

## ABSTRACT

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  CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS OF BODY  
  SIZE

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In his thoroughly researched work, Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities (1999), Jason Cromwell states for the communities of transmen and FTMs, “The limits on the uses of bodies, and on what types of bodies are considered legitimate, is regulated through the body politic (judicial, medical, and political systems)... Furthermore, through the body, the body politic dictates what constitutes legitimate sex and gender, normal sexuality, and even what identities are considered appropriate” (32). Similarly, our cultural understandings about and personal relationships to fatness are informed by an intricate configuration of medical, legal, political, and visual messages that convey notions of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” body size. This dissertation will examine multiple instances wherein the negotiation of these messages produces complicated subject positions for bodies of size. It will investigate how the fat body operates to reveal both hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic significance by drawing upon the authority of medical, legal,

and political narratives produced about fatness and body size. By analyzing the performative texts of the film, *Real Women Have Curves*, the photography collection Women En Large, and a political performance group of fat cheerleaders, called F.A.T.A.S.S., this project will examine the representations of fat women to illustrate how fat subjectivities are neither merely accommodating nor simply resistive. Denying any construction of a one-dimensional story about resisting bodies or hegemonic narratives, this dissertation seeks to highlight the nuanced and complicated subjectivities produced by and for fat women within various contexts. And by analyzing the complexity of these moments, “Performing Fatness” will attempt to elevate body size as a major point of consideration within the analysis of all bodies. In so doing, body size will be revealed as interconnected and inseparable from our understandings of race, class, gender, sexuality, as well as, other points of identification, and ultimately transform the ways in which we theorize and understand bodies altogether.

PERFORMING FATNESS AND THE  
CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS OF BODY SIZE

By

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## Dedication

For all the fat women and men who challenge us to think differently about ourselves and the communities we live in... thank you for your bravery.

## Acknowledgements

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## Chapter 1: Introducing the Body – Constructing Personhood and Other Theoretical Work on the Body

...a true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born.

-Katherine Dunn Geek Love (20)

The Geek constructed its own status as a “living anomaly” out of the ephemeral and malleable tissue of behavior – biting off the heads of chickens and rats and “animalistically acting out” to amuse and repulse spectators before they imbibed the real thing – and, in doing so, demonstrated that “freakishness” was a state of mind: programmed and packaged to appeal to its audiences yearning for the unusual and different.

-David Mitchell “Modernist Freaks and Postmodernist Geeks” (362)

The fat body is one that has become of recent interest to feminist theory. The publication of books such as Kathleen LeBesco’s Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity (2004), LeBesco and Brazier’s edited collection Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression (2001), Don Kulick and Ann Mealey’s Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession (2005), and the much anticipated Fat Studies Reader by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (currently being shopped to university presses) demonstrates that feminist theorists are paying attention to fatness and bodies of size, their meanings, identities, and cultural constructions.<sup>1</sup> Feminist theory has long focused on theorizing the body and remains one of the foremost theoretical locations from which to question and analyze the body. The epigraphs above outline one of the primary contentions in feminist theory about the body – whether it is a cultural construction in and of itself and/or whether it exists prior to meaning and the cultural constructions of particular behaviors and appearances make it meaningful.

A primary point of investigation for this project is the kind of cultural work that bodies are able to do – be it through performances or other representations in art or film. I will argue that this cultural work is, first, the negotiation of multiple messages received about body size and, second, that this negotiation, arguably, produces something significant for our cultural conversations about body size in the United States. This dissertation focuses on bringing together medical and legal discourses about fatness and body size with moments of “fat performance” in order to examine how the messages of each contribute to, contradict, and even reinforce one another. In the vein of performance studies, I am using the term “performance,” to mean all the ways that people consciously and unconsciously present themselves as “fat” – in a way, capturing both everyday life and cognizant performance and everything in between.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, I explore how the body can transform the way one interprets the world by concentrating on the interplay between the messages conveyed through art, film, and performance and the authority granted to messages circulating from other discursive outlets. Are particular “fat performances” able to offer something that legal, medical, and political discourses cannot? How do these “performances” generate a new conversation about body size in this historical moment? And finally, how might we begin to acknowledge the multiple and even contradictory positions on fatness as part and parcel of one another – viewing/seeing them as a more accurate portrayal of an ongoing negotiation of the world that surrounds us?

In the sections to come, I will outline two major theoretical camps within the field on the body. In addition, I will highlight how some scholars are trying to think through and bring together those theoretical positions by considering a middle ground that draws

attention to the construction of meaning on the body. Finally, I will offer a new theoretical frame through which to consider the body, its meanings, constructions, and realities.

### *Theorizing the Body*

What is a body? Although the answer for some might be obvious, the variety of theoretical and material answers is actually indicative of the different cultural imaginations we have about the body. In that way, the question then becomes a precursor for one of the arguments that I would like to make in this chapter. All too often, however, the answers are conceived in one of two ways. For some the body is a social construction upon which meanings are inscribed; thus, the body itself becomes meaningful. For others, the body is the lived entity through which a material reality is experienced. Although these are not the only options for understanding the body, they do become the most prominent categories for understanding much of the theory written about the body in Women's Studies circles. As the opening epigraphs demonstrate, the literature about the body weaves together a myriad of complex and even contradictory assumptions, theories, stereotypes, and understandings of the body and its multiple meanings and incarnations within contemporary culture. The question, "what is a body?," generates so much theoretical conversation that it arguably constitutes its own area of study – a field simultaneously old and new with methodologies and disciplinary locations that are varied and overlapping. The collection of literature centered here focuses on contemporary understandings of the body primarily as it is conceived within Western thinking. In addition, it covers a number of topics including cosmetic surgery, perversion, representation, body alteration, eating problems, disability, performance, sex

and pain. This chapter will show how this field is divided into two modes of thinking about the body: the first, I call the social construction of bodies and the second, is the lived or material reality of bodies. After explicating the important texts and issues embedded within each argument, I will consider yet another line of thinking that has emerged from these different modes of thought. This third avenue, I call the construction of complex personhood (to borrow the words of sociologist, Avery Gordon). I will argue that complex personhood offers a fresh perspective to the literature about the body. Despite the fact that many of these works do not explicitly name "the body" as their primary topic, I will demonstrate how they are contributing to the field and changing it. Complex personhood offers a necessary yet complicated mode of thought in an effort to better understand and integrate the bodies we construct with the bodies we live in. This is imperative to the argument of this dissertation because it highlights the ways that people construct an understanding of themselves and their presentation to the world in complicated and often contradictory ways.

### *Constructing a Body*

The body is both a contested and a celebrated site for feminist and cultural theory. Although one can argue that theorists have been thinking about the body since antiquity, the particular understandings of the body that I want to discuss here are relatively recent. Susan Bordo writes in *Unbearable Weight* (1993) that:

...feminism inverted and converted the old metaphor of the Body Politic, found in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and many others, to a new metaphor: the politics of the body. In the old metaphor of the Body Politic, the state or society was imagined as a human body, with different organs and parts

symbolizing different functions, needs, social constituents, forces, and so forth...  
Now, feminism imagined the human body as *itself* a politically inscribed entity,  
its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment  
and control. (21)

Bordo identifies one of the shifts I would like to highlight - the discursive movement from the lived reality of bodies to the social construction of bodies. It is within the conversation of constructed bodies that three smaller discussions will be highlighted: representations of the body, how these representations come together to canonize the prevailing notion that the body is socially constructed, and finally, the criticism of this thinking most commonly characterized as the poststructuralist death of the subject.

In an effort to better understand our cultural landscape and its impact on our bodies and the bodies of others, feminists have consistently turned toward the analysis of representations. Not surprisingly, then, many of the texts here focus on representation analysis and its impact on the viewing consumer. Susan Bordo's Unbearable Weight and Twilight Zones (1999) both examine images of femininity and masculinity in advertisements in an effort to think through the power of persuasion these images carry. In Black Looks (1992), bell hooks interrogates the representations of blackness and black subjectivity exploring clothing catalogues, documentaries such as *Paris Is Burning*, as well as mainstream film and videos. Following hooks' lead, Michael Bennett and Vanessa Dickerson's anthology Recovering the Black Female Body (2001) brings together multiple authors to discuss the counter-hegemonic images of African American women and what they contribute to our understandings and even, reunderstandings of the black female body. Amelia Jones' Body Art/Performing the Subject (1998) investigates

the performance art of Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, and other body artists from the 1970's to the present in order to discuss what remains of their work after the performance is over. In Bound and Gagged (1996), Laura Kipnis explores the meanings of pornography for those whom the pornography claims to represent and for the culture at large. Judith Halberstam's Female Masculinity (1998) talks about the representations of female masculinity or masculinity without men in film, drag shows, and in fiction. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz weave together multiple conversations about race and class through their anthology, White Trash (1997) which explores the representations and meanings of "white trash" in contemporary America. Finally, in The Technology and the Logic of American Racism (2000), Sarah Chinn discusses the meanings of literary figures such as Huck Finn and Uncle Tom in order to shed light on how the body serves as evidence for our cultural imaginations of race in the United States.

These texts are only a sample, but they indicate the breadth of work on the body that is concerned with how that body is being represented. For some, the connection between an image or representation and a "real" body is a literal translation, one that might be characterized, somewhat simplistically, as cause and effect. For others, there is no connection at all. In The Body in Late-Capitalist USA (1995), Donald Lowe explains: "To some extent, the way in which the body is represented and imaged deeply affects our lives, but representation and image do not directly reflect the actual conditions of the lived body. I reject any equivalence between body image/representation and the lived body" (1). Although he does not dismiss the power of the image to affect us perceptually, Lowe argues strongly that in a late-capitalist era, representations are put forth to eliminate all distinction from an actual real body. In other words, an image of

Michelle Pfeifer provides the illusion that it is Michelle Pfeifer when 1) an image is not a real person, but a representation of a real person, and 2) images are enhanced and detailed to eliminate imperfections and thus the image is no longer even a representation of a real person, but a created version of her that we accept as "real."

Lowe is not alone in his beliefs about representations of the body and in thinking about how we construct images to represent the "real." Scholars invariably begin to question how outside the world of images, our own bodies are constructed in an effort to publicly represent them to the others around us. In the introduction to Writing on the Body (1997), the editors remark, "A focus on the body offers a creative alternative to a historical overview of feminist and gender theories because the body, that space where gender difference seems materially inscribed, has always been central to feminist investigations of representation" (Conboy et al. 7-8). Thinking beyond representations and toward the constructions of bodies themselves, Judith Butler writes in Gender Trouble (1990) that "...the body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But 'the body' is itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender" (8).

The social construction model is a common framework for how bodies are categorized within a social hierarchy dependent on classifications of race, class, gender, sex, sexuality, disability, and nationality. Despite its frequent usage, many theorists and critics have been voicing concern for what is often characterized as the poststructuralist death of the subject. In an attempt to answer critics of Gender Trouble, in her second



book Bodies that Matter (1993), Butler points out that “Within some quarters of feminist theory in recent years, there have been calls to retrieve the body from what is often characterized as the linguistic idealism of poststructuralism” (27). Despite her recognition of this concern, Bodies that Matter only seems to further explain Butler’s initial arguments in Gender Trouble. Rather than locating a lived body in the theory of her work, she continues to contest that there is no body without understanding its meaning or significance.

Butler argues that a body does not exist prior to any signification. It only materializes when it becomes meaningful or when it “matters” and thus becomes intelligible to others as a signifier of space, time, location, and socio-cultural status (Bodies the Matter, 34-5). Through such signifiers, the body develops as a text to be read and a code to be deciphered – much like that of an image or representation. This signification process, however, is not without considerations of power. Michel Foucault contributes to this conversation by locating the body as a “target of power,” wherein the body is disciplined and made docile or subject to the institutions and disciplines that enact power on it. He writes:

The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body – to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces... A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. (Discipline and Punish 1977/1995, 136)

Through this theoretical framework, bodies are connected to representations, representations to constructed images, constructed images to institutions of power, and

institutions of power to docile bodies – ones awaiting meaning and social value.

Interestingly, this theoretical genealogy is repeated at the beginnings of most of the texts interested in representations mentioned earlier. In this way, the social construction of bodies is imperative in any contemporary understanding of a field looking to answer the question, “what is a body?”

Although for Butler, gender is the primary mark of signification, others have argued since, that race, class, sexuality, and disability are also meaningful markers of a body’s value in society. In her chapter on the similarities between the construction of bodies and the construction of cities, Elizabeth Grosz offers the “body” as “...a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, and skeletal structure, which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and form through the psychical and social inscription of the body’s surface” (Space, Time, and Perversion 1995, 104). In other words, the body only exists as the makeup of different social and cultural meanings grounded in the material reality of living, breathing, and experiencing flesh. By connecting both a discursive analysis with a material understanding, Grosz serves as a meaningful transition between the two theoretical modes of thinking about the body that is being represented here.

### *The Material Reality of Bodies*

At the start of Twilight Zones, Susan Bordo expresses apprehension about the reception her book will receive. She states:

All human bodies are culturally worked on, adorned, shaped, evaluated. But that doesn’t mean that I am ready, along with some postmodernists, to embrace the wholly artificial, ideological nature of ‘the body’ and celebrate the spectacle of its cultural self-fashionings and reconfigurations. (17)

Bordo is not alone, and in spite of a very “theoretical” collection, Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury also find it necessary to acknowledge the schism that has emerged between “theory” and “real life.” “The body has, however, been at the center of feminist theory precisely because it offers no such ‘natural’ foundation for our pervasive cultural assumptions about femininity. Indeed, there is a tension between women’s lived bodily experience and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences” (Writing on the Body 1).

This tension is no doubt familiar to practitioners in Women’s Studies, American Studies and other area studies. It is arguably indicative of the university system’s attempt to “discipline” these interdisciplinary locations. However, within a field about the body, it carries a slightly different set of meanings. It marks different understandings of the body and the tensions that arise when a political movement such as feminism is integrated into the academy as Women’s Studies. Do questions about the category of “Woman” and who that represents outweigh the questions about women who are trying to survive and raise families in a domestic violence shelter or those who are hurt physically or emotionally at the hands of people and institutions who have power over them? In an effort to manage this tension, Rosemary Hennessy explains that she begins from a different theoretical lineage – that of Marxist feminism. In Profit and Pleasure (2000), her position enables her to argue that the material reality of women’s lives is only important in so far as they can be considered inside of a larger looking glass that sees beyond the local. She writes, “...the celebration of ‘the local’ as a self-defined space for the affirmation of cultural identity and the formation of political resistance often also play into late capitalism’s opportunistic use of local-izing – not just as an arrangement of

production but also as a structure of knowing” (8). Hennessey argues that the hyper-localizing of postmodernity fails to account for the ways that late capitalism links the global and the local in a complex system of exploitation and commodification and her text makes that complex system visible. Her voice, along with the concerns of Bordo and Conboy et al., are important in considering the multiple understandings of the body highlighted here. In addition, this foreshadows the next section where I address the material significance of the body in communal, national, and global configurations and how those are illuminated by understanding the body as a social construction, while still needing to voice the material and lived realities that people experience through those bodies.

### *The Construction of Meaning From a Material Standpoint*

It would be inaccurate to represent the theories on the body as mutually exclusive; as either entirely constructed or completely founded in only a lived material reality. Theorists have tried to reconcile these positions for years and many of them are successful by exploring how the meaning layered onto the body is constructed without losing the “real” body underneath. If we consider Hennessey’s work in Profit and Pleasure as an example of texts about the body that manage the contradictions and overlapping of the socially constructed body with the desire to talk about a lived material reality, then other texts from the field of body politics emerge. These texts, like Hennessey's, present a complicated understanding of bodies, some engaging more or less with both the socially constructed or lived reality modes of thinking about the body, but all attempting to situate the body in relationships to other groups of bodies - be they communal, national, or global. Although this does not exactly replicate what Bordo

mentions above in her description of the Body Politic as it was once understood to be a representation of the State, the texts described in this section do implicate individual bodies within larger communities, nations, or global settings and in so doing, talk about how bodies are incorporated into and excluded from these situations and what the impact that has on the individual body as well as the larger body of individuals.

Authors and texts out of Disability Studies seem, more than any others, to be able to discuss the disabled or differently functioning body as included in larger communities of people that might be labeled "disabled" or "freakish," simultaneously leaving them out of the mainstream able-bodied community or, as Erving Goffman called them, "the norms." The work on the disabled body most clearly and consistently builds communities by naming the body and its differences (physical, psychological, and/or mental) as the basis of its community formation. Unlike other interdisciplinary locations based on identity (such as Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, and/or LGBT Studies), Disability Studies does not get caught in the trap of thinking about the body outside of the body. In other words, a clear distinction is drawn between thinking about the body as solely a discursive construction versus thinking about the body as a lived reality upon which social meaning is layered on. As such, community is maintained, rather than compromised or questioned, because the root of analysis of the disabled figure is the actual body, in a wheelchair, on crutches, disfigured, small, large, differently functioning, etc.

In his article "Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century," Lennard Davis describes how the norm is derived from a notion of the majority and how that is then projected onto the

bell curve and maintained through eugenic thought. By demonstrating the hegemony of the normal, he wants to provide an opportunity to rethink the abnormal (26). Davis' article, along with The Disability Studies Reader (1997) in which it appears, offer clear distinctions between the construction of normal/able-bodies and abnormal/disabled people and the communities in which they form and represent. Although in his introduction of the reader, Davis is explicit to say that the anthology is not about the experiences of disabled people [of which Kenny Fries' Staring Back (1997) might well represent], but instead intends to show the breadth of work being done on disability. Although Davis' efforts might at first read as having little to do with the material realities of disabled people or the communities they find themselves in, his own article within the collection demonstrates how the disabled are set apart from "the norms" by physical difference. In addition, his edited collection brings together a community of academics working in the small, but growing area of disability studies, but also speaking to a larger community of disabled people who are looking to see themselves reflected in the study of culture.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson's Extraordinary Bodies (1997) refigures physical disability onto a landscape of American ideology that promotes individualism, freedom, and productive work. Thomson states that "the disabled figure operates as a code for insufficiency, contingency, and abjection - for deviant particularity - thus establishing the contours of a canonical body that garners the prerogatives and privileges of a supposedly stable, universal normalcy" (136). Within the text, she argues that the "disabled" and the "normal" are constructed categories that are imbued with particular meanings and privileges at discrete moments in time. Like Davis, Thomson is able to construct the

disabled figure (more so than the normal figure), thus naming and voicing a community even if only in opposition to a definitive “normal.” In this way, she never questions the body itself, but instead questions the meaning that body implies. She also contributes to the refiguring of disability by arguing in favor of looking at disabled bodies with a new lens; to see them as extraordinary instead of abnormal or deviant.

In her subsequent anthology Freakery (1996), Thomson offers yet another conception of community within the conversation on body politics. In this collected anthology about freakish “others,” she gathers a number of texts in order to tell the varied stories of freaks in history, the construction of the freak, freak and side shows, and contemporary renderings of the freak. On the one hand, Freakery tells the story of freak and side show entertainers who occupy a smaller community of people within the disabled community. These people often work, live, and perform together for years at a time. On the other hand, Freakery questions the definitional boundaries of the “freak” and, to some degree, reclaims the name as a powerful label that captures both the historical exploitation of disabled figures in history, but also the possibility of disabled people forging communities with one another.

Still other authors explore the conflict of communities in light of multiple and competing identities. For Eli Clare, Victoria Brownworth and Susan Raffo, communities are difficult to forge in spite of bodies that are disabled and sexually minoritized. In Exile and Pride (1999), Clare describes a life that is often caught between queer, disabled, rural, and working class communities. As such, she is forced to walk (with cerebral palsy) often unpaved ground into each of these separate communities, thus uniting them as often unfriendly bedfellows. Brownworth and Raffo describe similar

situations in their anthology Restricted Access (1999). They use the language of access in order to talk about how homophobia in a disabled community, and able-ism in a lesbian community, often mean that disabled lesbians find themselves on the margins of, and without access to, already marginalized groups.

Several texts also implicate bodies in a still larger formation of national and/or global locations. Linda Kauffman's Bad Girls and Sick Boys (1998) investigates contemporary U.S. culture, highlighting various artists and genres in order to grasp the fantasies or desires that inform our everyday lives and everyday representations. In looking at artists such as Bob Flanagan, Orlan, David Cronenberg, Kathy Acker, and others, she decodes these cultural fantasies, connecting them to our national fantasies (of the United States as a country and Americans as citizens of that country) through legal and national media channels, addressing issues such as medicine, technology, science, pornography, horror, desire, sex work, censorship, and sexuality. Kauffman notes all of these artists make the body a prominent and important vehicle in their craft – that it serves as evidence “to the process of metamorphosis mapped here” (1). Kauffman engages the porn debates and asks new questions about fantasy and how these artists and performers engage fantasy in their efforts to subvert the dominant paradigm. Throughout the book, there are conversations about our national fantasies constructed about America, American citizens, and American bodies. She points out our obsession with the U.S. president's body – scrutinizing and reporting every action, doctor's visit, and embarrassment. She writes: “Bush's vomiting into the lap of Japan's prime minister demonstrated that sex is not really the realm in which bodily acts are obscene, disgusting, unwatchable. Somewhere between the puking scene and the sanitized rhetorical clean-up



lies the pornographic, like so much vomit in the lap of luxury” (265). Here, Kauffman is able to question our legal definitions of pornography and obscenity. In Bad Girls and Sick Boys, she shows how artists are using their bodies to push those limits and in doing so, implicate the individual body in a matrix of cultural fantasy, national politics, and legal consequences.

Jennifer Robertson’s Takarazuka (1998) also addresses the national body in relation to individual bodies in her book about the all-female Japanese singing and theatre revue that started in 1913 and continues to operate today. Robertson explores the ways in which notions of masculinity, femininity, maleness, and femaleness are created in Japan by investigating the Revue and analyzing the performers, the performances, the training, the fans, and how national identity is formed and maintained in Japan. In her understandings of Takarazuka, she is able to question the performances as “real” for the fans and what that means for the construction of gendered bodies and the disruption of identifiable sexed individuals. In her chapter “Performing Empire,” Robertson explores how the Revue’s reception changes according to the popular national rhetoric in Japan at the time. For example during the second world war, many of the performances “alluded to things Anglo-American in terms of dangerous ‘germs’ (baikin). These germs had to be destroyed before they irrevocably weakened individual Japanese and the ‘national body’ (kokutai) alike” (133). Robertson also points out how, after World War II, the Revue supported “the official rhetoric of assimilation, which equated Japanese expansion with a mission to ‘civilize’ through Japanization [of] the peoples of Asia and the Pacific” (97). Takarazuka was and remains on the one hand, a performance of individual body

transgressors who on the other hand, firmly uphold the dominant logic and ideology of a national body in Japan.

In Women Crossing Boundaries (1999), Oliva Espin presents a qualitative study of women's narratives of migration, focusing on language and transformations of sexuality. The book serves as an intervention into the disciplines of psychology and women's studies to highlight the importance of the immigration and acculturation process in women's lives. Speaking for her informants, she says that "...all of them are confronted with the alternative meanings of womanhood provided by observing the lives of women in the host country" (4). This, in some cases, produces tension between the surrounding environment and the environment created at "home" in a new country.

Within immigrant communities, traditional gender-role behaviors are often demanded from women migrants... They are used by enemies and friends alike as proof of the morality – or decay – of social groups or nations... In many immigrant communities, to be 'Americanized' is seen as almost synonymous with being sexually promiscuous. (6)

Although Espin's work is not specifically about the body, she allows the words of the women she interviews to tell stories about their bodies – their hardships and opportunities of transitioning between cultures, and their reunderstandings of the body in new language, with new meanings. Language in particular becomes a central issue with which many of the women struggle. She notes that among immigrant women who are bilingual, the first language most commonly remains the language of emotions, while the second language can be used to discuss things that might be taboo in the first language – most notably sexuality (138-143). In other words, the meanings and experiences of the

body shift as national, geographic, and linguistic boundaries and communities are transgressed.

What is most interesting in Espin's thinking on the body is her ability to discuss language without entering an entirely discursive conversation. Simultaneously, she shows how the language enables and disables female immigrants in their constructions of identity and bodies. I would like to borrow this language of migration in order to transition into a conversation about one final trajectory within the field of body politics. It may seem curious that I turn now toward feminist psychology in order to enhance my discussion of the field of body politics, but in fact, it is a critical move that demonstrates how social constructions and material realities are being considered together in an effort to enhance our understanding of corporeal existences. Furthermore it lends itself to a conversation about identity and how the body and identity repeatedly implicate each other in texts that are interested in the body, community building, difference, and mental and physical disability. Even though Espin's text is situated firmly within psychological analysis, her attention to the nuance in her informant's lives is indicative of the final mode of thinking that I would like to engage – that of complex personhood.

### *Constructing Complex Personhood*

As we can see, scholars have tried to reconcile arguments about the understanding of the body as discursively constructed or materially experienced by exposing the meanings and representations of the body as constructed. I argue here that there is still another avenue of thought that offers a new lens through which to understand the body. This new frame of reference is hinged on a concept I borrow from Avery Gordon called

“complex personhood.” As she defines it at length in her book Ghostly Matters (1997), complex personhood means:

...all people remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those called “Other” are never never that. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward... (4-5)

It is this notion that I want to stay attentive to in considering all the multiple arguments imbedded within the field of body politics. In an age of neocolonialism and global capitalism, some theorists are trying to offer new ways of thinking about the body that situate it in relationships to other bodies. As such, space and location emerge as useful tools in which to analyze social structures.<sup>3</sup> In addition, all of the texts mentioned here are searching and asking for new ways to think about the body. The authors are calling for more inclusion and yet more specificity, for better understanding of the exterior and the interior. In the sections to follow, I will argue for a conversation about identity and identity politics and its connections to the conversation on complex personhood and body politics. I will show how texts within the discipline of psychology are asking new questions that consider both the material and the discursive in an even newer way, and finally I will show authors who are attempting to mobilize complex personhood by rethinking the individual body, it’s identities and politics, as well as how this rethinking

offers new strategies for resisting subordination and new strategies for how we think about that resistance.

In any conversation on body politics, one cannot ignore the impact and connections the body has on identity politics and vice versa. This conversation is strategically placed here in order to highlight these connections, but also to begin thinking about how the field of body politics is in some way no longer limited to conversations that strictly cite "the body" as their primary point of engagement. In Essentially Speaking (1990), Diana Fuss unpacks the social construction/essentialist divide (similar to the one I highlight in the beginning) and what that divide means for identity politics in contemporary culture. She defines identity politics as "the tendency to base one's politics on a sense of personal identity - as gay, as Jewish, as Black, as female..." (97). As such, identity politics is often used as a call to arms for particular political groups to engage a political action. Fuss clearly links identity with bodily difference and in this case, difference means difference from the norm, the privileged, or the mainstream. She is skeptical though of the power these identity groups have based on her discussion of the constructionist/essentialist divide. Fuss argues that this divide is predicated on an imaginary binary that sees constructionism and essentialism at opposite ends of the theoretical spectrum. For this reason, she questions if "...it may be time to ask whether essences can change and whether constructions can be normative" (6). She demonstrates through her discussions of Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray's work that materialism can be anti-essentialist and postmodernism can mobilize categories of essence. She concludes her book by talking about how we operationalize essentialism and social construction in theoretical conversations and ends her discussion by stating her

hopes for future theory and politics. "While the essentialist/constructionist polemic may continue to cast its shadow over our critical discussions, it is the final contention of this book that reliance on an admittedly overvalued binarism need not be paralyzing" (119). I contend that Fuss's primary contribution to this project is how the connections between identity politics and the body contribute yet another layer to the conversation about essentialism and social constructionism. Although her text does not explicate what Gordon calls complex personhood, it lays the theoretical groundwork in order to do so.

In Body Talk (1997), Jane Ussher collects a number of essays that represent sexuality, madness, and/or reproduction from a "material-discursive" perspective. In explaining this perspective, she notes:

Those who stand on the 'material' side focus on the physical aspects of experience - on the corporeal body, the literal implementation of institutional control, the impact of the social environment, or on factors such as social class or economic status. Those who focus on the 'discursive' look to the social and linguistic domains - to talk, to visual representation, to ideology, culture and power. (1)

She goes on to argue that a material-discursive analysis is indeed an integration of the above taxonomy, but she also warns that it may not be necessary to move beyond this binary, but instead (as Fuss does) to see how they are interrelated, informing and constructing each other simultaneously.

Using a similar approach in his anthology on mental illness, Dwight Fee's Pathology and the Postmodern (2000) argues in favor of understanding mental illness as both a discursive project and an experience of the mind. Increasing psychopharmacology

and mainstream representations to sell drugs mediates the experience of mental illness through multiply constructed images (5). Compared to Ussher, Fee's approach is radical and informative in that he questions the construction of mental illness without negating the experience of it. These two material-discursive approaches contribute to the foundations of complex personhood that I would like to engage. Unlike some of the other texts and authors mentioned above, a material-discursive perspective as described here allows for a conversation about feelings, emotions, and interiority wherein an approach that combines material realities and social constructionist understandings of the body cannot. While it is easy to assume that an understanding of the lived reality of the body conveys interiority, the majority of cultural theory texts do not indeed do this. Instead they use context in order to help explain the material realities within which bodies are situated.

In her innovative text, The Body in Pain (1985), Elaine Scarry argues that any discussion of pain illustrates the difficulty of such a task. For Scarry, pain resists language and because there is no way to experience another person's pain, that pain is unsharable, even in words. Throughout the text, she accounts for the times when pain is recorded: in a courtroom, doctor's office, police station, and in poetry, narratives, and art. Despite these records, Scarry points out that making pain visible using language that is insufficient to describe it, eliminates the nuance and intensity of the experience of pain. In her introduction, she acknowledges that the project of her book explores the way "...other persons become visible to us, or cease to be visible to us. It is about the way we make ourselves available to one another through verbal and material artifacts, as it is also about the way the derealization of artifacts may assist in taking away another person's

visibility” (22). It is Scarry's acknowledgements that language is insufficient in expressing feelings that I believe most deters theorists from engaging in a material-discursive analysis as presented by Ussher and Fee. In the section to follow, I hope to illustrate the ways in which several texts attempt to engage this methodology in an effort to offer better words for understanding the body as a complex person.

In their respective works, Jose Munoz and Chela Sandoval try to explain strategies for survival operationalized by subordinated communities of people. For Munoz (1999), this strategy is embodied in "disidentification" which he says is "a mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly oppose it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (11). In this way, disidentification resists the critique of an apolitical, ambivalent location and instead becomes a starting point for negotiating the complexity of identification in late capitalism, and, as Munoz insists throughout his book, disidentification serves as a survival strategy for subjects who are not offered privilege or power within the mainstream.

Sandoval's text, the Methodology of the Oppressed (2000) does similar work to theorize what she calls differential consciousness. She defines differential consciousness as a composition of:

... a mode of consciousness once relegated to the province of intuition and psychic phenomena, but which now must be recognized as a specific practice. I define differential consciousness as a kind of anarchic activity (but with method), a form of ideological guerrilla warfare, and a new kind of ethical activity that is



discussed here as the way in which opposition to oppressive authorities is achieved in a highly technologized and disciplinized society. (197)

Differential consciousness, and her text as a whole, try to think through an apparatus of survival where access to language would allow for resistive mobilization in a postmodern world. Sandoval likens it to a lover who is open to the possibility of love in any form – a lover who remains unaffected by the hegemony of the couple or monogamy (141-2). For her, differential consciousness is already mobilized by subordinate groups, but is presented as a possibility for future community and coalition building inside dominant paradigms that insist on a singular or, more commonly, a binary way of thinking.

Avery Gordon begins Ghostly Matters with the statement (borrowed from Patricia Williams) that life is complicated and it becomes the foundational point from which the entire book is hinged. She explains that there are two theoretical dimensions to the complication of life. First, power relations are never as transparent as the names we give them imply, and second, we need to consider people and ourselves in terms of complex personhood (3-5). It is complex personhood that we withhold from oppressed groups, and it is complex personhood that we recognize when we are able to build communities outside of and beyond singular and simplistic identity politics. Gordon states that Ghostly Matters is about hauntings, "a paradigmatic way in which life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted. Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import... " (7). In other words, haunting becomes the way for Gordon to discuss all the things that are tangible and possibly knowable without ignoring or forgetting all the things that are invisible and

unknowable. More importantly, she grants importance to hauntings because of the way that she believes they affect our understandings of everything else in the world. Gordon argues that to write about the invisible or to write about ghosts means they are real and they produce tangible material effects (17). This text is important to the overall field of body politics, and the central argument of this dissertation, because she challenges us on what we think we know and to know what we cannot see. For Gordon, these ghosts and their hauntings might be personal, emotional, psychological, institutional, and/or stereotypical. In addition, she challenges those of us who study life to consider complex personhood as integral to our study and to accept the ways it changes what we see and don't, and what we do and do not say about it.

Gordon's theories do not separate and split the ways in which institutional hauntings might be different from emotional or personal hauntings. This creates a little confusion at first, because how can we know who and what is she talking about? Yet, it also does not allow us to enforce a hierarchy of value where institutional hauntings over emotional ones become more important and legitimate. This connects to Munoz's "disidentification" and Sandoval's "differential consciousness" because they are all arguing for identity and consciousness outside of simple binaries and categories. These methods allow the complexity of people's lives, their identities, bodies, and existences to be explored, revealed, and legitimated. Because differential consciousness, disidentification, and an examination of hauntings allows for multiple hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses to exist and be employed at once by a singular person or community, we begin to scratch the surface of Gordon's call for complex personhood. These understandings are crucial to the field of body politics for two reasons. First, they

demonstrate that the field can no longer just examine the external fashionings or representations of the body. In other words, body politics must engage the experience of the body as well as the interiority of the body in order to fully conceptualize the body in all its transformations. Second, as the epigraphs that begin this chapter demonstrate, it is equally as easy to imagine the body as Dunn's main character Olympia does, "as made" or as Mitchell does "as a state of mind." Although I began with these quotes to demonstrate what might seem to be oppositional statements (ones that have been elaborated on here), my hope is that by identifying complex personhood as that determining frame in which to rethink the body, we begin to hear these two statements, not as mutually exclusive, but as something we ought to consider together. Thus, allowing them to implode or explode one another, forging new understandings of our selves, our bodies, our identities, and our communities.

Thinking in terms of complex personhood is important for this project because in looking at the cultural work of bodies, it offers a more nuanced interpretation of fat representations (be they legal, medical, or visual). It begs an analysis that looks beyond simple conclusions that might otherwise lead us to see individual fat people and/or fat communities as merely empowered or disempowered. And finally, the lens of complex personhood allows the cultural work produced on the backs of fat bodies to be reabsorbed and named as significant to the conversations about bodies, communities, and identities – thinking and rethinking what is at stake, what is important, and what is valuable.

### *Outlining the Project Ahead*

In order to address the questions above, this project will engage three sites of inquiry where the discourses about body size provide a multi-dimensional narrative about

the fat body. In her widely published essay, “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics,” (originally published 1991) Elsa Barkley Brown encourages historians to contextualize their narratives and allow multiple voices to be heard. She writes that history, like jazz music, is “everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms being played simultaneously” (274). Unfortunately, many historians and academics do not allow all this talking to be heard (or at least, not at the same time). Instead, a single narrative is highlighted and the volume of the surrounding “music” is turned down. Barkley Brown insists that in order to talk meaningfully about difference, we need to begin recognizing how all of our stories are connected to one another. We need to begin taking more seriously the iterations of difference, particularly race, class, and gender, but also sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality, in order to explore how difference (and the relationships between differences) affect all of us and how we, in turn, affect one another. To do this, she suggests that we adopt a mode of thinking and writing that allows all these connections, all these voices, to be revealed. She concludes by stating that “learning to think nonlinearly, asymmetrically, is... essential to our intellectual and political developments. A linear history will lead us to a linear politics and neither will serve us well in an asymmetrical world” (281). All too often, the existing discourses about fatness and body size are dominated by one-sided representations that only tell hegemonic or counter-hegemonic stories. In contrast, this project will make visible a complicated and multi-vocal cultural landscape of representations on fatness in the United States.

As such, this dissertation will engage a number of methodological approaches in its investigation, cutting across several disciplinary territories. As with all

interdisciplinary projects, it is critical to bear in mind that loyalties to any one discipline or methodology are strained or ignored, and doing so often renders said projects suspect. The following chapters primarily use content and textual analysis in order to examine the messages generated from medical, legal, historical, and visual realms. However, the research questions asked and the modes of investigation used to answer these questions slice through several disciplinary locations, such as sociology, medicine, legal studies, and visual culture.

In the second chapter, I investigate the political history of fat activism in the U.S. and situate that within the context of several cultural histories. These cultural histories are carefully chosen representatives that offer different explanations for the growing waistlines of Americans and the ever changing meanings attributed to various bodies based on size and shape. In chapter three, I examine the medical documentation on obesity and overweight produced by the U.S. government in order to show how these reports offer overwhelming support for medically sponsored, yet risky and dangerous, weight-loss techniques. Chapter four takes a closer look at four employment discrimination cases brought forward by fat plaintiffs seeking justice using a variety of legal strategies under the available anti-discrimination law in the U.S. Finally, chapter five explores three avenues of creative fat representation in film, photography, and performance activism. In its unique way, each representation draws attention to complicated understandings of fatness and coupled with the other historical, medical, and legal understandings, contributes to the overall argument of this dissertation – that these moments cannot be reduced to simple interpretations and when contextualized within a conversation on bodies more broadly, they offer significant new understanding.

By looking beyond the usual suspects of textual analysis (literature, film, and other visual representations), this dissertation is embedded in other conversations about history, science, and the law. Thus, the investigatory methods by which to ask and answer the research questions stated above, become more creative. As Barkley Brown encourages, I have tried to not to silence particular voices for the sake of disciplinary or methodological loyalties. Instead, this dissertation engages different sites of illustration in an effort to consider all the messages created about body size from multiple and various locations.

Finally, one of the primary contributions of this project to feminist theory and Women's Studies is the unwrapping or fleshing out of complex personhood as a theoretical framework. Feminist theory needs to politically value complexity and flexibility, not only in the ways we come to know the world around us, but in the methods we chose to look, analyze, and interpret those moments. As such, this dissertation not only amplifies complex personhood as a theoretical way of knowing, but it is itself, an illustration of that complexity as well. By engaging evidence as those cultural moments that produce and replicate meaning, this project sits at a peculiar nexus of feminist theory – one that is hard to categorize (in terms of methodology) and difficult to know in a single moment. Much like the cultural moments or illustrations described herein, this project is a product of the theory it mobilizes and the cultural work it makes meaning out of.

## Chapter 2: Weighing In – Cultural Histories of Body Size and Fat Oppression

The desire to be slim is not simply a result of fashion. It must be understood in terms of a confluence of movements in the sciences and in dance, in home economics and political economy, in medical technology and food marketing, in evangelical religion and life insurance. Our sense of the body, of its heft and momentum, is shaped more by the theatre of our lives than by our costume. Our furniture, our toys, our architecture, our etiquette are designed for, or impel us toward, a certain kind of body and a certain feeling of weight.

-Hillel Schwartz, Never Satisfied (4)

In order to better understand the messages generated about body size and their cultural effects in the United States, this chapter will begin by exploring the political efforts against fat oppression and the various stories that have been written in the last thirty years that offer explanations about the shifting ideals of beauty and body size in the U.S. over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The texts discussed herein investigate the different meanings of fatness for men and women, masculinity and femininity, and detail why and how the United States has become fatter as a nation and more obsessed with thinness as a culture. These cultural histories rely on the industrial and agricultural revolutions, as well as, the increased pervasiveness of the media to explain the shift in American standards of beauty and body size. By constructing this brief literature review, the following questions will be addressed: What stereotypes are in operation within these cultural histories and which ones are dispelled? Which stories are left out or what is missing from these accounts of fatness, obesity, and body size in the U.S? How do these absences shape our understanding of identity, bodies, and fatness? Finally, how do these stories influence or shape the cultural messages we receive about fatness and body size in the contemporary

moment? Most importantly, by examining fat oppression, the history of fat politics, and the academic explanations that try to make sense of it all, this chapter will expose some of the general narratives about body size that circulate and must be negotiated by all of us.

### Contextualizing Fat Oppression

In white European western cultures, the struggle of women to obliterate the excess of flesh on their bodies is well documented. As evidence, one only has to look at the proliferation of the thin, white, female bodies in magazines and films, and on television and billboards.<sup>1</sup> It is her image that tells part of the story about our society's relationship to fat; it is her image that contributes to the message that fat is unattractive and should be avoided at any cost. Ironically, this becomes painfully clear in the advertisements for plus-size clothing. As a relatively recent legitimized and targeted consumer market, "plus-size" has emerged partly in response to the ultra thin images and models used to promote clothing fashions for women. Fashion magazines, such as Radiance, AmaZe, and Mode, cater specifically to a plus-size audience. Paradoxically the average size of the American woman is a 14, making the majority of American women today "plus-size."<sup>2</sup> However the demarcation of "plus-size" insinuates difference from the norm (read: thin), thus reinforcing the thin body as the norm. It also establishes plus-size\_magazines that caters to a specific and presumably smaller number of women, when indeed, they represent the majority of women in the U.S. In addition, Lane Bryant, a retail clothing chain for larger women falls prey to the pressure of thin imagery in their own advertisements. The smallest size Lane Bryant carries is a 14/16, but in their



advertisements featuring Anna Nicole Smith in 2000, Smith's curvy and notably thin body does not seem to reflect the size of Lane Bryant's supposed clientele.

In her book Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance (1986), Wendy Chapkis notes that the thin female body in popular visual culture is characteristic of a "packaged fear" (181). This fear is one of becoming fat, of being rejected and ostracized by society as something filthy, dirty, lazy, sloppy, clumsy, asexual, and ugly. Everyday this fear is squeezed into a slinky dress and sold back to consumers for a profit. In order to prevent what women fear becoming, many join the gym or Jenny Craig, put themselves through painful surgery, buy "fat-free" food which may contain harmful additives for the sake of fat removal, and/or believe consciously or subconsciously that with enough inner strength, willpower, and money, anyone can look like the models used to advertise Calvin Klein jeans. The social stigma endured by fat women because of these fears is enough to make many starve for the thin ideal. It is imperative however to understand that the question of *how* thin bodies are privileged over fat bodies as a historical question, while *why* thin bodies are privileged over fat bodies is a political one. In order to answer either question, one must discuss the cultural atmosphere within which such bodies exist. The image of the thin, and most often white female body abounds in all spaces of popular and visual culture and those bodies make up the vast majority of models, television characters, and movie actresses. As a result, the thin white body is represented and celebrated to the point of extinction for the fat body. Fat oppression, fat phobia, and the confining and constraining institutions of heterosexuality and femininity play a significant role in the discrepancy of privilege between fat and thin bodies.

Not only is the dominant hegemonic image of women, thin, but it is almost always coded as white and middle to upper class thus, reinforcing the dominance of a particular kind of hegemonic femininity that is both white and thin. Feminist theorists such as Susan Bordo, Doris Witt, Lorraine Gamman, and Merja Makinen have noted in their research that there is an increasing number of women (regardless of race, class, or sexuality) who are affected by such images. This may attest to the successful colonizing and appropriating affects of popular visual culture within western society. Conversely, some communities and cultures have also resisted such colonizing images by maintaining alternative images of ideal beauty for women, but such ideals remain marginalized to that of the thin, white, hegemonic version.

In the same way that heterosexuality is compulsively reiterated as if it might be forgotten or disappear without endless repetition - as if it must be constantly shown and re/produced in order to maintain itself as natural and original - thinness is forced onto us as a reminder of what we should look like, or at the very least, what we should *want* to look like (Butler 312-313). In addition to the image of the thin body, the ever growing number of facilities (such as gyms, fitness centers, doctor's office, special hospitals, and weight loss programs/centers) where one can "treat" a weight "problem" teaches us that fat is not acceptable and will not be tolerated. In fact, fat is often associated with the grotesque or the monstrous and, as such, fatness is maintained as something our bodies should not look like; it is coded as an illness or pathology, while thinness is coded as normal and healthy. All of this describes a state of fat oppression – a state that privileges thinness over any other body size or shape. Even when an ultra thin ideal does not reflect a community or cultural standard of beauty, there still seems to be no question that

thinness occupies a position of power and privilege over fatness within a dominant discourse about body size. In her essay “On Being a Fat Black Girl,” Margaret Bass (2001) talks about the ways in which her sense of self as a beautiful woman changes depending on her location. In a predominately black town in the rural South, she is beautiful as black and fat, but in a white middle-class world, she finds herself no longer acceptable for her race or her size. She goes on to analyze the acute connection between fatness and class status stating, “to be fat is not to be representatively middle class... Middle-class America, black or white, won’t let you be fat and happy, and I resent it” (226 & 229). Bass argues (even as she is disturbed by it) that being fat affects her in a white middle-class professional environment despite positive experiences of being fat elsewhere.

In contrast, actress and comedian, Mo’Nique mediates these spheres that Bass names in terms of race and class, by existing in (and as) them all at once. In her book, *Skinny Women Are Evil: Notes of a Big Girl in a Small-Minded World* (2003), Mo’Nique (with co-author Sherri McGee) writes about the pride she has as a large black woman in Hollywood and names skinny woman (both white and black) as the culprits of fat hatred and phobia in today’s society. She sees her size as an asset and makes the argument that her success is not in spite of her size, but because of it.

I’m so FLUFFY and FABULOUS that if I were to walk into a room with Iman, Naomi, [or] Tyra...I’d strut my stuff with the grace, finesse, and attitude of the world’s finest high-fashion supermodel. That’s right!

Those trees haven’t got shit on me, except maybe an eating disorder. Yes,

I'm HEAVY, but I'm also HEALTHY and HAPPY. Happy to be a THICK girl in an image-conscious industry... (3)

For Mo'Nique, being fat is a decision not to participate in the dieting, exercising, and plastic surgery schemes that are perpetuated by skinny women. As such, she reconciles the worlds that Bass co-exists in by taking up space and proclaiming herself as simultaneously fat and happy.

### *Fat Activist Movements*

Analyses, like that of Bass, comes on the heels of political work from the late 1960's and early 1970's, when women of size, tired of being stereotyped as unhappy, asexual, lazy, and unattractive, challenged popular views of themselves. Reclaiming the word "fat", they aimed to redefine the term to denote joyful, sexy, active, beautiful women. In 1969, the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) was formed. NAAFA, along with other fat positive individuals, claimed that "fat" was not a negative state of being, but could be used with pride to mean something positive. Since early academic explorations such as Marcia Millman's Such a Pretty Face (1980) and Susie Orbach's Fat is a Feminist Issue (1978), the work on fat oppression and fat phobia has made little impact on feminist theory and research. Scholars have, instead, headed in an important and related, but alternate route – the analysis of thinness. Today, the images of women produced within popular visual culture are overwhelmingly thin. So thin, in fact, that feminists such as Susan Faludi, Leslie Heywood, Joan Brumberg, Jean Kilbourne, Wendy Chapkis, and Naomi Wolf have developed theories to explain why the thin female body dominates visual imagery and describe the effects that body has on the psyches of other women. Although these theories aid in the study of fat

oppression, they do not explicitly critique society and culture in terms of fat phobia or oppression. However, the relative marginalization of fat liberation (as compared to other civil rights and social movements) has left fat oppression undertheorized as a structural and institutional force – forcing fatness to be analyzed on an individual level and maintaining what Debra Gimlin calls, in her book Body Work (2002), the connection of body and self, or the stereotypical links between the type of body one has and the type of person (self) one is (112-113).

In addition to NAAFA, the Fat Underground emerged out of a radical therapy collective in southern California in 1971. Lois Mabel and Judy Freespirit, both fat women who raised the issue of fat stereotyping and oppression within the collective, were the founding members. The mission of the Fat Underground was to dismantle the stereotypes of fatness for women. They did this, most effectively, by investigating the medical data that states fatness was detrimental to one's health. In response, the Fat Underground, armed with substantial counter medical data, claimed that dieting was actually worse for one's health than being fat. In other words, fat is not as bad for you as excessive and repetitive dieting might be. In addition, the many health complications from which fat (and any other) people die from can more often be traced to stress on the body and organs (especially the heart) brought on by dieting (Cogan 236-38).

Although the Fat Underground and NAAFA share some political overlap, like many political organizations and movements, they did not share a common vision in terms of strategy. When the Fat Underground came into existence, they initially joined NAAFA as a local chapter. In 1973 however, the Underground seceded from NAAFA after being asked by the national organization to tone down their politics and actions. As

Gimlin notes in her study of NAAFA, the organization primarily serves as a social environment free from the horrifying circumstances under which fat men and women and their admirers exist in the everyday world (111-12). On the other hand, as an explicitly radical political endeavor, the Underground was interested in affecting social change for everyone and not just creating a small enclave free from oppression. At its largest, the Fat Underground consisted of eight members – all white and female. Their actions largely included giving talks on fat oppression, protesting appearance based discrimination, publishing fat affirmative brochures, and infiltrating weight loss program seminars (initially as participants) and asking questions and providing information to refute the seminar speakers on weight loss and dieting – hopefully turning women away from the program. Although the Underground folded in 1975, its actions and contributions to fat liberation (as are those of NAAFA) are extremely important. In contrast, NAAFA still exists as a social and political organization today, holding annual conferences, supporting a large online network for the fat community, and working to promote awareness about fat oppression.

*Academic Additions – Cultural Histories on Fatness and Body Size*

Academic interventions into this conversation on fatness and body size offer some explanations as to why our contemporary situation demonizes fat bodies and exonerates thin ones. The seven texts examined below each focus differently on dieting, fatness, and thinness. Simultaneously, each suggest varying contributing factors for how this moment came to be, citing the industrial and agricultural revolution in the U.S., the changing production/manufacturing of many food products, the incorporation of high fructose corn syrup into our daily diets, genetic, evolutionary, environmental, and geographic

differences, as well as shifting cultural and historical expectations. Though these texts are not intended to represent a comprehensive cultural history of body size, they do offer different components of the larger story of body size in the U.S. In addition, the explanations presented here serve as a backdrop for the chapters to come which explore the medical, legal, and visual representations available to fat people, both individually and as a community.

In 1977, historian and scientist, Anne Scott Beller published Fat and Thin: A Natural History of Obesity in an effort to “objectively” explain why people are getting larger. She notes that her interest in writing about obesity stems from the incongruence of information to that point which argued that people got larger in response to food shortages. In a time when famine is becoming less likely and the medical concerns of obesity are growing, she writes that her book will:

...attempt to retrace the ecological, genetic, and climatological history of obesity as a physiological response to environment, and in the process to suggest some morally and culturally neutral ways of dealing with the problem, even in the face of long genetic odds favoring the accumulation of fat in the fat-prone individual, and his or her possibly constitutional predisposition to chronic overweight. (4-5)

Beller understands obesity as a disease of which certain people are more genetically prone to developing. Furthermore, she hopes that by investigating obesity, her research will provide “a fresh look at what is passing for ‘common knowledge’ for the last 40-70 years” (10).

Beller's strongest arguments contend that we must look at obesity as more than just a psychological or individual problem. She writes that the genetic differences among humans in different geographical areas cannot be ignored and environmental factors also contribute in large part to the kind and type of body a person will have (36). Beller also notes that there are strong environmental forces including ethnic differences that contribute to obesity and overweight in certain individuals and for entire communities (51). She spends large amounts of her book tracing the geographical and environmental shifts of human beings over time and relating these shifts to the accumulation of weight. In so doing, Beller tells an evolutionary story about the connections between biology and obesity, casting a very different shadow of explanations, for the time, about the causes of obesity. For all of her genetic arguing, however, Beller still advocates dieting – just a different kind of diet – more in line with lifetime nutritional altering as opposed to short-term or “crash” dieting (262). She writes, “Dieting is not the answer; systematic, lifelong understanding is the gist of the medical handwriting on the wall. For the constitutionally obese, ‘proper’ nutrition is overnutrition” (271). In the end, she is critical of dieting too, stating that dieting is only temporary and clarifies instead, that she advocates a lifelong regime.

Marcia Millman's Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America, one of the first texts to tell about the lives and feelings of fat people in the U.S., is both praised and criticized for its representation of fatness. Coming only three years after the publication of Beller's history, Millman takes a different tack, interviewing many women and men in diverse contexts in order to capture the perspective of being and living as fat in a world where bodies are valued and rewarded for being thin. She explores three different



settings: NAAFA (National Association for the Aid of Fat Americans), meetings for Overeaters Anonymous, and a summer weight loss camp for adolescents. Within each of these venues, fatness is valued to a greater or lesser extent, but as Millman argues, each provide a space for fat people to meet, converse, and form communities with each other. The primary intention driving her text is understanding "the effort to lose weight should be secondary to the effort to understand the meanings of being overweight" (ix). The central question Millman asks is: "What is it like to live as a fat person in our society, at a time when obesity and fat people are increasingly disparaged?" (ix). By investigating the lives of fat people in each of these contexts, she highlights the major stereotypes that people of size (in particular women) live with everyday. They include: fat women as asexual people and contradictorily, fat women as the object of sexual fetish and thus, overflowing with sexuality. In addition, Millman explores the stereotypical and real connections between fat people and poorness, lack of control, and desexualization. Millman's text is groundbreaking, on the one hand, because it is one of the first books to represent fat people in a positive light and allows them to share their feelings about their own bodies. On the other hand, Millman has been criticized (by contemporary fat activists) for not just pointing out the stereotypes faced by fat people, but by also reinforcing them through personal stories and her underlying pitiful tone that can be interpreted as reprimanding and condescending. Although she never specifically claims to be responding to works like that of Beller's (which takes a biological/anthropological approach to looking at obesity), Millman's text does offer a sociological/psychological look into the lives of fat people and their communities like no text before hers had.

Hillel Schwartz's Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat, published in 1986, was one of the first books to explode the conversation of shifting body ideals outside of merely a fashion induced or medical explanation. In an effort to understand why desirable and popular body types have changed over time, historians have largely relied on shifting fashion trends and/or food availability as the primary reason. Although Schwartz does not discount fashion trends as a contributing factor, he also connects body size desires to shared fictions of the era as well as other prevailing fantasies about the body, weight, and fat (4-5). Unlike Beller before him, he begins the book on decidedly non-medical terms, stating that fat and weight are cultural conditions and to tell the story about the cultural condition of weight and fatness is to tell the history of dieting (5). Each chapter tries to explain the cultural fit between the shared fictions about the body and the reducing methods of the era (from Horace Fletcher's slow chewing campaign in 1899, to Cornaro and Santorio's theory of absolute weight, to Cheyne's theories on the distinction between the weight of the body and the weight of the soul).

Schwartz acknowledges that dieting and diets come and go, but the passion for slimming has mounted steadily over the centuries. He argues that "slimming ... is the modern expression of an industrial society confused by its own desires and therefore never satisfied" (5). He goes on to describe dieting in terms of ritual and romance. A culture of slimming is not without a historical conscience, but it is without a sense of process of logic – diets make no sense and don't seem to move from worse to better. Although they carry a certain degree of ritualistic practice and will, one that Schwartz likens to a religion, like romance, their results are unpredictable and haphazard.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg's Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa, published in 1988, chronicles the history of anorexia nervosa and shows how the "disease" changed in meaning and consequence over time. Compelled to write about anorexia because of her desire to tell the stories of young girls and women and to locate the origins of contemporary social problems, she notes that while anorexia is a relatively new "disease," the phenomenon of fasting women is hardly recent. In its different incarnations throughout history, fasting or anorexia has been dealt with as a spiritual anomaly or a psychological dysfunction often landing women in institutions or on permanent bed rest. Brumberg's largest contribution to the conversations on body size, extreme weight reduction and eating disorders is her ability as a social and cultural historian to link larger social issues to the experiences of fasting girls and the medical establishment that tried and continues to try to treat them. Although she acknowledges that anorexia was and is a largely white and middle class female endeavor, she is unable to question the "disease" outside of that framework either.<sup>3</sup>

Leslie Heywood's Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture (1996) theorizes a concept Heywood names the "anorexic logic" – a way of thinking about ourselves and the world wherein the mind is always privileged over the body and by extension, the masculine over the feminine, the hard over the soft, the individual over the group, and the thin over the fat. She explores the ways in which this "logic" is perpetuated in philosophy and literature, internalized by thinkers and reproduced again and again. It also infects our media culture and becoming evident in advertisements, movies, television, and magazines. Additionally, Heywood looks at the world of bodybuilding and female athleticism which might appear outside the realm of an

"anorexic logic," but as she shows, is only a complex reinvention where "shaping up" becomes a metaphor for "slimming down." The notable conclusions this book draws has to do with the connections between anorexia as a failed attempt to fulfill the lack (a lack created by the white male signifier) and create an alternative – "to avoid lining up on one side of the male/female, rich/poor, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual divides" (13). In this way, Heywood's notion of anorexia is more complicated than merely thinking about thinness as a feminine ideal and hence a means to an ideal ends. But rather, anorexia and the logic produced by it affect us all, male and female, athlete and not, white and of color, reproducing itself in new and ever more remarkable ways. Although Heywood and Brumberg are not necessarily in conversation with one another, considered together, their works provide a compelling picture of anorexia as a medical condition, a social/cultural strategy, and a method for understanding the meanings of bodies within our cultural moment.

In their anthology, Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression (2001), Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel make fatness and fat people visible in a way that they had not been previously allowed.<sup>4</sup> They state that one of their goals is to unmask the fat body; to make it "seen rather than unsightly" (1). Another goal of the collection is to deconstruct the discourses that define and fix fat bodies as a single thing – all the while provoking further investigation and redefinition of our cultural understandings of fatness and fat people. LeBesco and Braziel divide their anthology into several sections that explore fat representation and subjectivity, larger conversations of identity politics, corpulent sexualities, the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and performativity. It is one of the few contemporary text that focuses exclusively on the fat

body and the issue of bodily excess. In her separate contribution, LeBesco's "Queering Fat Bodies/Politics," argues against a fat identity politic, using the theories developed by Butler, Grosz, and others to push for a queer fat identity, encouraging us to play with our identities even in the face of dominant and mainstream constructions. Additionally, Le'a Kent's "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women" theorizes the fat as abject and shows how some independent publications, such as Fat Girl and Women En Large, resist such discursive constructions. As a collection, LeBesco and Braziel present an anthology that focuses on fatness in an effort to tell a theoretical story about the cultural and social existence of excessive body size.

In 2003, Greg Critser's Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World was published. Critser begins by admitting his own struggle with weight and fat, thus prompting his curiosity about how we, in the U.S., have progressively become larger people over the last fifty years. In his chapter, "Where the Calories Come From," he examines how the U.S. diet has drastically changed in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the creation and consumption of high fructose corn syrup. High fructose corn syrup was a product developed at a time when the U.S. corn farmer was in trouble, thus keeping them in business and boosting a flailing economy at the time (9-11). Although high fructose corn syrup is now a veritable staple in the production of packaged food, primarily because of its shelf life, it is also a substance that the human body has difficulty digesting and metabolizing compared to sugar. Critser goes on to investigate our shifting attitudes about the quantity of food we consume, naming us the "supersize me" generation and showing how with the increasing size and quantity of food, there is a corresponding increase of appetites (27-28). He points out that along with the

incorporation of high fructose corn syrup into our daily diets and the enlarged quantity of food portions, the cancellation of physical education programs in public schools and the increase of television viewing among people under 18, all contribute to the growing waistlines of Americans over the last fifty years. Although Critser is able to connect seemingly unrelated incidents in the story of obesity in the United States, his overall arguments are tainted with his own fat phobia and privileged white middle class ethnocentrism. He is never able to get over the idea that fat can only be bad for people and/or that it needs to and should be "cured."

### Conclusion

This chapter examines the political efforts that have been waged to combat fat oppression in the United States and the narratives offered in the last thirty years that suggest explanations for the shift in body size and ideals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By showcasing these "histories," this chapter provides a background for some of the general narratives about body size that circulate the ones to be discussed in more detail in the subsequent three chapters. The information here moves between culturally contextualizing fat oppression, providing a brief history of the fat liberation movement(s), and examining how academics and scholars have made sense of this cultural moment by examining patterns in history (Brumberg, Hillel, and Beller), connecting seemingly disparate facts as a method for presenting a more comprehensive reality (Critser), looking at the lives of people to see what their realities reveal (Millman), and using theory to help explain our cultural logic (Heywood and LeBesco and Braziel).

By exploring these cultural histories and examining the particulars of fat oppression and the political movements that objected, this chapter sets the groundwork

for the for the chapters to come that take as their point of examination, specific illustrations of medical, legal, and visual discourse. Even though a single, all inclusive history of fatness and body size would be impossible to represent here, it is important to understand how academics, activists, and those who believe they are both, have theorized why and how fat phobia exists in our current moment.

This chapter situates the dissertation within the growing field of fat studies, as well as feminist and women's studies. The backdrop provided here is important for a more nuanced understanding of complex personhood because it highlights the ongoing public conversations surrounding fatness, body size, food politics, nutrition, fashion influences, agriculture, evolution, marketing, oppression, and liberating politics. Despite the focus in the next three chapters on medicine, the law, and visual performance, one cannot forget that these specific conversations occur within and among those represented in the sections above.

## Chapter 3: Measuring Up – Medical Discourses on Body Size

Obesity is the dominant unmet global health issue, with Western countries topping the list.

-World Health Organization (2000)

The above epigraph from the World Health Organization (WHO) represents one of the most commonly held constructions about fatness in the United States. Despite competing research and politicized narratives, this health concern over obesity is repeated over and over again in literature that claims to speak for the national well being of people in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> For example, in August 2004, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) released its “Strategic Plan for NIH Obesity Research.” Largely, the “Strategic Plan” is an effort to coordinate research across the NIH, but it also names obesity as a national epidemic in the United States. Consequently, the “Plan” aims to intensify the NIH's efforts at education, prevention, and treatment of obesity. In 2001, the Surgeon General's office released its “Call to Action” in the treatment and prevention of obesity nationwide. In that same year, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published its primary decade-long forecasting document, Healthy People 2010. It brought together the very best of public health research in order to raise awareness of and prevent particular health problems in America. One of the named focus areas in Healthy People 2010 is "Nutrition and Overweight," which claims that the "total costs (medical and lost productivity) attributable to obesity alone amounted to an estimated \$99 billion in 1995" (19-5).



These documents illustrate and illuminate the construction of obesity as a national health crisis, which is one of the significant narratives contributing to our current cultural climate toward bodies of size. Additionally, these documents, portray obesity as a "disease" that is costing the nation, a disease that Americans should be working to change and prevent for the sake of our economy, future generations, and our current health outlook. Yet the absence of perspective and contextualization within these documents also raises a number of questions for this study. What are the connections between the construction of obesity as a disease and the medical technologies designed to “cure” it? What narratives are produced by these documents and what room is left, offered, and/or forged for fat subjectivities to navigate through, among, and between such narratives?

This chapter explores this medical landscape by focusing on these three large-scale reports published by the NIH, the Office of the Surgeon General, and the Department of Health and Human Services. These documents are important because of their availability (online and in hardcopy if requested through the agency) and accessibility (in terms of language) to the general public. Their availability, in turn, suggests several important “facts.” First, the audience for a conversation about the medical implications of obesity is larger than just health practitioners. By releasing these documents to the public, this conversation is extended to anyone (medical or not) who is interested in participating. Second, as products of well-known government sponsored programs, together these documents offer a look inside the national picture of concern for obese and overweight individuals and their presumed impact on the rest of the country. Furthermore, these agencies carry a certain amount of “brand name” credibility that grants their respective reports legitimacy, which works to overrule any questions about

the accuracy of the information they provide. Simultaneously, these documents construct obesity as the object of medical intervention, while also naming fat people as the subjects of proposed medical treatment. In addition to their accessibility and availability, they function on these two levels, thus diluting the distinctions between the disease of obesity as a the pathology of fatness.

In their work, “Medicalization, Markets and Consumers,” Peter Conrad and Valerie Leiter (2004) state that medicalization, while exploding in the last three decades, “occurs when previously non-medical problems are defined and treated as medical problems, usually in terms of illnesses and disorders” (158). Adele Clark and her colleagues (2003) take this notion a step further, calling this process “biomedicalization” to incite “the transformations of both the human and nonhuman made possible by such technoscientific innovations as molecular biology, biotechnologies, genomization, transplant medicine, and new medical technologies” (162). Obesity becomes one such issue that while of interest to medical professionals throughout the century, has only recently come under medical jurisdiction with the explosion of medically sponsored/prescribed diets, the commercial and medical success of weight-loss medications that have been on the market for nearly a decade, and the public acceptance of weight-loss surgery (particularly, gastric bypass) as a legitimate medical intervention for substantial weight-loss. All of this marks obesity’s entrance into our cultural vernacular as a medical condition worthy of medical technologies that can “cure” our “problem.”

As the previous chapter demonstrates, however, the pathologizing consequences of fatness linger in light of the biomedicalization of obesity. Stereotypes pervade about

fat people as lazy and lacking willpower and self-control. Although biomedicalization can legitimize some behaviors deemed pathological, such as excessive drinking or social awkwardness, from the stigma of being a drunk or a recluse (by remapping them as alcoholism or social anxiety disorder), such is not the case with obesity/fatness. While there have certainly been medical advancements in technologies to override obesity, thus cementing it as a medical condition, the stigma of being fat and its associated pathological behaviors (eating and inactivity) are as pervasive as ever. In other words, a doctor can diagnose an individual as “obese,” that person can locate acceptance and identity in such a diagnosis, and that in no way spares them from the social prejudice and punishment for being fat.

I argue here that these reports contribute to a nationwide cultural attitude of fat phobia and prejudice. In order to examine this more closely, I have focused the analysis on how these government agencies identify and define overweight and obesity as medical conditions with variable associated health risks. Furthermore, a connection between these government sponsored reports and the growing popularity of medically sponsored weight loss technologies and regimes is analyzed, specifically, bariatric surgery, prescription medications, and dieting. All of these elements produce a medical narrative about fat bodies by constructing them as obese. This chapter exposes the underlying assumptions of that narrative and its impact for bodies of size in this country. I discuss the competing narratives that challenge the information on obesity provided by the medical meta-narrative and suggest how this conversation contributes to the construction of complex personhood for fat subjectivities because of their ability to hold multiple narratives and messages together at once.

### Definition of Terms

In Sorting Things Out (1999), Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star undergo a thorough analysis of classification systems, the meanings they produce, and the consequences for us all. They write: “Classification systems are one form of technology...linked together in elaborate informatic systems and enjoining deep consequences for those touched by them” (290). As a system of classification, medicine and its terminologies produce meanings and those meanings have consequences for the people who employ them and are labeled by them. For the authors, classification systems are “historical and political artifacts” located within a particular space and time (285). As they explain, membership in particular communities (like the medical profession) is maintained and controlled through the naturalization of certain categories or objects. One can identify membership by familiarity with these categories or objects – so much so, that these objects become natural or ordinary (294-95). In other words, certain categories or objects become common to the members of that group and they often go unquestioned and/or unchallenged by the group members themselves. For these reasons, it is important to make visible the meanings of particular terms or categories used throughout medical discourse and narratives.

Within the three government reports from the NIH, the Office of the Surgeon General, and the Department of Health and Human Services, there are four terms that circulate quite frequently. The meanings of these terms in the reports themselves is significant for understanding the assumptions of medical discourse and the public’s interactions with and meanings produced by medical discourse. Although fat activists have waged multiple arguments against the validity, impact, and use of these terms, they

are presented here, without contention so that the larger picture about fat bodies in medical discourse can be examined.

Furthermore, I employ these terms in order to clarify their meaning and reduce confusion with other related terms, such as “fat” and “of size,” used throughout this project. As will be shown, medical discourse quantifies the degrees of fatness that activists and scholars specifically avoid so as not to divide a community. By engaging this language, I hope to make sense of the specific terms used throughout medical discourse and to draw a sharp distinction between those terms and the more politicized terms used in other chapters of this dissertation.

### Body Mass Index

The Body Mass Index (BMI) is the most commonly used tool in medical practice and research for measuring and identifying individuals as healthy weight, overweight, and obese (refer to Table 1.1).<sup>2</sup> The BMI is a calculation of the ratio of one’s weight to their height. According to the Office of the Surgeon General:

BMI is a practical measure that requires only two things: accurate measures of an individual’s weight and height... BMI is a measure of weight in relation to height.

BMI is calculated as weight in pounds divided by the square of the height in inches, multiplied by 703. Alternatively, BMI can be calculated as weight in kilograms divided by the square of the height in meters. (“Call to Action” 4)

However, the BMI does not take into consideration altering factors, such as gender, race/ethnicity, age, or overall muscle mass compared to body fat. This is important

because certain communities of color, the elderly, women, and athletes can be easily misdiagnosed (misclassified) as overweight or even obese based purely on their BMI.

$$BMI = \left\{ \frac{WEIGHT (pounds)}{HEIGHT (inches)^2} \right\} \times 703$$

		Weight in Pounds															
		120	130	140	150	160	170	180	190	200	210	220	230	240	250		
Height in Feet and Inches	4'6"	29	31	34	36	39	41	43	46	48	51	53	56	58	60		
	4'8"	27	29	31	34	36	38	40	43	45	47	49	52	54	56		
	4'10"	25	27	29	31	34	36	38	40	42	44	46	48	50	52		
	5'0"	23	25	27	29	31	33	35	37	39	41	43	45	47	49		
	5'2"	22	24	26	27	29	31	33	35	37	38	40	42	44	46		
	5'4"	21	22	24	26	28	29	31	33	36	36	38	40	41	43		
	5'6"	19	21	23	24	26	27	29	31	32	34	36	37	39	40		
	5'8"	18	20	21	23	24	26	27	29	30	32	34	35	37	38		
	5'10"	17	19	20	22	23	24	26	27	29	30	32	33	35	36		
	6'0"	16	18	19	20	22	23	24	26	27	28	30	31	33	34		
	6'2"	15	17	18	19	21	22	23	24	26	27	28	30	31	32		
	6'4"	15	16	17	18	20	21	22	23	24	26	27	28	29	30		
	6'6"	14	15	16	17	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	27	28	29		
	6'8"	13	14	15	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	28		

Healthy Weight
Overweight
Obese

**Table 1.1**

This can be dangerous if other aspects of their lifestyle and health patterns are not considered. Despite the recognition of these limitations, the BMI remains the leading classification system and method of diagnosis within the medical establishment for determining the health quality and other risk factors associated with someone’s weight.<sup>3</sup>

Overweight

Another term used consistently in medical discourse is “overweight.” In general, “overweight” refers to anyone who weights more than average from others of the same height (Chafetz 181). The Weight-Control Information Network of the NIH defines “overweight” as “an excess of body weight compared to set standards. The excess weight may come from muscle, bone, fat, and/or body water” (<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/>

statistics/index.htm). Since the BMI determines the cut offs between healthy weight and obese, “overweight” is equal to a BMI between 25 and 29 (Table 1.1). Most often it is used to indicate a person’s risk for developing obesity in the future.

### Obese

Similar to “overweight,” “obese” is defined by a BMI of 30 or greater (Table 1). According to the NIH, “Obesity refers specifically to having an abnormally high proportion of body fat. A person can be overweight without being obese, as in the example of a bodybuilder or other athlete who has a lot of muscle. However, many people who are overweight are also obese” (<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/statistics/index.htm>). What is important here, is that fatness has been quantified and categorized in this medical narrative in order to construct it as a legitimate medical problem.

### Morbidly Obese

Although the BMI chart above does not make distinctions within the classification of obesity, the term “morbidly obese” or “extremely obese” will often be used in reference to individuals with a BMI of 40 or greater. Commonly it is thought that anyone identified as obese, lives with such substantial health risks that they are referred to as morbidly obese, but in actuality, that category is medically reserved for super-sized individuals whose BMI is greater than 40.

### *Defining the “Problem”*

The United States government’s primary health agencies, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Office of the Surgeon General, and the Department of Health and

Human Services (DHHS), all use the above terminology to engage a national conversation about body size and fatness with the American people.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, as Bowker and Star discuss, these kinds of terminologies or categories actually produce real affects and have significant power on their own. “Classifications are powerful technologies. Embedded in working infrastructures they become relatively invisible without losing any of that power” (319). They argue throughout their work that infrastructures or information systems are infused with “political and ethical value” and these classifications become powerful in their deployment and ability to incite action. As the measuring structure of the BMI and the diagnoses of “overweight,” “obese,” and “morbidly obese” show, the definition of a particular body based on certain measurements can be powerful because it incites anxiety about the additional cost these bodies place on the national health care system. But also, by defining certain bodies as ill or disordered (read: obese), the medical treatments developed to correct those disorders is justified despite certain health risks. Finally, though, these categories work on a basic level to define some bodies as deviant and conversely, others as normal.

What follows is a closer examination of the three different documents produced by these government agencies to investigate how this medical information/classifications are presented to the public. I will expose how obesity becomes the object of medical inquiry, thus inciting fat people as the subjects of medical intervention. In so doing, the kinds of fat subjectivities that resist, accommodate, and/or accept these narratives can be revealed. It is precisely the ways in which people make sense of categories of classification, work within, beyond, and around them that make known those moments of complex personhood this dissertation is fleshing out.



## The National Institutes of Health “Strategic Plan”

The National Institutes of Health “Strategic Plan for Obesity Research” outlines how the NIH will move forward with research on overweight and obesity, as well as consolidate the existing/ongoing research so that information can be more easily accessed and shared among various research constituencies. The “Plan” sets out goals along four themes which include: (1) “Research toward preventing and treating obesity through lifestyle modification,” (2) “Research toward preventing and treating obesity through pharmacologic, surgical, or other medical approaches,” (3) “Research toward breaking the link between obesity and its associated health conditions,” and (4) “Cross-cutting research topics, including health disparities, technology, fostering of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research teams, investigator training, translational research, and education/outreach efforts” (“Executive Summary” 4).

Though the chief function of the “Strategic Plan” is to outline a course of action for research in the area of obesity, the report makes a number of crucial claims about body weight and fatness in order to justify the research it wants to conduct in addition to the research it will presumably aid in consolidating. As per the NIH, “65 percent of U.S. adults—or about 129.6 million people—are either overweight or obese. In addition to decreasing quality of life and increasing the risk of premature death, obesity and overweight cost the Nation an estimated \$117 billion in direct medical costs and indirect costs such as lost wages due to illness” (Press Release for the NIH’s Strategic Plan – 2004). In response to how the incidence of overweight and obesity has shifted over the years, the NIH reports:

The prevalence has steadily increased over the years among both genders, all ages, all racial/ethnic groups, all educational levels, and all smoking levels. From 1960 to 2000, the prevalence of overweight (BMI  $\geq$  25 to  $<$  30) increased from 31.5 to 33.6 percent in U.S. adults aged 20 to 74. The prevalence of obesity (BMI  $\geq$  30) during the same time period more than doubled from 13.3 to 30.9 percent, with most of this rise occurring in the past 20 years. From 1988 to 2000, the prevalence of extreme obesity (BMI  $\geq$  40) increased from 2.9 to 4.7 percent, up from 0.8 percent in 1960. In 1991, four states had obesity rates above 16 percent. By 2000, every state except Colorado had obesity rates of 15 percent or more, and 22 states had obesity rates of 20 percent or more. The prevalence of overweight and obesity generally increases with advancing age, then starts to decline among people over 60” (Weight-Control Information Network – NIDDK website – <http://win.niddk.nih.gov/statistics/index.htm>).

The NIH argues that while the occurrences of overweight and obesity increase, so too does the cost of healthcare along with the loss of wages or future earnings by individuals and companies alike. By publishing the “Strategic Plan for NIH Obesity Research,” the agency is hopeful that it can present “a cohesive, multi-dimensional research agenda” that will be helpful in understanding the effects and the experiences of obesity in order to help eliminate it as a health concern in this country (Executive Summary 2). Although the intention of the “Plan” is to bring together multiple research efforts about obesity to tell a more comprehensive narrative, the research and statistics it presents is so overwhelmingly one-sided that the only story being told is that Americans are getting

fatter, their health risks are multiplying, and therefore we have a national crisis with regard to obesity in this country.

#### The Office of the Surgeon General's "Call to Action"

The Surgeon General's, "Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity," states that "Overweight and obesity have reached nationwide epidemic proportions. Both the prevention and treatment of overweight and obesity and their associated health problems are important public health goals" (v). Similar to the NIH, the Office of the Surgeon General is committed to several overarching goals within their proposed initiative. They include the recognition of overweight and obesity as health problems, the promotion of a healthy diet and regular exercise for all Americans, identifying appropriate interventions for preventing and treating excessive body weight, encouraging environmental shifts to eliminate overweight and obesity, and lastly, developing and encouraging public and private partnerships that would assist in accomplishing these goals (v).

The Surgeon General claims that overweight and obesity is one of the most important health risks currently facing people in the United States. The "Call to Action" attempts to incite readers to care and act by providing information and statistics that talk about how 300,000 people die each year from complications associated with body weight (xiii). Moreover, the Office estimates that the total cost (both direct and indirect) of obesity to be "\$117 billion (\$61 billion direct and \$56 billion indirect). Most of the cost associated with obesity is due to type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, and hypertension" (10). The "Call to Action" also gives more details to these numbers by offering which groups are more likely to be affected by overweight and obesity. "In

general, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is higher in women who are members of racial and ethnic minority populations than in non-Hispanic white women. Among men, Mexican Americans have a higher prevalence of overweight and obesity than non-Hispanic whites or non-Hispanic blacks. For non-Hispanic men, the prevalence of overweight and obesity among whites is slightly greater than among blacks” (12).

All of this information is presented in a way to be neutral and merely factual, but in reality, it is hardly that. The Surgeon General’s Office names or medicalizes fatness as a major health issue (i.e. obesity), thus promoting medical interventions (i.e. diet, exercise, environmental shifts, public and private partnerships, etc.) that would seemingly mitigate the problem. It also goes a step further, under the guise of raising awareness, by naming the problem of fatness and justifying the treatments for obesity, by citing the cost that we all pay for increased healthcare. If that weren’t enough, it also locates fat bodies more prevalently within particular communities of color, thus, making the “problem” of fat an issue of race and ethnicity as well. Although this report does not dictate what reactions readers should have, it is clear that fat bodies in general and fat bodies of color, in particular, are to blame for the rising healthcare cost in the nation. Additionally, by diagnosing these bodies as overweight and obese, the justification for risky medical interventions is established and supported.

### Healthy People 2010

Every ten years, the Department of Health and Human Services publishes a diagnostic and prescriptive health report for the upcoming decade. In 2000, Healthy People 2010 was published as a comprehensive evaluation of American health, as well as a series of recommendations and goals in order to improve the health of the American

people over the course of the next ten years. Although this report encompasses many aspects of human health, such as substance abuse, cancer, occupational safety, immunization, and family planning, an entire chapter devoted to “Nutrition and Overweight” looks at the current state of obesity and sets goals for reducing those percentages in the future. Like the Surgeon General and the NIH, Healthy People estimates the cost of overweight and obese individuals to the nation’s medical expenses and loss of productivity at \$200 billion each year (19-3). In addition it comments on the increase of such individuals over the years, stating:

When a body mass index (BMI) cut-point of 25 is used, nearly 55 percent of the U.S. adult population was defined as overweight or obese in 1988-94, compared to 46 percent in 1976-80. In particular, the proportion of adults defined as obese by a BMI of 30 or greater has increased from 14.5 percent to 22.5 percent. (19-5)

Again, like its counterparts, this report points out, in no uncertain terms, that people are getting larger and this, coupled with the financial burden it places on the government, individual citizens, and our economy, clearly indicates fatness as a disease (read: obesity) is a problem that needs to be dealt with in the very near future. Unlike the “Strategic Plan” or “Call to Action” however, Healthy People acknowledges that increased body weight could be due to many factors, reflecting “...inherited, metabolic, behavioral, environmental, cultural, and socio-economic components” (19-14). By arguing that with a significant weight increase comes more health risks, one of the goals set out by Healthy People 2010 is to increase the number of adults who are healthy in their weight from 42 to 60 percent and to reduce the number of obese adults from 23 to

15 percent by 2010 (19-10, 19-11). By setting these goals, the Department of Health and Human Services hopes to improve the overall health of the country by reducing people's weight and thus, the associated health risks linked to fatness and obesity.

### *Curing the "Problem"*

As the preceding reports show, the "problem" of fatness in America is clearly marked as a medical one and therefore, remaps it as "obesity." Across all three documents, the number of people who are categorized as overweight and/or obese and the predictions that those numbers will only grow, legitimizes medical interventions, the creation of new medical technologies, and firmly situates fat and fat people under medical jurisdiction. The production of medical technologies that do this intervention is the subject of the section to follow.

With the declaration of an obesity "epidemic" and the connection of that to a burden of cost, there have been new advances in medicine along with the revision of old procedures to help people lose weight. Though many of these procedures have medical risks and low success rates, they continue to be performed and prescribed by medical practitioners. The following will discuss the impact of medical authority on dieting and the diet industrial complex, as well as, various surgical procedures used in the last century (most notably bariatric surgery, such as gastric bypass). Finally, I will examine two different popular pharmaceuticals (Meridia<sup>®</sup> and Xenical<sup>®</sup>) designed for weight-loss and weight management. By exploring these medical interventions, the connections between the construction of obesity and the technologies created to mitigate the problems it creates (for the individual, the community, and the nation) will be highlighted in order

to discuss how fat subjectivities negotiate this medical climate in order to exist in our contemporary culture.

### *Diet Industrial Complex*

In the United States, dieting is a billion dollar industry. Our cultural value on thinness and the myth that anyone can easily control or regulate their own body size, influences us to buy everything from diet books, foods, drinks, gym memberships, fitness equipment and how-to tapes/programs. The self regulation of food intake has been around for centuries, but the notion of dieting today is conceived as a legitimate fix for the “problem” of fat. This ideology and the processes it supports is further supported when dieting is recommended and substantiated by the medical profession. Doctors have been prescribing various kinds of diets (e.g. liquid, low-calorie, low-fat, low-sodium, and low-carb) as a method of aiding their patients to lose weight. In addition to weight loss, these motives are also connected to the general improvement of a patient’s health, often recommending that dieting will reduce cholesterol, blood pressure, and better manage diabetes and heart disease. In effect, dieting has been designated as a “healthy” way to control and maintain body weight.

These notions are repeated over and again within the reports discussed above. The Surgeon General’s “Call to Action” specifically states that all Americans should engage in a *healthy diet* and regular exercise as a method for reducing the risk of developing obesity (v). The information provided from Healthy People 2010 comes in a chapter titled “Nutrition and Overweight” whereby the amount and quality of what one eats is in direct connection to and conversation with the body size classification of that

individual. Finally, documentation out of the NIH actually suggests a reduction of calories as a method for weight loss.

In the majority of overweight and obese patients, adjustments of the diet will be required to reduce caloric intake. Dietary therapy includes instructing patients in the modification of their diets to achieve a decrease in caloric intake. A diet that is individually planned to help create a deficit of 500 to 1,000 kcal/day should be an integral part of any program aimed at achieving a weight loss of 1 to 2 pounds per week. (The Practical Guide 26)

Collectively, this demonstrates the medical support for dieting as a legitimate technique for losing weight and controlling body size.

Dieting, however, has been proven over and over again to be a temporary and unreliable method for weight reduction. This has to do with the fact that individuals have a difficult time restricting their food intake for any substantial length of time and invariably revert back to their older habits over time. Because of this, dieting has a very low success rate for permanent weight loss and more unfortunately, it has been shown that the majority of people who engage dieting (on their own or by prescription) end up gaining more weight back over time than they initially lost. As with the other procedures that will be discussed, dieting also comes with certain health risks and a very high failure rate. All of this, however, does not outweigh the temporary and fleeting results of reshaping one's body into a thinner, trimmer, and healthier version (even if only temporarily).



### Drug Interventions

Most recently, an explosion of pharmaceuticals for the treatment of everything from depression to hair loss has taken place.<sup>5</sup> It is no surprise, then, that pharmaceuticals approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are also available for the treatment of obesity. Although drugs that prompt weight loss have existed for quite some time, with the construction of obesity as a medical condition, the creation and marketing of drugs geared specifically for “safe” and “healthy” weight-loss has grown substantially in the last twenty years.

Weight-loss drug interventions fall into two main types – appetite suppressants and lipase inhibitors. Appetite suppressants work by increasing the body’s metabolism and the sensation of being full, while decreasing one’s urge to eat. Lipase inhibitors function by blocking the lipase enzyme which works to absorb fat from the food we intake. By not absorbing all the fat, the body cannot absorb the subsequent calories, and thus weight loss is promoted (Weight-Control Information Network – <http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/prescription.htm>). Although all pharmaceuticals have some medical risks, a number of weight loss drugs have been introduced and then taken off the market because they were later found to be too dangerous. The most notorious, in recent years, was the drug combination fenfluramine and phentermine, commonly known as “fen/phentermine” in the early 1990s. Each of these drugs had been around for some time, but it was their use in combination which became incredibly successful in promoting weight loss and unfortunately, serious heart and lung disease. The drug was taken off the market, but one half of the cocktail, phentermine, an appetite suppressant, remains available to doctor’s and their patients today. Two drugs still currently manufactured and

prescribed for weight loss are Meridia<sup>®</sup> and Xenical<sup>®</sup>. Each were developed in the mid 1990's and have been on the market for almost ten years.

### Meridia<sup>®</sup>

Initially developed by Knoll Laboratories, Inc. and approved for use in the U.S. by the FDA in 1997, Meridia<sup>®</sup> is an appetite suppressant with the chemical compound name of sibutramine hydrochloride monohydrate. Later acquired by Abbott Laboratories, Inc. (in a buyout of Knoll in 2001), Meridia<sup>®</sup> is currently marketed for long term use (though not recommended for more than two years) to treat people with a BMI of 30 or greater or people with a BMI of 27 or greater who also have high blood pressure, diabetes, and/or high cholesterol. The active ingredient in Meridia<sup>®</sup> is sibutramine which works to decrease appetite and increase metabolism. It is classified by the FDA as a Schedule IV drug (along with the muscle relaxer, Valium<sup>®</sup> and the sleep-aid, Ambien<sup>®</sup>) which carries some risk of dependency. In clinical studies, Meridia<sup>®</sup> was found to cause some adverse reactions such as dry mouth, anoxeria, insomnia, constipation, and headache (“Meridia<sup>®</sup> Patient Information Brochure” 18).

Meridia<sup>®</sup> comes with a number of warnings that are made clear to the consumer and the prescriber. Ironically, the most serious warning states that “Meridia<sup>®</sup> substantially increases blood pressure and/or pulse rate in some patients” and that anyone taking this drug should be regularly monitored for increased blood pressure and pulse rate by a physician (“Meridia<sup>®</sup> Patient Information Brochure” 18). It seems contradictory, at best, that the medication recommended to patients with high blood pressure would also threaten to cause high blood pressure. On March 19, 2002, a public citizen petition was filed with the FDA as a plea to remove the drug from the market. The petition (Docket

No. 2002P-0120/CP1 and SUP1) argued that sibutramine adversely affected its consumers, causing increased blood pressure, cardiovascular issues, and stroke, some of which, resulted in death. After investigating the claims, the FDA denied the petition in August 2005 and today, Meridia<sup>®</sup> remains on the market. In a letter to the petitioners, the Director of the Center for Drug Research and Evaluation (a division of the Department of Health and Human Services) stated that during the review process for Meridia<sup>®</sup>, one reviewer noted the increase of blood pressure, but drew these conclusions: ““Were sibutramine’s effects on blood pressure the only basis for considering non-approval, such a decision would be a mistake, because potential long-term benefits of weight reduction could outweigh short-term risks of blood pressure elevation...”” (Galson 2). Even according to the researchers examining the drug, the medical risks of taking the medication never overshadow the potential effect of weight loss and the reduction or management of obesity.

In addition to the contradictions listed on the packaging and information for Meridia<sup>®</sup>, the drug’s website is yet another point deserving of analysis (<http://www.meridia.net>). As suspected, it provides all the warnings and disclosures that Abbott is required to make available, but it also includes information making a strong case for the importance of losing weight and fighting obesity. The site is divided into two categories; one for (potential and current) consumers and the other for healthcare providers. On each side, a number of government sponsored medical documents are made available via links and downloads as a way to justify and prove that obesity is a problem in our country, but also to show how we as a culture are committed to fighting it. Most notably mentioned, the Surgeon General’s “Call to Action” and the NIH’s

“Practical Guide: Identification, Evaluation, and Treatment of Overweight and Obesity in Adults” (a publication that emerged out of the NIH’s “Strategic Plan”). This, not only furthers an argument that there is, indeed, a national conversation about obesity and fatness, but it also points to how that conversation is being generated in both the public and private sector. More importantly, perhaps, this linkage wherein a private drug company uses government sponsored medical documentation to substantiate the sell and promotion of its weight-loss drug, validates a suspicion that private medical companies are working with government medical operations in an effort to generate revenue.

### Xenical<sup>®</sup>

The brand name Xenical<sup>®</sup>, also known as orlistat, was approved, as a weight loss drug, by the FDA in 1999. Xenical<sup>®</sup> is manufactured and distributed by Roche Laboratories, Inc. and in 2004, the FDA approved the drug again for use in delaying the onset of Type II Diabetes (Roche Press Release) . According to the official Xenical<sup>®</sup> website, the drug is a lipase inhibitor that “works in your digestive system to block about one-third of the fat in the food you eat from being digested” (<http://www.xenical.com>). In other words, the body is unable to absorb all of the fat it intakes and therefore, that fat is expelled rather than fully digested and absorbed into the body’s system. Like Meridia<sup>®</sup>, Xenical<sup>®</sup> was approved for long term use (but not more than two years) in people with a BMI of 30 or greater or people with a BMI of 27 or greater who also complicating health risks such high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease or diabetes.

According to the published product information, the reported adverse effects of Xenical<sup>®</sup> can include diarrhea, flatulence with discharge, oily discharge and stool, and

fecal incontinence (20). Like any medical procedure or drug, the risk of these adverse affects must be weighed against the reported risks of being obese. Like Meridia<sup>®</sup>, Xenical<sup>®</sup>'s website is divided into consumer and prescriber areas, each of which provide information on the benefits of losing weight and risks associated with overweight and obesity. In addition, the prescriber side of the website offers a list of resources that begin with government sites such as the FDA, the CDC, the NIH's Weight Control Information Network, and Shape Up America (an organization founded in 1994, by the former Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop). Although, Xenical<sup>®</sup> has not been under investigation for extreme adverse effects (such as Meridia<sup>®</sup>), taking the drug is not without health risk and lifestyle changes. Additionally, the connections between the information provided through various government agencies and the profit the pharmaceutical manufacturers aim to gain by providing a drug that produces a desired result (i.e. weight-loss). These connections cannot be ignored in the consideration of a medical narrative that produces meaning and particular effects based on those meanings.

### Surgical Interventions

Over the last century, there have been numerous surgical inventions with the sole purpose of reducing someone's weight. These procedures have been more or less popular for a variety of cultural and historical reasons, but overall, medical doctors and surgeons continue to create and perfect different techniques that will enable individuals, in most cases, to lose significant weight. At the turn of the twentieth century, jaw wiring became popular as a medical procedure that was relatively uninvasive, yet effective, at reducing someone's weight. It was dismissed later as archaic and cruel when people died from starvation and malnutrition. In the middle of the century, stomach stapling (later called

vertical banded gastroplasty) was introduced and popularized in the U.S. Although this procedure proved to be very effective in helping people lose large amounts of weight, it is not a permanent solution. When a full size stomach is reduced to a smaller size, if a person's eating and health habits remain the same, over time, their stomach can expand to accommodate and, eventually, all if not more of the weight can be regained.

In the late 1950s, surgeons began to experiment with, not only the reduction of the stomach, but also the manipulation of the intestinal tract in order to help people maintain their weight loss over a greater period of time. These bariatric experiments evolved into one of the more common weight-loss surgical interventions used today – a Roux-en-Y gastric bypass. After many incarnations and the improvements of surgical precision, powerful antibiotic drugs, and nutritional supplements, this procedure has grown in popularity with medical practitioners since the late 1980s.<sup>6</sup> In most cases, although there is some variation depending on the patient and the surgeon, gastric bypass includes a severe reduction of the stomach and connecting that stomach directly to the large intestine and bypassing some or part of the small intestine. This produces two results in the patient after surgery. First, their appetite is severely altered because of the stomach reduction and though they may find that they are as hungry as they were before surgery, they are unable to consume the same amount and the sensation of being “full” occurs more quickly after eating is initiated. Second, when digestion is interrupted in the bypass of the small intestine, patients are unable to digest and absorb food in the same way as they did before. As a result, they are often given nutritional counseling before and after surgery in order to learn how to eat more effectively in order to maximize the nutritional content their bodies can absorb. Since patients who have gastric bypass no longer have a

functioning small intestine, the very small stomach and large intestine that remain, must perform that nutritional absorption instead. Although there is still risk in performing the surgery itself (reports vary on complications and morbidity from 2-4% to almost 10%), its popularity continues to grow among patients and doctors (The Practical Guide 38).

In her 1997 book, No Fat Chicks: How Big Business Profits by Making Women Hate Their Bodies – And How to Fight Back, Terry Poulton argues that bariatric surgery, in general, and gastric bypass, in particular, is one of the ways that women are being manipulated by big business interests to invest in the changing of their bodies. She writes that, there were more than 17,500 ‘bariatric’ physicians and 3,300 hospitals that specialize in weight loss in the United States (103). These numbers have undoubtedly grown as the information about weight-loss procedures, pharmaceuticals, weight-loss camps, programs, and exercise regimes continue to enter our cultural vernacular every day. Poulton also argues that the desire to be thin among individuals and the money to be made in helping those individuals lose weight, encourages doctors and the medical establishment to ignore the striking risks in a surgery that completely changes people’s lives forever. She writes:

...doctors who specialize in weight loss surgery do so in defiance of frightening research results indicating not only the potential danger of the operations themselves, which can multiply an obese patient’s mortality risk ninefold, but the fact that the failure rate, in terms of weight loss, is as high as 75 percent. Additionally, some experts contend that every type weight loss surgery carries the risk of at least two dozen different

complications, including liver damage and severe malnutrition. Even more prevalent is uncontrollable life-long diarrhea. (110)

Poulton's criticism makes evident the connections (highlighted earlier with dieting and pharmaceuticals) that there is a private (corporate) interest in weight loss and that interest is deeply connected to a medical narrative that constructs obesity as a "problem" for medicine to correct.

### *A Medical Meta-Narrative*

The narrative created by this medical discourse is one that turns fat bodies into obese ones and prescribes medical interventions for the sake of controlling an "epidemic," reducing the future cost of healthcare, but ultimately disciplining fat bodies both physically (by the manipulation of the body through medical technologies) and psychologically (through the classification of fat as a medical disorder – obese). The connection of these procedures to the kinds of documentation presented above cannot go ignored and considered together, they produce an overwhelming meta-narrative that tells a particular story about obesity and the risks of being fat in America. More than just an experience of prejudice or phobia (as Chapter 2 or Chapter 4 discuss), this medical terrain exposes the ways in which the categories of obesity and overweight impact the body negatively and suggests how to help people lose weight so that they will be healthier individuals. It also implies that by losing weight, individuals will become less of a strain on the economy and more productive in the workforce.

It is no surprise that the Office of the Surgeon General, the NIH, and the Department of Health and Human Services all make recommendations that obese individuals engage medical help for the treatment of their "problem." Additionally, the



most popular medical treatments discussed here, all cite similar claims as the government documentation as a means to justify the risks they impose. None of these procedures are without risk, but it seems that the risk involved never out-weighs the importance of losing weight for the individual or the medical professional. Considered together, they produce a narrative that dominates the mainstream conversation about body size in the U.S. Furthermore, the information presented within this medical discourse carries a kind of authority that can be difficult, but not impossible to challenge.

### *Critiquing a Medical Meta-Narrative*

With the multitude of publications about the current state of body size and weight management, there has also been mounting criticism of this information and its subsequent effects on those it targets. Despite the widespread impact and authority that the mainstream medical meta-narrative holds, there is a growing community of scholars and doctors who are challenging the authority that saturates our current understandings about body size and in particular, challenging our cultural acceptance of medical advice.

In his book, *Big Fat Liars: How Politicians, Corporations, and the Media Use Science and Statistics to Manipulate the Public* (2005), Morris Chafetz questions the validity of medical statistics and how they are used by those in power to influence the general public in their own opinions and decisions. He writes, in the preface to his book, that “the misinterpretation and misapplication of so-called science is used to justify, rationalize, and implement disastrous political policy” (xiv). He discusses how science and statistics are used to manipulate our attitudes about the environment, alcohol, tobacco, big business, and obesity. Chafetz builds his argument by showing that a popular trend is to identify a problem and to create it as a disease, in order to generate

concern and thus an adequate response by the public (81). By medicalizing current problems as diseases, certain responses then become legitimate because the seriousness of the “problem” has been elevated to that of a disease.

In his discussion of obesity, Chafetz writes that the onslaught of government documentation about the “obesity epidemic” has led to a variety of opportunities for big business (such as the diet industry) and medical professionals to jump at a cure, thus easing our growing national anxiety over America’s increasing waistline. He counters the notion of an obesity epidemic by pointing out that the primary guideline for determining obesity, the BMI, was recently adjusted by the NIH in 1998 to be more in keeping with international standards so that comparative research would be more accurate (182). Chafetz argues that the “the story of the ‘obesity epidemic’ is an excellent case of how questionable science unquestioned has led to a national panic...” (177). First, he points out that obesity was medically categorized as a “disease,” and the government went on to declare it an “epidemic” (Chafetz 178). He addresses the number of surveys that point to the sharp increase of both overweight and obese adults in the United States between 1960 and 2000, remarking:

These startling figures are behind assertions of an ‘obesity epidemic.’ But the statistics underlying these figures should be examined with great skepticism. In recent years, the federal government changed its definitions of overweight and obesity, thus labeling a lot of people as dangerously fat, not by their having changed at all but by the standards having been altered. Nor was this due to new discoveries that produced alarming news about body fat—it was merely a bookkeeping change... Until 1998, the federal

government defined overweight as a BMI of 27.8 or greater in men, and 27.3 or greater in women; it defined obesity as a BMI of 31.1 or greater for men, and 32.3 for women. Since changing the standards in 1998, the government now considers both men and women overweight at a BMI of 25 or greater, and officially obese at 30 or greater. (181-84)

Not only does Chafetz challenge the shift in BMI standards for the determination of overweight and obesity, he also raises questions about the use of the Body Mass Index in the determination of healthy and unhealthy weight. He disputes that the BMI is a very poor measurement for obesity because the ratio of one's weight to their height cannot distinguish the difference between a body that is muscular versus fatty (185-86). He criticizes the NIH, CDC, and other statistical information for not taking into account ethnic makeup as an important category in the study of body size (Chafetz 191). Additionally, he recognizes a recent CDC report that states that people who are moderately "overweight" by government standards are actually living longer (Chafetz 195). For Chafetz, the presentation of this information without public contention about the actual "facts," has led to a misplaced anxiety about fatness within our culture. Furthermore, he argues that there is a connection to the kind of unquestioned medical and scientific research being presented to the public and the profitability of medically sponsored treatments aimed to eliminate the obesity epidemic. In other words, the authority of medical discourse produces an accepting and almost apathetic response in the American people. This leaves the door open for big business to step in and capitalize on information that heightens anxiety and urges individual responses (such as beginning Weight Watchers or seeking weight-loss surgery).

Allied with Chafetz in challenging the assumed medical authority on fatness and body size is also Terry Poulton. Poulton argues that "...the whole diet phenomenon is not about beauty or how much women weight at all. It's about how much we can persuaded to spend trying to be thin. The entire process is just a despicable scheme to guarantee annual sales of weight-loss products and services currently estimated at \$50 billion in the United States alone" (10). Naming it the "billion-dollar brainwash," Poulton examines how money is made via promoting weight loss by any means (dieting, surgery, drugs, exercise, etc.), and thus teaching all women to hate their bodies regardless of their size.

According to Poulton, three lies underpin our cultural brainwashing about body size and health. They are "1. that fatness is the worst cultural catastrophe possible for women; 2. that obesity must be voluntary because slenderness is available to all who pursue it with sufficient diligence and money; and 3. that the sole cause of all 'excess' weight is therefore despicable self-indulgence" (61). She argues that these lies create a foundation of cultural belief in the medical "cure" of fatness and obesity and contribute to our general acquiescence when it comes to medical and scientific research on the topic. Both Chafetz and Poulton are able to identify how the big business of weight loss, the government, and the medical establishment are in bed together producing the meta-narrative discussed above. In so doing, they are able to critique the motives, inherent bias, and the questionable data used to support such a narrative.

In her essay, "Re-evaluating the Weight-Centered Approach toward Health: The Need for a Paradigm Shift" published in Jeffrey Sobel and Donna Maurer's Interpreting Weight: The Social Management of Fatness and Thinness (1999), Jeanine Cogan

examines the breadth of scientific research that has been and is being conducted to disprove and challenge the harmful health consequences of obesity. Cogan argues that this research is being overlooked because of pervasive stereotypes about fatness in addition to the immense opportunity to make a profit within the diet and weight-loss industry through surgery, prescription drugs, and nutritional supplements. She writes that there exists an “invisible iatrogenic cause of death result[ing] from our cultural understanding of obesity as a serious health threat and the consequences of obesity treatment as necessary and having minimal side effects” (229). Like Chafetz, Cogan questions the immense scientific data pointing to the unhealthy consequences of being fat, while connecting that data to fat phobia and oppression. She claims that this incomplete information actual promotes risky and ultimately “harmful attitudes toward our bodies and health” (229).

Cogan notes that obesity is not value-free, but rather, is culturally produced category. It is also defined as a medical condition and often presumed to be a public health threat (230-31). She writes:

...research on the eating habits of those considered obese and those considered normal weight challenges a fundamental tenet in the current obesity conceptualization. No consistent or marked difference in the eating habits between the obese and nonobese in style, amount and content of consumption occurs in both self-report surveys and observational studies... A central belief about obesity is that it is self-induced through overindulgence, gluttony, and laziness, which allows us to blame the obese individual. Yet if people are obese in part due to genetic and

biological factors, then holding them completely responsible for their ‘condition’ is inaccurate and eliminates the rationale for our sense of justified hostility and fat discrimination. (239)

Cogan recommends that we pay more attention to opposing research about obesity, its causes and its cures. By investigating this challenging information and not sidelining it, as the medical meta-narrative does, the public can engage a more well rounded conversation about obesity, fatness, and its subsequent “solutions.”

### *Negotiating Medical Information and Constructing a Complex Personhood*

What, then, does all this medical information mean for the construction of complex personhood? In this chapter, I examine the documentation about obesity produced by large and well-known government agencies and show how that information works hand in hand with various kinds of medical procedures that have countless risks of their own. In so doing, a medical meta-narrative is revealed. It is important to see fat bodies in the context of this meta-narrative for two reasons. First, there is a material reality inherent in any conversation of fatness and understanding how those bodies are categorized (as overweight, obese, etc.) and seeing the impact of that categorization is important because as Cogan points out, that system of definition is not “value-free.” It has sharp consequences for the individuals labeled as such and it is also used to create anxiety and turn a profit for the big business of weight-loss. Second, this medical classification system of fat bodies is well known and commonly used in the American vernacular. Therefore to dismiss it entirely and not engage with its potential impact on individuals and communities would be naïve.

In this chapter, I am not as interested in how medical discourse categorizes particular bodies based on height and weight, but more so, on what those categorizations mean in a larger frame of reference; how the U.S. government, the medical establishment, and capitalism work together to reinforce prejudice and self-loathing, but also incite action that directly benefits their bottom line. By discussing this meta-narrative and its critics, I want to expose these connections and challenge the information on which it's founded and accepted as fact. Medical discourse has incredible authority to create and define what we think about fat and thin bodies. It is able to construct a concept of "health" that then becomes a dialogue about weight-loss. As such, the categories and definitions created by this meta-narrative are real and have a real impact in the minds of people even if they disagree with or challenge them.

In her book, Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity (2004), Kathleen LeBesco argues that understanding medical data as either right or wrong is not the answer. In fact, it is almost impossible. She suggests instead that we view this information and its criticisms as part of a larger matrix that cannot be reduced to simple answers of right and wrong. LeBesco writes:

Rather than presenting scientific counterfactuals to propel fat acceptance, activists might do well to embrace the contradictions of the lived experience of fatness. That involves recognizing that sometimes fat is healthy, and sometimes it's not; that every person, fat and thin alike, has moments of self-control to parallel their times of abandon; and that diets do work sometimes, though the choices one makes in order to achieve considerable weight loss frequently reduce one's quality of life. (116)

By calling activists and scholars to see beyond the binaries created by them and the prevailing medical establishment, LeBesco engages complex personhood and recognizes that there are no trouble-free explanations. In reality, we all live with the complications of negotiating a multitude of messages, simultaneously with the authority we are taught to grant them and the questions we learn to ask of them.

An illustration of this complexity is the performance work of the Padded Lilies. Started in 1997, as the brainchild of Shirley Sheffield, the Padded Lilies is a troupe of fat female synchronized swimmers. They have been featured in magazine articles and on television shows such as *CSI: Las Vegas* and *The Tonight Show*. Wearing make-up and colorful costumes, the Padded Lilies perform to music while swimming in choreographed unison. Their performances raise questions about our cultural connections between body size, physical health, body aesthetics, and physical ability. The combination of fat bodies performing a very difficult athletic sport, synchronized swimming, creates a confrontation of many stereotypes and brings Western medical discourse and the meta-medical narrative into question. This is further complicated by the Health at Every Size movement, from which the Padded Lilies seem to be operating and performing.

The Health at Every Size movement is an alternative medical approach that values the diversity in human body size, acknowledges the dangers of traditional weight-loss paradigms, and accounts for the social, political, and personal impacts that can affect a person's health. The Padded Lilies do not engage synchronized swimming as their performance medium simply because it the best place from which to combat negative stereotypes about fatness. It is also healthy and fun for the performers themselves. As a good source of exercise and movement, members of the Padded Lilies benefit (physically



and emotionally) from the practices and performances. In an article written for the East Bay Express (a weekly city paper for the East San Francisco Bay), Sheffield is noted as swimming three hours a week and group itself has open practices and performances for anyone to join (Gard, September 13, 2006). Anyone is invited to benefit from their body-positive message along with a good workout. As such, the Padded Lilies offer an intriguing position in relation to medical discourse; they are neither wholly opposed nor supportive. Their performances are a staunch commentary on the oppressive forces working against bodies of size, and at the same time, the members of the Padded Lilies engage exercise in a healthy, yet fat-friendly way.

### Conclusion

This chapter offers a closer analysis of the government sponsored medical documentation (Surgeon General, NIH, and HHS), released to the public, about the well-being of the nation and the growing concern around obesity for Americans. Upon closer inspection, these documents reveal and legitimize the pathology of fat and the medical construction of the obese body. As such, they contribute to a nationwide climate of fat phobia that is substantiated by medical authority. In addition, this chapter argues that by constructing the obese body in medical terms, it substantiates the medical interventions that are discussed in more detail within. Hence, a connection is reveal between these government documents, medically sponsored (and potentially risky) prescription drugs (Meridia® and Xenical®) and surgical operations (gastric bypass) being performed in the name of fat reduction and weight loss. After constructing what I call, the medical meta-narrative, I offer counter evidence to the legitimacy of this narrative and discuss how this information is often overlooked, but also when it is not, what that means for the

construction of complex personhood – because there is this space in between all the messages that must be navigated. There are no easy or neat answers to how fat subjectivities are forged in the context of medical meta- and counter-narratives, and ultimately, I argue that employing the analysis of complex personhood, allows for looking at this information without deconstructing it. In other words, we can hold all the information at once (much like the Health at Every Size movement and the performance of the Padded Lilies encourage) without trying to explain away the contradictions or inconsistencies. Instead, the complications remain intact and our understanding of the survival skills necessary for fat subjects to navigate this terrain is made visible as crafty and artful.

## Chapter 4: Getting on the Scales – Negotiating Legal Avenues for Fighting Weight Discrimination in Employment

The radical consequence of law, conceived as social practice, is to make us pause, and pause again, as we enter into the risky process of knowing and judging one another.

-Judith Butler, “Appearances Aside.” California Law Review. (63)

In many ways, the law defines who we are, what we can do, and how we can do it. The stipulations provided by the law are often unflinching and unsympathetic.

Although most of us do not go through our everyday lives defining ourselves in the same way the law might, we still depend on the law to protect and defend us and our communities if we experience situations that seem unfair. For fat women and men, experiencing unfair treatment is hardly uncommon, particularly on the job. Statistics show that fat people are less likely to be hired and if hired, less likely to be promoted than their thinner counterparts (Goodman 150-52). In addition, being fat has been shown to have a negative effect on one’s self-confidence not only when they apply for a job, but also when they are interviewing for a job (Rothblum et al. “The Relationship Between Obesity, Employment Discrimination, and Employment Related Victimization” 262, Solovay 101).

Impacted by the relevance and application of particular laws, the existing culture for fat people in the workplace and the available ‘protection’ afforded by various components of the United States antidiscrimination laws is the focus of this chapter.

While weight based discrimination is arguably common in most facets of U.S. culture, it is in the workplace where the law has the most to offer about how fat people can/should

be treated. Even though antidiscrimination law can be used successfully outside of employment, these laws were designed to “level the field” and protect individuals and their livelihood (their jobs) from various kinds of prejudice and discrimination. By introducing different weight-based employment discrimination cases, several important threads that tie together the larger legal story of weight discrimination in the United States will be revealed. One important tenant in thinking about the intersection of employment discrimination, the available protective law, and fat politics is the effectiveness of using current antidiscrimination law to represent fat claimants, in addition to the political and cultural decisions to use them or not. Ultimately, this leads to questions about the kinds of “legal personhood” available to fat claimants in court as well as the culture at large. This chapter will unpack some of the legal doings and undoings for fat personhood and draw connections to social/cultural understandings of fatness in the United States. By focusing on how fatness is represented within the legal system, this chapter will investigate the following four questions: First, what are the options for protection and justice available to fat people within the legal system? Second, what cultural work do legal proceedings do in terms of changing public attitudes toward fatness and body size? Third, how do legal representations of fat people inform and/or reflect our social understandings of fatness and body size? And fourth, how does this conversation contribute to a larger discussion of complex personhood in terms of the ways that fat people engage or reject an existing system of antidiscrimination?

In order to answer these questions, this chapter will begin with an overview of antidiscrimination law in the U.S., focusing at the federal level, on the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Federal Rehabilitation Act, and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

After which, a discussion of four different weight-based employment discrimination cases, brought forward by fat plaintiffs, will be presented in order to examine how these antidiscrimination laws are used (alone and in combination) to seek retribution. Finally, an analysis of the available laws and the diverse legal strategies presented in these four cases (all of which yielded a variety of results) will be presented as a means of showing how fat plaintiffs simultaneously engage and reject a system of protection, thus demonstrating complex personhood in a different light than the medical and the visual realms provide.

### *Antidiscrimination Law*

For fat people who experience weight-based employment discrimination, using American antidiscrimination law is complicated at best. Currently, there is no federal protection against discrimination specifically on the basis of weight, body size, or appearance. There does exist one state law and three local ordinances that name weight and/or appearance as a protected class, but in the larger landscape of legal possibilities, these protections from fat prejudice are sparse (Solovay 114). Because of this, fat plaintiffs are often cornered into using the available federal laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Federal Rehabilitation Act (RHA), and/or Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. In her book, *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination* (2000), Sondra Solovay explains that “the multiple layers of prejudice, along with varying degrees of legal protection per category, combine to create special problems when seeking courtroom justice” (123). Since none of these laws specifically name fatness or obesity as a protected class, then it is up to the courts to determine if a plaintiff’s size qualifies as a disability, was perceived as a disability by the employer, or

if they experiences prejudice in conjunction with another protected class such as race, sex, religion, etc.

Most often, complications arise, both individually and politically, around whether fatness qualifies as a disability. Solovay writes: “Is fat a disability? Is weight discrimination the same thing as disability discrimination? Is it appropriate for fat people to seek civil liberties protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act? Should the ADA apply to fat people?” (129). The fat community is often hostile about using the ADA and the RHA because of its implications around being “disabled” or “impaired,” while the disabled community is conversely hostile about including fatness as a category deserving of protection under the ADA or the RHA because of misperceptions that fat is temporary and always within a person’s control (Solovay 130). More often than not, fat people who bring claims of discrimination to court are never heard because their weight does not meet the threshold for impairment and their cases are subsequently dismissed (Solovay 152). In the following section, a breakdown of the federal antidiscrimination laws is provided to clarify the terms under which fat plaintiffs must argue their cases, particularly in locations where no state or local law specifically protects them. These three federal laws are also the most commonly used in weight-based employment discrimination cases because they offer the most latitude in terms of arguing for protection against prejudice in the workplace. However, as the cases discussed herein will show, they also have steep stipulations of defining oneself as qualified for that protection.

## Title VII of the Civil Right Act

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act (CRA) was ratified securing, among other things, voting rights for all citizens and equal access to public education and federal assistance. The passing of the CRA was a landmark in U.S. and civil rights history because it marked a national legal commitment to treating people equally as citizens within the United States. As such, it remains one of the important first steps in the development of antidiscrimination law in this country. Title VII of the CRA, named the Equal Employment Opportunity, includes section 703 which specifically prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin (Public Law 88-352, 78, Statute 241).

Title VII does not, however, specifically protect individuals for their weight, body size, or appearance. How, then, does Title VII of the Civil Rights Act work in cases of weight-discrimination? One legal strategy for fat plaintiffs in weight-based discrimination cases has been to argue protection under Title VII by connecting weight discrimination to one of the protected classes under this law. In other words, if being fat is statistically proven to be more prevalent among women, people of color and the poor, and federal and state laws protects women and people of color from race and sex discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, then fat people might be able to obtain protection under this law if they can prove there is a link between their experience of weight discrimination with race and/or sex discrimination. (Kirkland 98-99).

## The Federal Rehabilitation Act

In another move toward antidiscrimination and, in particular, the development of protective laws for the disabled, the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (RHA) was passed. It states in section 504, that “[n]o otherwise qualified individual...shall, solely by reason of her or his disability...be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (§ 701. 29 USC and Solovay 140). In cases where employees or potential employees are denied employment, the plaintiffs must prove all four of the following elements to show that the employer is in violation of the RHA.

1. The Plaintiff applied for a position in an activity or program receiving federal financial assistance,
2. At the time, plaintiff suffered from a cognizable disability,
3. Was, nevertheless, qualified for the position, and
4. Was not hired solely due to her/his disability.

Furthermore, the RHA moved one step beyond the Civil Rights Act in its recognition of disability as a physical condition that required protection under the law. It also set up a legal precedent which is followed up in the Americans with Disabilities Act by allowing an understanding of disability beyond a mere physical condition. In this way, the RHA affords protection for individuals who actually experience physical difference, but also allows protection for those *perceived* by others to be physically different as well.



## The Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, came after a long struggle by the disability rights movement to force recognition of the able-bodied prejudice inherent in our society. It also came almost two decades after the RHA which did not go far enough to protect and provide access for persons with disabilities. From buildings with no elevators and heavy doors to the subtle prejudice of not being considered for a job, the ADA was (and is) intended to rectify and make accessible the able-bodied world to those who function in physically (and mentally) different ways. Section 202 of the (ADA) states: “Subject to the provisions of this title, no qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by such entity” (§ 202. Discrimination. 42 USC 12132). The ADA goes on to qualify what it means to be “disabled” by asking an individual to prove one of the following:

- A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of her/his major life activities.
- A record of such an impairment; or
- Is regarded as having such an impairment.

Furthermore the ADA defines “discriminate” to include “using qualification standards, employment tests or other selection criteria that screen out or tend to screen out an individual with a disability” (Solovay 134). One of the intended goals of the ADA is protection for persons with disabilities from the experience of discrimination or prejudice in the workplace. “It combats prejudice, demanding employers look to ‘the same

performance standards and requirements’ of disabled applicants and employees as they do of everyone else” (Solovay 134).

### *Weight-Based Employment Discrimination Cases*

The following four cases reveal various kinds of weight-based employment discrimination and the different legal avenues engaged to rectify those situations. While fat phobia and prejudice is arguably experienced in multiple facets of people’s lives, I chose to focus this conversation only on discrimination in the workplace because one’s job is a concrete location from which individuals can engage the available legal system to combat situations that seem unfair. Unlike personal injury cases that often involve seeking retribution as a result of an accident that may be deemed the fault of another individual or entity, employment discrimination cases try to rectify unfair situations that are protected by the available antidiscrimination law in the United States. As such, the workplace becomes a fertile ground on which to examine the available antidiscrimination laws and the ways in which fat claimants engage said law in order to prove prejudice and seek out justice.

#### *Cook v. Rhode Island*

In 1986, Bonnie Cook left her position as an institutional attendant after eight years at the Ladd Center – a residentially operated assistance facility for the mentally disabled, operated by the state of Rhode Island Mental Health, Retardation, and Hospitals (MHRH). In 1988 when Ms. Cook reapplied with MHRH for reinstatement to a similar position, she was accepted contingent upon completion of a physical examination. The examining physician would not approve her application unless she could reduce her

weight to something less than three hundred pounds. When she did not comply, her application was denied. Ms Cook filed suit, under Section 504 of the RHA, against the state of Rhode Island MHRH on the grounds that she had been discriminated against for being regarded as having a physical disability which violated both federal and state statutes that protect individuals from such discrimination. MHRH contended that Ms. Cook's complaint be denied for two reasons: first, that obesity is not considered a physical disability under said statutes, and second, that the department made reasonable accommodations to hire Ms. Cook if she could reduce her weight and thus, the state could and should not be held accountable for her failure to meet those accommodations. Cook's lawyers presented medical documentation and testimony arguing that her condition – morbid obesity – was physiological and involuntary. During the trial proceedings, MHRH conceded that Cook was not hired because they thought her weight would limit her ability to do the job. Although the jury in this case never had to specify whether obesity was indeed a disability or not, this concession on the defense's part, coupled with the evidence that Cook's weight was an immutable medical condition (expert medical testimony was provided by Ms. Cook's doctor), gave the jury enough evidence to conclude that Cook had been discriminated against because MHRH considered her to be disabled, thus affording her protection under the RHA for a "perceived disability." Although *Cook v. Rhode Island MHRH* set a legal precedent for weight discrimination in the United States, that precedent has done little to affect future cases of weight discrimination and in fact, has become the exception among cases that have attempted to use the "regarded as" or "perceived of" prong of either the RHA or the ADA for protection in weight-based employment discrimination cases.

### Cassista v. Community Foods

In a similar case, a number of years later in 1993, Toni Cassista was repeatedly denied employment with Community Foods, a health food store located in Santa Cruz, California. Upon inquiry with the company as to why she was never hired, it was revealed that there was a concern about her weight. At 5 feet, 4 inches and three hundred and five pounds, Ms. Cassista, like Bonnie Cook before her, filed suit against the grocery store on the grounds of employment discrimination using the “perceived of” prong under the California Fair Employment and Housing Act (Government Code §§12900 - 12996), which is very similar to the ADA.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Cook however, Cassista did not argue that her obesity was a physical disability that afforded her legal protection, and instead, she argued that her weight in no way impeded or limited her ability to perform the duties of the job. She contended in court that being turned down for the position was unfair and unjust discrimination and she had been denied employment for a physical attribute that would not affect her potential job performance. Community Foods argued that they had every right (and in no way violated the law) to discriminate for the position based on appearance. With nothing to protect Cassista on this point, the courts decided in favor of Community Foods and upheld their decision to not hire Toni Cassista. Although this case did little to change Ms. Cassista’s personal situation with Community Foods, it did spark the city of Santa Cruz in 1992 to propose and pass a local ordinance that protected individuals from discrimination based on “height, weight or physical characteristic.”<sup>2</sup>

### Murray v. Archbold

In May 1995, Sandra Murray applied for a position as a respiratory therapist at Archbold Hospital, in Thomasville County, Georgia. Later that month, Ms. Murray was informed that despite her qualifications she was denied the position because her weight, at the time exceeded the hospital's weight policy. This weight policy was one that the hospital claimed to prescribe to all potential and current employees and it states that based on the Metropolitan Life Insurance Tables, that no employee can exceed thirty percent more than the maximum desirable weight of a large framed woman or man. Believing that she had been discriminated against, Murray filed an official complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in July, 1995 on two separate grounds of discrimination. The first was employment discrimination based on disability due to her weight and the second, based on race. Having heard from an employee that the weight policy was not enforced by the hospital uniformly, Murray believed that it had been unfairly enforced against her because she is African American. After investigating Murray's claims, the EEOC decided to support her disability discrimination claim, but dropped her racial discrimination claim stating that the hospital did employ many African Americans and specifically, African American respiratory therapists (the position for which Murray had applied).

After retaining counsel, Murray refiled her EEOC claim of racial discrimination, only this time she stated that she experienced racial discrimination because of the weight discrimination. Using a disparate impact theory to make her claim, Murray argued that she experienced race discrimination because enforcing the kind of weight policy as Archbold did, disparately impacts more African American women than it would their

white counterparts. The EEOC insists that she amend her claim to all African Americans because she had not before that time argued sex or gender discrimination and they thought it was untimely in bringing it up after the fact. With her letter to sue from the EEOC, Murray's case went to trial and together with five other plaintiffs, it is one of the few case action cases of weight discrimination filed in the United States. During the trial, Murray and the other plaintiff's lawyers present four different claims to be disputed and decided upon by the court. First, the women were refused employment based on a perceived disability which is in violation of the ADA. Second, they were refused employment based on a perceived disability which is in violation of the Federal Rehabilitation Act (RHA). Third, the hospital weight policy constitutes an illegal pre-employment medical inquiry which violates a statute of the ADA. Finally, the weight policy has a disparate impact on African Americans who are medically predisposed to be more overweight than their white counterparts, which is in violation of the racial discrimination tenant of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

The courts considered all four of Murray's claims and decided on each one. For the perceived disability violations of the ADA and the RHA, the defendant's argued that the weight policy was not about perception of a disability, and instead about the actual weight of the individual. The hospital even claimed to be making allowances by increasing the maximum weight by thirty percent. In order for a perceived disability claim to be successful, the plaintiff must prove that the employer perceived the individual to have a disability where in fact, no disability actually exists. In this case, the weight policy itself is not a subjective analysis of one's body, but an objective limitation for employment with the hospital. The courts agreed with the defense and the first two

claims of perceived disability were dismissed. On the third claim of a pre-employment medical inquiry, the court decided that because the plaintiffs did not represent themselves as having a disability, then the ADA could not be used to protect them and the weight policy was upheld as a legal restriction of employment. Finally, on the fourth claim that the weight policy disparately impacted African Americans, the defense showed that Murray had filed her EEOC claim of racial discrimination based on disparate impact more than the legal 180 days after the actual incident, thus no decision was necessary on this point because Murray was beyond the statute of limitations for filing with the EEOC. The courts agreed again and in the end, Murray and her fellow plaintiffs were unsuccessful in court and Archbold Hospital's weight policy was found to be legal for employment purposes.

#### Nedder v. Rivier College

In the summer of 1988, Mary Nedder was hired on a part-time, contractual basis to teach Religious Studies at Rivier College in New Hampshire. She continued to teach on a part-time basis until June 1992, when a full time Assistant Professor position became available and she was hired for that position by the Department of Religious Studies for the 1992-93 academic year. Her full-time contract was renewed with excellent evaluations every year thereafter until 1994. Her contract for the 1994-95 academic year was again renewed, but this time there were concerns raised about "certain teaching and learning community issues." Those issues included negative student evaluations of Nedder's teaching effectiveness and complaints from other faculty about her body odor and the use of strongly scented perfumes. Nedder met with the Chair of the department to discuss these issues and they were subsequently resolved. In May of

1994, Nedder is rehired once again for the 1994-95 academic year, but over the course of the summer her contract for the upcoming year is withdrawn. In August 1994, a memo from the Chair of Religious Studies to the Vice President of Academic Affairs is produced outlining the reasons that Nedder's contract should be revoked. They included the following:

- Nedder was too absorbed with her personal problems.
- She scapegoats negative feedback.
- She was unable to use the office when there was snow on the ground.
- She could not fully participate in convocation or commencement processions.
- Her inappropriate use of the faculty secretary.
- She called a faculty meeting without notifying the chair of the department.
- Her body odor and the subsequent meeting to discuss it.
- Her negative evaluations from students.
- Her doctorate in theology from Boston University was too specialized and would no longer fulfill the department's need for a generalist.

After talking with the VP of Academic Affairs about these points, Nedder pursued her grievances through the college's grievance process but was ultimately denied that process as she was no longer an employee. In March 1995, she filed suit against Rivier College for employment discrimination and breach of contract.

At five foot, six inches tall and three hundred and eighty pounds, Nedder contended that she was terminated because of her weight in violation of the American's with Disabilities Act. In court she argued that walking was a major life activity and that her limitations around walking constituted a disability and thus, afforded her protection



under the ADA. The courts disagreed, citing previous case law where obesity was not recognized as a disability on its own and her ability to walk (or not) did not qualify as substantially limiting a major life activity since walking in commencement and convocation for the college was only a small aspect of her job. Nedder eventually proceed to trial, disputing the College's decision on two other points; that the College had breached their contract with her and that they perceived her as disabled and therefore was again in violation of the ADA. In the pre-trial hearings, the courts decided that although the College stated legitimate reasons for withdrawing her contract, it would be up to a jury to decide if those reasons were merely a pretext for discrimination. In the end, the jury sided with Mary Nedder awarding her monetary damages on both her discrimination and breach of contract suits. Although she did not succeed in overturning previous law that would have recognized obesity as a disability, her case was a success in recognizing weight discrimination in the workplace and compensating her for loss of work.

### *The Narratives of Antidiscrimination Law*

In "Addressing the Problem of Weight Discrimination in Employment," published in the California Law Review (2002), Elizabeth Kristen writes a broad overview of weight discrimination and how antidiscrimination law has worked to benefit as well as fail fat complainants in court. She argues that in understanding how the Americans with Disabilities Act and other antidiscrimination laws are interpreted and interpret those they assume to protect, we can begin to see the political stakes (both individually and communally) for fat people who engage the legal system. She begins by outlining three legal possibilities for fat people who experience discrimination on the job due to their weight/body size. The first is to file suit under the pretense of discrimination based on a

disability or perceived disability theory. The second is to connect a weight discrimination claim to a protected class such as racism, class, or gender. The last avenue is to determine if your local government affords protection from weight discrimination through local ordinances (60). Kristen is quick to comment that prevailing cultural stereotypes about fatness (that fat is thought to be unhealthy and/or something that a person can control) coupled with contradictory medical information (stating that fat might be detrimental to one's health and that the current "cures" for obesity are as equally harmful) make using the existing antidiscrimination laws risky in court (68-70).

In his 1998-99 Brennan Center Symposium Lecture "Prejudicial Appearances: The Logic of American Antidiscrimination Law," Robert Post engages the philosophy of antidiscrimination law, its purpose and intention for changing social norms and shifting cultural attitudes. He argues that appearances are central to personhood and to attempt legally to ignore appearances or blind ourselves to them forces us to undercut the dynamics of antidiscrimination law in the first place which is to shift cultural attitudes so as to be ultimately unnecessary (2-6). Post questions whether the basic logic of antidiscrimination law fails when it is applied beyond categories like race and gender to that of appearances (8). One aspect of antidiscrimination law that he criticizes harshly is in the understanding of the person before the law using a transcendental model of personhood.<sup>3</sup> He argues to separate the way someone looks from who they actual are is to ignore the initial intention of the laws that seek to protect us from discrimination.

In her response to Robert Post, Judith Butler in "Appearances Aside" (2000) points out that the law itself is not impartial or objective, either in its intention or its interpretation. She writes:

...we ought not to idealize the law as a neutral instrument that might intervene in the social operation of such categories in order to eliminate them. Antidiscrimination law participates in the very practice it seeks to regulate; antidiscrimination law can become an instrument of discrimination in the sense that it must reiterate – and entrench – the stereotypical or discriminatory version of the social category it seeks to eliminate. Ideally, however, antidiscrimination law is a social practice that seeks to disrupt and transform another set of discriminatory social practices. Insofar as both are social practices, and society is underwritten by stereotypes, it is hard to see that antidiscrimination law might transcend the stereotypes it seeks to eliminate. (62)

Although Butler remains skeptical that antidiscrimination law will ever have the effect it was intended – to protect and make whole those who are unfairly disadvantaged by social norms and stereotypes – she raises important questions about the viability of antidiscrimination law to aid those whose physical appearance and abilities are not legitimate or easily intelligible.

Butler is not alone in her skepticism. Anna Kirkland warns in “Representations of Fatness and Personhood: Pro-Fat Advocacy and the Limits and Uses of Law,” (2003) that the law is already implicated in the social norms it might seek to revise. “There is rarely any ‘coming to’ the law anew to take some new freedom or protection out of it; rather, one often finds a discrete list of options for describing oneself already embedded in American law” (24). It is precisely for this reason that antidiscrimination law becomes the most available avenue for combating fat prejudice in the workplace. It is also where

the most contention exists for fat plaintiffs. Kirkland goes on to explain that “because [the] law is not an instrument outside of culture, legal representations of fat people share in the multifarious and contradictory means of understanding one another that we commonly use for social recognition” (Kirkland 47).

### *Legal Narratives of Antidiscrimination and Complex Personhood*

The four cases represented here demonstrate the most commonly used legal possibilities for fat personhood available under the existing antidiscrimination laws. Although arguing that obesity itself as a disability has proven risky, using the “perceived of” prong of either the ADA or the RHA has been the most viable option to date for fat plaintiffs. Despite this, these cases show that even that strategy is not without risk. When the “perceived of” theory has been successful, it has required making the medical argument that the plaintiff is morbidly obese and somehow incapacitated to a degree. In both *Cook v. Rhode Island* and *Nedder v. Rivier College*, evidence was also introduced proving that the defendants did not rehire each woman because her size raised documented concerns about her ability to perform the requirements of the job. These concerns were raised, however, only after each had been executing the requirements for the position with high evaluations. Kristen remarks on this point, stating that “an obese plaintiff who is not morbidly obese is extremely unlikely to succeed using a perceived disability theory. Therefore even if the disability framework is able to provide a legal remedy for some fat workers, it is unlikely to protect those who are less fat but who are still experiencing weight-based employment discrimination” (91). This is important to note because while each woman (*Cook* and *Nedder*) was performing the requirements of her position before the issue of her weight was raised, when they were not rehired or

recontracted for their positions, each argued that they were perceived to have a disability (making their situations unlawful) but they also argued that each was morbidly obese and therefore their weight was beyond their control. This last argument is the one that makes their cases difficult to deny. If their weight is beyond their control, even though being fat is not considered a disability per say, it aligns our notions of fatness with disability by providing testimony that denies the stereotype that one can lose weight simply because they want to. In other words, if fatness is beyond our own control, then it is more on par with our understandings of disability and given current law, makes firing or not hiring of a morbidly obese person solely of the reasons of their fatness against the law. For Cook and Nedder, they argue two different and almost contradictory tenants. First, that they are fully capable employees who were wrongfully discharged because their employers perceived their physical conditions to impede their work. Second, that their physical conditions are unmanageable by themselves and therefore they cannot be held responsible or denied equal employment opportunity because of this condition.

Although successful for Cook and Nedder, the “perceived of” disability theory presents its own set of issues, even if it has proven more effective in court. Kirkland writes:

The ADA offers a way for those who are not *actually* disabled by obesity to file lawsuits, which is to claim that the firing, failure to hire, or exclusion was based on a *perception in others* that the claimant was disabled by obesity, when in fact s[he] is perfectly healthy and able-bodied... Plaintiffs who litigate weight-based discrimination on a ‘perceived disability’ theory are therefore affirming their health and

asking the courts to condemn their employers' negative social attributes. The ADA then becomes a classic antidiscrimination tool deployed against those who make hurtful empirical misjudgments about the abilities of fat people, and who are unable to suppress their contempt for fat bodies. (31-2)

Though she is hopeful that the ADA and similar laws are used to their fullest extent as antidiscrimination tools, Kirkland overlooks the other evidence needed to make a perceived disability case successful in court. As *Cassista v. Community Foods* and *Murray v. Archbold Hospital* prove, asserting one's good health as a fat woman and asking the law to condemn their potential employer's negative stereotyping, is not enough to proceed using a "perceived of" disability claim. In fact, this is where the bias of the law becomes particularly evident and upholding certain appearance standards (whether or not they are based on social/cultural stereotypes) remains perfectly legal. Kirkland goes on to say, "it seems that attempts at establishing obesity as a legally recognized disability have failed because many courts refuse to believe that being fat is morally irrelevant and unrelated to the character and behavior of the true self. In other words, they insist on regarding the obese person as socially embedded and marked with all the attendant moral judgments that typically pertain to fatness" (39-40).

For *Cassista* and *Murray* this could not be more true. Each woman represents herself legally as full fledged, capable individuals who were wronged by potential employers because they were perceived to have physical conditions that would impede their work or not represent the employers in the manner they expected. Each woman argues her case based on a pure form of the perceived disability theory, but with no

specifically named protection for fatness or obesity under the ADA, the RHA, Title VII, or the California Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA), they find little help in these legal statutes. Additionally, Cassista and Murray did not (unlike Cook and Nedder) present medical evidence as to the unmanageability of their physical conditions and therefore, there is no connection to disability in their legal arguments for protection. As such, Community Foods and Archibold Hospital are found to be within their legal right to deny employment to these women on the basis of their weight because their defense was reduced to proving that obesity or fatness is not a disability “affecting one or more major life activities” as the law requires.

The legal strategies of Cook, Cassista, Murray, and Nedder all present interesting moments of negotiation politically, culturally, and most likely, personally. Although it is not within the scope of this project to investigate how these women felt and continue to feel about their legal battles, it has been the purpose of this chapter to highlight different legal strategies and results using these four cases as examples. Furthermore, the differences and similarities between these cases also shows how embedded our understandings of fatness are within the legal system. As Kirkland argues, “Instead of amplifying accounts of fat people as members of a politically and socially oppressed group who deserve more respect, more room, more income, and so on, the actual legal battles that fat plaintiffs wage divert notions of fat personhood down more narrow and less politically viable paths” (47). Her point is valid in the sense that it is easy to see how plaintiffs end up arguing incapacitation in order to validate a perceived disability claim, but I also think that it is more complicated than simply saying that this road is less politically viable. The legal arguments of Cook and Nedder become a way to work an

already unfair system to their advantage. Does this necessarily benefit anyone else, possibly not, but each woman is able to raise the issue of fat prejudice in her case. By conceding to being defined as morbidly obese, each is able to shift the terms of the trial from a conversation about whether fatness deserves protection under a disability protection law (as was the cases with Cassista and Murray) to the unfair treatment of their employers. In so doing, Cook and Nedder win their cases. Conversely, Toni Cassista and Sandra Murray lose their cases, but by not allowing themselves to be defined as morbidly obese or physically impaired they each raise awareness about the stereotypes of fatness and how the legal system offers them no specific protection under current antidiscrimination statutes. In the case of Cassista, that awareness eventually lead to the passing of a local protective law in Santa Cruz, California.

This chapter focuses on a conversation about the construction of personhood in legal terms and offers examples (4 different court cases) to show how individuals engage and reject various aspects of the law (anti-discrimination laws) in order to combat weight-based employment discrimination. By looking at how people are represented legally, as well as how successful their cases were or not, I have shown the various kinds of negotiations that take place when a fat claimant goes to court. This negotiation is never more visible than when a fat claimant (such as Bonnie Cook and Mary Nedder) mobilizes the ADA to argue discrimination, but in so doing, must accept the definition of their bodies as disabled or insufficient to some degree. Looking more closely at the available anti-discrimination law in the U.S. and the available options for fat people to seek retribution if they experience discrimination on the job, exposes the difficulty within weight-based discrimination given that there are virtually no legal protections available



specifically for fatness or appearance in the U.S. By choosing to fight against fat oppression in a legal context, fat plaintiffs simultaneously engage and reject a legal system of protection for their own benefit and in so doing, demonstrate, again, an aspect of complex personhood wherein there are not simple explanations about how to use the legal system in this manner and even what the outcome might be.

The legal landscape for fat claimants is certainly treacherous and not without risk, but by looking at the previous cases and the choices of possibilities for fat plaintiffs in their own representation, we can see the complication of multiple competing messages. Additionally, the results of such legal representations cannot be viewed as merely positive or negative based on whether plaintiffs win their case or not. In the chapter to come, our attention will shift toward visual representation to see how fat characters and performers engage these many narratives and finally, in the last chapter the overlap of all these narratives will be examined for their contribution to complex personhood.

## Chapter 5: Looking Out/Looking In – Visual Representations of Fatness

Mamá, I *do* want to lose weight, but part of me doesn't... because my weight says to everybody “fuck you!”

“Ana” – *Real Women Have Curves* (2002)<sup>1</sup>

The epigraph above, from the film, *Real Women Have Curves*, is Ana's response to her mother's shaming efforts for being fat. In a moment of desperation imposed by the heat inside the clothing factory where they work, Ana begins to take off her clothes. Her mother, horrified, demands her to stop. Ana retorts that a room full of women should not mind seeing her in her underwear, but her mother disagrees and argues that Ana should be more shameful of her body and that she should not so easily (or proudly) put it on display, even for other women. Ana's defiance of her mother provokes a mixture of pride and shame in the other factory workers. Soon, though, they too are taking off their clothes and comparing their stretch marks to one another. After concluding that in every size, they are all beautiful, the women return to work in their underwear.

Although there are a number of points that could be made about this scene, I want to focus specifically on Ana's statement to her mother quoted above because it captures an important sentiment that informs this dissertation overall and drives this chapter in particular. When Ana simultaneously admits that she does and doesn't want to lose weight, she exposes a contradiction that is relevant and arguably common among many women (and men as well). On the one hand, she admits her desires for wanting to be thinner. And on the other, she is proud of her body because it is unique in a world that

tells her that she should not (or at least not want to) be different. Taken together, however, this kind of “schizophrenic” expression exemplifies the mixed messages that exist about how bodies, and in particular female bodies, (female bodies in particular) are represented, made meaningful, and then embodied. These messages or meanings come from and are substantiated by a myriad of sources: the authority of the Western medical establishment, legal jurisprudence, fashion magazines, television, films, size-acceptance organizations, health and fitness journals, art, theatre, and communities. The previous chapters examined how these messages are legitimized by prevailing discourse (western medical and U.S. legal precedent) and negotiated by the fat subjects who exist within such narratives. This chapter is looking at the visual realm as another place where messages about the body and fatness are conveyed. By examining representations, it allows us to see how images provide a different kind of information (set of meanings or categories) than the law or medicine. Some of these sources tell women to be proud of who they are regardless of their body size, while others tell women that they should be careful and watchful of their bodies, while still others encourage women to feel ashamed particularly if their bodies are labeled “fat,” “overweight,” or “obese.” It is precisely the combination and in some cases, the contradiction of these messages that I am interested in identifying by focusing here on three different types of visual representations. As such, this chapter will investigate the representations of bodies and size in the fat nude photography collection of Women En Large, the radical activist performances of F.A.T.A.S.S., a cheerleading troupe based in Portland, Oregon, and finally in the film, *Real Women Have Curves*.

Across diverse mediums, there are many visual representations of fatness. They can include pornography, plus-size fashion magazines, traditional art, television characters, and talk shows participants. The three examined more closely in this chapter were chosen because each visual text and its representation complicates notions of race, class, gender, sexuality, community, and health by not simplifying body size down to one particular axis of social identity. As a result, they challenge viewers to see the fat women represented as more than just fat. Additionally, the mediums of representation provide a certain amount of accessibility and mainstream appeal judged necessary in order to discuss the messages produced out of each representation.

Women En Large (1994), as a photography collection, was selected because every photo is devoted to depicting fat women of many backgrounds and identities and participating in various activities. Moreover, the collection is contemporary and it asks an audience to see the fat nudes within as fat, but also more holistically, as people and specifically, as women. Another more recent collection, Proud to be Fat: The Big Beautiful Woman (2003) shot by Fredrick Neema, captures the bodies in action of several San Francisco based pro-fat and fat acceptance performance and social groups, such as the Fat Bottom Review, Phat Fly Girls, Big Boogie Nights, the Bod Squad, and the Padded Lillies. Although Neema's collection is beautifully shot and reveals the creativity and variety of the fat movement, the subjects of his photos belong to a relatively small number of women who belong to political and fat-identified activist, social, and performance groups, all of which currently exist in the San Francisco bay area. In contrast, Women En Large exposes the everyday woman. Laurie Toby Edison's photographs are powerful because they combine the intimacy of the nude with the

politics of revealing the fat body naked. In so doing, the fat body becomes visible as fat (Kipnis 121). Furthermore, by structuring the collection around the nude, using ordinary women as models, and interlacing the photographs with the stories told by her co-author, Debbie Notkin, and the other models, Women En Large becomes a collection representative of the everyday fat woman.

Along with *Real Women Have Curves*, there are a number of contemporary films that present the fat body on screen. There are several that focus on fatness among men, including, *Fatso*, *Fat Girls*, and *Heavy*. *Fatso* (1980) features Dom DeLuise and was written and directed by Anne Bancroft, depicts the comedic follies of a fat man trying to lose weight after the death of a family member. In 1995, the independent film *Heavy* was released which featured Pruitt Taylor Vince as a mourning and lonely fat man who struggles with his desires for Liv Tyler's character in the wake of his mother's death. The independent film *Fat Girls* premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in April 2006. It tells the story of a young, awkward gay high school student living in Texas. The film's title is a play on words about the central relationship in the film, that of the main character and his best fat girlfriend. Though these films make visible the fat man's body, they do so for very particular motives; to intensify the film's comic relief (*Fatso*), to symbolize a symptom of his own depression (*Heavy*) or merely as a point of contrast between the stereotypical expectations of heterosexual female and gay male bodies (*Fat Girls*).

Among fat representations in film, there are a series of movies featuring well-known thin actors and actresses who play fat men and women. In 2004, Kennan Thompson donned a fat suit to enhance his size and play the larger than life character of fat Albert. A remake of Bill Cosby's famous cartoon characters, *Fat Albert*, brought to

life the 1970's inner-city Philadelphia kid gang and portrayed their antics in contemporary times. Similarly, Gwyneth Paltrow portrays a lonely fat woman in *Shallow Hall* (2001), who finds love only after a superficial man (played by Jack Black) is hypnotized to see just the inner of beauty of women. Finally, Martin Lawrence (*Big Momma's House*, 2000, and *Big Momma's House 2*, 2006) and Eddie Murphy (*The Nutty Professor*, 1996, *The Nutty Professor 2: The Klumps*, 2000, and *Norbit*, 2007) have been the most successful playing fat characters. Each has boosted their careers and their acting repertoires with these commercially successful films. Unfortunately, the fat characters in all of these films become stereotypical caricatures of real fat people. The constructed bodies, personalities, and their impact on everything else in the film, is distorted and stretched in order to reiterate most of the negative stereotypes about fatness in our culture. These stereotypes are served up for comic relief precisely because they pinpoint the horror and fear of fat and expose our cultural fat phobia.

Three films that focus on the fat female body include *Hairspray*, *À ma soeur!*, and *Phat Girls*. In 1988, John Water's released the cult classic, *Hairspray*. The film features Ricki Lake and Devine as a fat mother daughter duo who are battling sizism and racism in 1960's Baltimore. The French film, *À ma soeur!* (2001), translated "Fat Girl," depicts a young plus-size woman coping with her father's celebrity while trying to trust the love of someone else. Finally, *Phat Girls* (2006), is a romantic comedy, featuring Mo'Nique and captures the plight of a fat African American woman who dares to start her own clothing line for women of size and finds love along the way while on vacation with her girlfriends. Although each of these films conveys a body positive message about and for

fat women, their settings and plots are unrealistic and feel out of touch with ordinary women.

In contrast, however, the setting of *Real Women Have Curves* in an East Los Angeles neighborhood, within a Mexican American family, where the protagonist is struggling to find her own identity as a woman, a Latina, a daughter, and a girlfriend, provides numerous possibilities for analysis around multiple sites of difference. Upon debut at the Sundance Film Festival in 2002, the film was an instant success winning the Audience Award for direction and the Special Jury Award for acting. Furthermore, the film's success on the film festival circuit and its production through HBO, allowed access to the film in mainstream theatres, on cable television, and eventually on DVD. Unlike many of the films mentioned above, *Real Women* takes seriously the feelings of the main character toward her own body and the ways that those feelings are entangled with her cultural and gendered situation. Moreover, the plot and the characters throughout the film are sensible and accessible, serving as touchstones for situations that ordinary everyday people experience.

Finally, the fat cheerleaders of F.A.T.A.S.S. represent a protest performance that is very accessible in terms of familiarity for most potential audience members. Unlike other forms of protest performance (albeit burlesque dancing or synchronized swimming) the medium and structure of cheerleading is recognizable to many, if not most, people. Additionally, the combination of cheerleading with fat bodies, unlike that of hip hop or burlesque dancing, strikes a particular kind of dissonance as the thin and light body of the cheerleader sits in sharp contrast to a fat body. The combination of fat bodies with cheerleading also raises questions about our cultural notions of race, class, gender,

sexuality, and health. Overall, each of these representations share a sense of accessibility for the audience (albeit in different ways) and each is recently produced, thus working within a similar generation of narratives and counter narratives about body size and fatness.

Returning again to Ana's words at the start of this chapter, she tells her mother that she is not interested in losing weight because her weight says to the world, "fuck you!" Although Ana proves throughout the film that she is not hesitant to speak up for herself, in this moment, she acknowledges that it is her body that does the talking for her. Another point of investigation here is how the visible fat body is able to do this kind of cultural work – be it through performances or other representations in art or film. By examining these different realms of visual production, I argue that these representations are able to present a negotiation of the multiple messages we receive about body size, producing a complicated and possibly even conflicted and messy subject position for bodies of size. In addition, I attend to how the body transforms the way we interpret the world by concentrating on the interplay between the multiple messages presented in these "fat performances" and ask several questions. What meanings are constructed throughout these contemporary visual texts and do these performances generate a different conversation about body size in this historical moment? Like Ana, how can we begin to acknowledge the multiple and even contradictory positions of fatness as part and parcel of one another and as an ongoing negotiation of the world that surrounds us? And in understanding how fat bodies are visually represented, what can be said for fat identity?

By focusing on three different visual productions, I intend to show that there is a visual narrative full of multiple plots and subplots about fatness and body size. Though



undoubtedly rich with interpretive opportunity, this chapter is not focused on the mechanics or the medium of the representations it looks at, but instead, is interested in what different representations say across one another. In other words, it is the meaning that the visual narrative constructs about body size through photography, film, and performance that is the focus of this chapter.

### *The Visual and the Visible*

In order to discuss the similarities and the distinctions across three different visual mediums, it is important first to ground this discussion in the theoretical work of visual cultural. Although the texts discussed here only scratch the surface of work being done in media studies, visual culture studies, and film theory, they offer a window into those larger fields of study and they also ground my analysis of the representation presented later in this chapter. In addition, an exhaustive look at these fields would be impossible here, it is important to note the highlights, as they inform and enrich my discussion of the visual, the visible, and the meaning(s) we derive from each.

Though primarily a philosopher and phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's contribution to visual studies comes in his unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), which was published as a book after his death in 1961. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the visible and the invisible are connected to and informed by one another. In other words, without one, the other does not exist – there is no visible without the invisible and vice versa. He writes, “One has to understand that it is the visibility itself that involves a non-visibility” (247). The visible is the invisible (in a non-contradictory way) and to see something is to simultaneously understand what it is not (247). Therefore, the relationship between the visible and the invisible more than just oppositional, in fact is

codependent and the one is reliant on the other for its existence. This philosophical understanding becomes useful in later decades as theorists in art history, film studies, and feminist thought start to grapple with notions of representation, visual imagery, the gaze, spectatorship, and performance. For this project, Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on the visible and invisible are useful in thinking through how the fat body is represented, what we can see and don't, and how meanings are constructed and reified in the presentation of the fat body.

Originally published in 1972, John Berger's Ways of Seeing, offers one of the first analyses, within art history, of the gaze from a gendered perspective. Berger argues that women understand themselves in two simultaneous ways – she knows herself as herself and she knows herself as others see her. It is this dual understanding that Berger claims is what defines a woman as female. He states, “And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman” (37). He goes on to say that men are engaged in the act of looking, while women become the objects to be seen.

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision – a sight. (38)

Berger offers an analysis of early modern European art in order to satisfy this claim, pointing to the nudes of the seventeenth century as his primary example. For visual

culture studies, Ways of Seeing is one of the foundational works that investigate the gaze and how the act of looking is gendered.

Expanding Berger's ideas about women as the object of the man's gaze, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" introduced to film theory the notion that the gaze of the viewer was male. Using psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey argues that the woman "stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by the symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning" (15). In other words, the cinematic woman represents the male lack and therefore is only made meaningful through the gaze of the male. For this, Mulvey remarks that the cinema becomes a place to analyze the ways of seeing and the pleasures in looking (15). She goes on to dispute that the image of the woman is passive in comparison to the gaze of the active male. Within film, there are three different "looks" that participate in this patriarchal structure of passive/female and active/male – the first is the look of the camera to the actors, the second is the look of the audience to the film itself, and last is the look of the characters themselves to one another (25). For Mulvey, it is the narrative function within the cinema (the editing, the lighting, the camera angles, etc.) as well as the psychological roots of human desire (the pleasure in looking) that offers the male gaze, even to the female spectator. For this project, the work of Berger and Mulvey serve as points of departure in the consideration of how meaning is constructed within a representation by the look/gaze of the representational subject, as well as by the viewing audience.

Working to theorize the reception of visual texts by an audience, Stuart Hall's influential essay, "Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse" (originally published in 1973) explores the relationship between the viewer and a visual text. He argues that this relationship can take many forms; that a visual text can imply multiple meanings and an audience can have multiple interpretations. The encoding/decoding model shows how visual media is encoded with particular codes and meanings by the producer of an image and decoded with similar or different codes by the receiver or viewer of that image. Hall shows how a decoded reading can affect what is actually encoded through the process of reproduction. In turn, this describes how the producer of an image will alter what is encoded according to how an image is decoded in order to achieve a particular reading. Hall offers three different decoded readings of any text – (1) dominant/preferred, (2) negotiated, and (3) oppositional. Hall's model of the relationship between the audience and an image works beyond theories that posit that the gaze is masculine, and instead offers the viewer options for reading a visual text as something other than purely hegemonic or beyond the dominant/preferred meaning.

Peggy Phelan's Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (1993) explores the interesting relationships between the object, the gaze (both the gaze of the subject and the object), representation, the real, and identity politics. UnMarked establishes a theoretical framework that examines the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, films by Yvonne Rainer and Jennie Livingstone, performances on the street (anti-abortion groups) and the theatre (plays by Tom Stoppard and work by Angelika Festa). This framework focuses on the power of representation in relation to visibility and identity politics. Phelan argues that categories of privilege such as the male, the masculine, whiteness, heterosexuality,

and other privileged categories are marked and thus visible within mainstream representation. In contrast, subordinate categories such as women, the feminine, homosexuality, and non-whiteness remain unmarked and outside the frame of visibility (in the sense that visibility is readable as diverse and multiple rather than reduced to the single token image) by mainstream culture. She goes on to argue that representation is equated with power and a schema of identity politics that is constantly seeking power for subordinate groups through visible recognition. Phelan warns that with visibility comes surveillance and that by remaining unmarked there might be power to be had in the mobility offered from remaining under the radar (so to speak). In addition, she critiques the notion that a representation in some way tells the truth. Instead she states that a representation "always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing" (2). As such she highlights the power of performance as a method of representing without reproducing where the inequality between the marked and unmarked categories cannot be assured.

These theories on the visual image, visibility, the ways we look and make meaning out of what we see, and the power that exists in representation, speak (in multiple ways) to the visual narratives about body size that exists in our culture. Although, there are plenty of analyses on the hegemonic and normalizing narratives about the thin, healthy, fit body, this chapter aims to explore the representations of fat bodies and the narratives (both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic) created from those visual images.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, I hope to reveal the options for fat subjectivity and identity.

### Women En Large

Women En Large (released as a book in 1994) is an intimate black and white collection of fat nudes, featuring women of various skin colors, abilities, and sizes. The photos are intended to make starkly visible that which our culture is not interested in seeing or looking at. Combining visual and written texts, Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin provide a political message about fatness that is on the one hand, considered (by some) assimilationist in its message, and on the other, radical in its ability to reach a broad audience and challenge the body status quo. The book participates in an effort to rearrange cultural attitudes towards fatness; challenging their readers to consider fatness in everyday life and producing a narrative that is complicated in its presentation of competing messages about body size and identity.

Women En Large begins with a brief forward by both the photographer (Edison) and the author of the accompanying text (Notkin), each talking about their collaboration with one another and their journey in producing the collection. What follows is a series of forty-one photographs of fat female nudes both posed and candid with women engaged in a multitude of activities from weight lifting to private contemplation. The bodies of the women featured fill the photographs and nothing is hidden or veiled from the viewer. The women represent a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds as well as abilities, body shapes, and sizes (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1**  
**(Women En Large 89 – Debbie Notkin, April Miller, Carol S., Queen Thisha, and Robyn Brooks)**

The majority of the women engage the viewer directly by staring back into the camera, while others are featured in pairs or groups engaged with one another. A handful of the photos represent the women doing something else albeit sleeping, dancing, stretching, or watering plants (Figure 1.2).



**Figure 1.2**  
**(Women En Large 35 – Bernadette Bosky)**

In every photo though, the body of the women is central to the image and either takes up the entire photograph itself or is centered in the context of the photo so that she cannot be missed (Figure 1.3.and 1.4).



**Figure 1.3**  
**(Women En Large 49 – Queen Thisha)**



**Figure 1.4**  
**(Women En Large 59 – Edna Rivera)**

In reference to the work, Notkin explains that the book is an effort to represent the shared experiences of fat women and in particular, to offer a realistic and positive representation rarely allowed by mainstream culture. In her essay, “Enlarging: Politics



and Society,” printed at the end of the photo collection, she pieces together the words from the fat women (some who are the models for the photos of the collection) along with her own commentary about being fat in today’s society. Notkin challenges the stereotypes (both social and medical) about fatness and offers that the book is not intended to sexualize the women it represents despite the subjects’ nudity. In addition, she challenges the fat phobic tendencies within our culture by asking her readers to reconsider the fat female body as both artful and beautiful. While many of the models recount various stories of fatness from child to adulthood, they make clear their own struggles with bodies that defy social norms of acceptability.

Kate Schaefer describes her experience of being fat and having to acknowledge her fat in a public context. When she sees the photos of the fat women included in the collection, she writes, “What positive feelings I have about my fat are fairly few and far between. This is a book of pictures of women who are more than armful, and who are beautiful, yes, in these pictures and in other places, but take that knowledge and turn it around for myself? Not in this lifetime” (92). Schaefer talks about the shame she has for her own body and how her fat makes her visible at times when she wishes she were not. She also admits that there are times when she can see herself as beautiful in spite of being fat, but that she struggles with seeing herself as beautiful as a fat woman (92). Schaefer’s words are a point of departure for Notkin, who argues that fat phobia and prejudice work to alienate even fat women from their own bodies.

Notkin’s voice throughout the text defends her subjects’ words and challenges those cultural discourses that impose and maintain fat phobic sentiments. In particular, she focuses on the medical establishment, criticizing the way fatness is categorized as a

disease and how those who are fat are humiliated and attacked by doctors and other medical personnel. Although she is harsh in her criticism of medicine's treatment of fat people, she is also reliant on a related discourse based in scientific data that allows her to argue that fatness is no less healthy than any other body size (93-4). Her conclusions are two-fold. On the one hand, she would like Women En Large to serve as a reminder of fat phobia's impact on the lives of everyday women (by highlighting the voices of the models throughout) and as a visual statement about the beauty of fat female bodies and the bravery of the women who modeled for the collection.

Although the work of Notkin and Edison is revolutionary in its ability to present and reconceive the fat female body for a mass audience, it has also be criticized for not pushing the ordinary boundaries of representation and sex enough. In her essay, "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women," published in Bodies Out of Bounds, Le'a Kent explains that to confront the representational status quo "requires undermining the process of abjection that makes fat women's bodies synonymous with the offensive, horrible, or deadly aspects of embodiment. It requires finding a way of representing the self that is not body-neutral or disembodied (and therefore presumptively thin), but intimately connected with the body in a new vision of embodiment that no longer disdains flesh" (131).<sup>3</sup> She argues that by shifting the presentation of fat women and providing more images of embodiment, fat women will begin to stop living in their bodies as those "before" pictures or as something not themselves; separate from their identities as people. Instead, fat women will begin to own a body image in the present; a body image that is intricately connected to the self, instead of this awful thing that is just waiting to be exercised, dieted, or suctioned away (131 & 134-35). In this way, Kent

believes that Women En Large challenges the fat body as an abject, but she also contends that the book simultaneously reinstates the fat body as a symptom, which she finds problematic. It is in the written text of Notkin's essays that Kent takes issue with the book as a whole. She disputes that while the photographs seem to challenge medical and cultural discourse about fat bodies as unhealthy and unattractive, it is the text that "...troubles the usual construction of embodiment, in which the self is presumptively thin and the fat body is made to stand in for the abjectness of flesh itself" (144). Kent goes on to state that, "while Women En Large attempts to counteract representations of fat women as the abject by correcting the medical and cultural assumptions that anchor them, it ends up reinstating the fat body as symptom. Moreover, by avoiding potentially negative images the book fails to write the fat body out of the narrative of medical symptom and into a narrative of sexual pleasure" (144-45). For Kent, the mixed messages of the photos and the text no longer present a unified or cohesive argument for challenging mainstream culture's fat phobia and oppression. She contends that although the photos and essays work to construct a fat identity for women, Notkin's strategy to present fatness as something for which fat women (and men) are not to blame, thus genetic, presents a conundrum. Kent points out, "Notkin sees medicalizing discourses as the major enemy of fat subjectivity, but she also relies on them, marshaling scientific citations to debunk the assertion that fat people are inherently unhealthy" (139). For Kent, the complication of having visual photographs that state that fat bodies are beautiful and sexy coupled with text that mobilizes medical arguments so as not to blame the fat person for their fatness is contradictory and thus, problematic. In this way, Kent criticizes Women En Large for its overall presentation – one that makes the fat body

visible through the photographs and then, in the text, presents “fat as [a] symptom, and maintain[s] some of the mainstream erasure of the fat body” (140).

In her work, Revolting Bodies, Kathleen LeBesco comments that the work of Edison and Notkin is “visually confrontational” (46). Having interviewed Notkin, LeBesco writes:

Notkin herself locates Women En Large in a politically assimilationist position, as far as *sexual* representation is concerned. She claims... ‘the book is not about sex. It’s about beauty ...and it’s interesting that people automatically make the connection to sex when they see nudes.’ Notkin maintains that her book is targeted to fat people ‘who are in a place where they can even begin to think about liking their bodies’; her text is intended less to radically revamp society’s perception of fat bodies than to aid fat women in feeling better about themselves. She quotes one of the models, Chupoo Alafonte as saying that ‘survival is more important than acceptance’; though this seems to contradict the book’s emphasis on the acceptance of fat beauty, it captures the expressed assimilationist stance of its authors, whose primary goal is to change fat women’s self-perception (rather than society’s perception of fat women). (47)

Notkin’s words challenge Kent’s criticism above, raising an interesting point in and of itself for the remainder of this chapter to consider. In an effort to offer other fat women a beautiful reflection of themselves, Notkin also makes her understanding of her own body and fatness vulnerable to her readers. What’s more, the contradictions raised between wanting to debunk medical understandings of body size, while also relying on them to

challenge popular cultural attitudes of fatness seem to be a more holistic portrayal of fat identity. Additionally, it would seem more reasonable that the struggle over the emotional contradictions over our bodies reveals a more sensible version of fat identity – one that must negotiate a series of messages, rather maintain a singular, mono-political thought about fatness and body size. In other words, Women En Large serves as a wonderful example of complex personhood in that it does not attempt to relocate or write away the contradictions it presents. Even more, these “contradictions” are not understood as such, by the photographer, the writer, or the other models and hence, the fat identity revealed in the collection is one that simultaneously struggles with self esteem, finds beauty in fat bodies, understands the difficulty of interfacing with medical discourse, but also knows that there is power to be harnessed there. As such, there exists a glimmer of the complexity for fat identity.

### *Real Women Have Curves*

The film, released in theatres in 2003, begins on Ana’s last day of high school where we see her completing house-hold chores and attending to her mother’s whims, all before catching several buses that take her out of her predominately Latino neighborhood in East Los Angeles and into Beverly Hills where she attends school. In her last class, Ana lies about her plans after graduation, but admits to her teacher, Mr. Guzman, that he should not concentrate his efforts on her, as her family would never allow her to leave home and attend college. After school, Ana quits her job at the hamburger stand and heads home to a surprise graduation party planned by her family. Upon hearing that Ana has quit her job, it is announced that she will go to work with her mother, in her sister Estela’s, clothing factory. When Mr. Guzman arrives unannounced at the family house

during the party, his efforts to convince Ana's parents (particularly her mother, Carmen) to allow Ana to attend college are not well received. Although they are polite, it is made clear that she is expected to stay at home and contribute to the family household in the same way her mother and sister have done before her.

This beginning sets up one of the integral tensions in the film between Ana and her mother – that of education and opportunity. In a private conversation with her husband, Raul, Carmen admits that she does not want Ana to go to college. She says that she can teach her all the things she needs to know in life: how to raise children, how to take care of a husband, and how to sew. Carmen goes on to explain that Ana is lucky just to have finished high school at all, as she herself had not been given that opportunity. She tells Raul, “it’s principle, it’s not fair.” This conversation reveals Carmen’s feelings of jealousy about Ana’s desire to leave home to continue her education and it visually demonstrates the competing cultural ideas about family and education for young Latinas. Within Ana’s family dynamic, we also see her father and sister caught between the positions held by Carmen and Ana. On the one hand, Raul would like to see his daughters have the opportunity of college and on the other, he does not want his family to split apart. Estela, too, is caught at twenty-nine years old, an unwed Latina business owner who lives at home with her parents – she is simultaneously breaking and reinventing the role of the typical Latina. When Ana goes to Estela’s factory for the first time, she is taken aback by the beauty of the dresses manufactured there. Almost immediately though, Carmen squelches Ana’s awe by announcing that the dress is a size seven and that Ana would never be able to fit into it. Carmen then grabs her daughter’s breasts and proclaims them enormous. Ana yells for her to stop as the other seamstresses

arrive to the factory. At the factory, it doesn't take Ana long to recognize that the work done there is as she states it, "cheap labor for Bloomingdales." Again competing ideologies emerge and are relevant to the plots of the film. On the one side Ana's resentment at working in the factory comes from her understanding that her sister's place of business is a "sweatshop." Ana goes so far as to call the work of the women there "dirty work" of the department stores pointing out that the dresses cost only eighteen dollars to assemble and are sold by Bloomingdales for close to six hundred dollars. On the other side, Estela and the other seamstresses, Pancha, Carmen, Rosalee, Norma and Norma's mother understand the quality of their own labor, saying that they take great pride in their work and that the job is quite meaningful for them. They are not discouraged by Ana's feelings and instead, accuse her of being arrogant.

Another plotline that generates tension in the film, centers on Jimmy, the white boy from Ana's high school who is clearly attracted to her. Jimmy gives Ana his number and they soon arrange to have a date. Jimmy's character facilitates yet another set of ideas about family and sexuality by which Ana feels caught and torn between. Ana uses Jimmy as a point of comparison, asking if he feels like his mother understands him. When he answers, "I guess so..." she admits that her mother hates her and thinks she is fat and ugly and stupid. This moment serves as further evidence that Ana feels differently from her family and that she feels punished by Carmen's disapproval of her body. It also establishes the gendered, as well as the racial and class differences between Jimmy and Ana. As a white male, Jimmy might not expect or even want to be understood by his mother. Moreover, Jimmy's lukewarm assertion might also indicate that as a middle-class white male, being understood by one's mother is not necessary or

even expected. Several scenes later, Ana is shown taking control of the mounting sexual tension between her and Jimmy. In one moment, she takes responsibility to buy condoms from the local pharmacy and in another, she tells Jimmy to leave the lights on so that he can see her while they have sex. On their first date, Jimmy remarks that Ana has a beautiful face and she immediately challenges him to like all of her by saying, "Just my face?" All of these moments sit in sharp contrast to the messages Ana receives (primarily from Carmen, but also from her immediate community of other women) about how a woman should look and behave for men in order to get a husband. These messages are conveyed in scenes with Carmen where she tells Ana to be careful about knowing too much; "A man wants a virgin." Ana responds by saying, "there's more to me than what's between my legs. A woman has thoughts, ideas, a mind of her own." What precipitates this conversation is gossip among the seamstresses about Norma who used to work at the factory but who leaves early in the film to be married in Mexico. According to gossip, Norma had sex with her fiancé before the wedding and now he has disappeared and left her at the altar. Carmen goes on to say that Norma's mother never approved of her fiancé and the story then becomes a moment for Carmen to tell Ana that a mother can always identify the right man for her daughter.

In many ways, however, Carmen's knowledge is not legitimate or taken seriously by Ana who thinks her mother is old fashioned and not in keeping with contemporary ideas about women's bodies, sexuality, education, family, etc. This is never more apparent than when Carmen reveals secretly to Ana that she believes herself to be pregnant because she has not menstruated for the last three months. Ana doesn't take her seriously and recommends that Carmen see a doctor. When the doctor confirms Ana's



suspicion that Carmen is not pregnant, but instead going through menopause, Carmen's knowledge/legitimacy (particularly in Ana's eyes) is further called into question. The scene following this is of Ana and Carmen eating together in a café. When Carmen tries to eat the flan, Ana objects stating that the doctor warned against having too much sugar. Carmen rebels, arguing that Ana should not eat the flan either because she is fat and will not be able to get a husband with that body. Ana appeals to her mother, pointing out that they have the same body and that Carmen's hypocrisy about Ana's body size is ridiculous. Carmen retorts that it doesn't matter because she is married and orders Ana to not eat the flan. Ana ignores her mother and she defiantly shoves the flan in her mouth and sits back with her arms crossed.

The tension between Carmen and Ana intensifies throughout the film and climaxes when Ana receives news that she has been accepted to Columbia University. When Mr. Guzman comes over to the family house to announce the news, it is clear that Raul and Carmen are not in consensus about Ana leaving the house to pursue her education. In a subsequent scene, Ana talks with her father and makes it clear that she intends to leave for New York City and Columbia University, but she would like to have the approval of her parents before going. Raul gives Ana his blessing to leave, but Carmen does not and refuses to come out of her room on the morning Ana leaves for New York. Ana pleads for her mother to say goodbye in person, but Carmen refuses and Ana leaves without her mother's approval. This ending is juxtaposed with the final scene of the film which depicts Ana walking confidently out of the subway and down a New York City street.

The many tensions in the film's plot highlight the contradictions that Ana must negotiate as a young, plus-size, Latina who would like to please her family and also pursue her own dreams. The film succeeds in making real those negotiations and not compromising the integrity of the plot by trying to resolve the various tensions that Ana faces throughout the storyline. Ana must live with Carmen's disapproval and figure out how to love her body and herself without her mother's support. She, however, is not ever represented as completely unconcerned or unsympathetic to her mother's feelings. Throughout the film, Ana is shown negotiating what she wants to think about herself with Carmen's criticism of her. It is in these moments – in Estela's factory in her underwear, with Jimmy, and on her last day at home pleading with her mother – that we see Ana saying and acting in a way that would seem to appeal to her mother. It is these negotiations that might seem to contradict on the surface, that enhance and provide the nuance for a representation of fat identity.

With regard to the issue of body size alone, the film challenges commonly held stereotypes about communities of color and their relationships to fatness. A common stereotype of Latino communities is that there is more acceptance of larger body sizes among the women in those communities. Carmen and the testimony of the other women in the factory dispute this stereotype. On the flip side, Ana almost reiterates the stereotype by asserting and believing in her value and worth as a larger young Latina woman. However, it is in her words to her mother about sometimes wishing to be thinner, or in a moment of insecurity when asks Jimmy why he likes her, that we see Ana herself struggling. It is this visual struggle and the messy position it creates that speaks to complexity of fat identity that this dissertation is fleshing out.

Like the photographs of Women En Large, *Real Women Have Curves* does not represent its protagonist with a singular way a being or thinking. In fact, through the film, we see Ana struggling to make sense of the messages she receives from her family, her mother, her teacher, the women in the factory, and her community. Ana is also depicted as a young woman who wants to believe in herself – to believe that she can go to college and that she is beautiful despite what popular media and her mother tell her. In this way, the film becomes a resistant text that represents a fat identity that is not interested in a simple representation of how to be yourself in the world.

### F.A.T.A.S.S.

Also known as the Fat Action Troupe Allstar Spirit Squad, the F.A.T.A.S.S. cheerleading troupe in Portland, Oregon is a performance group doing both radical cheerleading and fat activism. Radical cheerleading, reportedly started by two women in Florida, is a combination of protest and performance challenging the status quo using a presentation style that is largely acceptable in the mainstream. In addition, radical cheerleading generally brings together the message of leftist political protest with the presentation of iconic Americana, cheerleading. F.A.T.A.S.S. is a derivation of radical cheerleading that combines the fat activist message of body acceptance at *any* size with a cheerleading presentation. The group was started in February 2003 as a performance number for a local conference, FatGirl Speaks, which was held in May later that year. After the conference, the group stayed together and was most recently featured as a positive role model for girls and young women in the February 2006 issue of Marie Claire, a popular fashion magazine. On their website (<http://www.geocities.com/>

fatasspdx/index.html) F.A.T.A.S.S. names themselves as a group of fat women who are “getting a message across about body image prejudice, loving yourself, not dieting, and revolting against the 50 billion dollar industries that are thriving on the self-loathing th[e]y have encouraged in us.” In addition, they are using the ironic combination of fat bodies and cheerleading in order to deliver an activist message about fat acceptance.



**Figure 2.1**  
**(F.A.T.A.S.S.)**

Performance groups like F.A.T.A.S.S. are not unheard of, and in fact, there are several different types of performance troupes that engage in a similar kind of representation. For example, the Padded Lilies, a fat synchronized swimming group, and the Fat Bottom Revue, a troupe of fat burlesque performers, both performing out of the San Francisco bay area. Like the fat cheerleaders, these performances combine two unlikely components in an effort to challenge the stereotypes about fatness, femininity, sexuality, beauty, grace, and ability. Unlike cheerleading, however, the medium of synchronized swimming and burlesque dancing does not provoke the same kind of memory and nostalgia. As one of the most common components in public high school

America, the combination of fatness with cheerleading is likely to provoke or trigger a myriad of adolescent emotions for girls and women.

In looking at another form of fat performance, Sharon Mazer describes in her essay, “‘She’s So Fat...’: Facing the Fat Lady at Coney Island’s Sideshows by the Seashore,” Helen Melon (a.k.a. Katy Dierlam) who performs as a contemporary Fat Lady at a Coney Island sideshow. Appearing in a satin pink baby doll dress, Helen Melon’s five hundred pound body is put on display for an audience to come and witness. As they do, however, Helen tells them her story and prompts them to question who they are, who she is, and why they both obligated and entitled to stare at her body. As she shares with Mazer, Helen declares herself as an “‘appetite outlaw’ and sexual provocateur to sideshow historian, contented wife, and cabaret singer” and “by mapping her psyche as well as her body, she problematize[s] the relationship between who she is and what she looks like” (257). Within Helen Melon’s performances, fatness become this is thing that the audience simultaneously sees and looks at and yet, doesn’t want to see and look at. For most, fatness is recognizable as something they should try to avoid in themselves and despise in others. Within this particular cultural arrangement, what are the options for a meaningful counter response? For those engaged in performance there are number notions about how performance can challenge the status quo.

According to Erving Goffman’s Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, a performance “may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (15-16). For Goffman, a performance of any kind incites everyone who participates or witnesses as participants. As Jill Dolan notes, however, “...there's nothing inherently radical about

performance or theatre. Performance as a strategy only becomes transgressive or disruptive or efficacious in context" (14). In her book, The Radical in Performance, Baz Kershaw comments that the radical in performance always already implicates and references the dominant and mainstream in any effort to be transgressive (70). Returning to Goffman's notion of performance in everyday life, he argues that an "individual effectively projects a definition of the situation when he enters the presence of others" and as such, "we can assume that events may occur within the interaction which contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon this projection" (12).



**Figure 2.2**  
**(F.A.T.A.S.S. at a fat friendly party in 2006)**

For F.A.T.A.S.S., problematizing the same relationship is key. Dressed in short pleated skirts and holding pom-poms (see Figure 2.1 and 2.2), the women yell in unison to cheers such as, "We're Fat, We Know It!" written by a member of the group, "Stacy Fatass."

We're fat! We know it!  
And now we're gonna show it!  
We're fat! We know it!  
And now we're gonna show it!

Short sleeves, no sleeves  
Tanks and minis,  
Bare belly buttons,  
Outies and innies!

Tight pants, hot pants,  
Babydoll t-shirts,  
Sports bras, lace bras,  
Really really short skirts!

Show your chub!  
Big big love!

We're fat! We know it!  
And now we're gonna show it!  
We're fat! We know it!  
And now we're gonna show it!

Show (clap, clap, clap) your chub!  
Big (clap, clap, clap) big love!

This cheer, performed by a group of fat cheerleaders accomplishes several things. First, it works to incite other fat women to love their bodies (and possibly join the cheerleaders). Second, it challenges all women to appreciate their bodies regardless of their size. Finally, it confronts the audience to look at the fat bodies of the cheerleaders themselves. In addition, the cheer does not apologize for the women's fatness, and instead flaunts it in "Tight pants, hot pants,/ Babydoll t-shirts,/ Sports bras, lace bras,/ Really really short skirts!" By combining a sport that has historically been associated with the sexualization of girls and women, as well as the promotion of extreme thinness and athleticism among its participants, with the bodies of fat women and their body

conscious cheers, F.A.T.A.S.S. succeeds in shifting how we look at and making meaning out of both cheerleading and fat women.

### Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the multiple ways in which fat is represented visually and pulls three examples as a point of investigation – the film, *Real Women Have Curves*, the photo collection, Women En Large, and the performance activism of a troupe of fat cheerleaders. By discussing the visual narratives constructed across one another, complex personhood, disidentification, and differential consciousness are revealed by fat subjects who are presented as negotiating the plots they convey, the multiple stories of women they represent, and the interesting combination of a radical political message with a traditional method of communication. By theoretically grounding my examination in theories of the visible and the visual, I look at each text individually and show how it is juggling a myriad of messages about body size – some arguably positive in their ability to challenge stereotypes and the status quo, while others remain more suspicious because they appear to uphold and reinforce the stereotype or status quo. I argue, in the end, that by looking and interpreting these complicated fat subjects created from these visual representations, we can begin to see more clearly the kinds of fat subjectivity that people of size engage every day.

In her dissertation on the freak body, Ruth Mee Jung Kwon (2005) tells how the body of Otherness or difference is “deployed in our culture to affirm hegemonic ideals about race, gender, class, and health” (iii). Through an examination of P.T. Barnum’s marketing of race, the connections of adolescent girl bodies and freaks, the medical construction of intersexuals, and the performance of transgender identity, Mee Jung



Kwon argues for new understandings of the body and identity. She uses the body of the freak as a point of entrance into conversations about normalizing discourse (of whiteness, childhood/girlhood, sex assignment, and gender/sexuality alignment) and the reclamation and affirmation of the freak that can be found in counter-hegemonic representations.

“For those who feel excluded from the social community, identifying with freaks can be a potent way of forging a self in opposition to an Other who becomes a psychic playground for alternative identities...In fact, how the stigmatized individual manages to write h/erself into the social milieu depends on the culture’s ability to proliferate stories about viable forms of difference” (2 & 181). Mee Jung Kwon’s exploration of freak narratives and alternative discourse within representations illustrates how individuals survive, cope, build community, and speak back to the powerful normalizing discourses that support our culture. She concludes by suggesting that it is the individual experience that needs privileging because within the individual system the social world and all its meaning is best negotiated and processed.

Mee Jong Kwon’s focus on the individual as a legitimate way to interpret the world may be connected to Gordon’s theory of complex personhood. In particular, it is Gordon’s theoretical suggestion that life is more complicated than we credit and her notion of haunting that contribute to an interpretation of representations as more than just the messages they convey and the identities they construct. Although this chapter has tried to flesh out the nuance within each of these fat representations or performances, the ways in which these images are understood and consumed by individual fat subjects can never really be articulated. There are too many personal, social, emotional, and cultural ghosts that haunt all of these representations. However, we can examine and draw

meaning from how these artists create fat subjects for the rest of us to see, consume, and take pleasure in looking at. Most importantly though, we can see the multiple and complicated ways that these visual fat subjects negotiate the competing messages about body size for themselves.

For *Real Women Have Curves*, this is revealed in the way that Ana is shown throughout the film as a strong and confident young woman who is proud of her size, and yet, as a girl who would like her mother's approval and to be able to fit into the dresses that her sister's factory produces. In Women En Large, Debbie Notkin's political essays and the many voices of the models, coupled with the photographs of Laurie Toby Edison produce several different (and possibly conflicted) narratives about women of size. One of the treasures within the collection is that it does not try to send a single message about how women should feel about their bodies. Though, largely positive, the authors allowed the photos, the narratives, and words of the models to exist together. Finally, F.A.T.A.S.S. represents, quite literally, a complication in the presentation itself. By bringing together two unlikely forms (fat bodies and cheerleading) the performance troupe not only conveys a political message about body size, but it challenges audiences to think of fatness as sexual, fun, and ultimately political in and of itself.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion – Complex Fat Personhood

When body size matters the cultural politics of understanding why matters as well.

-Helen Gremillion, “The Cultural Politics of Body Size.” Annual Review of Anthropology. (26)

This project began as an endeavor to theorize a space for fat subjectivity and personhood. The goal from the beginning was not to align fatness as something that is only constructed or natural, subversive or apolitical. By relying on a theoretical framework that voices a location of negotiation and valorizes this location as valuable and worthy of study, this dissertation offers multiple locations and illustrations where bodies of size negotiate the discursive power through which they are constituted. It is also bound by a myriad of practical and political boundaries (some more easily navigated than others) that this chapter will attend to.

I initially began this work with the motive to further my research on the representations of fatness in popular culture. My interest, for years, has been the moments when fatness is made visible and understandable as “fat” in fashion magazines, fat pornography, on television talk shows, and through the language we engage to talk about ourselves and our bodies.<sup>1</sup> In all of this work, however, I avoided focusing on the moments when fatness materializes as something else, albeit “plus-size,” “disabled,” or “obese,” for two primary reasons. The first was that these moments often did not yield neat and precise explanations that fit easily into my schema of understanding fat activism and resistance. The second was that I had not personally committed myself to seeing more than one possibility of resistance to fat phobia and discrimination. As such, I

remained consciously blind to issues, like those raised in the medical and legal chapters in particular, because they were difficult to analyze and they never offered a clean explanation of resistance.

As I continued to examine the same kinds of representations over and again, I realized that the questions that I have tried to raise and offer answers to here, kept coming up. In particular, questions about survival and the navigation of uncertain and unfair terrain, in addition to questions about the construction of identity and complex personhood. The most common questions I have both endured and ignored over the years has been the ones that involve fitness and health, which speaks to the pervasiveness of a medical narrative in our everyday worlds. Over time, however, I started to engage these questions differently. Doing further research, I began to highlight the problems by accepting the medical narrative at face value and raising questions of my own about the validity of commonly cited research that essentializes and offers facile connections between certain medical issues and fatness, as well as the amount of money the medical profession garners on the backs and bodies of fat women and men. This kind of reluctant engagement lead me to the present dissertation.

This project began with a series of questions centered around the body and how our interpretation of the world can be transformed by paying attention to how the body and the identities constructed from and connected to the body navigate the messages from multiple discursive outlets. Thinking more specifically about the fat body, this dissertation is interested in focusing on how “fat performances” can offer a new conversation about body size in this historical moment. Namely, that fat bodies and identities cannot be reduced to one particular political or theoretical position and, instead,

demand to be considered in more complex and nuanced terms. Additionally, I have presented instances when the multiple and often contradictory positions of fatness are endemic to one another, thus revealing the ongoing negotiation of powerful discursive messages necessary for the constitution of a fat identity. As a result, our understanding of fatness is complicated and the construction of fat subjectivity is not reduced to simple interpretations. In the past, these interpretations have included only self hating or self loving understandings that excluded the ways in which individuals and communities forge identities from within, between, and, sometimes in spite, of these feelings.

The first chapter of this dissertation focuses theoretically on the cultural work that bodies are able to do and argues (in the beginning) that the cultural work is actually the negotiation of multiple messages, thus yielding something significant and important in the larger conversation about body size in the United States and for theories of the body within Women's Studies. By looking at the interplay of messages, both positive and negative, competing and in collaboration, another point of argument is that an acknowledgement of all these discursive messages and an investigation into how they are managed by individuals and communities reveals a new kind of fat subjectivity – a new way to think about how to be fat in the world. In arguing that feminist theory remains one of the best locations from which to theorize the body, fatness, and body size, this chapter presents an overview of the theoretical literature on the body and shows how there are two major camps of thought – one that sees the body as purely constructed and another that is interested in a more materialist approach looking at the body as embedded in and a product of the socio-economic, political, and cultural world in which we live. At the end of this chapter, I offer literature on the body that is trying to navigate between

these two theoretical camps and in the vein of that work, I construct a theoretical framework built primarily from Avery Gordon's Ghostly Matters, as well as the work of Jose Munoz, and Chela Sandoval. Although these three works are not necessarily concerned with theorizing the body per se, I argue that in conversation with one another, they offer the field of literature on the body a method to theorize the spaces between the purely philosophical construction and the material reality of the body. By examining this space, I argue that a more nuanced understanding of fat representations (medical, legal, or visual) becomes available because we must see past simple binaries and explanations that mark such representations as merely apolitical, assimilationist, resistant, empowered, or radical. Complex personhood, together with disidentification and differential consciousness, provide a framework from which to validate the multiple strategies mobilized by individuals in the construction of communities and their own subjectivity.

Chapter Two began with a broad conversation about fat oppression in order to contextualize the fat activist organizations that developed out of that stigmatization. A selection of scholarly texts that provide cultural histories for both the changing body and its understandings is presented, in order to complete one of the many conversations that exist about body size and fatness. All of this becomes important for the construction of complex personhood because it provides a backdrop for the next three chapters that narrow their focus to specific realms of representation – the medical, the legal, and the visual, in order to further examine what kinds of messages, narratives, and discourses about body size circulate for consumption.

The third chapter examines medical documentation provided by U.S. government agencies and connects the information they provide to the growing popularity of diets,

drugs, and weight-loss surgery. By highlighting these connections, a medical meta-narrative is revealed. Additionally, counter information is provided that challenges this meta-narrative and the chapter concludes by suggesting that all of this creates a cultural environment saturated with medical information. As such, people of size are forced to navigate this information and these messages, creating yet another example of complex personhood.

Chapter Four focuses on four weight-based employment discrimination cases that illustrate the legal avenues available to people of size in the U.S. judicial system. All four cases argued using different aspects of anti-discrimination law, none of which specifically protects appearance and size as a component of the available protective law. As such, the fat claimants in each case chose to represent themselves in very different ways given the existing law and each produced vastly different results. These four cases demonstrate the variety and legal strategies available to fat people in court, but more importantly, they show how people of size must creatively represent themselves in order to achieve fairness in the public sector.

The final chapter explores three visual representations, each demonstrating the theoretical notion of complex personhood. In the film, *Real Women Have Curves*, the photography collection, Women En Large, and the performance of F.A.T.A.S.S., the characters, models, and performers weave together competing and contradictory messages about size and in so doing, visual represent and mobilize differential consciousness and disidentification. In this way, these representations illustrate a complex fat personhood and do not adhere to simple understandings of identity, body, and/or self.

Complex Fat Personhood and the Negotiation of Identity

In her review of the literature on body size, Helen Gremillion's "The Cultural Politics of Body Size" published in the Annual Review of Anthropology examines works on body size from an anthropological, sociological, and cultural studies point of view. Her review reveals the breadth of work in this area, from studies on eating problems and obesity to work that deals with body building, wrestling, and aerobics. Additionally, Gremillion locates a number of cross-cultural studies that do comparative analyses on body size. After investigating the literature, she suggests that "scholars writing about body size who examine and unpack the conditions of possibility for their research are the most likely to be attuned to complex imbrications of materiality, cultural meanings, and sociopolitical structures" (26). The work she highlights comes from a number of disciplinary locations and Gremillion concludes that academics working on body size are challenging and accounting for the many incarnations of cultural meaning because they are reaching past their knowledge and method foundations to better understand how bodies and size create meanings that implicate all cultural citizens. It is my hope that this project contributes in the same vein by keeping intact complexities and illustrating how they are navigated for personal survival, resistance, and the construction of self, as well as, one's communities. In addition, the dissertation itself is also stretching beyond particular boundaries of discipline and method in order to expose the contradictions mentioned earlier and to offer analysis about their meanings and consequences.

I am not alone nor unique in this endeavor and it is in the works of others that I locate similar project missions or outcomes. For example, in her work, Fat Talk: What Girls and Their Parents Say About Dieting (2000), Mimi Nichter looks at the how



adolescent and teen girls talk about their bodies and dieting. She names “fat talk” as a phenomenon whereby girls use the “I’m so fat” discourse to enable particular social relationships among one another (4). Nichter reports that “fat talk” among girls is used for a variety of purposes that may not be indicative of any particular behavior but “rather, it indexes important personal and cultural concerns” (47). Based on focus groups and individual interviews, she finds that girls engage fat talk for a whole host of reasons. It may indicate stress or be used as a means to garner support from fellow girls. It also helps girls understand themselves in relation to others their own age (47-8). In all of these situations, however, Nichter argues that fat talk, instead of just an indicator of negative self-esteem, is also a way for girls to support each other and solicit positive commentary in return (47-8). When a girl pronounces, “I’m so fat,” it becomes an opportunity for other girls to support her and boost her self-esteem. It also serves as a method for unloading stress and frustration about something else in a manner that is easily understood. In this fashion, Nichter turns the “I’m so fat” discourse on its head and shows how girls who engage this talk are not just suffering from poor self image, but instead how they use this talk to build their confidence and self-esteem.

In “Identity Management among Overweight Women: Narrative Resistance to Stigma,” from Interpreting Weight (1999), Gina Cordell and Carol Rambo Ronai conduct ten life history interviews in order to uncover how overweight women understand themselves and resist the negative stereotypes and discrimination that exist for fat people. They begin by locating the negative perceptions of society as “discursive constraint” which is the way “society controls a person or group of people, such as overweight women, by establishing and perpetuating negative stereotypes that affect their behavior

and how they think of themselves” (31). In the course of conducting interviews, Cordell and Ronai discover that overweight women resist discursive constraint by mobilizing a number of strategies that the authors label as “exemplars” “continuums,” and “loopholes.” By examining these strategies, they discover for example, that “overweight women will use negative exemplars [such as ‘I am not sexually undesirable’] to simultaneously resist the attendant stigmas and oppress over overweight women” (44). This happens when an overweight woman garners confidence in herself by distancing her identity from others (“I’m not as fat as she is...”) or criticizing other overweight women for reiterating a negative stereotype (“At least I’m not a lazy slob”). Cordell and Ronai’s study provides an interesting analysis in the context of this dissertation. It is neither wholly positive or negative, but instead offers information that contributes to the overall argument here – that women of size (and arguably, men as well) mobilize a multitude of efforts to survive a public social arena that is saturated with negative and discriminatory stereotypes about fatness. Most importantly, these efforts are a compromise of resistance and acceptance of the discursive power embedded in the daily fabric of our lives.

Kathleen LeBesco’s solo project, Revoltin’ Bodies (2004), is also an endeavor that seeks to write the fat subject into existence. Reflecting on the book overall, she offers that it is an “investigation of the ways in which negotiating questions of fat identity involves a fluid, alternating pattern of invocation and refusal of mainstream tropes of health, nature, and beauty” (123). She goes on to hope that her book, in seeking to highlight “fat positive public discourse,” also makes visible the negotiation of a “livable fat subjectivity” (123). LeBesco concludes by hoping that future research will “continue

to question our assumptions about the terms that discursively make or break bodies and to recognize that there is never a neat separation between the power we promote and that which we oppose” (124). Although LeBesco offers many instances of fat positive representation (discussing size organizations, fashion, consumerism, and fat activism), she is always critical of what these moments of positive representation lack or give up. For her, like the others discussed here above, there exists a complication in talking about fatness, fat identity, fat subjectivity, that cannot be ignored.

The works of Nichter, Cordell, and Ronai exemplify a type of work in the field of fat studies or body size wherein the words of fat individuals and/or people who are affected by body size discourse is analyzed in order to offer evidence of how people understand themselves and make sense of the world they live in. LeBesco’s work, on the other hand, takes a slightly different tact, examining the cultural moments that contribute to how individuals come to understand themselves. Together, however, these works identify the complications in what LeBesco names as a “livable fat subjectivity.” For Nichter’s girls, particularly the fat girls, the use of the phrase “I’m so fat,” though clearly an expression rooted in fat phobia, is used to improve their self esteem and feel better about their bodies as fat girls. Cordell and Ronai identify the intellectual and emotional conflict that fat women experience in living fat lives. Finally, LeBesco’s work captures those politically fat, public moments to challenge what they offer in the creation of a fat identity. This dissertation specifically tries to make visible those moments of complication in more detail. In particular, by looking at how the medical and legal narratives make fat subjectivity viable only as a compromise to obesity and disability,

this work sits in relation to others offered here drawing from research in fat studies and trying to think through what it means to forge a fat identity.

### *Constructing a Complex Fat Personhood*

One of the principal contributions of this project is to the overall thinking of the body within feminist theory. Feminist theorists have focused on theorizing the body and feminist theory remains one of the primary locations from which to question and analyze the body. Whether the body is thought to be a cultural construction all on its own or whether it exists as a medium upon which meanings are placed, the body remains a serious focus and topic of conversation within feminist theory, and hence within, Women's Studies. A primary point of investigation for this project is the kind of cultural work that bodies of size are able to do. I argue that this cultural work is, first, a negotiation of multiple messages received about body size and second, that this negotiation produces something significant for our cultural conversations about fatness in the United States. My project brings together medical, legal, and visual discourses about fatness and body size in order to examine how the messages of each contribute to, contradict, and even reinforce one another. Additionally, I explore how the body transforms the way we interpret the world by concentrating on the interplay between the messages conveyed through art, film, and performance and the authority granted to messages circulating from other discursive outlets. One of the major questions I ask is how might we acknowledge the multiple and even contradictory positions and identities on fatness as aspects of one another – seeing them as a more accurate portrayal of an ongoing negotiation of the world that surrounds us?

Scholars have tried to reconcile arguments about the understanding of the body as discursively constructed or materially experienced by exposing the meanings and representations of the body as constructed. I argue here that there is still another avenue of thought that offers a new lens through which to understand the body. This new frame of reference is hinged on what Avery Gordon calls “complex personhood.” She argues that complex personhood is not granted to marginalized groups of people, and complex personhood that aspect of life that we recognize when we are able to build communities outside of one-dimensional understandings of identity and identity politics.

Informing the concept of complex personhood is the work of Jose Munoz and Chela Sandoval who both theorize strategies of survival operationalized by subordinated communities of people. What they share in their theoretical work is a resistance to see the mobilization of marginalized people and communities in a singular way. In fact, they each talk about the ways in which communities and individuals survive and politically strategize as an intricate engagement and/or disengagement with dominant thinking and privileged locations. For Munoz, he names disidentification as the way people can simultaneously adopt and resist hegemonic thinking. For Sandoval, she uses the metaphor of a gear shift to explain differential consciousness, whereby individuals can shift into various gears or engage different ways of thinking as situations and psyches demand.

Returning to Gordon, it is the ghosts and the hauntings in her texts that become the mechanism for her to talk about all the things that are invisible and unknowable, and yet important to consider in our everyday existence. Gordon argues that to write about ghosts or the invisible is to acknowledge that they are real and they have real effects (17).

This text is important to the overall field of body politics, and the central argument of this dissertation, because she challenges us to question what we know and further, to seek knowledge about what we cannot see. Ghosts and hauntings connect to Munoz's "disidentification" and Sandoval's "differential consciousness" because together they argue for identity and consciousness outside of simple binaries and categories. By holding Gordon's "sense" about the world together with Sandoval and Munoz's concrete identification of survival strategies among marginalized communities and individuals, the complexity of people's lives, their identities, bodies, and existences can be explored, revealed, and legitimated. Because differential consciousness, disidentification, and an examination of hauntings allows for multiple hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses to exist and be employed at once, we can begin to understand Gordon's notion of complex personhood. As stated before, I think that these understandings are crucial to the field of body politics for two reasons. First, they demand that the field look beyond mere representations of the body and engage experience, feelings, ideas, dreams, and the interiority of the body in order to fully conceptualize the body in all its transformations (getting at that sense we cannot see, but we know is there, is important). Second, it's too easy to imagine the body as either made or as a state of mind. My hope is that by identifying complex personhood as that determining frame in which to rethink the body, we begin to hear these two imaginations, not as mutually exclusive, but as something we consider together. Thus, allowing them to implode or explode one another, forging new understandings of ourselves, our bodies, our identities, and our communities.

Thinking in terms of this framework is important because in looking at the cultural work of bodies, it allows a more nuanced interpretation of fat representations (be

they legal, medical, or visual). It begs an analysis that looks beyond simple conclusions that might otherwise lead us to see individual fat people and/or fat communities as merely empowered or disempowered. And finally, the lens of complex personhood allows the cultural work produced by fat bodies to be reabsorbed and named as significant to the conversations about bodies, communities, and identities. This project is important because it offers an examination of disparate locations where fat identities are forced to negotiate competing and often contradictory messages about body size. Additionally, it offers this theoretical framework housed within theories of the body as a way to see this negotiation as integral to the construction and acknowledgement of a complex fat personhood or subjectivity. In keeping with Barkley Brown's suggestion to contextualize narratives and allow for multiple stories to be told at once, this project makes visible a complicated and multi-vocal cultural landscape of representations on fatness in the United States.

The possibilities for fat subjectivity presented in this dissertation are varied and multiple. What they share, is the ability and the skill to navigate uneasy, confusing, and inconsistent cultural terrain. This skill set is made visible when the main character of the film *Real Women Have Curves* admits that she loves her body because its fat and at the same time, often considers losing weight. Similarly, Toni Cassista represents herself as physically capable, but must argue in court that her potential employer perceived her as having a disability, because that is her only legal avenue to correct an unfair situation. Every day, fat people are prescribed diets, drugs, and surgery that may be more damaging than they are helpful. As such individuals must pay attention to pharmaceutical manufacturers who advertise drugs that simultaneously might reduce weight and blood

pressure, but also carries the risk of increasing blood pressure as well. Ultimately, this project uncovers the many narratives and messages about body size that fat individuals must traverse, but it also names the traversing itself as crucial to understanding fat personhood in complex terms.

Across all the locations examined in this project, it's interesting how the narratives work in conjunction with and speak to one another. For example, how a medical narrative is raised in the text of the photo collection, Women En Large, as a viable explanation for fat at the same time that medical practitioners are criticized for their fat prejudice and the mistreatment of fat individuals. Similarly, within a discussion of legal strategies to combat weight-based appearance discrimination, medical explanations are used by both fat plaintiffs and their defendants to argue that fat is (and in some cases, is not) a medical condition that constitutes protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Moreover, the legal and the visual representations work in competing ways to construct different kinds of fat subjects. Although the legal cases do not reward a complicated fat subject in court, the visual representations allow for that complexity to exist within a single photo, character, or performance. Finally, this project offers a lens by which to see all these medical, legal, and visual messages and how fat individuals interact, digest, play with, and use them, thus demonstrating how the fat body incites a subjectivity that employs intricate, competing, and complex strategies for individual and community survival.

*The Limits of Looking Back and the Possibilities in Looking Forward*

This project is an effort to offer a more thorough examination of the moments when people of size can be identified as working with, against, and between powerful



(and often competing) discursive narratives that impact their daily lives. I have investigated how fat personhood is always more complicated than we can give it credit and I have tried to expose those moments that make that evident. In addition, the theoretical model of complex personhood coupled with the theorized strategies of disidentification and differential consciousness offer a unique mode of looking at and making sense of identity in our current moment. This is important because the construction of personhood is integral to understanding identity in a more holistic and comprehensive way. As such, this work raises questions about how we (as cultural theorists and scholars) come to understand and make sense of the world and its inhabitants. It suggests that we complicate simple understandings that reduce individuals to a single political frame of mind and that we talk about and expose the complications for a greater, more nuanced, interpretation of how people (and communities) understand themselves. Finally, this dissertation brings to bear the importance of acknowledging that individuals and communities navigate and negotiate a multitude of powerful messages that exist in our cultural moment. As such, we must credit their existence and validate their subjectivities as that terrain is nothing less than difficult to walk across.

In a November 26, 2006 New York Times article, titled “Big People on Campus,” Abby Ellin highlights a growing trend in academia toward fat studies. She writes that while obesity continues to be named as the primary health threat in America by medical and government agencies, fat studies is emerging “as a new interdisciplinary area of study on campuses across the country” (9:1). Additionally, she notes that fat studies is a field related to women’s studies, queer studies, disability, and ethnic studies. Although Ellin concedes that fat studies exists in the borderlands of these more established

interdisciplinary fields, she argues that with the growing number of scholars interested in fatness, the increase of publications and dissertations on the subject, as well as student and public interest, the field is “gaining traction” within academia (9:6). I see this dissertation as one more contribution to this growing field. Furthermore, as an expanding field related to women’s studies, it also contributes to the larger body of work on the body, as well as, the breadth of interdisciplinary work interested in identity and the communities developed from oppressive social locations.

I hope, in the future, to be able to continue research on fatness, expanding into more qualitative methodologies and heightening the intersections of privilege and oppression as a means to further understand the complications within which we all exist.

## Appendix

There are a number of terms circulating this project for which meaning is too easily assumed. For this reason and for clarity, they are highlighted and defined here.

Fat: Used in the vernacular as a description of body size, but more commonly is used to describe how one feels about their body size/shape. “Fat” also designates a political identity. In the vein of fat liberation politics of the 1970’s, “fat” is reclaimed from its negative connotation in the vernacular and used instead to incite a political renegotiation of the meanings of body size within our cultural imagination. Used synonymously herein with “bodies of size,” “fat” is a marker of a politicized identity and not an adjective for a particular body size. Unlike the terms “overweight” or “obese” which denote a medical understanding of a “problem”, “fat” for the purpose of this project is a cultural construction whose meaning is constantly in flux with the norms and trends of society.

Discourse: In her analysis of the term ‘discourse,’ Sara Mills highlights the theoretical underpinnings of the term as it is used in different disciplines and theoretical frameworks. Drawing from the work of Pecheux, she writes that “discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity” (15). Focusing more on the effects of discourse, Mills turn to Foucault for a more concrete description of discourse itself. Through an analysis of the History of Sexuality, Volume One (1978), ‘discourse’ is described as “something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analyzed in

isolation. A discursive structure can be detected because of the systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving which are formed within a particular context, and because of the effects of those ways of thinking and behaving” (17). These definitions inform how ‘discourse’ is used throughout this project.

## Notes

### Chapter I

<sup>1</sup> The Fat Studies Reader was highlighted in a New York Times article, “Big People on Campus” (11/26/2006), which highlighted a growing academic field, fat studies, and the increasing focus on body size, obesity, fatness, and fat activism in other courses offered at some universities.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the key texts in the field of performance studies include: Erving Goffman’s The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959) and Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (1963); Jill Dolan’s Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance (2001); Diana Taylor’s The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas (2003); Peggy Phelan’s Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (1993); Richard Schechner’s Performance Studies: An Introduction (2002); Victor Turner’s The Anthropology of Performance (1986); and Shannon Jackson’s Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity (2004).

<sup>3</sup> For texts that argue specifically in favor of considering cultural analysis of the body in terms of space, refer to Elizabeth Grosz’s “Space, Time, and Bodies” in Space, Time, and Perversion (1995), Linda McDowell’s Gender, Identity, and Place (1999), and Radhika Mohanram’s Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space (1999).

### Chapter II

<sup>1</sup> For more on this, reference: Jean Kilbourne’s Can’t Buy Me Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel (2000); Susan Faludi’s Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (1992); Naomi Wolf’s The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women (1991 & 2002); Kim Chernin’s The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness (1994); Sharlene Hesse-Biber’s Am I Thin Enough Yet?: The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity (1997).

<sup>2</sup> This is best exemplified by an ad campaign run for the Body Shop in 1998 stating, "There are only 3 billion women who don't look like supermodels and only eight who do."

<sup>3</sup> Becky Thompson's A Hunger So Wide and So Deep (1994) critiques current eating disorder literature for not considering the multiple ways in which women use eating control and food to escape and/or survive their living conditions. This also includes a more in depth and previously ignored analysis that included the voices of women of color, lesbians and bisexual women, poor women, and Jewish women.

<sup>4</sup> Aside from one early text, Shadow on a Tightrope (1983), which was largely considered to be a collection of activist writing and not theoretical academic work.

### Chapter III

<sup>1</sup> For information on competing research, see Jeanine C. Cogan's "Re-evaluating the Weight-Centered Approach toward Health: The Need for a Paradigm Shift" in Jeffrey Sobel and Donna Maurer's Interpreting Weight: The Social Management of Fatness and Thinness (1999). For more on politicized narratives, a number of books and articles have been published and organizations (NAAFA, NOLOSE, and ISAO) have been created, all arguing for the reclamation of the word 'fat' from its derogatory origins as a necessary step in naming "fat" as a political identity. Refer to the following for more information: Bennett, Michael and Vanessa D. Dickerson's Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women (2001); Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel's Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression (2001); Eli Clare's Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation (1999); Rosemarie Garland Thompson's Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body (1996); Charisse W. Goodman's The Invisible Woman: Confronting Weight Prejudice in America (1995); Carol A. Wiley's Journeys to Self-Acceptance: Fat Women Speak (1994); Nomy Lamm's "It's a Big Fat Revolution" in Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Revolution (1995) "Fishnets, Feather Boas and Fat" in Adiós, Barbie: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity (1998); Kathleen LeBesco's Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity (2004); Lisa Schoenfelder and Barb Wieser's Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression (1983); Marilyn Wann's Fat!So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size (1998).

<sup>2</sup> This chart shows Body Mass Index for various weights (in pounds) and height (in feet and inches). The chart shows a healthy BMI as being from 19 to 24; overweight is a Body Mass Index from 25 to 29, and obese is a Body Mass Index at 30 or above. All Body Mass Indexes in the chart are rounded to the nearest whole number.

<sup>3</sup> The NIH, the Surgeon General's Office, and the Department of Health and Human Services all remark on the limitations of the BMI in their own documentation. In particular, the Weight-Control Information Network, a focus of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, housed under the NIH has an excellent conversation about these limitations on its website - <http://win.niddk.nih.gov/statistics/index.htm>), which take into consideration that the current BMI cannot differentiate between weight due to muscle mass rather than fat (making most athletes "overweight"). Moreover, the BMI also does not distinguish between genders, races, cultures, ethnicities, region, or age – all of which may contribute to vastly different BMIs for different individuals.

<sup>4</sup> The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) are not included in this conversation, despite their support and collaboration with the afore mentioned agencies, because the CDC's primary focus includes infectious disease and not congenital, chronic, or secondary

disease, such as obesity. It is, however, interesting to note the number of times that obesity is referred to as an epidemic in both medical and non-medical literatures. This is important to note because, by definition, an epidemic is an infectious disease that can be passed from one individual to another. Although there is some argument that obesity is hereditary, it is not contagious and therefore, could not be an epidemic. However, the connection of obesity to an epidemic is hardly surprising given the medical jurisdiction granted over fatness and the construction of obesity as a medical disorder, illness, and/or disease.

<sup>5</sup> Prompted, in part, by Food and Drug Administration Modernization Act of 1997 which loosened the regulations about how drugs could be marketed to physicians and what information had to be provided in advertisements directly aimed at consumers (Conrad and Leiter 160).

<sup>6</sup> It should also be noted that gastric bypass and other surgical interventions have grown in popularity with patients and consumers as well. This can be attributed to many factors, but most notably, the FDA Modernization Act of 1997, the explosion of information available on the internet about hospitals and doctors who will perform the surgeries, the assistance made available on websites to navigate the insurance company bureaucracy, and of course, the number of celebrities who have “come out” in recent years has having had the surgery, including Al Roker, Rosanne Barr, Randy Jackson, and Carnie Wilson (who had her surgery broadcast live on the internet in 1999).

## **Chapter IV**

<sup>1</sup> The California Fair Employment and Housing Act is a state law which prohibits employment discrimination based on race or color; religion; national origin or ancestry, physical disability; mental disability or medical condition; marital status; sex or sexual orientation; age, with respect to persons over the age of 40; and pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions (Government Code §§12900 - 12996).

<sup>1</sup> Santa Cruz, California, Municipal Code §§ 9.83.01, 9.83.08(6):  
It is the intent of the city council... to protect and safeguard the right and opportunity of all persons to be free from all forms of arbitrary discrimination, including discrimination based on age, race, color, creed, religion, national origin, ancestry, disability, marital status, sex, gender, sexual orientation, height, weight or physical characteristic.

<sup>1</sup> In “Representations of Fatness and Personhood: Pro-Fat Advocacy and the Limits and Uses of Law,” Anna Kirkland provides an outstanding breakdown of the different models of personhood available within the legal system. She explains that there are preexisting legal categories that describe the kind of personhood available to people under the law. They include: transcendental, communal-relational, functional, and actuarial. The transcendental model looks to see beyond the fat to the real person behind the physical attribute. In order to invoke this model, one must prove that the fat is irrelevant and involuntary so that the true person can then stand before the law as an equal. The

communal-relational model looks for an understanding of reasonable personhood which means that the law would see the fat person as socially embedded in their surroundings and judge her/him using common sense. The functional model would see fatness as merely a question of functional capacity or incapacity. In other words, can the person perform the job regardless of their size – is their fat functional or not? Finally, the actuarial model conceives subjects as disaggregated categories of risk. This means that the fat person is reduced to nothing more than her/his fat (27-30).

## Chapter V

<sup>1</sup>*Real Women Have Curves*. Dir. Patricia Cardoso. 2002. DVD. HBO Home Video, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough discussion on this, refer to the following texts: Jean Kilbourne's Can't Buy Me Love (2000), Susan Bordo's Unbearable Weight (1999), Joan Brumberg's The Body Project (1997), Wendy Chapkis' Beauty Secrets (1986), Kim Chernin's The Obsession (1981), Susan Faludi's Backlash (1991), Gamman, Lorraine and Merja Makinen's Female Fetishism (1994), Sara Halperin's Look at My Ugly Face! (1995), and Rose Weitz's The Politics of Women's Bodies (1998).

<sup>3</sup> The basis of Kent's argument about the abject of fat is drawn from the work of Julia Kristeva who explains that the abject is that part of the subject which is expelled and othered in the process of defining the subject.

## Chapter VI

<sup>1</sup> I have argued in previous work, that fatness is often assimilated and understood as "plus-size" depending on the nature of the representation (e.g. the audience reception, the presentation of the women of size within the representation, etc.).



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