "thin gaze" of the camera in the same fashion cinema-goers are accustomed to viewing erotic objects, the masculine cultural ideal of a lean physique is made at least as much present through its absence in Klump as it is by its presence on Eddie Murphy when the suit is off and he appears as the lean and muscular Buddy Love, who revels in modeling "Spandex! Nothin' but Spandex!"

It's little wonder that Carla Purdy (Jada Pinkett) is panned up and down from Klump's own perspective when the two meet; she is *his* erotic object. Her status as such is confirmed by Klump repeating, "Now that is fine," dialogue that, by using the pronoun "that" instead of "she" inscribes the objectification. Unfortunately, when Purdy walks into his classroom to meet the man who has been her academic idol, Klump is bent over to retrieve candy that has fallen on the floor. Audiences and Purdy get another loitering view of his backside. The posture provides an excuse to

pan Purdy from high-heeled shoes up, as Klump initially views only her legs in a short skirt from between his own legs, a view so Freudian as to defy comment. By forcing Klump into a ridiculous and vulnerable posture, the movie highlights Klump's lack of sexual prowess in his first meeting with a woman otherwise prepared to view him favorably.

The opportunity to gaze lingeringly at Klump and at portions of his anatomy may be both desirable and yet discouraged "in the real world" outside the theater. Perhaps an explanation lies in the code of politeness that discourages staring, especially at a feature that is aesthetically displeasing. Fat certainly isn't the only feature the unwritten code discourages staring at, and many comedies have used the "don't-stare" edict to comedic effect by having characters who do stare and allowing the theatrical audience to engage in such staring second-hand.

To avoid any appearance of staring, perhaps people who perceive themselves as thin and fatness as disfiguring avoid looking at people they perceive as fat. Curiosity about having a body type generally perceived as taboo, preventable and reversible probably engenders the desire to look and examine. Thus for the theater-goer who may be (is assumed to be) thin, some discomfort and confusion may arise over whether or not one should look at an obviously fat person and risk being perceived as staring at and condemning a defect. Creating the fat body as spectacle within the film is the equivalent of liberating this awkward theater-goer from a "politeness"-induced avoidance. "Stare all you want," the movie seems to exclaim, "We'll show you more!"

Mulvey's point about the "illusion of voyeuristic separation" is important here, then: If Klump were a real fat person, that is, one's own professor or even simply a man walking on the sidewalk, it would be impolite to stare openly, and certainly impolite if not impolitic to ridicule. However, that very impoliteness makes staring more tempting, more desirable, more possible to exploit for humor in the confines of a theater, in which the audience with whom one shares the theater, no matter their size, is forced to stare at Sherman Klump as an object, too. Even his surname suggests an object or set of objects, a "clump."

Klump's objectification is cemented by other characters' commentary and the laughter of the narrative audience, with whom the theatrical audience is encouraged to identify because the camera views him from their points-of-view. For example, his students laugh as his belly erases the bottom of the chalkboard while he is writing a complex formula across the top of it, an example that demonstrates how his fat renders him ineffective despite his brilliance. The camera shows this event principally from the rows of tiered seats, which are likely to be similar to the rows of tiered seats theatrical audiences are sitting in.

Similarly, the all-too-obvious distaste of Klump's boss, Dean Richmond (Larry Miller), who seems mesmerized rather than merely disgusted by Klump's physique, re-enforces the visual presentation of Klump as an object to-be-looked-at. In a scene in the dean's office, a squirming Klump receives the remonstrance he's earned for freeing the hamsters to such ill effects: The woman into whose mouth a hamster was propelled was a wealthy donor, who has, since the incident, withdrawn her considerable financial support. Richmond watches—and listens to some sound

effect squeaking--with contempt as Klump squeezes himself into an armchair. Audiences see Klump twisting into the chair from a point somewhere right of Richmond's desk. The dean's acid remarks ("Can I get you anything? A glass of water? A rack of lamb?") address Klump's size and offer a presumption about his eating habits, but Klump does not address the cruelty. He even chuckles. As the scene closes, one last hamster, unnoticed by the dean, dangles from a light fixture and defecates into his coffee. When Klump tries to intervene, Richmond abruptly dismisses him. The film punishes Richmond—not by having Klump assert his own dignity—but by having Richmond sip from the coffee mug. Thus audiences know that Richmond is a bad character, deserving punishment (and he is punished in a number of humiliating ways in the course of the two films), yet they are also offered his perspective on Klump, his jokes to laugh at, and Klump's meek acceptance of this torment. The reality of Klump's situation—that he is being treated prejudicially and cruelly—is never addressed with Sherman's assertions that he is entitled to better. Instead, Sherman decides to lose weight by hook or crook, as if to earn the right to better treatment, and the film uses hamster-poop-in-his-coffee-mug, and a variety of other vulgar *deus ex machinas*, to punish Richmond.

Klump's wimpiness in handling continued verbal abuse is also something that his thin alter ego, the hypersexual Buddy Love, will avenge. So it is not Sherman Klump (who is not an "everyman" or a "sure man" so that one wonders if the first name was chosen because the fat suit created a Sherman tank-like character) but "the thin person inside" Sherman who is both sexually potent and self-confident. While the plot requires that Buddy Love be too much of both to also be a good person, the

contrast between the two men highlights the stereotypical views of the fat man as clumsy, sexually frustrated and meek, substituting an appeasing jolliness for confidence. The leaner man attracts the women, and cuts other people down to size.

While the visual techniques and physical humor encourage audience distance from Klump—not like “us,” fat and clumsy and geeky and unfashionable and ridiculous—the audience is also encouraged to empathize with him. He’s congenial, he’s smart, he’s an underdog, he’s funny...he’s Eddie Murphy, after all. All of the characters in the movie, including Purdy and Richmond, are clearly to be judged by their treatment of Klump. Purdy is not only “purty” but good; she likes Sherman for his personality and even agrees to date him, though it’s clear that she prefers Buddy Love’s physique. Richmond is a money-grubbing jerk, whose cruelty earns him the audience’s dislike and a predictable comeuppance.

The simultaneity of the jokes at Klump’s expense and his development as a protagonist constitutes a mixed message, a fact that becomes most apparent when Klump takes Purdy to a comedy club. The comic (Dave Chappelle) appears as yet another stereotypical figure: the evil comic who preys on the visible flaws of his audience while possessing many obvious flaws himself. After chuckling at a few jokes at others’ expense, Klump perceives his status as target and rises to leave. His size makes escape impossible in the close quarters of the club, and again he knocks items over and must bend to retrieve them, as if the cinematographers can’t resist offering the comic and the cinematic audience yet another look at his rear. The comic goes on at length about Klump’s size. When Klump, still chuckling, says, “Okay, you got me,” the comic persists. The club audience’s response is hilarity, but this

time their laughter is viewed from the perspective of Sherman's table where he and Purdy suffer, he in misery, she in righteous indignation. And so, finally, the theatrical audience is made to stop laughing at Klump and feel sorry for him. The camera teaches the audience how to respond by focusing for long moments on Sherman's downcast eyes and Purdy's furious expression. The final view of the scene is from above, showing the cinematic audience the two trapped figures in a sea of hysterical laughter, and forcing them literally to "rise above" the scene.

This turn in audience perception is not, however, a turning point in the movie's use of humor. The fleeting drama instead justifies Klump's ingestion of the experimental formula that strips him of his excess and turns him into Buddy Love. Visual jokes on Klump's physique never cease; Buddy Love's commentary on Sherman is as acid as Richmond's. Love refers to Klump as "Chunky Butt," steals his weight-loss formula and strives to eliminate the Sherman persona from the shared brain. The movie provides a forum in which it is acceptable and even encouraged to laugh at fatness and stereotypical "fat" behavior, while showing how that very laughter causes pain. Theatrical audiences may feel virtuous for cheering the Klumps on even as they participate uncritically in the behavior that makes them underdogs. *Knowing* that Klump is *really* Eddie Murphy, a lean comedic actor, lifts the burden of reality and frees viewers to do what they condemn characters in the film for doing.

Shallow Hal shares with *The Nutty Professor* films the conceit that a thin actor appears both with and without the fat suit as two versions of the same person. However, in this case, the personality is the same. The premise of the film is that Hal Larkin (Jack Black) and his friend Mauricio (Jason Alexander), whose own physiques

don't make them matinee idols themselves, refuse to consider any woman who isn't physically flawless as romantic partners. Hence the title's shallowness. For rather obvious reasons, these two choosy men are romantically frustrated. Twist of fate: Hal gets stuck on an elevator with Tony Robbins, who hypnotizes him. Suddenly he sees strangers as physical representations of their inner selves, so that the good are beautiful and the bad hideous. Hal is unaware of this altered perception and begins to think he has become attractive to the beautiful women who previously rejected him. He meets Rosemary (Paltrow), whom he sees with Paltrow's sunny good looks, because Rosemary is a remarkably kind person, Peace Corps worker, volunteer at the hospital, etc. Everyone else sees Rosemary as she really is: very fat. Paltrow periodically appears in a fat suit that added over 200 pounds; a body double was filmed for other scenes. Throughout most of the film, however, the viewing audience sees a sylph-like Rosemary through Hal's eyes.

Viewers first see Rosemary (Paltrow *sans* fat suit) strolling on the street, as Hal sees her from a taxi. He follows her on foot into a store. The camera shows her, in the suit, full-length from behind (this may perhaps be the body double), looking through items on a table. When Hal appears, his head temporarily blocks Rosemary's form from the camera; when he turns and sees her, she has become slender, and is, rather gratuitously, holding aloft a large pair of women's underpants. Hal approaches and quips that the underwear might be used to repair a sail. Rosemary is upset; Hal apologizes; she, some may say improbably, forgives him enough to go out to lunch with him, which the audience may read as a sign of her charity or of her desperation or both.

As the pair exit the diner where they've eaten lunch, two incoming oafs jest that they've arrived too late, the food's gone. Hal, who has a paunch, thinks they're mocking *him* and returns alone into the diner to brag that, though paunchy, he's got Rosemary, at whom he gestures. This confuses the oafs, who stare through the window and obtain, with the theatrical audience, a glimpse of Rosemary's fat legs as she reaches under her skirt to scratch her behind. Here again the fat-suited or fat body is spectacle, only instead of putting the fat on incessant display, this film offers a peepshow. This different treatment seems a gender issue: the fat-suited male characters of *The Nutty Professor*, *Big Momma's House*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, et al, are copiously displayed, whereas Paltrow and Julia Roberts are seen only briefly in the films that were so hyped for having the two skinny-minnies in fat suits. All told, despite the hoopla, the fat-suited Paltrow is on screen for less than six minutes, and much of this time only of portions of her body, such as in a shot where her large arm frames another woman talking, are visible. Roberts' appearance in the fat suit, that added sixty pounds to her physique, was similarly brief.

In *Shallow Hal*, Rosemary's body is not the only one that is "disfigured;" it is merely the only one whose appearances are so tantalizingly rare and so crucially important to the resolution of the plot. For example, one character has spina bifida and walks on all fours. While none of the other characters joke about this (the ever-critical Mauricio verbalizes some distaste), the character himself treats the situation lightly. He is smart and wealthy, he dates, he goes on active outings. The camera follows his movements gracefully and without reluctance. The children in the burn unit Rosemary visits with Hal appear to him as adorable as Renaissance cherubs. But

when he is de-hypnotized, he sees one little girl, whose adorableness had formerly charmed him, whose burns are pronounced. No jokes—visual or otherwise—are made about the child’s injuries. It is a key moment for Hal, for the audience, and for the directing Farrelly brothers; they have discovered something they find it impossible to make light of. Other characters are also flawed physically. Even Mauricio, whose male pattern baldness, flabbiness, and lack of fashion sense have already made for jokes at his expense, turns out also to have...a tail. The film’s moral is the truism that many good people are not physically beautiful, and conversely that many beautiful people are not good. Hal, and perhaps through him the audience, learns not to be so shallow.

The humor, however, impedes rather than supports the moral. This is especially true of the humor evoked by Rosemary’s body and behavior. Here is an example of a recurring joke in the movie: Rosemary, appearing to the audience and to Hal as slender, breaks the chair on which she is sitting in the diner. She wallows facedown attempting to rise. Hal leaps to her rescue and berates a waiter for the flimsy chair. “What’s that made of?” he demands, holding high the chair, its legs sadly bent. The waiter takes the chair and, equally befuddled, guesses, “Steel?” Hal then suggests feebly that the chair should be “welded better.”

Clearly this scene is intended to be funny, but when illumined by its supposed goal of promoting acceptance, the scene is problematic. By what means is audience laughter elicited? Superiority theories of humor suggest that a feeling of triumph over others motivates laughter. According to Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, authors of *the New Rhetoric*, “What is ridiculous is what deserves to be

greeted by laughter...[some laughter is] the response to the breaking of an accepted rule, a way of condemning eccentric behavior which is not deemed sufficiently important or dangerous to be repressed by more violent means” (205-6). In this scene from *Shallow Hal*, a presumably thin audience’s sense of superiority may arise from their knowledge that Rosemary is indeed a fat person. And who doesn’t “know” that being fat is unhealthy and unattractive? Who doesn’t “know” one ought not be fat? The audience may therefore revel in her destruction of the chair and her subsequent inability to rise as a kind of punishment for daring to be so heavy in the first place. The feelings of superiority and the laughter, too, are extended when Hal, who lacks the audience’s knowledge about Rosemary’s fatness, blames the chair.

Another theoretical explanation of humor involves the resolution of an apparent incongruity. Incongruity appears in the course of a situation: something that seems to be going in one direction actually leads in another, or, leads in two direction at once. According to these theories, resolving the surprise element, which involves understanding the layered contexts, creates the humor and inspires the laughter. According to psychologist Arthur Koestler, for an incongruity to be funny, the resolution of the incongruity must render a social superior or aggressor undignified.²⁹¹ Incongruity adds a level of understanding to the chair-crushing scene. It is incongruous to an audience, seeing the slender Paltrow, that she would break a chair wrought of steel. They resolve this visual incongruity by returning to what they know in contrast with what they see, the knowledge that Rosemary is indeed heavy, though perhaps realistically not heavy enough to break a steel chair, hyperbole adding its own bit to the humor here. Hal’s inability to resolve the incongruity joke yields a

superiority joke. Factor in the other dose of superiority—the viewing audience is (again presumably) still not as fat as Rosemary and wouldn't break a steel chair—there seems much mirth-making potential. Certainly both Rosemary and Hal flounder in indignity in this scene, and Rosemary more, for her floundering is literal. But Rosemary is kind, not an aggressor who merits indignity for an inflated sense of self. Perhaps on some level, though, she is perceived as an aggressor, as most people have some sense of discomfort with others much larger than themselves, as if a difference in size that favors another person is inherently threatening.²⁹² Certainly fictitious bullies generally have considerable heft in contrast with the protagonists they push around. Though she may not have an inflated *sense* of self, Rosemary has an inflated self in that she, like other fat people, takes up more space than a thinner person.

A third humor theory clarifies the issue further. Primarily based in Freud, whose treatment of wit includes aspects of superiority/aggression and also incongruity, relief theories of humor suggest that humor can emerge when a topic typically deemed inappropriate for conversation is alluded to, especially when that topic addresses social dominance or presents a resolvable incongruity.²⁹³ Clearly sex, digestion and its discontents, and other topics that are “unmentionable” or views that are publicly disdained (racism, sexism) can be major topics of humor that derive much power from relieving the urge to discuss the taboo. The relief comes in the expression in a presumably safe discourse mode—humor—of what is not safe to discuss in other modes.

Once more to Rosemary, sitting on the chair. What taboo topic is alluded to when the chair breaks and Rosemary lands on the floor? Perhaps the audience is

relieved to see a worry they have not been able to express openly legitimized, in the “safe” arena of the darkened theater: the destruction of furnishings that a fat body can cause. Certainly it is easy to note that both movies, *The Nutty Professor* and *Shallow Hal*, suggest that fat people are poorly accounted for by furniture, and also that they are inept and clumsy and likely to wreak havoc where “normal” thin people would pass gracefully.²⁹⁴ The issue of seating for fat people is an issue of public debate, as fat acceptance activists request seating in public places that more adequately and comfortably accommodates them, public places such as planes, movie theaters and restaurants.

Freud and other proponents of the relief theory of humor are careful to indicate that audiences of jokes may respond negatively, that is, may not laugh, and may instead reprove, or laugh so weakly as to imply displeasure. Jokes, therefore, are often floated out to test the waters in a relationship. One of the problems, then, for *Shallow Hal*, and the fat suit movies in general, is that their jokes did find many audience members prepared to respond negatively. Fat activists clearly perceive fat people as a persecuted group, and much evidence bears out their claims that they suffer from prejudice. So while it is well known that the jester could criticize the king, providing an outlet for the critiques of the masses, the relationship between fat people and moviemakers is the opposite. “Hollywood,” figured metonymically as a unified, moneyed, powerful force, seems to have exploited an already persecuted group for laughs and box office green. The fat jokes in *Shallow Hal*--which include Rosemary’s obese bikini-clad form bending a diving board as she prepares to cannonball into a pool, jumping and displacing so much water that a child flies into a

tree and a grill is thoroughly doused—come across as a community of thin, powerful people using stereotypes and spectacle to mock a disadvantaged group, and to encourage their less economically and politically powerful, but still thin, peers to do so, as well.

Stereotypes and Identifications

Here is another complication. Paltrow and the filmmakers seem truly to have believed that they understood the difficulties life as a fat person in our society entails. As the movie went into production, the filmmakers tested their fat suit for realism by having Paltrow wear it in a hotel lobby. This experience was, according to Paltrow in myriad interviews, critical to her understanding of Rosemary's character:

‘It was horrible,’ says Paltrow, describing how she felt the day she waddled through the lobby of Manhattan’s Tribeca Grand Hotel in her prosthetic fat suit, a 25-pound costume that had been molded to Paltrow’s body in six separate pieces made of latex, foam, plastic boning, and many thousands of lentils. She explains how the cocktail-sipping hotel guests—the very same traveling businessmen who if they had actually spied Gwyneth Paltrow would whisper excitedly to their friends...would look at her and then immediately glance away from her gargantuan proportions. ‘It was really terrible, not getting that eye contact’....It was also invaluable character research. ‘I got everything I needed right in that moment,’ she says. ‘It really affected me, the experience. It was awful. Unbelievable. *Really* unbelievable.’²⁹⁵

By assuming the fat suit, even for such a brief time, Paltrow assumes identification with all fat women. In interviews, Paltrow was repeatedly asked what it was like to be fat. Her response was almost always to refer to this moment in the hotel when no one would look at her. Paltrow implies that the fat suit has taught her empathy. Interviewers like Vanessa Grigoriadis, who recorded the quotation above, generally failed to convey the same pro-fat message. Grigoriadis seems to sneer at a body type that might be perceived as “waddling,” and the exaggeration of “gargantuan proportions” reduces the persuasive effect of Paltrow’s effusions of empathy.

However, many felt that Paltrow’s fat-suit realizations were unacceptably limited. Debbie Hutzman, a Weight Watchers group leader, is quoted as saying, “Because they put on a suit, it doesn’t give them the full story...It doesn’t have anything to do with the emotions we feel.”²⁹⁶ Similarly, Carol Johnson, author of *Self Esteem Comes in All Sizes*, is quoted as saying, “Whenever thin actors portray fat people it’s always a stereotype. They look kind of blobby and sloppy, and do awkward, pathetic and embarrassing things.”²⁹⁷ Many other viewers were angry that the stars in the fat suits could merely take off their fat suit at the end of a day of filming, and walk off without that social burden, which also suggests an incomplete identification: they experienced fatness briefly, but did not have to experience it long term or have to do what might be required to eliminate it.

Rosemary is in some ways depicted as a stereotypical fat person. She eats a great deal and untidily at times. In the chair-breaking scene she has ordered a double cheeseburger, chili fries with cheese and a large chocolate milkshake. Later, she takes an enormous piece of cake, which, through prop department magic, doesn’t

crumble when she picks it up in two hands and eats it without benefit of the plate or fork she's offered. This is all food we imagine the slender Paltrow would be too health and/or figure-conscious to eat. We need not imagine the slender Paltrow's dietary habits if we read much press about the star, whose yoga habit and macrobiotic diet are the topic of interviews:

Three years ago Paltrow became a follower of guru Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, the Mysore, India-based patriarch of ashtanga yoga. Ashtanga is an excruciatingly difficult form of yoga...and it's meant to be done every day first thing in the morning. "I never skip unless I'm sick, which I never am," says Paltrow....She does about two hours of yoga each morning before her call, which means she's up around 4 a.m. "It doesn't really bother me—it's like brushing my teeth." she says...Yoga helped Paltrow stop smoking...and eventually led her to adopt a macrobiotic diet. "Macrobiotics are not about keeping thin," she says, "it's about eating healthy and clean. Although I have to say, as I get into my later twenties I can't eat whatever I want anymore! I'm like, 'What happened to my metabolism?'" These days, Paltrow says, she no longer drinks caffeine or eats wheat, dairy, sugar, or meat, and she only drinks occasionally.²⁹⁸

Rosemary utters lines to the effect that she stays the same size no matter what she eats, so she may as well order as she likes, but what audiences (imagine they) know about the actress is contradictory evidence to Rosemary's lines.

However, Rosemary's portrayal in *Shallow Hal* is only inconsistently stereotypical, as Paltrow's own exterior beauty is supposed to be the representation of Rosemary's inner beauty.²⁹⁹ She is wealthy, clever, forgiving, honest and generous, not depressed or lazy. She sticks up for herself when she perceives Mauricio's unwarranted dislike by giving as good as she gets. The leftover food Hal couldn't eat from their first lunch-date, Rosemary gives to a pair of homeless men, saying, "Lightweight here couldn't finish it." So, except for the relentless physical comedy involving weight, Rosemary is a complex, competent, interesting character. She verbalizes some dissatisfaction with her size, and Paltrow's body language—her slow walk, her visible discomfort in close quarters—suggests the mental/physical burden. But Rosemary doesn't dress in any stereotypical "Fat lady" fashion (no muu muus or caftans); her clothes are fashionable and form fitting, and she wears a bikini for the cannonball scene described above.

Yet wardrobe is itself a problem. Though not as obviously dualistic as outdated suit and bow tie versus spandex, the costumes highlight the fashion differences considered acceptable for fat women versus slim that have previously emerged, when Oprah Winfrey and Judy Matz describe how "obscene" it felt to have fat flesh appear from under "too short" skirts or bathing suits. In one scene, Rosemary's snug shirt, worn on the slender Paltrow, suggests ample cleavage on a slender woman. From the audience's dual perspective, the shirt may appear to suggest that the fat Rosemary, whom Hal doesn't see, is so big her shirt fits improperly.

Another scene shows Rosemary with Hal at her parents' house in "short shorts. When Rosemary leaves Hal at the dining table with her father, she leans on the kitchen counter, visible from the dining room. Hal sees her lean physique; her father sees a close up of a very large buttock protruding from the shorts. Rosemary's ensembles, as in this scene, are perhaps intended to call attention to the taboo against revealing flesh unless there's not much to reveal in the first place, but this generous interpretation must overlook the objectification of the larger buttock, which, divorced from a face and completely still, seems merely to reveal the extent of her "real" fatness. In contrast, when Hal looks at Rosemary, she smiles at him adoringly and wags a leg, an active, looking person. A thin person. The bikini-clad (confident?) Rosemary is the body double, faceless, bending the diving board; it is Paltrow's thin face that emerges to show embarrassment at having displaced the boy from the pool.

Also like Sherman Klump, Rosemary is never fat when the movie depicts sexuality. Instead, the movie continues its play with wardrobe: as Rosemary undresses and tosses her negligee at Hal, the underwear becomes huge. Hal shakes his head at Rosemary's clever trick. So audiences never see a fat person behaving sexually, and are never forced to confront their ideas about fat people and sexual attractiveness. When Mauricio asks Tony Robbins how Hal can't tell she's fat by touching her, Mauricio's disgust at the idea of touching the fat body, like Richmond's disgust with Klump, seems designed both to correct the thought by putting it in the mouth of the least noble of the film's characters, and to allow such a thought—one the audience might share—to be voiced, answering one of the implausibilities of the film's plot and maintaining "suspension of disbelief."

Stereotypes and Digestive Difficulties

Unlike Sherman Klump, however, Rosemary is not forced to suffer through the indignities of toilet humor. The two *Nutty Professor* films offer scenes in which Murphy, as the Klump family, consumes meals avidly and sloppily, just as Rosemary's stereotypical appetites for food are exploited only more excessively. Again, the fat-people-take-more-of-everything motif is at work, conjuring the fear of the person who is bigger than the "you" in the audience and who consumes more resources.

Few scenes in *The Nutty Professor* rely for humor on something other than the scatological, the sexual, the obese or some combination of the three. One scene consists principally of close ups of food disappearing from a restaurant buffet, the near-empty, messy trays, and the large hands and spoons. All this is accompanied by music that might also suggest a humorous murderer is on the prowl, a mock-seriousness that echoes the Klumps' ruination of the buffet. Add in Cletus Klump's farting ("ass trumpet" is a phrase rehashed early in *The Klumps*); Grandma's description of her and others' "sexual relations"; depictions of this in the sequel when Grandma kisses Buddy Love open-mouthed, nauseating him and necessitating a lengthy, audible regurgitation; and various other fodder for the relief style of humor. The humor arises, however, not merely from the presentation and discussion of taboo bowel functions and sexuality, but also from the indisputable superiority an audience is encouraged to feel because they, of course, do not engage so publicly in such presentations or discussions (probably because they don't experience as much flatulence, because they don't eat as much...and therefore, of course, they're not fat).

It's a Drag: Fat, Age, Gender and Comedy?

The nausea Grandma Klump inspires is part anti-fat prejudice and part anti-aging prejudice: a fat, old woman who dares to broadcast her sexuality seems among the favorite jokes in the two *Nutty Professor* films. The films, especially *The Klumps*, use her body as evidence of the inappropriateness of her sexuality, having Buddy Love scream in horror when she takes off her nightgown. At one point in the sequel, Grandma Klump tells her daughter that she'd experienced a sharp pain when she bent over, and realized that she was stepping on her own breast.

Similar humor emerges in the other comedies in which men in fat suit and drag play fat, older women, such as *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Big Momma's House*. Here are the plots of the films in brief. *Mrs. Doubtfire* is born when Robin Williams' character, Daniel, and his wife Miranda (Sally Field) separate, and Daniel transforms into Mrs. Euphemia Doubtfire in order to trick his wife into hiring him as their children's nanny. He subsequently uses his role as Miranda's confidant to attempt to steer her out of a romantic relationship. In *Big Momma's House*, Martin Lawrence stars as an FBI agent who goes "undercover" to catch a bank robber, whose former girlfriend was implicated in the crime. Lawrence's character follows the girlfriend, who flees home to "Big Momma" in Georgia, to escape her boyfriend. Because Sherry, the girlfriend, is also a suspect in the crime, Lawrence becomes "Big Momma," with the help of a costume assistant and fellow agent, to attempt to trick her into revealing the location of the money.

The prosthetic breasts used to portray fat, old women by men in these comedic films provide a literally ample source of comedy. "Mrs. Doubtfire" sets her breasts

on fire in her first day of housekeeping and cooking. After he puts out the flaming prosthetics with the lids to pots Williams quips, “My first day as a woman and I’m having hot flashes.” In *Big Momma’s House*, Martin Lawrence’s “Big Momma” is awakened one morning by her granddaughter, and both are disturbed to discover that one of “Big Momma’s” breasts is in the vicinity of her ear. Lawrence’s character covers it up by explaining how used to such wanderings she/he is. All of these films exaggerate what is “normal” or “true” of women’s bodies to humorous effect, exaggeration made more funny because the audience knows the character is really a man in drag, who wouldn’t know what “normal” for a woman’s body is.

Though audiences are certainly not encouraged to see these men in drag/women as sexually attractive, much is made of the fine line between fascinated repugnance and desire, as the desire to look at what norms suggest is desirable and the desire to look at what norms suggest is undesirable are equally strong. As in the *Nutty Professor* films, both *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Big Momma’s House* indulge in lingering pans of the fat suited men in drag, a gaze that creates the same objectivity that suggests sexual objectification. In *Big Momma’s House*, as in the *Nutty Professor* films, the female lead is ogled by the male protagonist on a number of occasions, and the camera treats her body in much the same way as the fat suited and real fat bodies are treated.

However, these films typically provide an older male figure whose attraction to these fat suited, ostensibly aging female bodies is depicted as bizarre. *Mrs. Doubtfire*’s admirer proves his abnormality by continuing to favor her even after observing one of Williams’ excessively hairy legs beneath that lady’s tweedy skirts.

The character remarks, “I like that Mediterranean look.” Similarly, Lawrence’s “Big Momma” has an admirer, though admittedly one whose exceedingly thick glasses suggests he isn’t seeing her clearly, a device necessary to keep him attracted to the man-in-drag version of the real “Big Momma,” played by an actress. The film suggests the inappropriateness of being attracted to a big, old woman by having one of Big Momma’s neighbors witness Lawrence’s costume assistant fondling the prosthetic body behind a screen, which looks as if a young white man is making love to Big Momma. The neighbor, herself an elderly woman, shows her disgust, which manifests itself in curiosity with the young man, whose desires seem to her to be awry. Thus the films are heavily normed, using some characters’ reactions to highlight the cultural sanctions against the perceiving of certain bodies—especially those of fat people, and of old women.

Double-Takes, or Fat Suits in the “Real World”

The movies with fat suited stars prompted considerable interest in the media. When Paltrow and Roberts suited up, some journalistic forays with the fat suit led to feature articles in women’s magazines. Their ostensible goal was to compare life as a thin woman with life as a fat woman, exploring cultural and personal biases and revealing them to a curious (female) public. Two such experiments appeared, both mentioning the release of *America’s Sweethearts* and *Shallow Hal* as inspiration, in *Mademoiselle* and *Marie Claire*. In *Mademoiselle*, size-6 author Katie Puckrik assumed a fat suit that would make her appear 20 sizes larger; for *Marie Claire*, Ilene Rosenzweig wore a suit that appeared to add 40 pounds. These stories confirm many of the theoretical assumptions about

audience I made based on the visual techniques of the fat suit comedies: temporary size increases via prosthetics show how audiences both do and do not want to stare at fat people, reveal anti-fat biases from inside and outside of the fat-suited body, and showcase anxiety about the fat female body as sexual object.

Puckrik's tale opens with a confession that, even at size 6, she feels some anxiety about being "too fat." On "Day 1," when she practices with the fat suit for the first time, she says, "I start[ed] to feel vaguely depressed." She quickly begins calling the fat-suited version of herself "her" instead of "me." On "Day 2," Puckrik goes shopping for "her," finds a "paucity of cool and hip clothes," is advised to focus on accessories because they don't come in sizes, and "feel[s] *really* depressed" (emphasis hers). All of these ticks and emotions demonstrate how the fat body, especially the temporary one, affects self-hood, making it difficult to feel stylish, highlighting how negatively judging the appearance of one's body can create depression as the symbol of selfhood becomes less attractive to the self, fostering "depression."

It is on "Day 3" however, when Puckrik tries the suit on in front of her boyfriend, that the tension between fascination with the fat body and sexual attractiveness becomes an issue. Puckrik indicates that her boyfriend is very curious about seeing her in the suit, suggesting that to look truly fat she needs "frizzy bangs," another indication that to be fat is necessarily to be unstylish. Puckrik comments: "Apparently, he thinks to be fat is to be white trash circa 1985." This correlation between fatness and class is cemented later in the article when Puckrik's friend, who observes others' reactions to her, points out that "as long as [Puckrik is] wearing

pricey, swellegant clothes and not cheap, bad ones, [she] could be ‘a wealthy mogul, for all people know.’” But Puckrik’s boyfriend is made uncomfortable by his girlfriend as a larger woman: she says “He gets quiet when I waddle around in my new body. When I snuggle next to him on the couch, he does a bad job of hiding the freaked-out look in his eyes.” What exactly is “freaking him out” is never explored, but it seems clear that the change in her body changes her level of attractiveness, confirming for the reading audience that they will be perceived differently by men if they gain weight. Similarly, after she flirts with a DJ at a club later to test the effects of the suit, her friend asks the DJ about his reactions to her (he calls Puckrik “a little heavysset”) and obtains his phone number. When Puckrik calls to confer with him about his reactions, he says:

...I have to say that if I’d described you to a guy, I would’ve said ‘a fat chick.’ ... You seemed embarrassed, like you wanted to get away fast... I remember thinking that this was typical behavior for fat women, like they’re always apologizing for themselves.... My roommate asked if you were cute, and I realized I didn’t know, because I didn’t even consider you as an option.³⁰⁰

While the reactions of the men merely confirm the anti-fat prejudice covered in Chapter One, what remains interesting is this article’s audience address. The readers of *Mademoiselle*, while likely to be angered or disgusted by the men’s reactions, are also—if the articles about dating, sexuality and so on are any clue—obsessed with being attractive. This article confirms their understanding that they are likely to be perceived as unattractive, potentially putting even current relationships in jeopardy, if

they gain weight. Though the article's ostensible purpose is to use the fat suit as an "empathy suit," the article itself, though it may foster empathy, is likely to maintain the cultural pressure on readers to stay or become thin, if attracting men is their goal. On the test day, when Puckrik tests out people's reactions to her as a size 6, a man yells a "hubba hubba" comment at her and creates a traffic accident, yet when she appears as "a fat chick," men "don't even consider her as an option." Surely it is somewhat odd to feature a "what it's like to be me on an ordinary day" section in the article, if not to showcase the dramatic difference in treatment. In any event, the contrast assures readers that thin is sexy, fat is not.

While men in this article seem to take no notice, or react negatively, women are depicted as staring behind her back despite their reactions to her face. Puckrik, visiting a "ruthlessly trendy hotel" for cocktails, sees:

a woman [she] know[s] at the next table. She does a bug-eyed double take. I heave myself out of my chair to go and chat with her. She politely makes no reference to my new chunkiness...Elizabeth tells me that every time I turn away, the woman I know goes in for another slack-jawed gander. I can't say I blame her; she saw me six weeks earlier and probably wonders what happened.

Though Puckrik indicates that her supposed weight gain must seem, to this woman, quite rapid, it's clear that to her face, the woman is polite, whereas when she can do so without appearing to, she stares. I suggested earlier that it would seem impolite to stare at the fat body, and that the filmic presentations of fake fat bodies allowed and even encouraged theatrical audiences to stare, which would seem like a relief. In this

article, the desire to do so is highlighted by this scene. When Anita Roddick disguised herself in a fat suit on British television, the hidden cameras similarly recorded people turning around to stare at her (fake) fat body when she had passed them.³⁰¹

Ilene Rosenzweig's experiment with the fat suit is less extreme, as she transforms herself from a size 6 only to the average size 14, not to a size 26. By contrasting her article, the tension between excess as desirable and excess as undesirable, and the difference in men's and women's perceptions of the female body, become clear. Rosenzweig, who like Puckrik confesses to anxieties about "not being thin enough" even at a size 6, discovers that, behind her back, men stare at her, in particular at her buttocks. Indeed, the suit was "supposed to [make her look] bigger, but more shapely and sexier." This is an interesting intention, considering a large text box in the column next to this quotation reads, "I expected the fat suit to make me invisible, not an object of desire." Three photographs of Rosenzweig walking past men show them appearing to look at her buttocks, and the text suggests that they are doing so approvingly. One caption reads, "Men literally stopped in their tracks," another "She's noticed everywhere." It is not always entirely clear from these photographs that her appearance is actually prompting the men's responses, or even exactly what their responses are. One man appears to be looking at her, but he is wearing sunglasses and in a rather blurry background, and could realistically be looking elsewhere. Another is clearly looking at her behind, but although the caption suggests he stops in his tracks, his knee is bent and clearly moving forward mid-stride, and his expression is ambiguous. Another man appears to be exhaling

sharply—his cheeks are puffed out at least—but again it isn't obvious that he is reacting to her body and not to something else; he only appears to be looking in the direction of her hips. Still, according to the article's author and those who observed her strolling about in the fat suit, she apparently received a great deal of attention. No men are interviewed after looking at her, but Rosenzweig, feeling "like a lonely, tipling tubby" while waiting for a friend to arrive, says she notices a man walk by: "[He] checked me out. When I turned to get a better look at him, I saw that he'd actually stopped in the street and was staring lasciviously in my direction." Another photograph allows readers to view her buttocks from behind—echoes of *The Nutty Professor*—as she ascends a flight of stairs, as if from the male point of view of her putative admirers.

Women, however, are less supportive. Like Puckrik, Rosenzweig finds shopping a challenge, as the store she visits has nothing larger than a size 10. A saleswoman asks, "Who's handling the purple dress?" and Rosenzweig sneers "as if I were a challenge." It is intriguing that she would be referred to metonymically through a description of her outfit, as part of what seems to be making people stare at her is that the snug purple dress, which she bought despite knowing that it was tight because she was unwilling to give up her search for an outfit in a designer boutique that would fit her enlarged body. Deliberately dressing in a tight, bright colored outfit is to court attention. When, in confessedly *Nutty Professor* mode, she bumps into tables in a bar, she says, "One emaciated matron gave me a cool look of disapproval." Again, it isn't clear that Rosenzweig doesn't perceive disapproval for simple clumsiness, or for her decision to wear what is admittedly a snug dress. It's also

interesting that the vocabulary of anti-skinniness gets picked up on so quickly in Rosenzweig's outing as a larger woman: the slender straw woman of the size acceptance narrative re-emerges here.

Similarly, the size acceptance narrative stance that one's attitudes towards one's body are difficult to keep positive reemerges in the pieces. Puckrik writes: "My extra large battle in this petite world turned out not to be with its thin inhabitants, because for the most part, folks treated me fine. I realized the main battle was against a far tougher opponent altogether: my own mind." She offers this conclusion despite the fact of being rejected by a man only for being fat and despite being stared at behind her back, both during her limited experience as a plus-size woman.

Ultimately, Puckrik and Rosenzweig come to similar conclusions that fatness and is mostly in how the fat person handles her body. Despite feeling more attractive at points during her day in the fat suit, Rosenzweig learns at the end of the evening that her friends have been "being polite" about her weight. She asks one, "What did you really think when you saw me?" and he replies, "Poundage. But I was never going to say anything." Another friend says, "But you're not fat, like, *Monica-on-Friends* fat," which, by implication, would have been bad. That is to say that if Rosenzweig's fat suit had been as large as Puckrik's, she would have been judged more negatively—as less attractive—than she was. Her experiment confirms the assessment offered in the fifth chapter, that "size acceptance" had expanded the range to include the "average," but no more. It is still curious that she inspired so much

positive interest in men, whose mainstream magazines rarely showcase above-average-sized female physiques.

Rosenzweig's last ironic thoughts are her hopes that the fat suit might have helped her shed water weight. Clearly the article's message to its readers is that, providing their silhouette remains hourglass-y, they might gain weight and still be attractive to some, though not all, men, though their friends might judge them negatively for gaining weight and they will have trouble finding fashionable clothing to fit their new size.

Conclusions

The fat suit technology provides thin people with an opportunity to be fat temporarily, an opportunity they usually think provides them with a more realistic perspective on what it is like to be fat. However, the very temporary nature of such an experiment makes it a problematic, as the discomfort of the prosthetic, their initial prejudices about fatness, their limited experiences, and the fact that they need not struggle to remove the additional size, makes the experience quite unlike real fatness. So, whether the performance of fatness is done by an actor in a film or by a journalist or fashion designer experimenting in daily life, the attempt at empathy is likely to generate more, rather than less, pressure on audiences to be or remain thin.

Coda: Fat and Sexy?

As Ilene Rosensweig's fat suit experiment proved, sometimes fat can be sexy. In the April 2004 issue of *Marie Claire*, Julia Savacool reported on a different experiment: the magazine took a picture of a size-14 (American) model, Nicole, in a black bikini.³⁰² Depending on your source, Nicole is either slightly smaller than the average American woman's size 16, or exactly the average size.³⁰³ Her silhouette was clearly visible against a white background; the magazine described her posture and expression as "neutral." They published copies of the un-retouched picture, with two different captions, in newspapers, online, and on the sides of trucks ("mobile billboards") that subsequently toured New York City. One picture's caption was: "I think I'm fat. Do you?" The other: "I think I'm sexy. Do you?" 55% of the people polled agreed with that Nicole was fat; 66% agreed that she was sexy (Fig. 21). Although *Marie Claire* did not publish the number of people polled altogether, the data suggests that more people resisted calling her fat, even when she herself asserted that she was, than resisted calling her sexy. Some of the people who agreed that Nicole "looked fat," also said she was "attractive." A consulting psychologist, Anne Demarais, concluded that "[t]he attitude you project when you meet someone is the emotion they begin to feel themselves, and they project that feeling back onto you.... You have the power to control what other people think of you."³⁰⁴

In Nicole's captioned photographs, a verbally expressed attitude, a physical posture and facial expression, the body as material ethos, and the choice of garment—a black bikini—meld. Audience interpretations of Nicole's posture and expression were driven by the textual message. Of those who observed the "fat" message, one

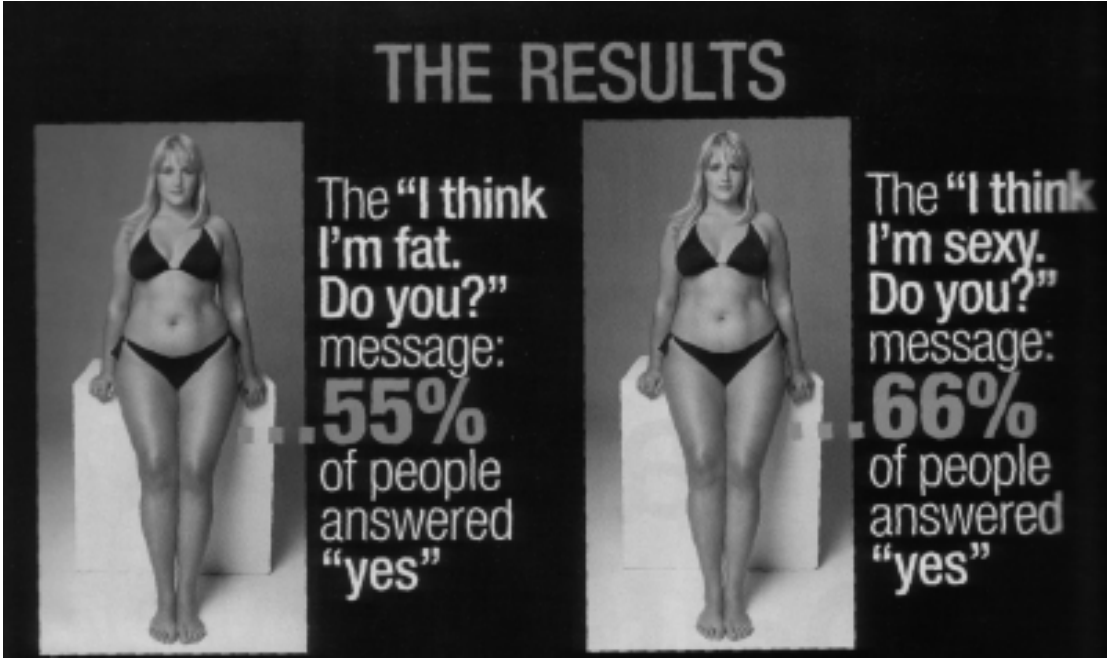


Figure 21: Nicole from *Marie Claire* Magazine, April, 2004

said, “Claiming that you think you’re fat makes you *look* fat—a dose of confidence can mask slight imperfections.” Another: “She seems to be unsure of herself, rather than confident about her body. Insecurity is not attractive.” Both of these were women. Of those who observed the “sexy” message, one said, “She’s sexy because she has the guts to show herself in a way most women won’t. Her confidence gives *me* confidence.” A male viewer responded: “She is a goddess to behold. Nothing is more sexy than a voluptuous woman—and confidence goes a long way.”

While it is possible that the selected quotations reflect an *a priori* message from the magazine—that attitude is the important factor in interpretations of the body--rather than an accurate representation of the respondents, what does seem important in this admittedly limited experiment is that a significant portion of readers resisted the textual message: 45% did not agree that Nicole was fat, and 34% did not agree that she was sexy, which suggests that those viewers had interpretive schemes for her body, choice of garment, pose and facial expression that were not negotiated by Nicole’s apparent “attitude.” What is perhaps most curious is that more people refused to say she was “fat” than refused to say she was “sexy.”³⁰⁵

Perhaps the experiment with the captions indicates that, from an “ultimate order,” the culture has shifted to a “dialectical order,” one in which interpretations of the body as material vary according to audience. Certainly, the eating disorder memoirs, size acceptance narratives, and other forms of activism in favor of fat and size acceptance and against the depiction of thinness, especially for women, have affected the culture.

In a way, it is disappointing that no comparable experiment was conducted twenty or even only ten years ago to see how people reacted to the “average” woman’s body with different captions. Such an experiment might help gauge the degree of cultural change more accurately. Perhaps what is most telling is the very absence of such a study from 1984 or 1994: the *Marie Claire* experiment, however motivated by a desire to assess how important projected attitude is to audience interpretation of ethos, was made possible by the cultural shifts that challenged the ultimate order by suggesting that a woman could be both average size and sexy, fat and confident.

* * *

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 21. My students commonly suggest that "exercise" is a synonym for "fitness," though they stipulate that "fitness" is also a state of body, whereas "exercise" is a means to that state.
 22. Qtd. In "Definition of Fitness." NFPT Personal Trainer Magazine. www.nfpt.com/Library/Articles/fitness.html. Feb 25, 2002.
 23. Webster's New World Dictionary ("freedom from disease, pain or defect; normalcy of physical and mental functions").
 24. A key example is Lynn Lingenfelter, whose narrative appears in Bill Phillips' *Body For Life*. Lingenfelter was diagnosed as HIV positive after receiving a blood transfusion in the 1980's; he is, however, a model of fitness according to the *Body for Life* book.
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 29. In a more humorous example of how these three subsidiary parts of fitness have slipped into our American vocabulary, witness this scene from 2000's *American Beauty*, in which Lester Burnham asks his neighbors (Jim and Jim) for assistance with his attempt to get in shape.
Lester: I figured you guys may be able to give me some pointers. I need to shape up fast.
Jim: Well, are you looking to just lose weight, or are you looking to have increased strength and flexibility as well?
Lester: (shrugging) I wanna look good naked.
 30. For example, as the army attempted throughout the 1990's to modify its fitness tests to take gender into consideration, controversy followed each change; most of the editorials that appeared argued that the fitness standards were too low.

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31. It is important not to undervalue immediate visual assessment and the judgment of fitness. Bill Phillips uses visual assessment to judge his devotees in the following passage from *Body For Life*:
“A couple of years ago, I attended a fitness convention in Atlanta....During the course of that weekend, hundreds of men and women who introduced themselves as avid followers of my magazine came up to shake my hand and chat. What struck me most about the entire experience...what absolutely *floored* me...was how strikingly *out* of shape many of these people were....That weekend I think I met about 600 of my students. Maybe 80 of them looked fit and strong, but the others, who had been receiving the *same* information on exercise and nutrition, looked like...well, *like they never had the opportunity to learn about how to get in top shape before.*” (Emphasis Phillips’)
32. Winfrey herself judges in hindsight: “When people would criticize me and say, ‘Don’t worry, she’ll put the weight back on,’ I couldn’t imagine what they were talking about. I thought it impossible. Anyone who had shown as much discipline as I had by not eating for four months certainly had licked this problem for good. What I didn’t know was my metabolism was shot. I’d lost muscle weight. I wasn’t exercising. And I didn’t exercise after losing the weight. There was nothing my body could have done but gain weight.”
Winfrey, Oprah. “Oprah’s Story” *Make the Connection*. Greene, Bob & Oprah Winfrey. New York: Hyperion, 1996:13.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

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 41. Hertz, Sue. "Can Heavy Be Healthy?" *Walking*. Jul/Aug 2001: 70+.
 42. For more information, see: Bormann, Ernest G. "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 396-407. See also: Bormann, Ernest G. *The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2001.
 43. Bormann, Ernest G. "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 398.
 44. As Burke writes, people may identify with others when either "their interests are joined," or when they assume or are persuaded that their interests are joined. *Ibid* 180.
 45. Presumably, such stories, based on enough shared values, can also alter ultimate orders. This presumption is taken up in Chapter 5.
 46. In Phillips, *Body For Life*, p. xiii.
 47. Reyes, Jr., Jimmy. "The Odds-On Favorite." *Men's Fitness* Feb 2001: 116.
 48. Messina, Mickey. "Positive Direction." *Shape*. Feb 2001:78.
 49. Dyson, Tonya. *Fit*. Dec 2000: 84.
 50. *Fitness*. Jan 2002:10.

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51. In this, we would say the narratives function primarily as epideictic rhetoric, which is rhetoric that assesses praise and blame. The narratives “blame” the fat person or the fat body for many ills and “praise” fitness methodologies and fitness habits as healthful and beneficial, etc.
52. Blair, Carole. “Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric’s Materiality.” *Rhetorical Bodies* ed. Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley. University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, WI, 1999: 16-57.
53. Researchers interested in the historical development of the conceptions of health and fitness, and these as they relate to aesthetics, in western culture include:
Schwartz, Hillel. *Never Satisfied*.
Green, Harvey. *Fit for America*.
Whorton, James. *Crusaders for Fitness*.
Banner, Lois. *American Beauty*.
Orbach, Susie. *Fat Is A Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide for Women*.
Chernin, Kim. *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*.
54. The ads do contain fine print that indicate that exercise programs were embarked upon in addition to eating Subway sandwiches.
55. A recent Subway brochure features Fogle holding a pair of his former jeans, and a letter from Jared reassessing his year of having kept off the weight and looking forward to his marriage, and recruiting for the American Heart Walk. For more on Jared Fogle’s relationship with the Subway chain and on his celebrity appearances, see:
Barnard, Linda. “Jared Doubles Up; His Half the Size and Set to Tie the Knot.” *The Toronto Sun*. 10/11/01:69.
Holleman, Joe. “Subway’s Celebrity Dieter Shed Pounds but not His Old Friend.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. 6/21/01:F3.
Silva, Jill Wendholt. “The Subway Diet Guy; Jared Fogle Found Inspiration in a Submarine Sandwich.” *The Kansas City Star*. 8/8/01:E1.
56. <http://www.subway.com/subwayroot/MenuNutrition/Jared/index.aspx> 19 Oct 2004.
57. *Fit*. Feb 2001:90.
58. It is important to note that many of the magazines whose focus is not on fitness, but which nonetheless run articles on weight loss and diet suggestions, are targeted at female audiences in a range of ages. For this reason, many scholars, including Susan Bordo (*Unbearable Weight*) assert that thinness, while becoming an issue for men, is a feminist issue.

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59. Phillips, Bill with Michael D'Orso. *Body for Life: 12 Weeks to Mental and Physical Strength*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999:2.
 60. The series, "The Body Challenge," which aired on the Discovery Health Channel from blank to blank, featured the body reshaping narratives of seven competitors. "Fitness Fantasy" is another DHC show.
 61. Weight Watchers, for example, has groups in over 30 countries.
 62. One exception is the ongoing weight loss success stories tracked in *Allure* magazine, which offers monthly photographs of the women on reduction plans, so that the last month of the process features twelve photographs of the women .
 63. www.menshealth.com/weightloss2/index.shtml. Retrieved May, 23, 2002.
 64. Phillips and D'Orso, p. 2.
 65. It is not my intention to suggest that Phillips and the other authors I quote from later are correct or incorrect in their assertions. Indeed, evidence suggests that, in our culture, fatness is an identity or role that is learned from social interactions. That is, people learn they are fat not merely from empirical signs, such as weight in pounds or clothing sizes, but from indications from other people. They then learn to adapt to the role of "fat person" by adjusting to social signals. The point is that learning you are fat leads to learning how to behave like a "fat person;" as a consequence, learning how to be thin after being fat would require another role change, the adoption of an altered identity. In other words, becoming thin after being fat would probably change your life. For more information, see Degher, Douglas and Gerald Hughes. "The Adoption and Management of a 'Fat Identity.'" *Interpreting Weight*. Ed. Jeffrey Sobal and Donna Maurer. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 11-28.
 66. Winfrey, Oprah. "Oprah's Story." In Greene, Bob. *Make the Connection*. New York: Hyperion, 1996:1-2.
 67. Ibid, p. 5-6.
 68. To demonstrate again that these reshaping narratives are, in fact, inspiring to others: Krista Degraffenreid, the author of a fitness success story, indicates the impression that Oprah Winfrey's success story had on her: "I read Oprah Winfrey's book *Make the Connection* and began to follow her 10 steps for a better, healthful life. If she could become healthy, I knew I could too." Note how the book and methodology are attributed to Winfrey, despite the author

of the actual book being Bob Greene. Winfrey's quotation is from p. 32 of Greene's book.

Degraffenreid, Krista. "Setting New Priorities." *Shape*. May 2001:80.

69. Voorhees, Mary. "Older and Wiser." *Shape*. Nov 1997:68.
70. Lind, Teri. "Helping Hand." *Shape*. Nov 1997:70.
71. Smarz Miller, Michele. *Fit*. Feb 2001:88.
72. Kirby, Ryan. "Resurrection." *Men's Fitness* Jan 2000:110-1.
73. Burke, Kenneth. *On Symbols and Society*. Ed. Joseph R. Gusfield. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989:139.
74. See, for example, "Why We're So Fat (and the French Are Not)." *Psychology Today*. Nov/Dec 2000:64-8.
75. Critser, Greg. *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World*. New York: Mariner/Houghton Mifflin, 2003:36-8.
76. "The Pima Paradox."
77. Critser, Greg. "Let Them Eat Fat: The Heavy Truths about American Obesity." *Harper's*. Mar 2000:42.
78. Farquhar, Amelia R. "Eat Smart Strategies: I Did It!" *Fitness*. Feb 2001:64.
79. Hertz, Sue. "Can Heavy Be Healthy?" *Walking*. Jul/Aug 2001: 70+.
80. Losano, Antonia and Brenda A. Risch. "Resisting Venus: Negotiating Corpulence in Exercise Videos." *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Ed. Braziel, Jana Evans and Kathleen LeBesco. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001-111-129.
81. Richard Simmons, in his workout videos, also includes large people as if to promote symbolic convergence and group identifications, as well as to suggest that the choreography and movements are accessible. His programs, partly as a result of Simmons' demeanor and partly the inclusion of large women, provided fodder for *Saturday Night Live* humor in the 1980's, when Eddie Murphy lampooned Simmons' speech and voice, and alluded to the women's figures.
82. *Ibid.* p. 65.

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83. Ibid.
 84. Flachsbart, Denise. "Pleasant Surprise." *Shape*. Dec 2000:100.
 85. Zuppichini, Matthew. "Flab on the Gridiron." *Men's Fitness* Aug 1989: 111-2.
 86. Rubin, Courtney. "Those 'Aha' Moments." *Shape*. May 2001:82.
 87. www.weightwatchers.com Retrieved December 20, 2000.
 88. Carvalho-Foucher, Kim.
 89. The weight loss success story genre as a whole has a set vocabulary, one suggested in this chapter but not analyzed closely, which would make an interesting project in and of itself. The use of the words "ballooned," for example, and "whopping," is prevalent in the genre, but seem of limited use elsewhere.
 90. Ibid. 53.
 91. (Kanefsky, Carl.) "Role Reversal." *Men's Health*. Aug 2001:53.
 92. Cohen, Craig. "Rockin' in the Fat-Free World." *Men's Fitness*. Feb 2000:120-2.
 93. Lasit, Vaughn. "Down But Not Out." *Men's Fitness* Jun 2000:112.
 94. Peck, Traci. "Just Rewards." *Shape*. Dec 2000:98.
 95. Zic, Mary Z. "Weight Loss Without Gimmicks." *Shape*. July 2001:64.
 96. Many weight-loss programs emphasize the need to create forms of self-comfort to replace the solace of food. See *When Food Is Love*, by Genneen Roth, for example.
 97. Kozak, Gary. "Making the Food Grade." *Men's Fitness*. Jul 2000:118-9.
 98. (Edwards, Marty.) "Half the Man He Used to Be." *Men's Health*. Jan/Feb 2001:48.
 99. Example here about cancer patient losing weight and being congratulated by her friends.

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100. Lagerfeld, Karl. "3-D." *Bazaar*. Feb 2002: 130-2.
 101. Johnson, Rebecca. "The Body Myth." *Vogue*. September 1996: 47+.
 102. In recent years, a number of articles have appeared in the popular press attempting to persuade readers not to judge themselves based solely on the number on the scale, but to pay attention also to these other ways of measuring healthy body weight, including "Weighty Wisdom." *Good Housekeeping*. July 2002:136.
 103. Demangone, Joseph. "The Better Half." *Men's Fitness* Sept 1996: 60-1.
 104. Latvala, Charlotte. "From Hefty to Healthy." *Fitness* Jan 2000: 62-5.
 105. Greer, Jennifer. "Model Behavior." *Weight Watchers*. May 1999:64.
 106. Ibid. 23.
 107. McKinney, Kevin M. "Sink or Swim." *Men's Fitness* Aug 1990: 93-4.
Wells, John. "Life or Death." *Men's Fitness* Dec 1991: 98-9.
 108. Ibid. 126
 109. Ibid. 64.
 110. Latvala, Charlotte. "I'll Never Go Back." *Fitness* Feb 2002: 27.
 111. Cohen, Craig. "Rockin' in the Fat-Free World." *Men's Fitness*. Feb 2000:120-2.
 112. West, Rebecca as told to Marlene Cimon. "A Dream Come True." *Woman's Day*. 10/5/99:116-8.
 113. Orbach, Susie. *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*. New York: Galahad Books, 1997:41.
 114. McGraw, Phillip C. "The Ultimate Weight Solution." *O*. Oct 2003:236+/
115. In Phillips and D'Orso, p. 7.
 116. Powter, Susan. *Stop the Insanity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993:51.
 117. (Mosher, Jerry.) "We Can Work It Off." *Men's Health*. Nov 2001:56.
 118. Miller, Ann. *Shape*. Feb 2000:66;
Hirtzel, Christine and Diana; Orgeron, Beth and Hilda; Bryant, Richard and

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- Brandon; Austin, Larianne and Awbrey, Billie; Marconi, Helen and Rose. "Success Files." *Weight Watchers*. May/June 2002:36-44.
119. Reality programs are known for manipulating and editing footage so that more tension appears than existed.
120. Interesting advertisements for Weight Watchers, featuring Whoopie Goldberg touting her status as a "Big Loser" make clear how the paradoxical language of celebration over losing has become rather commonplace.
121. See, for example, "Weighty Wisdom," in *Good Housekeeping*, July 2002:136. Section entitled "Dubious Diets and Smart Choices," which slots seven plans into two categories ("Bad [Too restrictive or unbalanced nutritionally]" or "Good [Nutritionally balanced, easy to follow]").
122. Compare the Atkins diet, based on the book, *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*, by Robert C. Atkins, M.D., with that proposed by Susan Powter in her two books, *Stop the Insanity* and *Food*.
123. Compare Powter's program with any so-called "Mediterranean" diet.
124. Latvala, Charlotte. "From Hefty to Healthy." *Fitness* Jan 2000: 63.
125. Hansen-Brown, Laura J. *Shape*. July 2000:126.
126. Miller, Shira. *Shape*. July 2000:124; Sexton, Chris. "I Love the New Me." *Fitness* May 2000: 88; 90-1.; Messina, Mickey. "Positive Direction." *Shape*. Feb 2001:78; 5 Peck, Traci. "Just Rewards." *Shape*. Dec 2000:98; 6 Flachsbar, Denise. *Fit*. Dec 2000: 86; 7 Spadaro, Linda. qtd. in McCafferty, Megan. "I Got the Body of My Dreams." *Fitness* Dec 2000-Jan 2001: 74; 76.
127. Grachanin, Chuck. *Men's Fitness*. Sept 1988:111
128. Dotsey, John M. "Deep-Dish Dilemma." *Men's Fitness* Oct 1989: 105; Silvestre, Henry. "Back from the Brink." *Men's Fitness* Feb 1989: 115-6; Roenick, James. "Speaking of Fitness." *Men's Fitness* Dec 1997: 64-5; Mazovec, Philip. "Pedaling to Lose." *Men's Fitness*. Oct 2000:116;133. Zuppichini, Matthew. "Flab on the Gridiron." *Men's Fitness* Aug 1989: 111-2.
129. Susan Powter's signature hyperbolic, verbose and exclamatory style is significantly different from most female authors, and certainly there are some men whose descriptions are understated.
130. Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight*. P. 108.

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131. Powter, Susan. *Stop the Insanity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993:67.
 132. Tudanger, Alan. *Men's Fitness*. Dec 2001:144.
 133. Reed, Elaine. *Fit*. Feb 2001: 86.
 134. Lynch, Danielle. "A Whole New Me." *Shape*. June 2001: 68.
 135. Flachsbart, Denise. "Pleasant Surprise." *Shape*. Dec 2000:100.
 136. In *Body-for-LIFE*, p. 14, 190, 198, and 200, respectively.
 137. McFadden, Brandon. In Phillips' *Body-for-LIFE*. P. 193.
 138. Osgoodby, Robert. In Phillips' *Body-for-LIFE*. P. 194.
 139. Life, Jeffry. In Phillips' *Body-for-LIFE*. P. 199.
 140. Tate, Michael. In Phillips' *Body-for-LIFE*. P. 201; Carson, Ralph. In Phillips' *Body-for-LIFE*. P. 197.
 141. Dyson, Tonya. *Fit*. Dec 2000: 84.
 142. P. 53.
 143. Lisenring, Aida. "Is Cardio Dead?" *Elle* month year: 344+.
 144. Whimper, Denise. "Losing Weight Through Spiritual Gain." *Heart and Soul* Feb-Mar 2000:48.
 145. Harris, Sonya. "Happy to be Hippy." *Heart and Soul* Mar-Apr 1998:44.
 146. Yancey, Antronette K. "What a Fit Body Looks Like." *Heart and Soul* Mar-Apr 1998.
 147. *Discipline and Punish*.
 148. One that I do not discuss but that seems to merit closer scrutiny is the use of larger women in commercials for such things as cleaning products, medicine and stores that offer economic and time "savings," stores like Wal-Mart where groceries and other goods can be shopped for at the same time.

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149. Kent, Le'a. "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women." *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001:134.
 150. Segal, Cora. "When Did Fat Become a Crime?" *Marie Claire*. Sep 2004: 131+.
 151. Photographic credit David LaChapelle. *George* Jun 2000:57.
 152. Kent, Le'a. "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women." *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001:134-5.
 153. Barthes, Roland. "The Photographic Message." P.26.
 154. Fleming, David. "Can Pictures Be Arguments?" *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33 (Summer 1996):13-15.
 155. Blair, J. Anthony. "The Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments." *Argumentation and Advocacy* (Summer 1996):24.
 156. Ibid, p. 33.
 157. Messaris. Paul. *Visual Literacy*. P. 109.
 158. Ibid, p. 109.
 159. Birdsell, David S. and Leo Groarke. "Toward a Theory of Visual Argument." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33 (Summer 1996):5.
 160. Ibid, p. 7.
 161. Kent, Le'a. "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women." *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001:135.
 162. A nearly identical advertisement appears on p. 5-6 in Joe Weider's *Muscle and Fitness* 1/02, and Hydroxycut runs ads featuring only the female weight loss story in *Elle*, *Marie Claire* and other "Fashion" magazines, too.
 163. Kress, Gunther and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: A Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996:204-5.
 164. When the goal of writing a success story is to highlight a dramatic change that is both mental and physical, it makes some sense for these authors to select

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- “bad pictures” for their before picture. That way, the change from before to after is more obvious, and their potential ability to win. Be it in the “Body for LIFE” challenge or the “Finally Fit!” vacation, or in whatever other contest they may be entering. People whose narratives are not also prize entries may have the same goal: emphasizing the dramatic change.
165. Given the after-the-fact nature of selecting a “before” photograph in other magazines and other variables, one will often find “before” photographs smiling.
 166. Hochheimer, Laurie. Personal interview. 13 August 2003.
 167. It is worth noting that Hochheimer’s second “after” photograph required her to re-lose some of the weight she had lost on the program the first time but had regained.
 168. While this is not exactly unusual, I am struck by the fact that her degree of visible fat “before” is not very pronounced. One might posit that the leaner one is “before” might determine some acceptability of smiling “before.” The photographic convention that call upon people to smile for photographs whether or not they are legitimately happy also accounts for some of the “before” smiling that is apparent in “before” photographs chosen more haphazardly.
 169. Matz, Judy. “Behind the Makeover.” *Allure* Jan 2004: 64-5.
 170. Bellucci is an Italian actress who starred in the two sequels to *The Matrix* and as Mary Magdalene in *The Passion of Christ*.
 171. Total Makeover: Life of the Party.” *Allure*. Oct 2004: 168.
 172. Latvala, Charlotte. “Fitness/Forecast: I Did It!” *Fitness* Aug 2002: 38.
 173. Sonnenburg, Beth. “Losing It.” *Muscle and Fitness: Hers* Nov 2003: 48-50.
 174. Miller, Carolyn. “Genre as Social Action.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (May 1984): 151-67.
 175. Cohen, Ralph. “History and Genre.” *New Literary History* 17 (1986): 203-18.
 176. See “From Bridget Jones to Skin and Bones.” You, Brenda, Suzanne Rozdeba, Victoria Gotti, Tony Brenna and Anna Holmes. *Star*. 15 Nov 2004:48-52. The article reports on Zellwegger’s “addiction to deadly dieting,” and shows “before and after” photographs of singers Gwen Stefani

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- and Amanda Bynes, as well as talk show host Kelly Ripa, suggesting that the three have lost too much weight since their “before” pictures.
177. Pope, Jr., Harrison G., Katharine A. Phillips, and Roberto Olivardia. *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession*. New York: Free Press, 2000.
 178. http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=286&Profile_ID=41142 (downloaded Nov 15, 2004)
 179. http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=286&Profile_ID=41141 (downloaded November 15, 2004)
 180. http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=286&Profile_ID=41140 (downloaded Nov 15, 2004)
 181. Pope, Jr., Harrison, G., Katharine A. Phillips, and Roberto Olivardia. *The donis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession*. New York: The Free Press, 2000.
 182. --- *Shape*. Mar 1993: 128.
 183. Gottlieb, Lori. *Stick Figure: A Diary of My Former Self*. Penguin: New York, 2000:61.
 184. Hornbacher, Marya. *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*. Harper Perennial: New York, 1999:16-7.
 185. Ibid. p. 102.
 186. Gottlieb, p. 96-7.
 187. www.nationaleatingdisorders.org (obtained February 8, 2002)
 188. Liu, p. 35-6.
 189. Pope et al, p. 15.
 190. Pope et al, p. 17.
 191. When my cousin, Christopher, was attempting to diet at age thirteen, and was frustrated by the scale, I suggested to him that he might gain weight by drinking water, but not gain fat, and he was disconcerted, I think because he

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- equated “weight” with “fat” and yet knew that drinking water would not cause him to become “fat.”
192. Derived from conversations with Barbara Burdych and Diane Boyd, among others.
 193. Liu, Aimee. *Solitaire*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.com, Inc., 2000: 36.
 194. *Ibid.*, p. 36-7.
 195. Gottlieb, p. 86-7.
 196. Taken from a list at “pro-anorexia” site <http://pages.ivillage.com/strayinbutterfly/id3.html> (November 15, 2004).
 197. Normandi and Roark, p. 46-7.
 198. See, for example, the diary from “Mariah,” who records what her “Negative Mind” says to her at various times of the day, and her reactions to it and to social situations, on p. 94-5; and “Mindy’s dialogue with her Negative Mind,” recorded on p. 116-26.
 199. Hornbacher, p. 85.
 200. Knapp, Caroline. *Appetites: Why Women Want*. Counterpoint/Perseus Group: New York, 2003:48-9.
 201. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
 202. Roth, Geneen. *When Food Is Love: Exploring the Relationship Between Eating and Intimacy*. New York: Penguin, 1992: 102-3.
 203. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
 204. See, for example, the *Time* cover story of 4/24/00, entitled “Never Too Buff,” in which author John Cloud reviews the book to call attention to the problem. See also Dickinson, Amy and Lisa McLaughlin. “Measuring Up.” *Time* 20 Nov 2000:154. Dickinson and McLaughlin critique “G.I. Joe...[who] has evolved from a normally proportioned grunt into a buff, ripped, mega muscular warrior who, if he were a real man, would have 27-inch biceps and other proportions achievable only through years of bench presses, protein diets and the liberal use of steroids.”
 205. Brainum, Jerry. “Jerry Brainum’s Bodybuilding Pharmacology: Fried Liver.” *Ironman* Mar 2001: 124+.

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206. Sedgwick, John. "The Adonis Complex." *Gentleman's Quarterly* May 2001: 220+.
207. McDougall, Christopher and Lou Schuler. "Buyin' Bulk." *Men's Health* Mar 2003: 156. Greenhill, Duke. "Loving Adonis." *American Fitness* Mar/Apr 2003: 29.
208. Ibid, p. 91.
209. The first advertisement mentioned is for "Lean Body" nutritional supplements and appeared on p. 125 of *Ironman*, March 2001. The second advertisement is from the same issue, and is for Nitro-Tech supplements, and is part of a six-page "ad-report" that spans p.86-91.
210. "Animal Stak" advertisement. In *Muscle and Fitness* Jan 2002:11-2.
211. Hornbacher, p. 7.
212. Claude-Pierre, p. 70.
213. Normandi, Carol Emery and Laurelee Roark. *It's Not About Food*. New York: Perigree, 1998:18.
214. My anecdotal experience tells me that the establishment of individuality within group membership is important. A student recently suggested that she might not do a project on overcoming her bulimia because "everybody has their bulimia story." There seems to be a sense that eating disordered behavior, especially in some communities (such as on college campuses), is so common that it individual cases lose their significance.
215. Here one might think of such cartoons as *He-Man*, in which a very muscular hero fights an equally muscular villain. Even the non-violent Nickelodeon cartoon, "Dora the Explorer," however, participates in the glorification of muscularity. Dora's backpack releases a number of talking and singing "stars," who help Dora and friends accomplish feats, but the greatest of these, "Hero Star," has bulky "biceps" which he flexes to claim his heroism. The regular stars have no such musculature.
216. Obviously, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and Jean-Claude Van Damme are stars of action movies that glorify the capabilities of very muscular men to save the day, but more recent examples include the two *Spiderman* films starring Tobey Maguire, whose Average Joe persona develops rigidly defined stomach muscles to transform into the superhero. Like the weight loss success story subjects featured in Chapter 3, Spiderman

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- and Superman shed their glasses when they transform into the superhero alter-ego.
217. MacLeod, Sheila. *The Art of Starvation: A Story of Anorexia and Survival*. New York: Schocken Books, 1982: 59. MacLeod's assertion that the anorexic's body is a rejection of female sexuality is often repeated. Both the anorexic female body and the fat female body are argued to be symbolic of a rejection of adult sexuality in addition to rejections of cultural strictures that say a woman's body should be both soft and slender.
218. Claude-Pierre, Peggy. *The Secret Language of Eating Disorders: How You Can Understand and Work to Cure Anorexia and Bulimia*. New York: Vintage/Random House. 1997: 67.
219. Thorne-Smith and De Rossi would later admit to anorexic behaviors used to maintain their figures during their work on the program.
220. Kidd would later gain weight but remain a runway model. Her "size acceptance narratives" were published. Two of them include:
Kidd, Jodie. "New Kidd." *Elle* (British Edition) May 2000:50-6.
Jamison, Laura. "They Called Me an Anorexic Giraffe." (Jodie Kidd) *Cosmopolitan*. Dec 2000:218-20.
221. Retrieved from <http://www.southcoasttoday.com/daily/02-00/02-01-00/b03he049.htm> Nov 25, 2004.
222. Seymour, Lesley Jane. Personal E-mail. Mar 15, 2005.
223. I name this genre for the International Size Acceptance Association, whose mission statement indicates that the organization's primary purpose is to end size discrimination against children and adults, and defines size acceptance as "acceptance of self and others without regard to weight or body size" (www.size-acceptance.org/mission.html). Because many of the narratives featured in this chapter are arguably written by women who are not "fat," I chose not to call the narratives "fat acceptance narratives," though there is an active group of Americans involved in the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance.
224. Perelman, Chaim, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Trans John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1971.
225. Wright, Les Ed. *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*. Harrington Park Press: Binghamton, NY; 1997.

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226. Mo’Nique and Sherri A. McGee. *Skinny Women Are Evil*. New York: Atria Books, 2003:1.
227. “A San Francisco gym put up a billboard of a space alien that said, ‘When they come, they’ll eat the fat ones first.’ After seeing that, I got people to wave signs that said, ‘Eat me!’ Wann, Marilyn. *Rosie* Jul 2002:89.
228. Thone, Ruth Raymond. *Fat—A Fat Worse Than Death: Women, Weight, and Appearance*. New York: Harrington Press, 1997.
229. Star. “Wow!” amazon.com Posted 18 June 2003. Retrieved 20 Jan 2004.
230. It may be argued that truly fat women are not featured often even in those issues which attempt to address body size acceptance. As is commonly argued, most “plus-size” models are size 10 or 12, so their body shape and, indeed, their height, make them less-than-representative of the “average” woman.
231. qtd in Dunn, Jancee. “Intimate Portrait: Life After Sex.” *Lifetime*. Feb 2004: 80.
232. Manheim, Camryn. *Wake Up, I’m Fat!* New York: Broadway Books, 1999:169.
233. Ibid, p. 240.
234. Wann, Marilyn. *Fat!So?* Ten Speed Press, 1999.
236. Comments reviewer Michelle Goldberg, “Except for those who frequent nude beaches or spend a lot of time in health club locker rooms, most of us hardly ever see what real people’s naked bodies look like. These pictures are calming and reassuring, though they can also defeat Wann’s purpose. Sadly, instead of realizing that all kinds of bodies can be beautiful, I found myself thinking, ‘Well, at least I’m not *that* fat.’” Her comments resonate with my earlier assertion that photographs are countervailing in the size acceptance movement, especially because side-by-side images--of several of the same body part, of several women of a variety of thinness-- inherently suggest comparison and contrast (as I argue in chapter 1).
237. Mo’Nique and Sherri A. McGee. *Skinny Women Are Evil*. New York: Atria Books, 2003:15-6.
238. Manheim, p. 233.

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239. Mo’Nique, p. 16.
240. Goodwin, E01.
241. *Prime Time*. Host Diane Sawyer. ABC. 6 Sep 2001.
242. *Fat!So?*
243. Brin, Geri. “Sizing Up Her Life--Literally and Figuratively.” *Figure* Winter 2003: 54-7.
244. Tisdale, Sallie. “A Weight That Women Carry.” *Strategies For College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000:176-83.
245. Shanker, Wendy. “Name That Size.” *Mode* Feb 1998.
246. Tisdale, p. 173.
247. Bandele, Asha. “Good bye scale, Hello Gorgeous.” *Lifetime*. Feb 2004:92-3.
248. Carré Otis, “Dressing Room Drama.” *Grace Woman*. Sept/Oct 2003 43.
249. “One Woman’s War With Her Scale.” *Glamour*. May 2003:250.
250. Dumas, Firoozeh. “The Surprising Road to Self Acceptance.” *Lifetime* Feb 2004:90-1.
251. *Fat!So?*
252. Tisdale, p. 174.
253. Wann, Marilyn. “Three Cheers For Learning to Love Yourself Just the Way You Are.” *Rosie* July 2002:86.
254. Tisdale, p. 174-5.
255. Tisdale, p. 178.
256. Wann, p. 88.
257. Tisdale, p. 182.
258. Dragonwagon, Crescent. “Pushing the Belly Button.” *Mode*. Winter 1997: 43-8.

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259. Smith, Peter. "Cybill Disobedience." *Mode* May 1999:100-5.
260. Kennedy, Lisa. "Carré Otis: Back on Top." *Mode* Sept 2001: 96-105.
261. ...[O]utspoken advocate [Terri Beringer] believes that society is still clinging to outmoded images of what being fit looks like--she immediately brings up the overly sculpted bodies in the Bally's commercials. While some of those women possess muscles not unlike the ones she used to have, Beringer now sees them and says, "Been there, done that, it's time to move on." Corbett, Corynne L. "Balancing Act." *Mode* Apr 1998:70.
- [I]nstead of letting the number on the scale run my life, I've adopted a radical, commonsense approach. I call it the Two E's, because it's too easy: Eat well; exercise regularly. It's familiar advice, but I don't expect the Two E's to make me thin, just healthy, and I think people of all sizes can benefit.... I do aerobics and swim and take hip-hop dance lessons every week because it feels great. I even got to be on *The Tonight Show* with the Padded Lilies, a fat women's synchronized-swimming troupe." Wann, Marilyn. "Three Cheers for Learning to Love Yourself Just the Way You Are." *Rosie* Jul 2002: 84-9.
262. Candye Kane, qtd in Gehman, Pleasant.
263. qtd in Goodwin Christopher. *Toronto Star* Apr 4 2002: E01.
264. K.M. "Mail and E-mail." *Mode*. Feb 1998: 28.
265. Consider also: "Now there's computer retouching. We're aspiring to an impossible ideal. Nobody looks like that--not even the models themselves! You almost have to put yourself on a Magazine Fast. Don't look at those magazines! If you do, you'll get depressed." Cybill Shepherd in "Cybill Disobedience."
266. Tisdale, p. 181.
267. Vanessa McGrady, "Show It Like It Is." *Seattle Times*. August 30, 2001:E2
268. Qtd. In Picker, Lauren. "How I Got Over My Weight weirdness." *New Woman* Nov 1999:80.
269. Ibid, p. 81.
270. Brin, Geri. "Sizing Up Her Life: Literally and Figuratively." *Figure*. Winter 2003:56.

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271. Tisdale, p. 181.
272. Manheim, p. 280-1.
273. "A Conversation With Jennifer Weiner." In *Good In Bed*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2001.
274. Weiner, Jennifer. *In Her Shoes*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2002: 167-8.
275. p. 151.
276. Weisberger, Lauren. *The Devil Wears Prada*. New York: Broadway Books, 2003: 41.
277. Holden, Wendy. *Simply Divine*. New York: Plume books, 2000:22.
278. See also Jim Karas, in *The Business Plan for the Body*, (Three Rivers Press, 2000), who writes: "Marilyn Wann...claims her 270 pounds on a five-foot-four frame [is] her natural size. I think this is absolutely ridiculous. Bodies want to be overweight and out of shape? They want to be? This is totally untrue" (2).
279. Manheim, p. 226.
280. Ibid, p. 280.
281. Segrest, Susan. "Embraceable Me." *Mode* Oct 1999:90-4
282. Peck, Cheryl. "Queen of the Gym." *Fat Girls and Lawn Chairs*. New York: Warner, 2004:1.
283. Castagnoli, Francesca. "Jess's Success." *Self* Jun 2004:46.
284. Tisdale, p. 180.
285. Manheim, p. 345.
286. Goddard, Joanna. "Jennifer Weiner Hits Her Stride." *Figure*. Winter 2003: 95.
287. Topel, Fred. "Action Adventure Movies: Get Sly (Continued)."
<http://actionadventure.about.com/library/weekly/aa100200b.htm> (9/2/04).
288. Remember that African American and Latino women are rarely depicted in weight loss success stories or eating disorder memoirs, and even in African

American women's success stories, the element of retaining a womanly "curvy" shape is linked to the culture.

289. Martin Short developed his "Jiminy Glick" character for *The Martin Short Show*, which aired in 1999. Then, in 2001, the character emerged again on *Primetime Glick*, which airs on Comedy Central. In November, 2002, the British Discovery channel featured "Skin Deep," a series of three programs in which Body Shop founder Anita Roddick, dressed alternately as a fat woman, an elderly woman and a homeless woman, explored what life was like as each. An American "reality" TV show, "Average Joe," also used a fat suit. The premise of the program, which has spawned two sequels already, is that a beautiful woman, expecting to choose from handsome bachelors, is instead presented with a group of ordinary looking men. The show calls for the bachelorettes to eliminate men they deem undesirable; as the program wears on, male models are introduced into the pool of eligible men and pitted against the remaining "average joes." Malena, the first bachelorette, was disguised as her own "cousin" in a fat suit and makeup to interview the suitors who remained near the end of the series, purportedly to ask them questions to advise Malena on a choice, but really to test their reactions to this less glamorous version of Malena. Cameras recorded the post-meeting discussion amongst Malena's suitors, to see what their reaction to the "cousin" was. The project was repeated on "Average Joe II," which was cast and filmed before the first was aired. These programs were aired in 2003 and 2004.
290. Previously introduced in Chapter 5, this acronym stands for the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance.
291. Pinker, Steven. *How the Mind Works*: 549-50.
292. Inspiring such a fear seems to be part of the motivation for becoming a bodybuilder, if my analysis in Chapter 3 of "The Adonis Complex" is to be trusted.
293. Freud, Sigmund. "Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious." *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. and Ed. A. A. Brill. New York: The Modern Library, 1995:660-7.
294. This type of humor is sometimes present in films in which fat actors play less objectified but still burly/clumsy Everymen, such as when John Goodman, in *Always*, sits on a delicate chair under an umbrella shade, only to have mud dropped on him by a would-be pilot guided by the spirit of Richard Dreyfuss' leading man. Similarly, Chris Farley's physical heft was often used for the kind of knocks-things-over-falls-down-repeatedly type of humor. Paradoxically, it requires a great deal of coordination to do that type of physical comedy, though the most famous incidence of Farley's grace also

mocked his physique: when Patrick Swayze hosted Saturday Night Live, a skit contrasting the two as they auditioned for a single spot as Chippendale dancer became an SNL classic.

295. Ibid, Grigoriadis.
296. Hinds, Julie. "Actresses Draw Flak for Putting on Fat Suits Rather Than Pounds," *The Houston Chronicle*. August 5, 2001:9.
297. Ellen, Barbara. "True Love Weighs." *The Times* (London). October 18, 2001. P. 12.
298. Ibid, Grigoriadis.
299. See Chapter 1, in which fat people before weight loss self-characterize as "out of control."
300. Puckrik, Katie. *Mademoiselle*. Jul 2001:86.
301. Roddick, Anita. "Dispatch: The Young Girls Were the Worst, Muttering 'Fat Cow' As I Walked Past...But Never to My Face."
www.anitaroddick.com/weblogdetail.jsp?title=null&id=347. Retrieved Nov 28, 2004.
302. Savacool, Julia. "One Woman, Two Messages." *Marie Claire* Apr 2004:120-4.
303. The magazine argues that she has the "same dimensions as the average American woman.", p. 124.
304. Ibid p. 122.
305. It is true that many people are accustomed to having women ask them if they look fat, and feeling obligated to offer reassurance and perhaps this pattern of ask and response influenced the responses to some degree, but certainly that conversational typicality could not account for such a response.