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## **The Promised Body: Diet Culture, the Fat Subject, and Ambivalence as Resistance**

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The Promised Body:  
Diet Culture, the Fat Subject, and Ambivalence as Resistance

by

Jennifer Dolan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts  
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Department of Humanities  
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## **DEDICATION**

To my husband, who encouraged me to pursue this degree and who made it possible.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since the turn of the twentieth century, middle-class Americans have considered the thin body—ostensibly the result of self-control and self-discipline—a moral imperative and a symbol of good citizenship. In this thesis, I provide a critical perspective on fat studies by examining the ways in which the field authorizes itself in a society that deems the fat body unhealthy, costly, and immoral. As one potential solution to fat-hatred, fat studies proposes fat-positivity, but I argue that fat-positivity requires an extraordinary act of imagination in which the fat person overcomes what I term the ideology of thinness and subsequently feels good about herself. Importing models of ambivalence from disability studies, I propose ambivalence as an alternative to fat-positivity. I argue that ambivalence is a legitimate response when living in a society that de-values one's embodiment, but ambivalence is undertheorized by fat studies scholars. In Chapter 2, I analyze from a feminist perspective Tweets with the hashtag “feeling fat,” tracing the emotion to cultural ambivalence about consumption and consumerism. In Chapter 3, I examine how the genre of the fat memoir authorizes itself during an “obesity epidemic” and what those methods reveal about gendered selfhood. Instead of indicting these Twitter users and fat memoirists for their purported lack of fat-positivity, I emphasize instead the social situations that give rise to these cultural forms. I suggest that drawing attention to ambivalence is a form of political resistance.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION: THINNESS AS IDEOLOGY

*“Between ages five and nine, 40 percent of girls say they wish they were thinner. Almost one-third of third-grade girls report they are ‘always’ afraid of becoming fat. These young girls are not worried about their weight because of health concerns.”*

- Renee Engeln in *Beauty Sick: How the Cultural Obsession with Appearance Hurts Girls and Women*

It’s the 1970s, and future literary agent Betsy Lerner is twelve years old, a fat girl standing in a line as if on a conveyer belt, waiting her turn as the gym teacher barks numbers: 100, 105, 88, 120. Weighing the smallest girl in the class, the teacher “slides the balance to the left, lower and lower. Finally, she calls out, ‘seventy-eight.’” Lerner, up next, fills with shame because that’s what she weighed in the third grade (Lerner 4).

Writer Laura Fraser describes a similar scene, this time with adults at a weekly Weight Watchers weigh-in: “the line started at the bathroom, which everyone visited first to make sure they didn’t weigh an ounce too much, some of them even spitting in the sink” (138).

*New York Times* journalist Taffy Brodesser-Akner had been dieting for twenty-five years when she finally lost it during an intuitive-eating class: “I am 41 and accomplished and a beloved wife and a good mother and a hard worker and a contributor to society and I am learning how to eat a goddamned raisin.”

And here I am, sitting at a vegan restaurant in Los Angeles with three women: an assistant dean at the University of California-Los Angeles, a corporate planner, and Cathy, who oversees more than one hundred people at her company and who recently opened up to me about her son’s leukemia years ago. We are here for our first book club meeting, but the conversation



revolves instead around three pounds: the three pounds Cathy can't lose. She has tried everything, she says, and she's ready to give up on working out and eating right if she can't reach her target weight.

What is going on?

Doctors, billboards, and every single magazine at the grocery check-out counter foist on us the same solution to the problem of the female body: watch or lose your weight, even if you're not (yet) fat. Find a program or a cosmetic surgeon. Achieve the discipline. Get the body under control. Losing weight is easier than changing society. A discourse that contributes to the construction of fat as a negative or spoiled identity, then, is self-help discourse, which puts the onus on the individual (and not society) to change herself and through this act of agency to become a better, happier, and more authentic person. Indeed, to be an American, it seems we—or our children—must become something other than what we are or at least a better version of it. For instance, Oprah Winfrey says in a commercial for Weight Watchers: let's make this year “the year of our best bodies.” Why do we have to? We live in a self-help culture, which “involves the pursuit of the . . . elusive and variable state of self-fulfillment” (McGee 19). How does one measure self-fulfillment in a consumer culture designed to undermine it? Self-help discourse, or this process of continual and in many ways burdensome becoming, is undertheorized by cultural historians of fat as well as fat studies scholars, and its appeal has not been properly situated as a major contributor to fat stigma and diet culture.

In this introduction chapter, I provide a critical perspective on fat studies by examining the ways in which the field authorizes itself in a self-help culture that deems the fat body unhealthy, costly, and immoral. Fat studies begins with the assumption that fat is not inherently unhealthy. Furthermore, fat studies scholars draw on the rhetoric of liberal individualism to

argue that fat people—fat women especially—are unfairly discriminated against in schools, the workplace, and the doctor’s office.

The focus on health promotes healthism, however, or the idea that there is something morally wrong with unhealthy people. Furthermore, although dozens of academic studies prove that fat people are treated differently than thin people, this unequal treatment is not codified in law but rather emerges in complex and amorphous ways. I suggest that thinness might be more usefully conceived by fat studies scholars not as an attainable embodiment but as a powerful ideology affecting everyone, regardless of her body size.

As a solution to fat-hatred, fat studies proposes size acceptance, fat-positivity, and fat pride (I use the terms interchangeably), but fat-positivity requires an act of imagination in which the fat person overcomes the ideology of thinness and subsequently feels *good* about herself. In many ways, fat-positivity relies on the same self-help narrative of dieting: an autonomous individual exercises her freedom and finds a truer, more liberated self. In an effort to create a more inclusive fat politics that asks less of the stigmatized person, I import models of ambivalence from disability studies, and I frame ambivalence as a potential form of resistance to this ideology of thinness—a form of resistance that does not equate health or happiness with morality and credibility.

### **Fat Studies: Scholarship in Defense of Fat**

This thesis project examines how the discourses of medicine, psychology, and self-help coalesce in popular American culture, thereby encouraging certain everyday practices (dieting and ‘feeling fat’) as well as creating identities (the lazy fat person and the disciplined thin one). I seek to de-naturalize these practices and identities and reveal them as contingent. Supporting the

goals of fat studies, I situate my project within that field, but I want to trouble some of the field's central methodologies.

What is fat studies? According to the Fat Studies page on the Popular Culture Association website (an organization credited with helping to develop the field of fat studies – see Wann, p. xi):

Fat studies is an interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary field of study that confronts and critiques cultural constraints against notions of “fatness” and “the fat body”; explores fat bodies as they live in, are shaped by, and remake the world; and creates paradigms for the development of fat acceptance or celebration within mass culture. Fat Studies uses body size as the starting point for a wide-ranging theorization and explication of how societies and cultures, past and present, have conceptualized all bodies and the political/cultural meanings ascribed to every body. Fat Studies reminds us that all bodies are inscribed with the fears and hopes of the particular culture they reside in, and these emotions often are mislabeled as objective “facts” of health and biology. More importantly, perhaps, Fat Studies insists on the recognition that fat identity can be as fundamental and world-shaping as other identity constructs analyzed within the academy and represented in media.

Let us focus first on the antagonistic relationship between health and fat studies. According to the editors of *The Fat Studies Reader*, Harvard University Press would not publish the book because it seemed to fly in the face of medical research: “I think I’d have trouble at various stages of the review process,” the senior editor said, “with a book that discounted, or seemed to discount, the health risks of obesity” (Solovay and Rothblum 7). For this editor, fat is an acceptable topic only when embedded in medical discourse aimed at its eradication. In fact, fat studies scholars refuse to use medicalized language, such as “overweight,” “obese,” or “super morbidly obese,” preferring instead the three-letter word: fat.

Although spurred by the fat acceptance movement of the 1970s (Farrell 140-145), arguably it was only when professors began undermining the link between health and weight that a space opened up for fat studies in the academy, a development significant in and of itself because it suggests the extent to which medical discourse—health as a moral imperative—has

colonized our collective thinking. In other words, for those living during the “obesity epidemic,” it is difficult to see fat as anything but a straightforward health issue. *Why wouldn't we want to be healthier? Let's eat less and move more. Problem solved!* The difficulty of seeing fat within a context other than health suggests an intrinsic relationship between fat and other categories of identity, such as sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and intersex—all considered, at one time or another, medical issues. For example, known as the father of Western medicine, Hippocrates thought of women as undercooked, deformed men. Until 1987, some variant of homosexuality appeared in the DSM as a psychological disorder (Burton). The medieval myth of the Jewish male menses and the identification of hemorrhoids as a Jewish disease provide further examples (Resnick 242-263). Finally, according to one influential sexologist, a broad pelvis in women correlated with the ‘higher,’ that is, the white European, human races (Markowitz 402). Medicine, it seems, has a long history of using bodies and their supposed deficiencies (or culture has a long history of using medicine) as justification for dehumanizing groups of people.

When does medicalization of bodily conditions or types of embodiment, such as fat, result in discrimination? When does it help people—transgender people, for instance—gain access to the care they need? Ambivalence about medicalization is justified and demands more attention, albeit only tangentially in this thesis. Though the Victorians considered masturbation a disease, for instance, when Kinsey and other sexologists found that 90 percent of men masturbated, it became statistically normal and even healthy (Conrad 97). This has not been the case with fat.

The Centers for Disease Control warns that two-thirds of Americans are overweight, yet overweight is still considered abnormal, as the word “overweight” implies a right weight. Similar to an astrological chart, every person who is 5'5 should fall within a “normal” range, a range

with a fascinating history (originally based on mid-century insurance tables), and a range that changes over the years for no medical reason. Indeed, Body Mass Index (BMI) charts seem to be “a better measurement of social acceptability than morbidity or mortality” (Heyes 68). Today a woman of average height—5’3—is considered overweight if she weighs 141 pounds. The problem with using BMI across a population is that BMI cannot say what any one individual should weigh (Burgard 44)—individuals with different builds, men versus women, manual laborers versus book editors, people of different ethnicities, pregnant women, cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, 18-year olds versus 55-year olds, etc. At the risk of belaboring the point, studies touted by weight loss advocates show a correlation between health problems and BMI, but in looking closely at the correlational statistic, one finds that 91 percent of the health outcomes in these studies have nothing to do with BMI (Burgard 43).

Arguably, fat studies would not be the burgeoning field it is today if science had proven both that overweight alone (a high BMI for instance) *causes* chronic diseases and early death, *and* dieting helps people lose weight. Instead, countless studies (see especially scholars Glenn Gaesser, Paul Campos, and Eric Oliver) show that weight is not the key factor in mortality rates or even in chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease—in fact, being overweight appears to provide health benefits (Gaesser 96-107). Major issues with obesity research include: 1) confusing correlation with causation (the studies cannot possibly isolate weight from other variables), 2) exaggerating small risks (for instance, a risk may have doubled from 5 people in every 100,000 people to 10 people in every 100,000 people, but in both cases, the risk remains miniscule), 3) excluding segments of the data to produce a result (without manipulating their data, some of the largest and most frequently cited studies show a correlation between *increased* fat and *lower* mortality rates), and 4) conflicts of interest (studies are funded by weight loss

clinics and others whose livelihood depends on an ‘obesity epidemic’—curious readers please see especially Campos 3-54 for an in depth study and analysis). Moreover, the best estimates show that between 80% to 95%—likely much closer to the latter—of diets fail (Gaesser 39). Because they fail, Americans yo-yo diet. Oprah Winfrey remains the most famous example, but these collective habits have spurred a \$66 billion-per-year diet industry (Marketdata Enterprises), yet sadly resulted in increased weight gain and ill health effects (Gaesser 153-180, Campos 25-34). It is indeed possible that the yo-yo dieting many fat Americans undergo is itself producing the ‘increased health risks’ attributed to being fat.

It does not require a scientific study to realize that thin people are not necessarily healthier than fat people and that eating fatty, sugary foods and remaining sedentary—not weight—cause health problems. However, instead of a basic fact of genetic diversity, weight has become a stand-in for health, as if fat people must be eating sandwiches “with Krispy Kreme donuts instead of buns” (West 74) and “reaching directly into [people’s] wallets,” draining the country of its health care dollars (Gay 124). By framing fat as an individual health problem, the fat woman becomes a scapegoat that distracts us from structural inequalities and deep-rooted cultural contradictions about consumption in a capitalist society.

Both fat and thin people exist. Even Hippocrates wrote about the former. My thesis project does not answer the question about why Americans have gained weight (they’ve gained an average of twenty pounds since the 1970s); instead, it asks why society cares so much. After all, if fat were simply a medical issue, similar to a disease like multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy or even alcoholism, then it would be deemed cruel to *openly* stare at, taunt, threat, intimidate, lecture, pity, or otherwise try to eradicate fat people the way we do; if fat were simply a medical issue, we would take our discomfort underground, as we have done with disabled

bodies. It should more than raise eyebrows that America has openly declared war on a basic fact of embodiment, one that disproportionately affects women, non-whites, and poor people—and in the name of national health. At the risk of simplifying a complex issue, women’s studies, black studies, and disability studies exist because of a consensus among academics that being a woman, black, and/or disabled is not *wrong*. Who would—at least publically—argue with that? Many, however, will argue that fat is wrong.

### **The False Promises of the Thin Body**

*“My name is thin. And I am the queen of this prom called life. . . It wasn’t until I was thin that I realized just how badly I was being treated when I was fat, and just how overlooked I was . . . Fat equals lazy and lacking and less than. Thin equals ‘no, really, after you.’”*  
- Jasmine Singer in *Always Too Much and Never Enough*

Elna Baker, a thirty-something performance artist, shared her story of weight loss on a 2016 episode of “This American Life” broadcast on National Public Radio. A bright and hard-working recent graduate of New York University, Baker wondered why prospective employers and would-be boyfriends never called. After losing 110 pounds in less than six months and going “from one human to another,” Baker realized: “it was all because I was fat.” This New Elna, as she called herself, kissed sixteen men in eight weeks. Within a month of losing the weight, she nabbed a job on the *David Letterman Show*. Instead of staring or hurling a derogatory remark, strangers now smiled and acted helpful. Baker complicates this seemingly triumphant personal narrative, though, when she confesses how she achieved—and maintains—the weight loss: by taking speed and enduring four painful surgeries to remove the extra skin from her body. Baker questions if “killing off old Elna” was the right thing to do, and she worries that the diet pills might harm her over the long term, but she also recognizes: “I need to stay thin so I can get what I want,” though “I know . . . how messed up it is.”

Thin people—and attractive women in general—are indeed treated better than fat people. They are hired more often, paid more, garner higher teaching evaluations from students, receive better care from doctors, and are less likely to be bullied in school or abused by their partners (see studies cited by Wann xviii – xxi and Royce 151-155). Losing weight appears to mitigate this discrimination, at least for the woman with the resources to pull it off, but ambivalent weight loss stories like Baker’s demonstrate the high costs involved to one’s health, wellbeing, wallet, and sense of security. Fat memoirist Jasmine Singer, for example, feels “traumatized” by her fatness (176), and that feeling does not suddenly dissipate after she loses weight.

Are thinner people happier? Whether fat or thin, women continue to be judged by their appearance and equated with their bodies, always, like Goldilocks, having to find that illusive balance between too fat, too thin, and just right. In such an environment, women cannot win no matter what they do because society continues to map social meanings onto women’s bodies. The too-thin woman, for instance, is called cold, anorexic, a snob, a “skinny Minnie,” stuck up, frigid, and she thinks she is better than you. Shifting the meanings will not prevent the mapping. Weight loss does not free women from the trap of being seen primarily through their bodies; weight loss removes the stigma from one individual but leaves it in place for others (Couser 34).

Because we think self-transformations will bring happiness, the temptation of a makeover, however, remains strong, even for women considered “normal” body size. Cultural studies scholar Sara Ahmed problematizes the idea of happiness by arguing that it is not simply a good feeling or a trait equally available to all subjects (via the techniques proposed by Weight Watchers, for example); rather, happiness inheres in those objects and paths that reify social norms and that render invisible the social injustices perpetuated by those norms. Ahmed writes: “some bodies more than others”—the white, male, upper-class, American body especially—“will



bear the promise of happiness” (45). For Ahmed, happiness means proximity to “happy objects” and a particular “orientation toward the objects we come into contact with” (24). In other words, certain objects—such as the family photo album or dining table, which promote the family as the means to happiness—arrive in our near sphere already imbued with value (21). Through socialization, through learning about ‘good taste’ and the correct objects to desire (it is our likes, Ahmed points out, that establish “*what we are like*”), we orient ourselves in the right direction: toward the *pursuit* of happiness as an end, and as a social good, in and of itself (24, 32).

One happy object that captures the contingency of happiness is the before and after photo. As I pointed out earlier, various forms of approbation—smiling faces, positive comments, increased career opportunities—accompany thinness. People with privilege are perhaps more likely to pursue weight loss because they more likely believe in the “fantasy of a moral and middle-class subject as the one who is without habit, who will and can choose insofar as they are imagined as free from inclination” (35). It seems that one simply chooses thinness, indeed is morally compelled to choose it, because of its association with happiness.

Like other happy objects, the before and after photo hides the work of happiness. Culturally sanctioned ‘cures’ for overweight and obesity—often expensive, painful, ineffective, dangerous, and available only to those with disposable income—include juice fasts, commercial weight loss centers, liposuction, gastric bypass surgery, and pharmaceuticals. Diet supplements containing ephedra have killed people. Despite its dismal track record, dieting practices continue undeterred, and the diets that do not fail must be maintained forever.

Fat studies questions this twisted logic and offers a different, but ultimately untenable, solution to the problem of the fat, female body: fat-positivity. Fat-positivity means choosing to feel good about yourself. To accomplish these good feelings, Marilyn Wann, in her

groundbreaking book *Fat!So? Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size!*,

recommends a type of de-programming that begins with coming out as and embracing your fat:

I know lots of people who've conquered their fear of fat. You *can* face your fears. You *can* dispel that cloud. And you don't have to change the world to do it. You don't even have to change your weight. You just have to change your attitude. (13).

Many have found this kind of approach empowering and transformative (fat memoirist Lindy West), while others, including myself, find liberationist politics problematic (Australian fat studies scholar Samantha Murray).

I argue that the rhetoric of fat liberation relies on the same self-help logic found in diet culture: with an act of *individual* imagination, one can subvert diet culture and embrace fatness with pride instead of shame. Like failure to lose weight, failure to achieve fat pride is considered a personal failure. One could argue, of course, that fat pride isn't meant to be practiced alone but rather in community, similar to the feminist consciousness-raising sessions of the 1970s, yet fat studies requires that you come to the table already liberated. Otherwise, you won't find a seat. As Wann writes in the Foreword to the *Fat Studies Reader*, if you think that fat people should lose weight (ostensibly this would include yourself), or, if you think that thin is inherently beautiful, "then you are not doing fat studies" (ix).

Life is messy and full of ambivalence, though. Samantha Murray, for example, underwent weight loss surgery and wrote that her ambivalence about it, as both a feminist and fat studies scholar, was worse than the actual surgery. Writer Roxanne Gay also feels ambivalent about her body and cannot overcome her own culture, which equates a woman's self with her body. She laments: "I want to change how this world responds to how I look because intellectually I know my body is not the real problem," but "on bad days . . . I forget how to separate my personality, the heart of who I am, from my body" (149). In fact, most feminist

scholars who write about fat (Cressida Heyes, Susan Bordo, Robyn Longhurst) write about the painfulness of wanting social justice for fat people while also losing weight themselves. We should address this ambivalence not by attacking feminists who continue to diet as ‘traitors’ but rather by viewing this ambivalence as a form of resistance in a regime of disciplinary power.

### **Theorizing Ambivalence: A Disability Studies Approach**

I argue that ambivalence is a legitimate response when living in a society that de-values one's embodiment, but ambivalence is undertheorized by fat studies scholars. To fight fat stigma and subsequent discrimination against fat people, fat studies employs two key strategies: 1) debunk the medical model, which claims that fat constitutes an individual health problem, and 2) re-program individuals (and subsequently society at large?) to view fat people as active, attractive, and productive—in short, “normal.” Both approaches offer pros and cons. Unfortunately, both tend to present a unitary vision of fat identity, one that does not adequately account for intersectionality. Both also leave unquestioned healthism and the ideology of ability, meaning “the preference for ablebodiedness,” that delimits—through a paradoxical logic that values bodily perfection and invulnerability—who qualifies as worthy and human (Siebers 315). In an effort to recognize the diversity and ambiguity of lived experience, and in the hopes of fostering a more inclusive politics, I highlight ambivalence as a starting point for theorizing fat identity. Although a heterogeneous field, disability studies provides several insights that illustrate why it is so difficult to attain a positive fat identity when the desire to like one's body co-exists with the desire to fix it.

Before I turn to these insights, let me recognize in more detail the contributions of fat studies scholar Samantha Murray. She criticizes fat politics because it insists the fat body “be seen within frameworks of beauty and desirability that appear to be non-normative and

subversive, but are in fact *reaffirmations* of normative frameworks” (161). In other words, fat politics still privileges what Murray terms “heteronormative aesthetic ideals” (161). To provide an example, actress Camryn Manheim appears on the cover of her 1999 fat memoir, *Wake Up, I’m Fat!*, donning a slimming black bathing suit and sleek high heels, with a hand on her hip and a smile on her heavily made-up face. Though she is fat, as that term is socially defined, Manheim wants to be seen as if she were thin; she wants to appear sexy. Instead of chanting “traitor” or “sell-out,” we should follow Murray’s lead and concede that:

If you have been denied the opportunity to experience oneself as a ‘normative’ woman, being given that chance is seductive, exciting. Even in my anger at these heteronormative presentations of feminine sexuality, as a fat girl, I would argue that I nevertheless have the desire to experience them (160).

Murray and the many other fat writers she cites embody ambivalence. After all, “how,” she asks, “can you completely remove yourself from the discourses that constitute us as subjects?” (159). I agree with Murray that we must create space in fat politics for ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction; however, I want to further theorize this ambiguity by drawing on disability theory.

The concept of stigma formulated by sociologist Erving Goffman lends credence to the inevitability of ambivalence among stigmatized people, including fat people. Despite its condescending and offensive tone, Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* remains a landmark text for disability studies scholars because Goffman captures pivotal aspects of the disability experience: how one’s disability overtakes one’s entire identity, the seductiveness of passing, and the constant need to manage other people’s emotions and impressions via one’s performance of disability. Fat clearly constitutes what Goffman calls a stigma or spoiled identity—the fat body, hypervisible, supposedly reveals something deep and true about the inner self. No wonder young American girls fear becoming fat!

Condemned by the larger, fat-shaming culture, the fat person cannot help but feel ambivalent about himself. As Goffman explains, because the stigmatized individual “acquires identity standards which he applies to himself in spite of failing to conform to them, it is inevitable that he will feel some ambivalence about his own self” (106). To put it another way, “the standards he has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be” (7). I find it unfortunate that some fat studies scholars hold the stigmatized fat person to a higher standard than what Goffman calls the “normals”—they expect fat women to overcome internalized stigma, but they do not expect the “normals” to overcome the ideologies, also internalized, that construct them as “normal.”

On the one hand, fat scholars and activists, such as Murray, are expected to be loyal to their “in-group,” their fellow sufferers, and take pride in their differentness as a political strategy. On the other hand, Murray cannot help but internalize the sense that there is something wrong with her, so she tries to minimize the problems associated with being a stigmatized person in society by undergoing weight loss surgery. This dialectic—knowing that the stigmatized status is contingent and contextual, yet also believing, on some level, that it is real—must be acknowledged in order for fat politics to become truly inclusive. Individuals—even when working together in groups—simply do not have the power to permanently overcome ideology. I make this point in an effort to assuage the guilt that often accompanies ambivalence, especially among social activists.

The ideology of ableism, in particular, plays into the construction of fat identity as spoiled. As previously mentioned, ableism refers to the unquestioned and deep-seated belief that we—despite our innate fragility and mortality—can and should perfect our bodies, and that

people with ‘abnormal’ bodies—whatever ‘abnormal’ means within the particular culture—do not qualify as fully human. Despite dieting’s dismal track record as an effective intervention, and despite the fact that the vast majority—seventy-five percent, according to the CDC—of Americans are overweight or obese, many Americans continue dieting. Why? A key reason is that our society disqualifies fat by portraying it as a disability—that is, a medical and individual abnormality to be overcome through talent and willpower. Because fat denigration relies on disability, a master trope that is so ingrained in our collective consciousness as itself an unquestioned, disqualifying attribute (Siebers 24), it is unrealistic to think that most fat people can attain a positive fat identity. Even ‘thin’ people feel fat in our culture, a phenomenon I will explore in Chapter 1. Siebers points to the power of disability when he suggests that it has become increasingly difficult to “disqualify people as inferior on the basis of their racial, sexual, gender, or class characteristics”; however, we express few qualms about disqualifying people based on disability (24). Like disability, fat is conceived “as a biological defect more or less resistant to social or cultural intervention” (27). A valuable strategy for making fat “normal,” is to reject a medical model of fat; however, I worry that this strategy keeps in place disability as the master disqualifier.

In arguing that fat is right because it’s not inherently unhealthy, fat studies scholars risk healthism, or the idea that healthy people are worthier human beings. For good reason, fat studies rejects the medical model of the fat body as impaired and instead views fat as a cultural construction (Solovay 3, PCA website). Indeed, fat stigma in the United States, which began around the turn of the twentieth century, preceded any health or medical concerns about fatness and reflected instead a burgeoning middle-class and its efforts to define itself in opposition to primitive and uncontrolled bodies, meaning the poor, the non-white, and women (Farrell 4-5). In

other words, fat became unhealthy because the medical discourse identified fat as a place to assert itself and attach an implicit critique of the lower-class.

The concern with treating fat people as ‘other’ continues today; it is problematic, for instance, that some well-meaning feminists who do not identify as fat continue to view fat as primarily a health issue, albeit with complex origins. Lauren Berlant, for instance, utilizes the heightened rhetoric of “globesity” to underline the issues of stress and exhaustion, especially for the poor, within a capitalist system (30, 33). Meanwhile, Susie Orbach reads in the fat, female body a psychological imbalance spurred by the pressures of living in a patriarchal society. As Marilyn Wann points out, however, “there is no nice, unstigmatizing way to wish that fat people did not eat or exist” (xvii). Understandably, then, fat studies scholars defend fat embodiment by challenging medical and psychological arguments about the dangers and origins of fat. Clearly, I agree with Anna Mollow that it is important to interrogate science, which is never ideologically neutral (207), but I also worry, along with Kathleen LeBesco, about using health as the attribute that qualifies fat people as OK (78). I suggest that viewing thinness as an ideology instead of a quantifiable embodiment minimizes the discursive essence of healthism, allows for a critique of health itself, and provides a better model for understanding how diet culture operates insidiously in the lives of women and girls, and increasingly of men, regardless of their body size.

Therefore I offer models of disability, put forth by scholars such as Siebers, Tom Shakespeare, and Alison Kaffer, that help us make better sense of fat embodiment. Neither univocally stigmatizing nor empowering, these scholars wish to supplement the social model with an explicit acknowledgement of the realities and ambiguities of lived experience. Shakespeare, for instance, in advocating what he terms an interactional approach, argues that “people are disabled by society *and* by their bodies” (75). He acknowledges the diversity of

disability as a category and recognizes that some impairments *do* cause pain and suffering. Some people, including those with chronic illness, *do* seek and hope for a cure, and these interventions are understandable and valid (83). The interaction between various factors—one's personality, support system, and impairment, as well as society's attitude toward disability and the accessibility of one's environment, etc.—produces disability (78). Fat studies should embrace a similar model, one that marries the embodied with the discursive. "Fat," like "disabled," is not an ontological state but rather inheres in relationships and social contexts. Nevertheless, the body is not only a social construction; there are certain immutable facts that come with embodiment. Sometimes fat causes pain, diabetes, or difficulty climbing stairs. Like disability, fat encompasses a diverse range of experiences. Manheim, the actress-turned-fat memoirist, is a different kind of fat than cultural critic Roxanne Gay, who weighs 400 pounds and is "always uncomfortable or in pain" (Gay 206). Finally, other identities—based on race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability—intersect with fat and influence the experience of fatness. By adopting an interactional approach like Shakespeare's, we can better understand that not everyone has *equal access* to a positive fat identity.

Utilizing the insights of disability studies scholarship, I cast doubt on the possibility of achieving a monolithic, positive fat identity. By acknowledging ambiguity, I hope to offer a more inclusive model not only for fat studies but also for other scholarship and activism based on minority groups. My model does not put the onus on individuals to achieve, through an act of willpower, imagination, or choice, a positive identity or an emancipatory narrative, but rather it acknowledges ambivalence as an appropriate and resistant response within an ableist society. Theorizing ambivalence is a necessary project not only for fat studies but also within an increasingly medicalized society—all of us, regardless of embodiment, will eventually confront a



profound ambivalence, as we cease to see ourselves as what Goffman calls the “normals” and as we face new and exciting opportunities to ‘fix’ our bodies and appearance, and by extension, our selves. How we collectively make sense of this ambivalence matters politically.

## Conclusion

By drawing attention to the culture’s ambivalence about the relationship between bodies and selves, fat studies could potentially undermine the gendered logic that equates a ‘good’ body with an autonomous self. Central to this task is recognizing a contradiction seemingly inherent in Western culture, dating from the mind/body dualism of Plato, St. Augustine, and especially Descartes. On one hand, bodies appear as vehicles for the mind, mere fashion accessories, colorful appendages. In this view, to invest in one’s body appears foolish and vain. On the other hand, Americans spend an inordinate amount of time, money, and mental anguish perfecting their bodies. Through a collision of opposites, remarks Siebers, the body becomes “both inconsequential and perfectible” (314). Encouraged to perfect their bodies, and yet admonished for vanity, women as “women” bear the burden of this contradiction in their embodiment, and they suffer because of it, no matter their size.

Are we our bodies? What is the relationship between body and self? Is there a true body to match a true self, or is the true self merely the normative self? I understand the notion of a fat self—the idea that a fat (outer) body reveals something true about one’s (inner) self—as an invention, a product of what Foucault calls in *Discipline & Punish* “normalization.” Normalization means a system of rewards and punishments that construct a “norm.” Under such a system, who needs a king? People will control themselves as they wonder, anxiously, if they are normal, good enough, and OK. A prime example of this: our vigilance over calories and diet, and our incessant worrying about being or appearing to be fat, both a product not only of

fatphobia and thinness as ideologies, but, as Sandra Lee Bartky points out, of femininity. Normalization requires deviants, Foucault suggests, as well as a production of knowledge about those deviants. The fat woman, like Foucault's prisoner, homosexual, or madman, is one such deviant. Like the prisoner, her life must be examined "from the triple point of view of psychology, social position and upbringing, in order to discover the dangerous proclivities of the first, the harmful dispositions of the second and the bad antecedents of the third" (252). In other words, authoritative discourses like psychology create a 'species' of person—the fat woman. The production of such knowledge links meaning not to an act, but to a very type of embodiment, one that cannot be hidden from the world.

In the chapters that follow, I read fat memoirs and tweets about feeling fat as both symptoms and products of normalization, yet I also find within both a space for ambivalence and resistance. In Chapter 1, I analyze the social meanings and uses of "feeling fat," tracing the emotion to cultural ambivalence about consumption and consumerism. In Chapter 2, I examine how the genre of the fat memoir authorizes itself during an "obesity epidemic" and what those methods reveal about gendered selfhood. Instead of merely indicting these Twitter users and fat memoirists for their lack of fat-positivity, I want to emphasize the social situations that give rise to these cultural forms. I want to challenge instead of appropriate the rhetorics of liberal individualism.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **FEELING FAT: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF AN AMERICAN EMOTION**

In 2015, based on users' input, Facebook added a "fat" emoticon to its roster of "How are you feeling?" options, which included "amazed," "discouraged," and "impatient." The feeling fat emoji featured a double-chinned, red-cheeked smiley face, an image that angered the body image activist group Endangered Bodies. The group launched a Change.org petition urging Facebook to delete the fat face because, as Endangered Bodies member Catherine Weingarten explained, it "mak[es] fun of people who consider themselves to be overweight." Weingarten, a college student who spearheaded the petition in the United States, argued that "fat is not a feeling" but rather "a natural part of our bodies, no matter their weight." In response to the controversy, Facebook kept the emoticon but changed "fat" to "stuffed." With or without the emoticon, however, Americans still feel fat. In addition to the dozens of recent articles in the mainstream press, a Google search on "feeling fat" results in hundreds of thousands of hits.

Weingarten's argument rests on a contradiction that reveals the complexity of feeling fat. In a paradoxical fashion, Weingarten dismissed feeling fat as a legible emotion: "as someone who has struggled with and overcome disordered eating," she wrote on her petition page, "I know what it's like to 'feel' fat." Weingarten protested the feeling precisely because she experienced it; she then attempted to deny the idea of feeling fat by re-routing it to a medicalized body. Long the province of anorexics and others with diagnosed eating disorders, feeling fat connotes pathology. Indeed, Northwestern University psychologist Renee Engeln found that ninety percent of college women engage in fat talk, despite only nine percent of them being

overweight. Feeling fat, it seems, differs from actually *being* fat—or, to use the medical terminology, overweight, a condition defined today chiefly through Body Mass Index charts that link one’s height to a medically appropriate weight range. In a 2015 *New York Times* article, Engeln warned readers that feeling fat may lead to eating-disordered behavior. Because it normalizes body shame and imbues fat with moral meaning, the social phenomenon of feeling fat concerns and saddens many of us, myself included.

I suggest, however, that to treat feeling fat as an ersatz emotion or individual pathology forecloses a discussion that would historicize feeling fat and shed light on emotions more generally. Feeling fat—conceived as an emotion, an approach hitherto unexplored by scholars—mediates the relationship between self and society, inside and outside, the embodied and the discursive. I argue that, like any emotion, feeling fat serves an ideological as much as an expressive function, one inscribed on the body. Neither wholly physiological nor solely discursive, the emotion of feeling fat points to the complex ways that human beings embody cultural norms.

In this essay, I identify the situations that give rise to feeling fat and explore the social meanings and functions of the feeling by analyzing fifty tweets with the hashtag “feelingfat,” posted during a three-month period in 2017. I suggest that, by feeling fat, the feeler situates herself as not fat; she confirms her commitment to slenderness via a neo-confessional post. Integrating extant scholarship on emotions, docile bodies, and the cultural history of fat, I suggest that these “feelingfat” tweets keep in circulation a disciplinary regimen of self-monitoring. Feeling fat marks the female body as striving toward an unattainable ideal, implicitly white, male and middle-class: the controlled body permitted the occasional good time. As a discursive practice, feeling fat shows how the simple act of eating continues to be a fraught task

for many women. More importantly, by locating emotion in the collective, social body instead of solely the individual, this paper makes possible a feminist critique of feeling fat. Interpreted here as a tool for social control, the emotion of feeling fat reinforces normative femininity and buttresses existing social hierarchies.

### **The Problem: Feeling Fat as Personal Pathology**

Even a cursory glance at popular culture shows that many American women feel fat. *Bustle*, an online magazine geared toward millennials, declared in 2016 that “most people, especially women, have uttered some derivative of ‘I feel so fat’ . . . in their lifetimes” (Ospina). Moreover, in one of the 7,000 YouTube videos that address feeling fat, YouTube personality, Kaitlyn, remarks to her 23,000 subscribers: “I would suggest that when you’re feeling particularly gross and fat . . . that you stop looking in the mirror. I’m not going to say ‘stop feeling fat’ because I think that’s unrealistic” (“When You Feel Fat”). Recent print headlines include: “Can Facebook Make You Feel Fat?” (*Men’s Health*), “10 Tricks to Beat a ‘Fat’ Day” (*Prevention Magazine*), “7 Helpful Ways to Cope with ‘Feeling Fat’” (*Psychology Today*), “Fat Days: How to Think Yourself Thin” (*Women’s Health & Fitness Magazine*), “‘Ugh! I Feel Fat!’ Does it Seem like Every Conversation You Have with Your Friends Comes Back to Your Body?” (*Seventeen Magazine*), “What it Means to Feel Fat” (*New York Magazine*), “I Feel Fat: How to Instantly Feel Better in Your Body” (*Huffington Post*), “I Wasted Decades Feeling Fat and Ugly” (*Salon*), and “The Problem with ‘Fat Talk’” (*The New York Times*). Noting the ubiquity of the phenomenon, two therapists co-wrote a children’s book in 2016 entitled *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Breaking the ‘I Feel Fat’ Spell*. Author Michael Alvear, likewise, titled his 2013 book about sex and body image *Not Tonight, Dear, I Feel Fat*. Readers of this essay have surely overheard or perhaps thought—after an extravagant lunch with coworkers, at a dress

fitting with (thinner) friends, or while flipping through the latest celebrity gossip magazine—“I feel fat.”

Regrettably, the above-cited articles find the solution to the problem of feeling fat in the individual and not society at large. Should women love their bodies as they are or perfect their bodies via weight loss? The answer, almost always formulated as an individual choice: both. Suggestions most often proposed include: weigh yourself less often, substitute a different word for fat, such as “sad” or “ashamed,” take a walk, or start a gratitude journal. Oprah Winfrey, America’s most influential yo-yo dieter, also individualizes concerns about weight. In January 2017, she ran a large headline on her magazine cover, titled “How Oprah Made Peace with Food.” In the article, Winfrey advises that “the deepest care must ultimately come from your own self-acceptance.” However, when the issue hit newsstands, Winfrey announced a forty-pound weight loss and attributed it to Weight Watchers—a company in which she owns shares. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo, on the other hand, suggests that pathologies reside not in the individual but in the larger culture; the latter authorizes and in fact incites the obsessive practices that make anorexia legible, for example (15). Confronted with this paradoxical message to slim down and stop hating their bodies, American women discipline their bodies in increasingly nuanced ways, which include feeling fat.

The emotion of feeling fat—an embodied experience conditioned by larger social institutions—challenges the individual paradigm. The common view of emotion as personal, subjective, private, and unavailable for public scrutiny obviates the political critique that would accompany a sociocultural view, which locates emotion not only in the individual but also in the collective, social body. As feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar points out, emotions are not only “historical products, bearing the marks of the society that constructed them,” but also constituted

in such a way as to maintain and perpetuate hegemony (396). After all, how can individual women, such as Weingarten, *choose* to stop feeling fat when the Centers for Disease Control warns that two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese, when former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop calls our expanding waistlines “grotesque” and harbingers of early death (Loar), and when the government ranks obesity a bigger threat to America than terrorism (Pace)? In the United States alone, concerns about health—and social status—fuel a \$66 billion weight loss market (Marketdata Enterprises). In this social environment, one is compelled to feel fat. Academic discourse, especially feminist scholarship, paves a path out of the individual-choice cul-de-sac by acknowledging that the systemic oppression of women—not individual pathology—creates the phenomenon of feeling fat.

Surprisingly few scholars outside of psychology, however, write about feeling fat. Let me briefly discuss two exceptions. In her examination of female shame in contemporary literature, J. Brooks Bouson provides a cogent, but ultimately incomplete, analysis of feeling fat. Bouson equates feeling fat with fear of fat. Drawing on feminist and fat studies scholarship, Bouson argues that women internalize fat-phobia; to feel fat is to feel ashamed (106). However, perhaps because Bouson limits her study to two literary representations of fatness (a novel about an anorexic woman and a fat memoir), she overemphasizes the shame aspect. In certain contexts, as I will show, feeling fat expresses not shame but rather pride in one’s social status as not-fat. Next, working in the field of geography, Morgan Windram-Geddes supplies a useful case study of feeling fat among Scottish girls in Physical Education classes. Like Bouson, Windram-Geddes links feeling fat to fear of fat, this time “result[ing] from encounters with the tangible and discursive spaces of physical education underpinned by contemporary obesity discourse” (48). Both Bouson’s and Windram-Geddes’ work, then, points to the contextual nature of feeling fat,

an insight I build upon by examining the feeling within a social media context. Although Bouson and Windram-Geddes offer the plausible interpretation that feeling fat denotes fear of fat, I complicate this interpretation. In a social media context where people publicize feeling fat, the feeling serves as a method for asserting one's social status as well as resolving—at least for a few minutes—competing social narratives about consumption.

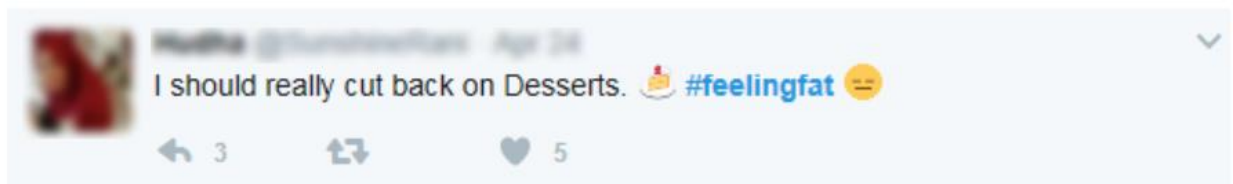
In this study, I analyzed around fifty tweets with the hashtag “feelingfat” published in February, March, and April of 2017. More than 300 million people visit Twitter each month, mostly via mobile devices such as cell phones. Because of its embeddedness in everyday life, and the seeming spontaneity of tweets, Twitter gives an unparalleled glimpse into the myriad meanings of feeling fat, as well as the situations that give rise to such a feeling. These public declarations of feeling fat complicate both the pop cultural view and the existing scholarship on feeling fat and prove untenable the equation of feeling fat with either personal experience or with monolithic social construction. My approach marries the physiological with the social, in the same way that disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers melds the social and medical models of disability in his concept of “complex embodiment,” which stresses the relational and “mutually transformative” interaction between body and society (325). In analyzing the tweets, I consider feeling fat a genuine emotion, and I draw on scholarship about the myriad functions of emotion in society—physiological, social, and ideological—to explain what feeling fat *does* in the social media space. By eschewing the standard view of emotion, that is, by accepting feeling fat as a feeling compelled by American society instead of solely an individual sensation, this essay opens up the possibility of a feminist analysis. Weingarten correctly implied that power relations—specifically the cultural denigration of fat people—leads to the body image issues inherent in



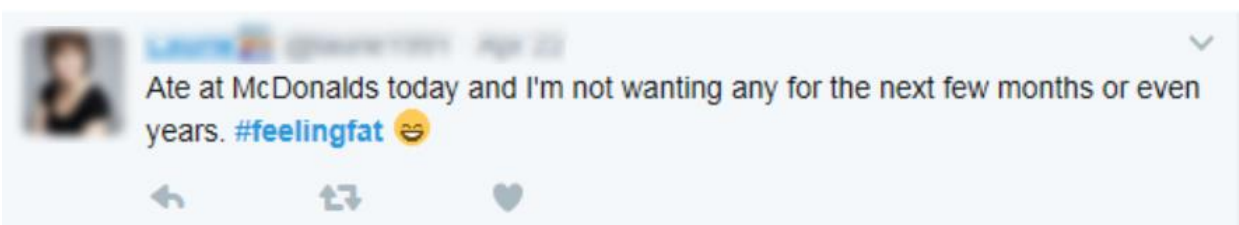
feeling fat. However, the solution to social injustice is not to discount feeling fat but rather to take it seriously as an emotion.

### **The Solution: Feeling Fat as an Emotion**

In this section, I walk the reader through a series of positions on the nature and function of emotion. By applying each theory to the emotion of feeling fat, I complicate and amalgamate the extant scholarship, ultimately rejecting the standard view of emotion as solely personal, interior, and bodily and instead emphasizing the relational, contextual, and ideological functions of emotion. As I will show, emotions act like keys to a social map; they tell us how to interpret situations, and they reveal what matters in society. Feeling fat offers a particularly rich site for showcasing how emotions often work as social tools that remind us who we are and keep us in our place, yet we have some wiggle room to resist these norms even as we perpetuate them.



**Figure 1.** Tweet from Twitter User #1



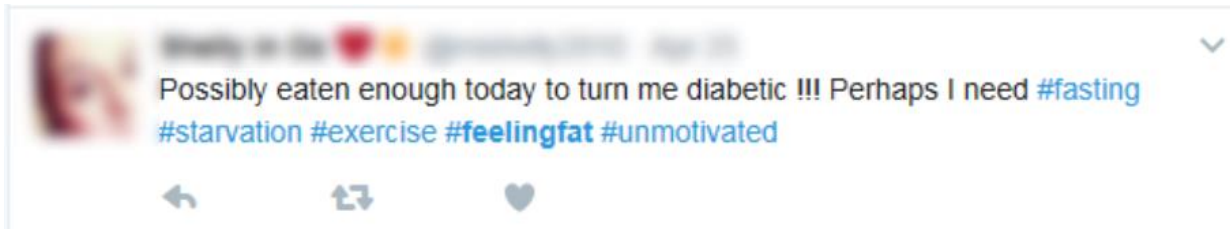
**Figure 2.** Tweet from Twitter User #2



**Figure 3.** Tweet from Twitter User #3



**Figure 4.** Tweet from Twitter User #4



**Figure 5.** Tweet from Twitter User #5

At first glance, it would appear that feeling fat entails a physical sensation: feeling full, bloated, or lethargic. Twitter User #2, for instance, feels fat after eating fast food at McDonald's, and Twitter User #3 feels fat after eating two donuts. As Facebook contended in my introduction to this essay, feeling fat might simply mean feeling stuffed. The presumptive view of emotion, which locates emotion inside individual bodies, supports such a reading. In his influential 1884 essay, "What is an Emotion?", psychologist and philosopher William James argues that emotion causes the bodily disturbance—an increased heart rate or sweaty palms, for instance; he claims that emotion *is* the bodily response, so that "we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble" (67). James writes, "Whatever moods, affections, and passions I have are in very truth constituted by, and made up of, those bodily changes we ordinarily call their expression or consequence" (70). For example, the subject perceives an object in her environment (a charging elephant) and experiences an innate physiological reaction (a rush of adrenaline); this sensing of the body's response constitutes the emotion (fear). A crucial corporeality, then, defines James' view and gives support to an interpretation of feeling fat as an interior sensation.

James complicates this model, though, by revealing that cognition of some sort, however dimly conceived, plays a role in emotion. “Bodily changes,” he suggests, “follow directly the PERCEPTION of [an] exciting fact” (67). Emotions, then, are *about* something—our interpretation of that something determines the emotional response. If James sees a man pointing an arrow at his head or reads a bad review of his work, he “can perceive in it intent or *animus*. *That* is the emotion-arousing perception; and may give rise to . . . bodily convulsions in me” (71). James shows here that human beings respond emotionally to objects by appraising them. In other words, one must register the charging elephant, ostensibly as a threat, before feeling the bodily changes that constitute fear. Nevertheless, the body appears to James as a reverberating sounding-board, and “no shade of emotion, however slight, [is] without a bodily reverberation as unique” (69). If, as James claims, “a purely disembodied human emotion is a nonentity” (70), then for feeling fat to qualify as an emotion, it must correspond to a physical and interior sensation. Ostensibly, a Facebook user would choose the “feeling fat” emoticon not to make an insulting statement about fat people but simply because she feels bloated.

An explanation of emotion rooted *primarily* in physiology, however, elides the relational function of emotion within society. Let us take anger as an example. To explain anger to someone unfamiliar with the concept, one might *begin* by describing physical sensations: a flushed face, increased heart rate, and pursing of the lips. The physical manifestations of anger, however, vary in intensity and from person to person. One quickly finds that a description of anger’s physical symptoms reveals very little to the interlocutor, who surely wants to know, indeed needs to know in order to understand anger, what these sensations *mean*. Not surprisingly, Aristotle defined multiple types of anger—spite, scorn, insolence, and contempt—not in terms of their physical profiles but rather by explaining the situations and relationships

that give rise to each kind (7-9). Similarly, to explain feeling fat as feeling bloated, full, or stuffed, reveals very little about what feeling fat actually means in American society.

Locating feeling fat primarily in physicality, then, offers an incomplete view of emotion. If feeling fat referred solely to physical sensations, few feminists and other activists would find it so troubling. People use emotion words not only to describe interior states, but rather to interpret behavior and especially to communicate judgments (Bedford, 210, 214). Writing in the mid-twentieth century and influenced by the linguistic turn, philosopher Errol Bedford asserts that “being angry is logically prior to feeling angry”; in fact, “being angry does not entail feeling angry [or] any other feeling” at all (209). In other words, one cannot choose the word anger without “first understanding what it is to be angry”: the situation of having been wronged (208). Likewise, the Twitter users above cannot choose feeling fat without understanding the situation of having eaten too much of the ‘wrong’ foods. No Twitter users felt fat after eating a tub of broccoli or multiple helpings of tofu with brown rice. Consuming only particular types of food and drink—McDonald’s, brownies, beer, etc.—elicits feeling fat. Clearly, emotions contain assessments that evoke standards of evaluation; if they did not, then, as Bedford claims, “to explain behavior by using them would not give the insight that it does” (216). To hate the taste of eggs, for instance, and yet to *hope* for their appearance at brunch defies logic; the word hope implies that what one hopes for is favorable. To see oneself as striving for and valuing slenderness, and yet to feel *fat* after participating in activities that ostensibly lead to slenderness, such as eating wholesome foods or working out at the gym, also defies logic. The word *fat* implies an unfavorable assessment of recent behavior, an unfavorable assessment socially understood and agreed upon.

Like any emotion, then, feeling fat depends on social context. Advancing his conceptual viewpoint, Bedford notes that emotions pack quite the linguistic punch: “in using [them] we are able . . . to relate behavior to the complex background in which it is enacted, and so to make human action intelligible” (216). In this model, emotions latch onto, in fact are defined by, the relationships and situations that they illuminate; the context matters. The ‘bad’ behaviors in the above tweets—eating too many desserts or enjoying a meal from Pizza Hut—revolve solely around eating. Interestingly, other behaviors that might lead to weight gain, such as sitting at a computer for eight hours a day, or binge-watching the latest Netflix series, do not provoke a feeling of fatness.

In addition to social context, one’s position within that context matters. Positionality delimits the emotion of anger, for example, as Americans may discount the putatively irrational anger of the stereotypical ‘angry black woman,’ or, as in the Western tradition, privilege the emotional authority of men’s anger over women’s, which may appear frivolous. Because fat constitutes a social stigma, a Twitter user who *is* fat—acknowledging here that being fat always depends on who else is in the room—most likely feels ashamed in mainstream American culture and would post no tweets that drew attention to her food consumption or body size.

Despite popular belief, the Twitter user who feels fat expresses not shame but a socially sanctioned embarrassment for having splurged. One feels embarrassed by situations out of one’s control or by one’s mild transgressions: fixable, relatively meaningless, or short-lived (Bedford 212). On the contrary, to feel shame one must feel, at least on some level, at fault vis-à-vis the social context that erects the taboo being transgressed (212). Shame implies a transgression so deep that it collapses one’s sense of self. To be shamed is to be silenced, shunned, and deemed unworthy of social connection—a terrifying prospect for a social being. Why would a woman

feeling ashamed about her eating *publicize* her transgression on Twitter for potentially the entire world—her parents, coworkers, partner, students, neighbors, that old flame from high school—to view, comment on, and potentially punish her for? The answer: she wouldn't.

Although we cannot know empirically the body size of Twitter users who profess feeling fat, we can assume that their bodies fall within a perceived “normal” range. In her study of fat talk among teenage girls, anthropologist Mimi Nichter found that overweight girls, unlike their thinner counterparts, do not engage in fat talk (i.e. “I’m so fat,” “No you’re not!”) because they do not want to draw attention to their weight (51-52). Likewise, as many first-person accounts show, fat women do not typically advertise their eating or their fatness because it invites censure and harassment; in fact, fat women often report fear of being ‘found out’ in the act of eating.<sup>1</sup> In a culture that excoriates fat people and that finds fat bodies disgusting, only Twitter users positioned as *not* fat—as that term is socially defined—may *feel* fat. Positionality determines who can—at least publically—feel fat.

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**Figure 6.** Tweet from Twitter User #6

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Jasmin Singer, in her memoir *Always Too Much and Never Enough*, writes that she prefers to eat in solitude and privacy, but one day a friend wants to eat breakfast with her. While the friend leaves to get a paper towel, Singer quickly consumes her entire breakfast. When the friend “saw that I was taking my final bite of my enormous meal, she stopped cold in her tracks—I had been caught . . . I was . . . mortified. It was as though she had caught me masturbating” (87).



**Figure 7.** Tweet from Twitter User #7



**Figure 8.** Tweet from Twitter User #8



**Figure 9.** Tweet from Twitter User #9

In discussing feeling fat, and in categorizing as “not fat” those who may publically declare such a feeling, I risk capitulating to extremes: either entrenching fatness in ontology or negating the body altogether. Inspired by the insights of Michel Foucault, anthropologist Catherine Lutz provides the most useful model of emotion for explaining feeling fat in that her model mediates these extremes. Instead of untangling the conceptual knot about physical versus cognitive components of emotion, Lutz conceives of emotion not as a personal state but as an “index of social relationship,” “an ideological practice,” and “a way of talking about the intensely meaningful as that is culturally defined, socially enacted, and personally articulated” (143-144). Emotions, in other words, are not internal, natural, precultural, or universal; one cannot translate “feeling fat” without understanding the meaning of fat in American culture, the social norms about the body, and the many ideologies and contradictions that inform the

American ethos more generally. Like “fago,” an emotion Lutz studies on the South Pacific island of Ifaluk and translates as “compassion/love/sadness,” feeling fat reveals a certain way of seeing the world. Lutz suggests, then, that emotions serve “complex communicative, moral, and cultural purposes” (144). Anger, for instance, “evokes in the listener of shared cultural background . . . a complicated scene with actors, actions, and interpersonal relationships” (146); like anger, feeling fat communicates, and also concretizes, social meanings and norms.

These #feelingfat posts likely provide a sense of shared community, a space for women to assert their commitment to femininity in a way that engenders a sense of belonging. Participating successfully in ritualistic and patriarchal practices—purchasing beauty products, reading women’s magazines, learning how to flirt, and engaging in other forms of “girl talk”—creates solidarity among women, but it also sets the rules of group membership. Nichter, for example, views fat talk among teenage girls “as a performance in which group solidarity and personal identity are negotiated” (48). Girls not only bond around fat talk, but they also show vulnerability, hence avoiding accusations of being stuck up (55). A girl who engages in too much fat talk risks annoying others and being perceived as fishing for compliments; one who never disparages herself, though, appears to be bragging (52-56). Girls at either end of the spectrum—overweight or underweight—particularly suffer in these social situations because they cannot participate in the social discourse of fat talk; otherwise, peers will accuse the skinny girl of anorexia. Like the fat girl, she too must avoid drawing attention to her weight via fat talk (57-59). Feeling fat might be a way of forging group ties but also of policing social groups so that members’ bodies stay within an acceptable range.

Feeling fat illuminates, then, not individual pathologies but rather reifies the stringent societal norms for women’s bodies. Emotions, as Lutz explains, “orien[t] us toward things that



matter” (144). Twitter User #7, for instance, feels fat when she sees a photo of herself thirty pounds lighter, and Twitter User #9 feels fat when surrounded by “beautiful, fit, skinny people at the gym.” The above tweets point to things that matter (at least for the segment of American society represented by these tweets): namely, the size of a woman’s body in comparison to other women, to men, and even to one’s own body in the past. Like any emotion, feeling fat also orients the feeler in a certain way, in this case, toward a desire to stop feeling fat. Lutz remarks that “the calling up of a scenario by the speaker of emotion words is done in particular contexts for particular ends, to negotiate aspects of social reality and to create that reality” (147). In other words, to use an emotion word—to tweet #feelingfat—“is an attempt to characterize and to move events, not merely or even mainly to map them” (147). Numerous tweets about feeling fat include statements that reaffirm the feeler’s commitment to slenderness. Twitter User #8 writes, “ate/drank way too much this weekend. Need to work it off this week.” By feeling fat, she situates herself as not fat, while also motivating herself to take actions that will prevent weight gain in the future. On this view, feeling fat implies merely a momentary lapse in judgment, corrected by going to the gym more often or by beginning a new diet. Clearly, these Twitter users are never ‘off the hook.’

On the other hand, posts about feeling fat betray an ambivalence about feminine norms. Feeling fat provides a socially sanctioned space in which to deviate from the attainment of bodily ideals while also maintaining commitment to those ideals. In other words, feeling fat gives certain women an ‘out,’ a way to engage in the prohibited behavior of splurging while ideologically distancing themselves from its connotations. If one feels fat after eating a box of cookies, then one has deviated from the norm, but she has done so safely because her identity as a non-fat woman remains intact—after all, she feels fat afterward. In some ways, feeling fat

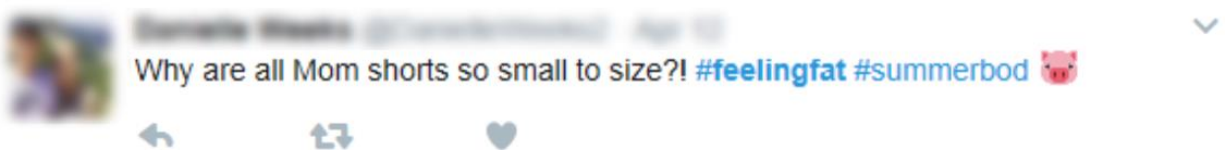
allows the feeler to have her cake and eat it, too. Posting a #feelingfat tweet still re-produces feminine norms about consumption, though, even as it offers a very narrow and circumscribed space in which to temporarily stray from those norms.

Emotions are often tools for social control. Because emotions construct reality, it is important to note that American culture discourages “negative” emotions, prizes cheerfulness in women, and reads anger in a woman with power as “bitchiness.” Feeling fat—and emotions in general, which often communicate gendered norms of behavior and thereby naturalize gender differences—constitutes a form of what Foucault calls disciplinary power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes an historical shift from the straight-forward ‘top-down’ power structure of a monarchy to a more modern form of power under capitalism, a power which is decentralized, diffuse, subtle, invisible, and seemingly more enlightened, but in actuality, more insidious. This “relational power,” as Foucault explains, “is everywhere and always alert” (177). For instance, although no single power figure outwardly ostracizes fat women in our culture, and although ‘polite’ society often employs euphemisms for fat, such as chubby or plump, disciplinary power constructs fat identity as abject and incites (not represses) a cultural obsession with fat; this guarding against becoming fat is what makes feeling fat possible.

Feeling fat is an example of disciplinary power because the feeler is complicit in her own subjugation—this is the efficiency and genius of disciplinary power. No one, for example, coerces these Twitter users to publically lament that brownie they ate after lunch. The democratization of the Internet—anyone with access can sign up for her own public platform—appears progressive, even freeing, but the constant status updates, the publications of one’s ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes,’ and the careful curating of one’s family photos, imply the opposite. Under disciplinary power, people police themselves as they wonder, anxiously, if they are normal, good

enough, and OK. Social media contributes to and keeps in circulation this paranoia. Modern discipline, then, controls bodies and minds not through overt methods like torture but, rather, via a “new micro-physics” of control that aims to make subjects more useful, productive, and docile (Foucault 139). Emotions, such as feeling fat, create docile bodies—bodies “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (135). Feeling fat moves the feeler in a certain direction: toward fitness, tightness, control, and continued self-interrogation.

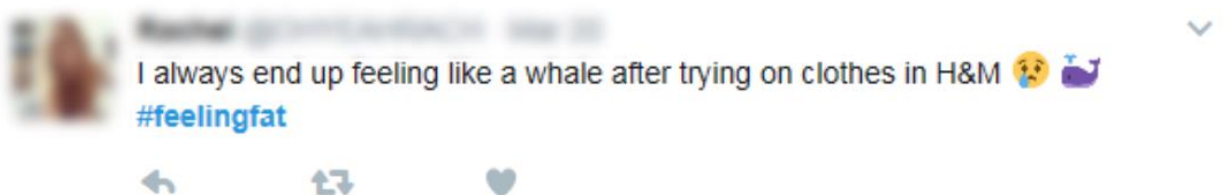
American society engenders the emotion of feeling fat through techniques of micro power. Intimate moments in American life—participation in certain scenes and movements through certain spaces—give rise to feeling fat, whether a fleeting sensation of dissatisfaction or a humming of hope for a thinner future. The following Twitter users, for example, feel fat when trying on—or merely seeing—clothing.



**Figure 10.** Tweet from Twitter User #10



**Figure 11.** Tweet from Twitter User #11



**Figure 12.** Tweet from Twitter User #12

The enclosed space of the dressing room, the segregation within department stores of plus-size clothing, the general unavailability of stylish clothing for young, fat women (hence, Twitter User #12 feels “like a whale” at the H&M store), and the inconsistent and not standardized system of women’s sizing all create for women a general atmosphere of surveillance and fear. What if I can’t fit into these jeans? What will it say about me *as a person*? Feeling fat, then, arises not inside of an individual body, but rather when that body encounters cultural ideology materialized in the structures of everyday life.

### **The Result: Feeling Fat as a Discursive Practice**

Diverse and seemingly unrelated discourses—fashion, religion, self-help, and psychology, among them—have interacted in such a way that they produce the fat subject (like Foucault’s homosexual, criminal, or madman) as a distinct identity. As American Studies scholar Amy Erdman Farrell puts it, fat in American culture means “lazy, gluttonous, greedy, immoral, uncontrolled, stupid, ugly, lacking in will power, *primitive*” (34). Moralizing fat isn’t new nor inevitable. Peter Stearns, in his cultural history of fat, notes that not until the turn of the twentieth century did middle-class Americans imbue fat with moral meaning and consider fat people with disgust (3). Far from a fashion fad, the hegemony of thinness established at the turn of the century has continued unabated, and largely unchallenged and unchanged (Stearns xx). Explaining, briefly, how thin first became ‘in’ situates feeling fat within an historical context and introduces contradictions central to the lives of modern American women, contradictions that make feeling fat possible. In this section I argue that feeling fat constitutes a discursive practice, a way of marking one’s self as not fat, meaning a good middle-class citizen.

Tweets about feeling fat reveal a cultural ambivalence about consumption, an ambivalence rooted in the history of fat in America. Historian Hillel Schwartz, in his seminal

study on diet culture, attributes Americans' obsession with dieting to their ambivalence about indulging. He explains the newfound concern with weight at the turn of the century as "the modern expression of an industrial society confused by its own desires" and "intimidated by abundance"; diets, he writes, "harbo[r] an implicit program for coping with abundance and excess in the body politic" (5-6). More recent histories of fat, by both Stearns and Farrell, support Schwartz' analysis. As Stearns suggests, at the turn of the century, the country transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy. During this age of surplus, when the amount of food and leisure increased, window shopping first captured the imagination. Meanwhile, religious jeremiads that warned against a consumerist, pleasure-seeking society lost their cultural power. In short, middle-class society grew more permissive and indulgent—through increased consumerism, relaxation of sexual standards, a decrease in religiosity, and a perceived decline in the American work ethic (48-70). To compensate for their more indulgent lifestyles, while still indulging, and to find an alternate way—besides sex, religion, and work—to prove their morality, Americans dieted (57). In other words, guilt and ambivalence spawned a crusade against fat because the new imperative for enjoyment and pleasure clashed with older Victorian ideals about delayed gratification and restraint (Farrell 44). It was in this context that fat became, as one magazine put it, "almost a crime," and the first attribute one noticed about a person (Stearns 22). Like dieting, feeling fat on Twitter disowns and yet also calls attention to and indeed provokes indulgence.

The middle class policed itself—and continues to police itself—by policing body size. Like a member of the *nouveau riche*, Farrell explains, "a thriving, upwardly mobile person needed to demonstrate those aspirations by controlling the wealth and abundance that came with an improvement in class status; and a fat body revealed an inability to handle that new wealth"

(27). A burgeoning middle class required a method for separating the worthy citizens from the less worthy, and body size—an attribute highly visible, difficult to change, and associated with ‘lower’ people—supplied such a method. In her cogent analysis of science and popular culture, Farrell suggests that prevailing ideas about race, civilization, and evolution in the late nineteenth century advanced a racialized and gendered teleology in which civilization—via the perfectible body—marches toward the ideal: the white, male European. Fat, in various discourses, including the scientific, became associated with the abnormal, or a ‘lower breed’ of person such as the infamous Sara Baartman, or “Venus Hottentot,” a slave from South Africa displayed in England and later Paris because of her (to Europeans) abnormally large buttocks. The culture of fat denigration, Farrell convincingly shows, depended upon race and gender hierarchies, a dependence that continues into the present day (59-81).



**Figure 13.** Kale meme. “I’ve Eaten More than Enough Kale this Week to Justify Destroying my Body this Weekend,” *Someecards*, Copyright by Someecards.



**Figure 14.** Ashamed meme. “I’m Gonna go Ahead and Count Putting on my Jeans as 15 Minutes of Cardio,” *Someecards*, Copyright by Someecards.

The historically-rooted contradictions inhering in a culture that encourages unabashed consumption while also celebrating self-control help to explain how feeling fat functions. Somewhat paradoxically, given the pleasure that food provides, instead of

embracing with their bellies a land of plenty, middle-class Americans have exercised self-sacrifice via the dinner table. Only out of such a culture of overabundance, notes Susan Bordo, in which those with power have more than enough to eat, emerges an ideology of self-control (192). Drawing on the work of Robert Crawford, Bordo argues that the contradictions between production and consumption, inherent in advanced consumer capitalism, create an internal battle within the self, one etched on the body and never wholly resolved (186). As producers, we must repress our desire for immediate gratification and instead value hard work and sacrifice. As consumers, however, we should indulge our every whim, reveling in and pursuing our desires for more. Figure 13 demonstrates a shared cultural understanding of this dichotomy, one the viewer surely recognizes: being ‘good all week’ so that one ‘earns’ indulgence on the weekend (only women who are not fat, of course, earn such indulgence; Figure 14 shows a plumper woman covering her face in shame). To be respectable, the modern, middle-class body must show mastery over desire, via dieting and other disciplinary measures, but one cannot show *too* much mastery either, which leads to being uptight, pathological, and not a good consumer. One must fall somewhere between restraint and indulgence, able to enjoy a slice of pizza or two but without eating the whole pie. Feeling fat signals, authorizes, and keeps in circulation this drama of appetite, this battle between the producer and consumer sides of the self.

The burden of resolving, at least symbolically, the culture’s ambivalence about consumption falls heavily on women’s shoulders. Women especially, Bordo suggests, must perform a precarious balancing act. They must care about their appearance, but not too much as to appear trivial or narcissistic. They must monitor and control their weight but not so severely that they become anorexic. Somewhere between anorexia and obesity—but much closer to the former—lies the right body, one that symbolizes the traditionally masculine attitude of

willpower, energy, and endurance (195). Precisely because the culture places moral value on the slender body (and by extension the regulated self, one that conquers its hungers and urges),

Twitter users post the following messages:



**Figure 15.** Tweet from Twitter User #13



**Figure 16.** Tweet from Twitter User #14



**Figure 17.** Tweet from Twitter User #15



**Figure 18.** Tweet from Twitter User #16



The authors of these tweets cannot take unmitigated pleasure in food—or, if they do, they must immediately disown such publically unacceptable, female pleasure. One way to disown such pleasure is to feel fat after eating the offending foods, thereby neutralizing the threat of having ‘splurged.’ As I have shown, feeling fat marks the subject as firmly between material and symbolic poles: anorexia and obesity. Because feeling fat balances the cultural compulsion to consume and the personal responsibility not to over-consume, feeling fat marks the self as a good middle-class citizen: someone who is not fat but cares enough about her body to feel fat after indulging; someone who values slenderness enough to make (future) sacrifices but also allows herself to enjoy abundance in limited quantities—whether chocolate on a “cosy Sunday night” (Twitter User #14), a pancake breakfast (Twitter User #16), or a “rolo Easter egg” candy (Twitter User #13).

Feeling fat is a disciplinary practice that produces a feminine body and mind and reproduces normative femininity. Drawing on Foucault’s conception of the docile body, Sandra Lee Bartky suggests that women’s bodies—through institutions but also through daily practices unbound from institutions—undergo a coercion and a disciplining that produce a particular mode of feminine embodiment (448). From facial expressions and manners of speech to the way women exercise and even stand, women perform femininity under the gaze of a “panoptical male connoisseur”; they live in a constant state of visibility, experiencing their bodies as seen by another (454). To Bartky’s “specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements” that reproduce femininity, I add the emotion of feeling fat (449). Iris Marion Young argues that women throw like girls, not because of some biological defect, but because they imagine and live their bodies as confined in space (151). Culture *creates* the female body. Feeling fat, likewise, molds a female body and mind attuned to appearances—not only physical attractiveness, but also

the dreaded appearance of letting one's self go, even for one meal, for one moment, for one bite. Dieting, Bartky explains, "disciplines the body's hungers" (449); so, too, does feeling fat. Feeling fat, like putting on makeup, constitutes a discursive practice: "femininity as spectacle" (454). The feeling itself is a spectacle; it must be tweeted and shared. Again, positionality matters. Anyone can feel anger, but not everyone—owing to her positionality—can make a spectacle of it. Similarly, anyone in our fat phobic culture can feel fat, but only certain people can moralize the feeling through a public spectacle: people who fall within an acceptable range of body size (not fat, but also not too thin), women much more so than men, and likely middle-class people. Because of the limitations of Twitter (we cannot know for certain the demographics of any user), further intersectional research is required to more fully address this issue of positionality.

Numerous pop culture sites testify to the disciplining of female bodies through practices such as feeling fat. For instance, in the 1995 comedic film *Clueless*, Alicia Silverstone plays Cher, a spoiled but good-hearted Beverly Hills teenager who lives in a mansion, chooses her wardrobe based on a computer program, and negotiates rather than earns her grades. Cher confesses to her best friend, Dionne: "I feel like such a heifer. I had two bowls of Special K, three pieces of turkey bacon, a handful of popcorn, five peanut butter M&Ms and, like, three pieces of licorice." Intended as a parody about privilege, Cher's obsessive accounting of her consumption mimics many tweets about feeling fat. Although men also tweet about feeling fat, and though they too suffer pressure to conform to increasingly unattainable body ideals, little boys do not typically count calories together nor would a TV show that featured a father and son eating copious amounts of food spark much interest (as did the conspicuous consumption of the *Gilmore Girls* in the early 2000s). Feeling fat is a method for regulating female hunger and, as in

the movie *Clueless*, a symbol of one's status and privilege—only people with more than enough to eat can feel fat.

## **Conclusion**

Instead of claiming, against all evidence to the contrary, that one cannot possibly feel fat, this essay took the feeling seriously in an attempt to illuminate the social and cultural functions of emotions more generally. Analyzing tweets with the hashtag “feelingfat,” I revealed the ways in which women who do not identify as fat nevertheless internalize, and keep in circulation, gendered norms about eating and body size. I have argued here for a complex understanding of feeling fat. On the one hand, feeling fat orients the feeler in a certain way: toward not feeling fat in the future. Feeling fat also neutralizes the threat—to one's self and to others—of having ‘splurged.’ Finally, because only the not-fat can publically feel fat, and because of fat's historic association with lower-class people, feeling fat in venues such as Twitter serves as a middle-class status symbol. I did not purport in this essay to explicate the phenomenon of feeling fat for all people or in all cases; however, by focusing on tweets—that is, purposeful and public declarations of feeling fat on social media—I emphasized the sociocultural aspects of emotion and showed how feeling fat reproduces normative femininity. As Bartky recognizes, mastering femininity may make a woman feel competent and confident. In the end, though, this sort of competence keeps women as a group oppressed (457, 460).

Because people who tweet about feeling fat are not fat by normative standards, their tweets often invoke a comedic, silly, or fun-loving tone, which elides the pain that millions of other women feel each day living in a culture that ties their personal worth to their appearance. Only certain people, in other words, have the luxury of feeling fat publically.

Tweets about feeling fat position certain types of people as worthy and good (or not), insofar as they pursue the same happiness projects; these tweets create a certain kind of solidarity and recognition which may feel pleasurable. Hey, we all slip at times. Hey, we all secretly know this is kind of ridiculous, but we're all in this together, so it's OK. However, the tweets also promote a familiar, future-oriented ideology about progress, one that advocates self-sacrifice and echoes religious stories about saved sinners and healed bodies, one that offers a comforting story about control (i.e., "I'll get on track tomorrow!"). Sara Ahmed suggests that the promising nature of happiness—that it "lies ahead of us, at least if we do the right thing"—constitutes happiness, so that even disappointments do not invalidate the promise of happiness (29). Likewise, Foucault reminds us that an individual's progress, what he calls "exercise," never ends. He writes, "exercise, having become an element in the political technology of the body and of duration, does not culminate in a beyond, but tends towards a subjection that has never reached its limit" (162). Thinness—with its myriad connotations of happiness—offers a mythic goal, an unattainable ideal. In a society where one can never be too rich or too thin, women will continue to feel fat.

**CHAPTER THREE:**  
**AUTHORIZING THE FAT MEMOIR:**  
**SELF-HELP, TRAUMA, AND THE TECHNIQUES OF GENDERED SELFHOOD**

A 2016 article in *The New York Times*, part of a series on “The Science of Fat,” demonstrates the fundamental mistrust of the fat person’s first-person authority in American culture. In the article, reporter Gina Kolata shares the results of a study that, though proving what most fat people already know (diets do not work for long-term weight loss) nevertheless “shocked the researchers.” Despite their best efforts, thirteen of the fourteen contestants from Season 8 of the reality weight loss TV show *Biggest Loser* regained weight, and four regained all their weight and more. “Dieters are at the mercy of their own bodies,” Kolata explains, “which muster hormones and an altered metabolic rate to pull them back to their own weights.” Biology, confirms Dr. Rosenbaum, and “not a pathological lack of willpower,” makes it difficult to lose weight. To what the medical establishment terms this “frightening and amazing” news, the contestants reacted strongly, though not uniformly: “it’s not as dramatic as being told you have a disease, but it’s along those lines,” said Sean Algaier, who gained 150 pounds after the show ended. Amanda Arlauskas felt absolved: “I could tell something wasn’t right with my body,” she said. “I just knew it was an issue with my metabolism.” So many readers felt compelled to respond that the *Times* published a separate article consisting solely of reader comments such as these: “at least we have persuasive medical evidence that being overweight is a disease rather than a moral failing,” “as someone who has struggled with weight almost all of my adult life, I can’t help but wonder if I am losing a fighting battle,” and “so can we stop our cultural tendency to fat-shame people now?” (McDermott). In a society that has medicalized the fat body, science

plays a powerful role as arbitrator of fat and potential vindicator of fat people. Science, it seems, speaks for fat people.

In a climate that denigrates fat people and cedes epistemic authority to science, how can a fat memoirist speak for herself? Within the Western tradition, women have long been associated with irrationality and emotionality, at odds with the purported objectivity of positivism (Jaggar 495), and since the turn of the twentieth century fat women in particular have signified lower-class laziness and primitiveness, pathology and excess, bodies and minds unable to cope with the modern cornucopia (see cultural histories of fat by Peter Stearns, Amy Farrell, and Hillel Schwartz). By the late twentieth century and with cooperation from the weight loss industry, increasing concern about the health risks and costs of a ballooning populace galvanized a war on “obesity,” a condition which became and remains a national obsession. In 2003, during what became known as the “obesity epidemic,” the mainstream media mentioned “obesity” 7,000 times, compared with 3,000 mentions in the year 2000, 500 in 1990, and less than 100 in 1980 (Saguy and Riley 876). That contemporary cultural products—TV shows like *My 600 Pound-lb Life* and films such as *Shallow Hal*—represent fat women as abject (when they are represented at all) is not surprising. Like Michel Foucault’s homosexual, the fat person has become a species, primed for dissection and designed for typology, a deviant ‘other’ that through its otherness creates the ideal self.

To gain traction and market share in a mainstream culture in which prejudice against fat people comprises “one of the few acceptable forms of prejudice left” (Hartley 65), stakeholders in the fat memoir face a formidable challenge: how to make credible and appealing the personal stories of fat women, or to put it another way, how to authorize a genre. Fat memoirist Lindy West points out why fat women need authorizing: “fat people are [seen as] helpless babies

enslaved to their most capricious cravings. Fat people do not know what's best for them. Fat people need to be guided and scolded like children" (14). I argue that, one way or another, fat memoirists earn credibility within the larger culture by reinforcing a pre-existing norm or ideology. For example, precisely because the culture values health as a moral good, science that doubts the purported link between weight and morbidity offers to destigmatize "overweight" and "obesity"—construed as medical but also moral conditions affecting two-thirds of American (Centers for Disease Control). Of course, one shouldn't have to invoke science in order to publish her memoir. One shouldn't have to cite a study every time she wants to eat an ice cream cone in public without harassment, and one shouldn't have to forego basic medical treatment because the doctor insists she lose weight first. In short, we shouldn't have to defend our embodiment, yet this is precisely the political task that marginalized and discredited groups face. Scholarship that does not adequately address authorization as a complex but nevertheless unavoidable process tends to overestimate the ease by which any one individual can re-write cultural codes, yet scholarship that hews strictly to social determinism leaves less room for resistance.

In an effort to address this stalemate, this essay investigates how American writers of fat memoirs come to authorship during an "obesity epidemic." In a medicalized and patriarchal society disgusted by the fat, female body, how do these authors claim moral authority, and how do their works appeal to a mass audience? Though much scholarship in the field of life writing has produced insights about how narratives reify or subvert norms, I am not interested in defining a right or wrong narrative, nor in hierarchizing life stories according to their emancipatory potential. What interests me are the methods *available* for authorization and what those methods reveal about gendered selfhood. Using recent fat memoirs as case studies, I

examine two particular discourses that fat memoirists draw upon to lend themselves credibility as fat, or formerly fat, women: self-help and trauma. In detailing the authorizing moves that these memoirs make, I demonstrate the assumed link between autonomy and credibility, and I show that fat women can assert autonomy but in circumscribed and gendered ways.

This essay updates research on the fat memoir genre by analyzing recent texts, and it complicates the extant scholarship by challenging the assumption that only a fat-positive narrative could accomplish the goals of fat studies. Despite the dearth of fat-positive narratives within the genre as a whole, some recent fat memoirs demonstrate a productive ambivalence about the liberal individual, as well as the meaning of the fat body and its relationship to the self. Fat memoirs can potentially question the ideal of autonomy and reveal self-sufficiency as a myth. In fact, I claim that a traditional fat-positive memoir tends to reinforce the liberal individuality that fat studies repudiates. Drawing attention to ambivalence opens up a space for a type of resistance that foregrounds power structures, acknowledges the existence of contradictory social narratives, and does not rely on stigmatized individuals to overcome stigma through willpower, imagination, and choice, or what I collectively call the “rhetorics of overcoming.”

## **Introduction to the Fat Memoir**

The advent of the fat memoir in the 2000s and its increasing popularity today is not accidental nor incidental. Goaded by America’s “obesity epidemic,” spurred by the memoir boom of the 1990s, and influenced by illness and disability narratives (what Anne Hunsaker Hawkins terms pathographies and what G. Thomas Couser calls autosomatography), the fat memoir arrived on the literary scene. Although not writing specifically about the fat memoir, Hawkins observes that a shift from memoirs about acute illness to ones about chronic illness—“obesity” qualifying as the latter—paralleled a broadening definition within trauma theory of



what constitutes a traumatic experience (123-124). Given the memoir genre's strong association with trauma in the 1990s (Gilmore 2), the fat memoir quite possibly emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century because being a fat woman in America at the height of the "obesity epidemic" was deemed traumatic enough to qualify as a public narrative worthy of consumption.

Ranging in tone from somber and resigned to humorous and uplifting, the fat memoir is a first-person, life story, crafted for publication, in which a typically white, middle-class woman selects and orders memories into a coherent narrative, thereby imposing meaning on her fat. Like any memoir, the fat memoir constructs a causal relationship among events, and its ending affirms certain cultural values, such as self-control or authenticity (Bjorklund 159). In her taxonomy of autobiographical works about fat, Donna Lee Brien asserts that men as well as women write fat memoirs, but men tend to adopt a more comical tone, and their books comprise much less of the fat memoir genre overall. This discrepancy reflects our gendered view of the relations between bodies and selves. Throughout Western history, women have been identified primarily with their bodies and men with their minds (Bordo 5-11). Fat men and women, of course, both suffer in a fatphobic society, but the female fat memoirist portrays her fat body as the central component of her identity.

Although I put pressure on the following typology, as a heuristic, I divide the fat memoir into three categories: fat-positive (the author remains happily fat), fat-negative (the author remains fat but unhappily), and the most popular form, weight loss (the author becomes thin). Updating scholarship on the fat memoir to include recent texts, I discuss one memoir from each category: *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman* by Lindy West (2016), *Always Too Much and Never Enough* by Jasmin Singer (2016), and *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* by Roxanne Gay (2017). Both West's (fat-positive) and Gay's books (fat-negative) touched a nerve within mainstream

culture—their books achieved critical and commercial acclaim, making these works particularly useful to analyze in terms of methods of authorization. Although not as successful as the others, Singer’s book (weight loss) is representative of the genre as a whole.

Despite fat studies’ commitment to analyzing cultural representations of the fat body, few scholars choose the fat memoir as a locus of study. The extant scholarship claims that the genre holds promise as a potentially liberating cultural form but, as a whole, fat memoirs reinforce negative stereotypes about the fat, female body. Literary studies scholar Elena Levy-Navarro criticizes the genre because it employs a normative and oppressive diet discourse that perpetuates discrimination against fat people. However, she categorizes Wendy McClure’s 2005 memoir *I’m Not the New Me* a resistant fat memoir because McClure satirizes diet discourse, exposing it as “generic, formula, a ritual” (341), or in other words, a performance compelled by the culture. I extend Navarro’s work by contemplating other methods of fat-resistance beyond the satire, methods that may be more accessible—perhaps the word is publishable—during an “obesity epidemic” and within the context of memoir as a commercial product.

Another model of resistance, fat pride, proves particularly problematic. In her study of fat memoirs published between 2003 and 2005, Kathryn Linder bemoans representations of fat women as disgusting and diseased and longs for a “resistant and fat-positive memoir” in which the “body can be represented as powerful and healthy rather than weak and in need of a cure” (221). Linder celebrates as a model of fat-positivity Emmy award-winning actress Camryn Manheim’s 1999 book *Wake Up, I’m Fat!*. The cover shows Manheim posing for a mock beauty pageant, hands on her hip and donning a black bathing suit, high heels, red lipstick, and a tiara. As Linder explains, Manheim “chooses to disrupt societal standards of weight and beauty” (232); fat becomes not ugly but beautiful. Although I appreciate Linder’s insight that most fat

memoirists “refuse their fat bodies as themselves” (222), I worry along with others (Kathleen LeBesco, Samantha Murray) that the model of fat positivity that she and others (Marilyn Wann) propose succeeds in rescuing the fat female body from abjection but only by creating an ‘other’ through its unquestioned assumption of health as “a transparent, universal good” (Metzl 2) and beauty as the defining trait of a ‘real’ woman. This model of fat positivity defines women by either the health or sexual attractiveness of their bodies, a tired framework that does not successfully avert the male gaze.

On the other hand, I do not deny that identity politics necessarily involves exclusion. To assert a self always involves the creation of an other (Moya qtd by Siebers 24), an observation that leads scholars wary of identity politics to shun any essentialist formulation of fat identity. To minimize othering, I follow Samantha Murray’s lead and highlight ambivalence as a potential form of fat resistance. Skeptical of fat acceptance movements, Murray argues that “if we can open a space for the ambiguity and contradictions of bodily experience, if we can accept the impossibility of a unitary self in fat politics, we can accomplish more than simply attempting to ‘re-hierarchise’ fat over thin” (162). This essay examines the ways in which fat memoirists authorize themselves through the rhetoric of liberal individuality, yet some fat memoirists also challenge that rhetoric. Heeding Murray’s call, I find in recent fat memoirs something of value to the project of fat studies: ambivalence about the connection between well-behaved bodies and autonomous selves.

### **The Liberal Individual as Authority Figure**

To be a fat woman in America is to be suspect; the culture discredits fat women in myriad ways. First, “in a society in which appearance is the primary index of value for women”

(Garland Thomson 28), fat women fail *as women*; they ‘let themselves go’ and therefore forfeit the privileges and rewards of normative femininity, such as the admiring male gaze and the social status it affords. Second, fat constitutes a health risk in a society that views health as a universal moral good and in an age where, as Nikolas Rose, explains:

hopes, fears, decisions and life-routines shaped in terms of the risks and possibilities in corporeal and biological existence ha[ve] come to supplant almost all others as organizing principles of a life of prudence, responsibility, and choice (18).

Because she embodies health risks that she could ostensibly mitigate if she chose to lose weight, the fat woman fails *as a liberal individual*. In a different but related point, Tobin Siebers suggests that “the fear of pain is often the beginning of oppression” because we assume “a painful life is a wrongful life,” a life not worth living (190, 186, 184). We often associate the fat body with pain—the physical pain of bad knees and cardiac arrest but also the pain of incompetence, the inability to traverse a flight of stairs or play with one’s children. The body in pain drains our collective empathetic resources but also our economic ones, as such a body costs more money—in health care costs, lost wages, etc.—to maintain. In this scenario, the fat body signifies disability because the fat body fails *as an able body*. Finally, as I explained in chapter one, fat people supposedly cannot control their appetites: a fundamental character flaw in a land of plenty. The fat woman fails *as a moral, middle-class citizen*. Take all these harmful representations in the aggregate and fat women no longer speak for themselves; doctors, psychologists, surgeon generals, dieticians, lawmakers, journalists, and other authority figures speak for them.

Because the culture denies first-person authority to the fat woman, the fat memoirist—and other marginalized autobiographers—must take special care to authorize themselves. G. Thomas Couser defines authority in autobiography as credibility derived not from research but

from personal experience and self-identity (73)—what qualifies as authority, then, cannot be fact checked but rather changes over time and depends on whom is speaking. Authority, Couser claims, “is constrained by matters such as gender, race, and ethnicity” and “may be best viewed as culturally negotiated,” “something to be contested and established by the autobiographer and others” (75). Because he strikes an appropriately middle path between self-determination and social determinism, Couser’s understanding of authority offers a starting point for analyzing fat memoirs as gendered, social products—not individual acts. As Diane Bjorklund’s study of American autobiographies shows, memoirs reveal the ever-evolving “vocabularies of the self,” as an author can only make sense of her life within the context of her own historical moment, an understanding constrained by culture (165).

When Americans from all walks of life began writing autobiographies in the 1820s, critics asked the same question they do today: “what, precisely, qualified someone to put before the public the story of his or her life?” (Yagoda 67). The answer depends in part on the author’s positionality. Autobiography scholar Leigh Gilmore observes that “memoir as a cultural formation represents a gendered sphere in which tolerances around nonnormative life stories are negotiated” (674). Given the fat body’s association with failure, how do readers begin to tolerate the life experiences of the fat memoirist? Memoir scholar Helen Buss provides a model for answering such a question; she outlines the formal ways that writer Lauren Slater, as both a woman and former mental patient, authorizes herself in her memoirs—that is, how she avoids being dismissed and discredited. Like the fat memoirists, Slater must find “a professional and public ‘langue’ to authorize her own ‘parole’” (Buss 37), meaning she must appropriate some authorizing discourse to effectively communicate the truth of her experience in a way that others, especially those with power, will receive. Buss argues that we “need to study the ways in which

the form and shape of autobiographical practices are being changed by specific interests of a given cultural moment, and by the different subject positions of writers in that moment” (42), a task I undertake via the fat memoir.

Understanding the gendered methods of authorization within the fat memoir genre gives insight into our historical moment. Since the 1970s, Americans have lived in a precarious social and economic environment (one could term it neoliberalism, late capitalism, or postindustrial capitalism) characterized by “the end of the standard job and family”—a time in which opportunities for social advancement and mobility have narrowed so that “a sense of personal security is anomalous” (McGee 12). You might land a job and a man, but can you keep them? At the same time, consumer culture has appropriated and reshaped the politics of liberal feminism so that “girls and women are encouraged to empower themselves through consumption practices, heightened visibility, and self-improvement” (Weiser 39). In a savvy study of contemporary brand culture, Sarah Banet Weiser explains that postfeminism “is often individualized and constructed as personal choice rather than collective action; its ideal manifestation, in turn, is not struggle for social change but rather capacity for entrepreneurship” (56). In other words, to exercise independence and attain empowerment, “each of us [women] has a duty to ourselves to cultivate a self-brand” (56). To be published, fat memoirists must engage in such self-branding.

Anxiety-inducing social instability combines with the cultural milieu of postfeminism so that the most accessible avenue for women to become liberal individuals—a vocabulary of the self that Garland Thomson calls the American ideal (41)—is through a rhetoric of overcoming, and specifically a rhetoric concentrated on the body and emotions. The body and emotions—healing from a personal tragedy or trauma, conquering or accepting illness, fat, aging, etc.—offer women the most straightforward and user-friendly raw material with which to meld a self-

determining and autonomous self. Perhaps this is one reason why, as Couser shows, the memoir boom has really been a boom in disability life writing—writing “about what it’s like to have or to *be*, to live in or *as*, a particular body—indeed, a body that is usually odd or anomalous” (2). Although Couser views the advent of the “some body memoir” positively, in the context of self-representation and civil rights (4, 7, 11), its popularity also points to the accessibility—and shared cultural understanding—of the body as a locus for overcoming, especially for marginalized people barred from other kinds of overcoming narratives. After all, who lacks access to her body and emotions?

In the age of the Enlightenment, society automatically conferred selfhood on the white, property-owning male—his rights appeared natural. The “other,” though, must always *earn* the designation of liberal self. Today, women often do so by overcoming bodily obstacles and by asserting the self through bodily progress—dieting, for instance. In this age of what Nikolas Rose calls “somatic individuality,” in which a consumer-citizen can spit in a cup for \$200 and receive a report in the mail of her ancestry, health risks, and genetic carrier status, bodily projects serve as a means of developing subjectivity. “Ethical practices,” Rose writes, “increasingly take the body as a key site for work on the self” (18). Women, however, have long managed minute details of the body—eyebrow shape, cellulite, varicose veins, forehead wrinkles, thigh gaps, cleavage, etc. Women, and increasingly men, track daily calories and the percentage of fat, protein, and carbohydrates in their diet. The Fitbit logs their steps each day. In the TV show *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, set in the 1950s, the heroine ditches her housewife routine to enter the male world of stand-up comedy, but she still keeps a daily log of bodily measurements—the circumference of her ankles, inner thighs, hips, and basically anywhere on her body that she can get a measuring tape around (Sherman-Palladino). A docile body reinforces unequal power

structures, but, on the other hand, it also offers a sense of mastery and an increase in autonomy, especially for women “stuck in a pink-collar job” (Heyes 77-78).

Fat memoirs reflect and reproduce the constraints and rewards of docile bodies. The majority of authors remain fixated on body size. They equate a thin self with an autonomous individual, yet it is precisely this correlation that authorizes the genre. Indeed, strident pleas from public health officials to halt an “obesity epidemic” telegraph the emergence of the fat memoir as a gendered narrative reliant on overcoming the female body that misbehaves and promising in return the authority vested in the liberal individual.

I want to briefly define three specific but interrelated rhetorics of overcoming that produce the liberal individual: willpower, imagination, and choice. Willpower means sheer, voluntary effort, the ability to control, direct, and apply one’s forces to the project at hand. Good middle-class subjects exercise willpower; such willpower appears to originate deep inside ourselves, like an inner and renewable resource. We often assume, for example, that people fail to lose weight because they lack the willpower to do so. Imagination, on the other hand, means asserting one’s individuality by imagining different values and models of living than the ones handed to us by culture. The size acceptance movement uses the positive trope of diversity, for instance, to re-imagine fat as not unhealthy or immoral but a simple fact of genetic diversity. Finally, choice means existing amidst a field of possibilities and producing one’s authentic self through the act of making ‘free,’ unimpeded choices. The successful dieter who finds her true self in a thin body appears to have made a choice. Fat memoirists utilize these rhetorics of overcoming to craft seemingly autonomous and therefore credible selves.

The rhetorics of overcoming appear to exist in a vacuum, a blank space of possibility, as if each of us arrives on the scene vested with equal potential for willpower, imagination, and



choice. Willpower, however, depends on social and economic resources—preparing healthy meals requires money (fast food is cheap), time (if you’re working 24/7 and taking care of your kids, you don’t have time to cook), and access (not everyone can afford to shop at Whole Foods; in fact not everyone can get to a grocery store or enjoy the privilege of a kitchen). Willpower should be understood as intricately tied to social resources. Likewise, imagination means drawing on and re-arranging available cultural resources in the form of tropes, narratives, and discourses. The culture and one’s positionality in society delimits imagination; not everyone has access to these cultural resources, and not everyone can draw upon them equally or in the same ways, a point I will elaborate on shortly. Finally, choice is a convenient and collective illusion because our choices depend on our material realities (not our individual ability to choose); potent social and economic rewards compel us to make certain choices and forego others.

Interpreted as a social situation between writer and presumed reader (Bjorklund 16), but a situation mediated also by editors, publishers, agents, critics, and booksellers, the fat memoir materializes not through a solitary political or artistic act but rather within and through culture, which Stephen Greenblatt defines as “a system of constraints” and “a structure of limits” (227, 228). Like other forms of literature, the fat memoir experiments within this system, but it must hew to at least some cultural norms, as “a life that fails to conform at all, that violates [all] the available patterns, will have to be dealt with as an emergency” (Greenblatt 229). These norms are forms of authorization. The fat memoirist employs the rhetorics of overcoming—willpower, imagination, and choice—to assert her liberal individuality and thereby earn credibility within mainstream American culture. However, she does so in gender-specific ways.

## Case Study #1: The Fat-Positive Memoir

*“When I looked in the mirror, I could never understand what was supposedly so disgusting” (West 68).*

In *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*, journalist and performer Lindy West conceives of fat as a positive identity instead of a medical or moral problem, a permanent state instead of a permeable boundary one passes through on the way to thinness. Though West hates being fat because of harassment, “I also love being fat,” she writes, because “the breadth of my shoulders makes me feel safe. I am unassailable. . . I can absorb blows—literal and metaphorical—meant for other women, smaller women, breakable women” (77). West achieves this standpoint only after analyzing her response to nude fat women, artfully photographed in black and white by Leonard Nimroy. She explains, “it was literally the first time in my life that I’d seen bodies like mine honored instead of lampooned” (77). Like shock therapy, West exposes herself to fat-positive blogs until fat, displayed unapologetically, becomes beautiful and a challenge to patriarchal beauty standards.

Marketed on the book jacket as a “feminist rallying cry,” *Shrill* in some ways challenges the logic of the liberal individual. West mocks the rhetoric of willpower (36), and throughout the book, she emphasizes the patriarchal constraints on women. In one essay, West actually satirizes the rhetorics of overcoming by providing a tongue-in-cheek numbered guide for how to stop being shy (34-50). Moreover, she changes her own mind about fat but does not stop there. She engages in a very public debate with her boss Dan Savage at the *Seattle Stranger* who wrote articles that mocked fat people. West rebuts him with her own series of articles because, as she writes, people like him “talk to you this way until you make them stop” (93). Although the fat, female body provides the impetus for the book and acts as a structural backbone, West discusses

women's reproductive rights and the problem with rape jokes in stand-up comedy. Hers is not a narrowly personal memoir.

However, *Shrill* authorizes itself in a number of ways that illuminate the gendered terrain of the fat memoir. First, West appropriates the rhetoric of imagination to authorize her position as a fat woman. She writes that “fat people can be competent, beautiful, talented, and proud without [anyone else's] approval” (73). West, then, views fat pride, or what she calls confidence, as an individual act of imagination, an overcoming of one's culture. After looking at Nimoy's photos, West declares: “I wasn't unnatural after all; the cultural attitude that taught me so was the real abomination. My body, I realized, was an opportunity . . . What a gift” (79). When people ask West how she found her confidence as a fat woman, she could answer in sixteen words, she says, “because there was really only one step to my body acceptance: Look at pictures of fat women on the Internet until they don't make you uncomfortable anymore” (69). Although very different from a weight loss narrative, West's book still posits a before and after. After looking at these photos, West liberates herself—at least on a personal level and seemingly once and for all—from the negative, symbolic meanings of fat. Finally, the publisher highlights the rhetoric of imagination by stating on the book jacket: “*Shrill* provocatively dissects what it means to become self-aware the hard way, to go from wanting to be silent and invisible to earning a living defending the silenced in all caps.” Using imagination, the book jacket implies, West became “self-aware” and even made a career and a name for herself.

Who, though, has access to imagination? West's book along with actress Camryn Manheim's are the two fat-positive memoirs—not self-help books or manuals but actual memoirs—that I am aware of, and both involve young, white, heterosexual, highly educated, successful, attractive, public individuals. Moreover, as fellow fat memoirist Roxanne Gay points

out, West (and also Manheim) is “Lane Bryant” fat, meaning she can still buy clothes at the chain store (Gay). In other words, West is not *so* fat that she cannot overcome fat through imagination. Because of their relative success in life and their positionality, Manheim and West appear to exercise a kind of autonomous imagination as they flip the cultural meanings of fat.

Moreover, both Manheim and West wrote funny books. The book jacket describes *Shrill* as “an uproarious memoir” that challenges the idea “that women, especially feminists, can’t be funny.” In fact, according to the publisher, “Lindy narrates her life with a blend of humor and pathos that manages to make a trip to the abortion clinic funny and wring tears out of a story about diarrhea.” Although West promulgates a feminist agenda in *Shrill*, she couches it in humor—an authorizing mechanism in the form of a spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down.

West encourages her readers to exercise their own imagination: “The ‘perfect body’ is a lie,” she writes. “I believed in it for a long time, and I let it shape my life, and shrink it—my real life, populated by my real body. Don’t let fiction tell you what to do” (22). By this standard, the other case studies in this essay—memoirs by Jasmine Singer and Roxanne Gay—fail. Singer loses weight, and Gay never stops trying. However, instead of blaming the fat person for not overcoming fat stigma, I emphasize the social context of these memoirs, as Levy-Navarro does when she suggests that fat women might be compelled to confess, but so too are audiences compelled toward a certain reaction to these confessions (353). I challenge the idea that fat women can “transcend . . . discourses” and “choose their own representations of the self” (Linder 223, 220), an expectation that burdens marginalized people disproportionately, leads to guilt, and, as Samantha Murray suggests, often reproduces instead of dismantles discursive regimes (162). Compared to the fat-positivity of West’s book, ambivalence about fat offers a more

accessible and potentially subversive starting point because ambivalence challenges the rhetorics of overcoming rather than merely riffing on them.

### **Self-Help as an Authorizing Discourse**

Weight loss offers a method of authorization for many fat memoirists because these authors can lose weight and speak from thinness instead of fatness, using a language that tacitly supports the continued stigmatizing of fat by presenting the thin body as the proper container for, as author Jasmine Singer puts it, a “true” and “healed” self (216). This weight loss method of authorization ‘works,’ however, in part because readers implicitly understand and respect the logic of self-help discourse. In other words, weight loss memoirs draw on self-help discourse because it lends credibility to their stories about fat; in a self-help narrative, the body is not an intractable fact but rather a playground of endless possibilities. Susan Bordo and Tobin Siebers describe this cultural fantasy as one of “rearranging, transforming, and correcting” malfunctioning parts, an “ideology of limitless improvement and change, defying the historicity, the mortality, and, indeed, the very materiality of the body” (Bordo 245). The past, full of “sickness, injury, disfigurement, enfeeblement, old age, and death” gives way to a contradictory future, one where humans, through cybernetics, genetics, or just good old fashioned self-help, triumph over death, at least for a while (Siebers 8). Every day, in every way, as the mantra goes, we get better and better.

Although rooted in the Enlightenment notion of the liberal individual, self-help literatures of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries advance a unique version of the self as fundamentally protean. In contemporary self-help discourse, the prerequisites for selfhood include an endless capacity to—and a boundless enthusiasm for—self-transformation and reinvention. Weight loss and other before-and-after body projects reify these prerequisites for

selfhood in a visceral way that makes the promise of self-mastery difficult to resist. The body in these narratives becomes a stand-in for the self: mutable and fixable. Of course, the self is never really solved and must be continually re-asserted through the pursuit of life projects (a recent Samsung commercial capitalizes on this paradox when it declares “we’re born to do what can’t be done”). Sociologist of self-help culture Micki McGee sums up succinctly the cyclical nature of self-help:

The resulting contagion of insufficiency constitutes the self-improvement industry as both self-perpetuating and self-serving. While the purchase of a commodity—mouthwash or dandruff shampoo—was once the route to some sense of interpersonal social security, today the simple purchase of a commodity is insufficient: altogether too easy. Instead, one must embrace a lifestyle, a series of regimes of time management or meditation, of diet and spiritual exploration, of self-scrutiny and self-affirmation (18).

Self-help, then, begets instead of abates anxiety. Futurity is central to self-help discourse because the promise of happiness always lies in the future and, in fact, happiness attains its promising nature precisely because it is not here now (Ahmed 32). The rhetoric of willpower comes to the fore in self-help, as only selves who work hard and long enough enjoy the promise of success.

In fact, with self-help, willpower never ceases; satisfaction must always be deferred as one lives “the effortful life” (McGee 175). At its core, McGee explains, self-help constitutes unending, unpaid labor on the self, giving way to what she terms “the belabored self” (177). To stay competitive in the job market, to improve their relationships, to achieve health and wellness, Americans must work *on themselves* 24/7. Importantly, the self-help ethos frames success and failure on wholly individual terms, re-casting societal problems as personal insufficiencies mitigated by mastering the self, charting one’s own course, and being all you can be. It is the rhetoric of willpower that appears most prominently in self-help discourse. The rhetoric of imagination, on the other hand, recedes. Despite the talk about personal uniqueness and authenticity, in self-help the imagination is utilized not to think beyond one’s cultural milieu but

rather to create a future hitched to its wagon. Consumers of self-help undertake the same exact tasks—make vision boards, recite affirmations provided for them in books, maintain a gratitude journal, etc.

The rise of self-help—the publication of self-help books more than doubled between 1972 and 2000—corresponds to sweeping changes in the structure of the labor market, as well as the success of the civil rights and women’s movements, which made more widely available the ideal of the self-made man (McGee 11, 14). Nearly anywhere you look now in the mainstream culture—advertisements, TV shows, pop music, political speeches, and of course the fat memoir—one finds a self-help narrative. Both a balm and a burden, self-help has captured, and one could argue held captive, the American imagination.

Publishers are likely more willing to publish fat memoirs about weight loss because of the demand in today’s marketplace for self-help memoirs. Autobiography scholar Leigh Gilmore argues that a redemptive, self-help (she uses the term “neoliberal”) narrative has neutralized the threat of non-normative witnesses and displaced the former vitality and inventiveness that characterized the genre in the 1990s (86). The “I” of the self-help story, she explains, “recasts historical and systemic harm as something an individual alone can, and should, manage through pluck, perseverance, and enterprise” (89). The author “transforms disadvantage into value” (89), thereby absolving herself for any previous failure.

Far from a panegyric about 1990s memoir, this essay nevertheless recognizes and legitimates Gilmore’s insight that *marketable* life stories—ones deemed by publishers to be legible and consumable by the culture—have narrowed, including within the subgenre of the fat memoir. The market domination of self-help and positive psychology books, and the power of the Oprah Winfrey brand, speak to the culture’s authorization of stories that eschew critical and

historical analysis and instead put the onus on individuals to ‘make good’ in a free market economy. Weight loss memoirs appeal to readers because they accommodate such a narrative.

One might argue that self-help discourse predates the late twentieth century, and indeed it does. After all, it was America’s first self-made man, Benjamin Franklin, who wrote the seminal American autobiography (first published in 1791): a self-help manual and pedagogical text with charts for how to become a middle-class person via daily habits. However, Franklin believed that the point of becoming this better person was to do good within a community, to become a *citizen*—this is, after all, the same man who created the library system, the police force, neighborhood militias, intellectual associations, and major aspects of the American government (Isaacson 459). The ethos of developing oneself for membership within a community is missing from today’s self-help memoir. Referring to addiction memoirs, autobiography scholar Megan Brown explains:

Such memoirs reinforce the neoliberal notion that life should be a project in the first place—an opportunity for individuals to manage, optimize, and take responsibility for themselves. This increasingly commonplace way of viewing everyday life comes with potential costs, such as foreclosing desires to foster community and interdependence, or further eroding public services and assistance (372).

Self-help discourse, then, draws on larger assumptions about selfhood and how to acquire it in a modern society with increasing income disparities, racial violence, and debt and where “corporate care and individual self-management replace public assistance and services” (Brown 361). In such a society, one way to keep the American Dream alive is through self-help narratives that feature ordinary individuals ostensibly conquering and thereby creating their own selves—the weight loss memoir offers one form of this narrative.

Let us examine the shape of a typical weight loss story. Katariina Kyrola identifies several elements common in weight loss TV shows (and, not incidentally, the weight loss



memoir). The makeover begins with what Kyrola terms a “start-reveal,” when the audience sees the dieter’s fat body in presumingly disgusting situations, such as lounging in public in a bathing suit or licking one’s fingers after eating greasy food. A personal trainer or nutritionist (the authority figure) confronts the fat person, who feels exposed and ashamed, cries, and then commits to purging herself of fat. Because of the nature of female corporeality, Kyrola argues, women can never wholly or permanently purify themselves of disgust, but the fantasy of a disgust-free body captivates the dieter, and by extension the viewer. A new, less disgusting self emerges only after the dieter obsessively tracks her food intake and engages in copious amounts of exercise (pathology in certain contexts, but empowering in the TV show). Unlike men, Kyrola remarks, women completely reject their former fat selves and cannot recognize themselves in photographs; their dieting narrative requires a complete transformation of the self, she suggests, whereas the male makeover revolves around his body only. In the “end-reveal,” for instance, the female dieter—perfectly styled—looks sexily at the camera. She wears different clothes and a better hair-do, and she chats with a new romantic interest or plays a sport she could not play before. The dieter and the personal trainer banter like friends—they are now on the same level (70-84). Now thin, the fat woman has been vindicated.

It is important to recognize that the weight loss story—the diet discourse I described above—is simply a form of self-help discourse. This is why, despite its utter inefficacy for weight loss and the depressing prospect of eating cottage cheese and rice cakes, the cultural logic of dieting remains so powerful and so difficult for individuals to let go of. Many of us know friends and family members who have dedicated decades of their lives and a large proportion of their paychecks and mental bandwidth to dieting. Because it properly situates the fat memoir within its historical moment, my analysis of the fat memoir genre interprets weight loss as an

authorizing move not only because fat people are abject in our culture but also because of dieting's association with self-help.

The before and after narrative appears to concretize success by pointing to a fixed moment in time and holding it up as a trophy, but really the star of the weight loss narrative is a self based on self-help discourse; her body must be forever modified and maintained, as the work of selfhood is never done under the regime of self-help. Despite its association with makeover culture, the self-help project never ends. The central contradiction of self-help is that one can never achieve once and for all a 'true' self and therefore always needs more help—help from outside the self. Of course, the dark underside of the “before and after” story is that there's always an after after the “after.” A fat memoir that acknowledges this can undermine the logic of self-help and the dominant view of the fat body as a problem that can be fixed.

### **Case Study #2: The Weight Loss Memoir**

*“I wanted to rip my flesh off my skeleton and put it through a shredder” (Singer 50).*

Fat speaks for Jasmine Singer, she explains in her fat memoir *Always Too Much and Never Enough*. A gay, thirty-something animal rights activist living in New York City, Singer writes about classmates and strangers calling her names like “fat fuck” and “fat tranny” (63, 114). Her size attracts bullies, delimits her career prospects, and infuses every setting with tension, from the dressing room and family dinner table to high-rise parties and city streets. In short, fat defines Singer's identity; she writes that her fat “follow[s] me around my room, my town, my life—never letting me forget” and always “running the show” (60). In fact, when people look at Singer, she claims, all they see is fat: “my body spoke for me before I was even able to” (324). So that others may *see* in Singer more than fat, so that others may, in fact, actually see Singer, she diets. She discovers juice fasting and loses 100 pounds in two years. By

losing weight, Singer can become more than and appear to transcend her body, which increases her chances at success in a society that prizes self-transformation and that equates fat with laziness and stupidity. Indeed, in a dieting narrative, the body shifts from a “subjective corporeality” to “an object, something one inhabits, owns, and molds, not something one is” (Kyrola 71); such a story frames dieting as a way to express one’s potential, which suits a culture that fetishizes the future. Because she promotes an ideology of progress through a self-help discourse, her successful dieting story authorizes Singer to speak publically through her memoir.

For example, the drama of the reality weight loss TV show plays out in Singer’s writing as she continually shifts from the viewpoint of a shamed, future dieter to the authority figure that makes sense of it all. Singer, for instance, “imagined heaven” as a Burger King drive-thru where:

I finally felt genuine. I took a bite of my burger and I was myself. There was no other place in my life . . . where I was safer, where I was calmer . . . My stomach and heart swelled with satisfaction, and I felt full of life. The irony, of course, is that it was death I was full of (42-43).

Only from the vantage point of her future thin self does Singer interpret this happy scene as dangerous and shameful. On one hand, Singer speaks sensuously about food and portrays eating as a beautiful, nourishing, and even transformative experience: “food was my guru, my lover, my sage” (13), “my constant distraction, my unconditional source of love, my trusted confidant” (26) “my salvation (33), and “best friend” (27). Singer describes French fries as “the perfect, orgasmic combination of fatty, sweet, and salty,” “so succulent” (42), and while eating them, “a sense of security and accomplishment spread to my limbs and heart” (27). On the other hand, the weight loss authority voice always intrudes to explain the real “overarching issue”: “the foods I consumed were highly addictive and unhealthy” (107), “the . . . deeper truth was that I was *addicted*” (9), “I have always used food as a way to assuage feelings” (217), and “it could

certainly be argued that my attitude toward food . . . could be thought of symbolically as a metaphor for my willingness (or lack thereof, really) to look inside myself with honesty” (187). Note how Singer speaks in the third person—“it could be argued.” Perhaps she wishes to appear objective, but it is, after all, *her* memoir. All of us must make sense of the events in our lives using the authoritative discourses available; diet discourse authorizes Singer’s memoir.

About two-thirds of the way through the book, the memoir jarringly becomes not a memoir but a self-help guide. In a 500-plus page book, these last 100 pages are an extreme departure from the rest of the book in terms of style, tone, and content. The address abruptly changes as Singer shifts into the second person, speaking directly to the audience in her new role as weight loss authority. With a repetitiveness and appeal to consumerism characteristic of self-help rhetoric, Singer describes her juicing journey, portraying herself along the way as an autonomous agent who, via willpower, achieves slenderness. In this self-help section, time slows down. Whereas a chapter in the previous section of the book might cover 5 years of Singer’s life, “Days 1-5” of her first juice fast comprise an entire chapter in this self-help section, and “Days 6-10” comprise another. Singer provides information (types of juicers, how often to juice, what fruits to use) to help the reader to undertake a similar journey. Like any diet guru, she includes the requisite, results-not-typical caveats. To give the reader a feel for the language in the self-help section, I offer the following paragraph (emphasis always mine):

“My decision to go on a juice fast would indeed **change the course of my life**” (209). “**It all started with juice**” (218). “Juice fasting . . . makes the ‘break’ from eating that much more conscious and intentional, **giving you more bang for your buck** . . . at least it did for me” (219). “Detox. That was the name of the game. Not weight loss” (222), but “I won’t deny it . . . I was really, really happy [to lose 11 pounds in 10 days]” (238). “As I continued on **this journey** through my first ten-day juice fast,” this “**life-altering ten days**” (237), “I could not possibly have known **how deeply and permanently my life would change** because of it” (226). “**It all started with juice**” (227). “**I hope that people will try out juice fasting** and find the successes that I have . . . I hope they ultimately **reclaim their health through the power of juice**” (233). “Sometimes the

answers are so incredibly obvious. **We just have to take the first sip**” (252) because **“just like that**, the pounds stayed off, and with each juice fast, more **pounds began to melt off**” (254). **“I was in charge**” and food “didn’t own me anymore” (254). **“I lost weight without even thinking about it**” (255). **“I could get past the finish line if I wanted to**” (274). “It’s easy to get complacent and ignore the issues in this world . . . or we can do whatever is in our power to change it. For me, that shift was not fully possible until I first changed myself. **I needed to find my truth. I needed to find my juicer**” (328).

The solution to bullying, harassment, sexual abuse, self-hatred, sexism.: juice. An editor or publisher likely asked Singer to add this self-help section to the book as a method for drawing an audience. Singer clearly feels ambivalent about this section, though, because she inserts a chapter at the end of the book that questions the validity of her happiness as a newly thin person and by extension the redemptive self-help narrative (277–294). Singer feels profoundly saddened that the world treats her so much better as a thin person, and she feels guilty for still judging fat women (286). Struggling to decide if fat is really so bad, she writes, “thin does not necessarily equal healthy, and zaftig does not necessarily mean unhealthy” but, “on the other hand, obesity can lead to serious medical conditions” (293). Likewise, juicing is not a “moral mandate,” but, about shopping for purslane at the farmer’s market, Singer writes, “I felt particularly virtuous and wholesome.” (223, 228). Most importantly, Singer *wants* to accept fat, but yet cannot stop dieting:

Can I shun fat-phobia and yet write a book detailing my journey of losing weight? Does it make me a hypocrite to get on my soapbox about how we should be kind, tolerant, accepting and embracing of all individuals—regardless of size or species—and then get off my soapbox just in time to request my tofu please be steamed and not fried? Can a formerly fat person like me hold any weight when it comes to size acceptance? (289)

She offers only a contradictory answer: “I am all for body acceptance no matter what our bodies look like, and I think it’s a travesty how fat people and queer people and people of color . . . have been, over the years, expected to feel ‘less than’” (291). It is not OK, however, for Singer *herself* to be fat, because she felt sick and as though she were given the wrong body (294), but “I am,”

she writes, “to tell the truth, somewhat conflicted about this” (292). Understandably, given the culture’s mixed messages about the importance of the body, Singer does not know how to feel. The book’s marketing, however, erases this ambivalence, an ambivalence that could be politicized.



**Figure 19.** Before and after photo. From *Always Too Much and Never Enough* (p. xi), by Jasmine Singer, 2016, New York: Berkley Books. Copyright 2016 by Jasmine Singer.

The marketing of *Always Too Much and Never Enough* depends upon a self-help fantasy in which autonomous agents achieve their ‘true’ bodies and destinies through willpower. On the book’s back cover, Dr. Neal Barnard offers this praise: “Jasmin’s story is an inspiration to create your best self and your best life.” Before the story begins, moreover, the reader finds a before and after picture of Singer. In the former, Singer looks away from the camera, her legs spread out, taking up space; this is a full body shot. In the latter, a close-up, Singer looks directly at the camera, holding her glasses in her hand, connoting sexiness and power. The before and after photo becomes what Sara Ahmed terms a “happy object” because it spreads the (false) promise

of weight loss as a path to happiness. The reader, too, can undertake this journey and overcome her fat body. The memoir's marketing relies on a self-help rhetoric that elides the pain, suffering, and ambivalence found within the pages of Singer's book, pain, suffering, and ambivalence which necessarily will continue after the "after," as Singer works to maintain her weight loss. The before and after photo effaces the work of happiness, a work that never ends.

In some ways, however, Singer challenges the rhetorics of overcoming and casts doubt on the logic of self-help. Her memoir does not actually end at the "after." She reveals the sacrifices and continual upkeep required to attain a slender body. To 'do' her life and maintain her figure, Singer schedules her juice fasts six months ahead of time and makes herself unavailable for socializing during these monthly fasts (243). She knows this regimen "might seem extreme to some," but "it's just what I do" (243). Although portrayed by Singer as a personal choice, one made with her partner "in the wake of a falafel-filled night in San Francisco" (201), juice fasting becomes a 'choice' only because it is authorized by a culture that views fat, especially female fat, as a moral issue—and because, as Singer herself recognizes, she is privileged enough to choose such a solution. She can afford the expensive ingredients, and she has the time it takes to juice. Singer seems to admit that she is not truly the autonomous agent starring in her own self-help story.

Moreover, for most of the book Singer does not constitute a "happy object" but rather what Ahmed calls a "feminist killjoy" (59)—a troublemaker who challenges the accepted script of happiness. Singer shares traumatic memories of being bullied and raped, and she describes in painstaking detail—the kind most Americans go out of their way to avoid—the plight of farm animals. Furthermore, Singer challenges the idea of the heterosexual family as a happy object; she is a lesbian with a partner thirty years older than her (of course, she doesn't reveal the latter

fact until the end of the book). Finally, the careful reader recognizes that Singer's weight loss does not actually lead to happiness, at least not the kind advertised in the before and after photo. She still has days, Singer admits, when she eats too much and feels bad about her sagging skin; "the guilt, the fear, and the despair about my relationship with food" are not gone (326).

Although no scholars would characterize her book as fat-positive, I argue that hers is a voice of ambivalence and therefore resistance; she admits the false promise of the before and after photo.

The book, of course, counters this feminist killjoy affect in several ways. The innocuous cover features an illustrated ice cream cone surrounded by sprinkles. The jacket copy makes no mention of Singer's sexuality or her ambivalence about her weight loss; instead, the publisher strategically emphasizes how Singer "found herself" through juicing, and how the reader will be "transformed" by "the journey." In order to be read, this memoir dresses itself up as a self-help book, a fact attributable not so much to Singer's individual shortcomings but rather to the social situation of the fat memoir and the gendered requirements of selfhood.

### **Trauma as an Authorizing Discourse**

Although different from self-help, trauma provides another authorizing discourse for the fat memoirist for several reasons, beginning with its ubiquity, or to put it another way, its legibility within mainstream culture. Because of what Roger Luckhurst terms "the affective transmissibility of trauma," we find trauma "across virtually every arena of discourse, whether scientific or cultural, professional or amateur, high or low" (119). From psychological studies on trauma to the confessional that is Oprah Winfrey's couch, from Holocaust writing and documentaries about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to Dave Pelzer's best-selling series of books about childhood abuse *A Child Called It*, trauma narratives abound. In fact, on Amazon, sixteen of the top twenty bestselling books under the category "Western U.S. Biographies" are trauma



stories—and Pelzer wrote four of them! (“Amazon Best Sellers”). The memoir genre itself, at least since the 1990s, has constituted a trauma discourse (Gilmore 2). Not surprisingly, then, fat memoirs appropriate trauma discourse, as well.

To speak of trauma as a single discourse, however, is misleading; no single field stakes a definitive claim on this slippery and contested term (Luckhurst 4). For example, does trauma discourse point to the impossibility of narrative, or does trauma discourse seek to reconstitute the shattered self through narrative? Trauma studies scholars disagree on the answer. Moreover, debates about the physical versus mental aspects of trauma have shaped its history (Luckhurst 34 - 49). Is trauma a physical, neurological disease, or is it psychological in nature? Arguments about trauma parallel arguments about fat—is the obese body a physical disease or a problem in the mind? For the most part, popular culture frames both fat and trauma as individual issues, yet both remain contested sites where the body and mind intertwine in an impenetrable knot.

At its core, trauma is the notion popularized by Sigmund Freud that a traumatic event can cause belated symptoms, as the sufferer deals with the trauma but can only do so indirectly and subconsciously (Freud 98-100). What makes trauma credible depends on the nature of the traumatizing experience. Traditionally masculine experiences of war or the concentration camps of the Holocaust offer seminal examples of trauma as an event outside the realm of ‘usual’ experience. In 1992, feminist psychiatrist Judith Herman sought to expand this definition of trauma to encompass ‘everyday’ experiences, such as sexual and child abuse, and therefore widen trauma’s umbrella to include women’s experiences in a patriarchal society. In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Power*, Herman defines a traumatic event not by its rarity or extraordinariness but rather by its ability to overwhelm a person and take over her life, as if the past continually intrudes on the present,

producing traumatic symptoms that “take on a life of their own” (34). Symptoms of trauma include *hyperarousal*, or the feeling of always being alert for danger, *intrusion*, or the re-living of the event long after it is over via flashbacks or traumatic dreams, and *constriction*, or numbing and disassociating with the event (33-47). Codified in the definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, these symptoms are an important and authoritative facet of trauma discourse, which the fat memoirist can draw upon to make sense of her experience in a way others would recognize.

Far from monolithic, trauma discourse nevertheless draws on a well-established narrative tropes, such as fragments. Literary scholars Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman develop an aesthetics of trauma that privileges aporias, gaps, fragments, repetition, and non-linearity. For these scholars, art mimics the experience of trauma by representing trauma as a breakdown of knowledge; art about trauma, then, elides resolution. For instance, Felman defines testimony as a discursive practice and speech act, one performed, it seems, only in reference to events beyond comprehension:

Testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (5)

The quintessential event “in excess of our frames of reference” is the Holocaust. Felman analyzes the poetry of Holocaust survivor, Paul Celan, and concludes that Celan gives testimony to this “historic cataclysm” by writing poetry that “dislocate[s] its own language and . . . break[s] its own verse” (25). In other words, Celan’s poetry resists narrative closure, and by doing so, accurately represents the Holocaust. Likewise, for Caruth, trauma resists narrative because trauma holds inside it a paradox: “*the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility*” (153). Trauma, she writes, “defies simple comprehension,” and in the act of verbalizing it, a

traumatic memory “may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall” (153). For these two scholars, only an aesthetics that plays with narrative form can give voice to trauma. The “right” and credible way to tell a trauma story, at least for Caruth and Felman, is through an anti-narrative narrative—a form well established in Holocaust stories and therefore readily available as an authorizing device.

The fat memoirist who appropriates trauma discourse represents herself as a liberal individual, seeking freedom and emancipation from her past. In trauma discourse, though, the rhetoric of willpower recedes and the rhetoric of choice comes forward. The survivor cannot overcome trauma through willpower, and she can’t change the past, but she can choose to testify, meaning that she can share her story publically. Professor of psychiatry Steven Weiner observes that our culture treats testimony with “reverential attitudes” because it “possesses qualities of emotional intensity, authenticity, morality, and diversity that may be wanting in other parts of the culture” (150). To testify is a special and political act outside of ‘normal’ storytelling. As Lynne Segal explains, “the fundamental threat, or exhilarating promise, which feminism offers those it ignites is that of transgressing the boundaries between public and private” (21). Testifying promises a feeling of empowerment and the possibility of social change, both associated with the women’s movement of the 1970s. The term “testimonio” makes explicit the connection between personal narratives and social change. John Beverly explains:

*Testimonio* represents an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle (103).

As a marginalized person, testifying about social problems experienced personally, such as rape, can be read by the larger culture as a courageous and civic act, the act of an autonomous and free individual.

On the other hand, testifying might de-authorize the fat memoirist. Testimony is highly gendered, and women's testimony is more often discredited and doubted (Gilmore 88). Though readers of memoir continue to consume and respond emotionally to trauma narratives, book critics and other literary gatekeepers disparage the trauma trend. Drawing on the insights of Ralph Savarese, Luckhurst notes that "objections to the narcissism of the 'misery memoir' begin to appear only once so-called 'minorities' begin to use the memoir form as a political device" (Luckhurst 124). Likewise, Leigh Gilmore argues that neoliberalism (what I refer to as self-help discourse) displaced the testimonies of women and minorities, who drew too much attention to the material conditions of their lives in a racist, sexist, and homophobic society. Weine acknowledges that testimony exists not in a vacuum but in relation to its particular cultural contexts, which mediate the forms testimony takes and the ways it is received by an audience. Many people are involved in and manipulating testimony, so that the relationship between testimony, authenticity, and social change remains fraught and extremely complex (Weine 147-153). Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, in fact, understands trauma not as an individual experience at all but rather as a social construction negotiated by and for the benefit of groups (13, 18). In other words, trauma is not an ontological phenomenon.

I argue, nevertheless, that trauma discourse offers an authorizing device for the fat memoirist because of its ubiquity, its association with 'expert' knowledge, the masculinity of war and other traditionally traumatic experiences, and the ready-made and easily recognizable narrative tropes of trauma. In Foucault's terms, testimony is a compelled confession and a form of self-disciplining that creates a space for experts and social institutions to assert power (58-61). Yet it is precisely Foucault's understanding of the neo-confession that gives trauma its authority as a discourse. The truth of trauma has already been produced. As I will show in the next section,

the fat memoirist can latch onto this truth as a way of explaining her embodiment in a society where people demand answers about the fat, female body.

### **Case Study #3: The Fat-Negative Memoir**

*“People see bodies like mine and make their assumptions. They think they know the why of my body. They do not” (Gay 5).*

Roxanne Gay, cultural critic and author of the bestselling book of essays, *Bad Feminist*, published the long-awaited *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* in 2017. Like other fat memoirs, *Hunger* tells the story of weight gain; the narrator transforms from a size 8 to a size 42. Gay, who identifies as a queer, Haitian American, grew up in Nebraska in an upper-middle class family. After a group of boys raped her in the woods when she was twelve, Gay “ate and ate and ate in the hopes that if [she] made herself big, [her] body would become safe” (21). In other words, Gay’s fat body originated with the rape. About the cleaving of a life, *Hunger* explores the messy aftermath of trauma. To her parents’ confusion, Gay gained 120 pounds in high school. In the middle of her junior year at Yale, Gay disappeared and traveled the country, often to meet in person lovers she first connected with online. Eventually Gay found success and notoriety as a writer, but, after thirty years, she thinks about her rapist daily, and she has yet to make peace with her body, which, at its heaviest, weighed 577 pounds (291, 23).

Like Lindy West’s memoir, Gay’s book also offers a feminist critique; she writes about the obesity epidemic, reality weight loss TV shows, Weight Watchers commercials, capitalism, the impossible beauty standards for women, and what she refers to as the weight-loss industrial complex. Whereas *Shrill* uses humor to disarm its feminism and intellect, *Hunger* uses trauma. The black and white cover of *Hunger* features a close-up photograph of a fork, each tong discernible and each casting a long shadow over the title letters. This ominous and stark cover

foregrounds the violent side of hunger, with the fork denoting a weapon. The book jacket copy likewise lures potential readers by presenting “the devastating act of violence that was a turning point in [Gay’s] young life” as a secret to be discovered.

In fact, every single aspect of the book’s marketing reinforces *Hunger* as emotional and personal. The subtitle for the book is “a memoir of (my) body.” The first phrase of the book jacket copy reads “in this intimate and searing memoir.” Readers go on to learn that Gay “casts an insightful and critical eye” not on society but “over her childhood, teens, and twenties” and that this book “is a deeply personal memoir.” Gay is deviant in her body size, gender, race, and sexuality, but the marketing of the book emphasizes her “wrenching past,” “wisdom,” and “bravery.” These strategic choices suggest the gendered nature of the memoir genre.

Gay defends her fat embodiment—that is, Gay authorizes herself to speak publically as a fat woman—not by accepting her body as beautiful (West) nor by successfully transforming it (Singer), but rather by attributing fat to trauma. The overwhelming majority of fat memoirs include a cause, or what I term an “origin story” about why the author became fat, but unlike origin stories in other fat memoirs, Gay’s origin story relies explicitly on the concept of trauma: she claims that the rape (the traumatic event) made her fat (the symptom). She reveals her secret within the first few pages: “some boys had destroyed me, and I barely survived it. I knew I wouldn’t be able to endure another such violation, and so I ate because I thought if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away” (13). In other words, trauma caused her embodiment; “trauma,” Gay says, “compelled me to create this body” (23). Instead of controlling the body through willpower, Gay gives up some control by framing her body as “marked” by trauma (20). After the rape, she writes, “my course was set” and “the past is written on my body” (41, 246).

Like the so-called obesity gene, one could interpret trauma as a discourse that at least partially absolves Gay of her fatness, making her a more likely heroine.

Gay adopts the trauma discourse in several ways. First, she exhibits in the book the hallmark symptoms of trauma. Throughout high school, she writes, “mostly, I was numb. . . I was trying to forget what happened to me. I was trying to stop feeling those boys on and in my skin” (64). Although trauma psychologist Judith Herman mentions alcohol and drugs as numbing agents, Gay eats to achieve numbness: “I was broken,” Gay writes, “and to numb the pain of that brokenness, I ate and ate and ate” (22). Gay also experiences intrusion. She writes, “I slept less and less because when I closed my eyes, I could feel boy bodies crushing my girl body” (82). Even after thirty years, she is still not free of the rape (40):

I am still haunted. I still have flashbacks that are trigged by the most unexpected things. I don’t like being touched by people with whom I do not share specific kinds of intimacy. I am suspicious of groups of men, particularly when I am alone. I have nightmares, though with far less frequency. I will never forgive the boys who raped me (32).

As the quote demonstrates, Gay suffers hyperarousal around men and strangers who try to touch her. Gay’s ambivalence about her sexuality also relates to hyperarousal. She writes, “saying I was gay wasn’t true, but it wasn’t a lie . . . I was terrified of men . . . I wanted to do everything in my power to remove the possibility of being with men” (236). Being with women, then, helped Gay avoid the hyperarousal she felt around men. Gay mentions *The Courage to Heal*, a handbook for sexual abuse survivors that “gave me a vocabulary for what I had been through,” she writes (70). Gay explains and makes public sense of her identity through a framework readily available to her: trauma.

In playing with narrative form, Gay’s book appropriates literary tropes suggestive of trauma. Sometimes poetic and sometimes an essayistic critique of the larger fat-hating culture, the book consists of numbered fragments, ranging in length from a paragraph to ten pages. For

instance, fragment number five reads in its totality: “what you need to know is that my life is split in two, cleaved not so neatly. There is the before and the after. Before I gained weight. After I gained weight. Before I was raped. After I was raped” (14). *Hunger* rejects a traditional narrative plot of a beginning, middle, and end, in favor of simply a before and an after. This version of before and after eschews the triumphant narrative of the weight loss makeover because trauma does not pretend to end happily ever after. Moreover, because fragment number five is so short, the majority of the page it appears on is blank. The blank space suggests silence, or the inability for words to adequately convey how the rape ripped Gay’s life apart. Trauma resists narrative, according to Caruth and Felman, and Gay’s work fits within this established aesthetic. In other words, Gay employs a set of discursive tropes that have come to represent trauma—she writes the ‘right’ trauma story in the ‘right’ ways.

In addition to its structure, *Hunger* enacts trauma through its repetitiveness. The rape returns again and again throughout the book, as if against Gay’s will. Caruth offers that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (5). Certainly, Gay’s writing reflects such an unwelcome possession; Gay references the rape in nearly every single fragment. The ceaseless repetition conveys the intrusive nature of trauma. She writes, “I wish I could bury that story . . . but it has been thirty years and, inexplicably, I am still not free of it” (40). Gay repeats herself on a sentence level also, which connotes an obsessive repetitiveness, a stalling, an inability to move forward. For example, in fragment eight, she writes, “I ate and ate and ate” because “I was broken.” Fragment nine repeats the same statement: “I was broken . . . I ate and ate and ate” (22). Note also the rhythm of the following excerpt: “My body was nothing. My body was a thing to be used. My body was repulsive and therefore deserved to be treated as such. I did not deserve to be desired. I did not deserve to be loved” (241). Her writing suggests a sort



of trance state, a feeling of being stuck, a circularity. Long after the rape, she continues to be nothing more than a body. Gay writes, “My body is a cage. My body is a cage of my own making. I am still trying to figure my way out of it. I have been trying to figure a way out of it for more than twenty years” (19). Her prose operates by accretion and reads like stops and starts; the reader feels trapped inside it. This is an artistic choice that echoes previous trauma literature.

This prose style suggests Gay’s inability to find any closure, as well as, more generally, the impossibility of knowing, which I interpret as a form of ambivalence about the trauma discourse. Paradoxes abound throughout *Hunger*: “I don’t know how things got out of control, or I do” (13), “I do not know why I turned to food. Or I do” (53), “I wish I knew why [I went back to the boy who raped me]. Or I do know why” (246). The inability to know is a central theme in Gay’s book because she doubts if her stories are true or simply constructions, which may be a defining characteristic of trauma, but it is also a form of ambivalence and hence resistance to dominant authoritative discourses. Herman, for instance, points out that survivors often “tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility” (1). Gay admits, “my memories of the after are scattered, fragmentary” and while looking at photos of herself, she writes, “I try to make sense of how I went from the child in these perfect photographed moments to who I am today. I know, precisely, and yet I do not know. . . the why still eludes me” (33). It’s not clear if the “why” refers to the rape, or if the “why” refers to her fat body. Either way, Gay contradicts herself throughout *Hunger*, and she doubts her own explanations. She questions the logic of trauma discourse instead of merely employing it.

In trauma discourse, one earns the credibility of a liberal individual by sharing her story, by going public, by coming ‘out.’ The rhetoric of choice plays a role here because Gay chooses to testify, despite the costs. She explains:

Something terrible happened, and I wish I could leave it at that because as a writer who is also a woman, I don’t want to be defined by the worst thing that has happened to me. I don’t want my personality to be consumed in that way. I don’t want my work to be consumed or defined by this terrible something. At the same time, I don’t want to be silent. I can’t be silent (38).

A radical departure from the weight loss story, the trauma narrative Gay wields nevertheless also speaks to a kind of freedom, not the freedom to mold the body at will but rather a freedom from shame and secrecy. As the book jacket states, *Hunger* “tells a story that hasn’t yet been told but needs to be.” Testimony, not weight loss, authorizes Gay’s story and gives her credibility. Her inability and compulsion to speak—she published essays about the rape, but never told her family about it—reflect what Herman calls “the central dialectic of psychological trauma”: “the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them” (1). Yet Gay accomplishes the task called essential by some and impossible by others: to speak the unspeakable. Writing her memoir, she says, was the most difficult thing she has ever done (303); “my sad stories will always be there. I am going to keep telling them even though I hate having the stories to tell” (251). She appears, then, to sacrifice her comfort and privacy—to do the labor of testifying, a labor demanded especially of women—for the sake of the collective good. She explains: “I hope that by sharing my story, by joining a chorus of women and men who share their stories, too, more people can become appropriately horrified by how much suffering is born of sexual violence” (39). Gay cannot overcome trauma—otherwise, it wouldn’t be trauma—but she can overcome her reluctance to confess it.

Gay is certainly not the first person to explain fat through the lens of trauma—as LeBesco and Braziel point out, a plethora of psychology books in the 1990s linked fat to trauma, thereby creating what these scholars call a traumatized body (5). In a different but related example, feminist and psychotherapist Susie Orbach wrote in 1978 of the fat female body as “a symbolic rejection of the limitation of women’s role,” a response (conscious or not) to living in a patriarchal society (26, 18). Gay’s memoir lends credence to Orbach’s position in ways that would likely disturb fat activists and rightly so. What is at stake in representing the fat body as a traumatized body is that such a representation puts forward a conception of fat that leaves in place the connection between an outer body and inner self; the fat body becomes not a valid form of embodiment but rather a symptom of some deeper, interior struggle (LeBesco and Braziel 3). Although Gay’s memoir looks nothing like the fat-positive memoirs celebrated by scholars, she nevertheless opens up a space for resistance, but she does so through trauma, a discourse that fat studies scholars understandably find problematic.

I argue that Gay appropriates trauma discourse to authorize the publication of her story, to *explain* her embodiment in a culture that demands such explanations (and in a way that resonates with readers as legitimate), yet she does so in a way that presents the fat body as a traumatic body. In my definition of the term, a traumatic body is a body marked, defined, and produced by trauma, a marking that is visible to all by the very nature of its embodiment. Referring to her weight gain, Gay writes: “I did this to myself. This is my fault and my responsibility. This is what I tell myself, though I should not bear the responsibility for this body alone” (16). Though ambivalent, Gay ultimately attributes the trauma of being raped and the concomitant weight gain to a patriarchal society that commits violence against women. She writes:

All too often, what ‘he said’ matters more, so we just swallow the truth. We swallow it, and more often than not, that truth turns rancid. It spreads through the body like an

infection. It becomes depression or addiction or obsession or some other physical manifestation of the silence of what she would have said, needed to say, couldn't say (45).

By bringing together the discourses of trauma, fat, and gender, Gay challenges dominant social narratives about the fat body, which characterize fat as an individual pathology of the body and/or the mind. Instead of an "expression of excess, decadence, and weakness" (Gay 122), the fat body in Gay's formulation reflects the material reality of unequal social relations.

I use the term traumatic instead of traumatized because I mean to draw attention to the ongoing trauma that Gay experiences by virtue of being "super morbidly obese" in a fat-hating world. As Gay explains, "when you're overweight. . . your body is constantly and prominently on display . . . your body is the subject of public discourse . . . the harassment is constant" (121, 268). She is "terrified of other people" and worries about taking up space on public transportation and wouldn't dream of eating potato chips in public (173, 146-147). During an appearance on her book tour for *Bad Feminist*, Gay must find a way to get onto a stage three feet off the ground, with no stairs. After several minutes of trying to hoist herself up (and in front of hundreds of people), another writer manages to pull her onstage. Finally onstage, she sits on her chair, and it cracks. She writes: "I threw up in my mouth, swallowed it, and then did a squat for the next two hours" (265). Alone and ashamed in her hotel room that night, "I sobbed because the world cannot accommodate a body like mine" (266). Even if Gay lost the weight, she would never overcome the trauma of once being fat; it wouldn't go away. In this way, Gay questions thinness as the solution to a traumatic body like hers:

I do not equate thinness with happiness. I could wake up thin tomorrow and I would still carry the same baggage I have been hauling around for almost thirty years. I would still bear the scar tissue of many of those years as a fat person in a cruel world (301).

Gay's story complicates the politics of fat pride—Gay cannot simply overcome trauma (or fat or gender) through willpower and magically feel good about being fat. One discursive set of conventions (trauma) disrupts another (fat). Although framed as a personal story, and in some ways an overcoming story about testifying, ultimately *Hunger* casts doubt on the American ideal of the autonomous individual in ways that fat-positive memoirs do not.

Hers is not a triumphant act of imagination like Lindy West's; Gay cannot overcome her shame, not even through testimony, since people doubt women's testimonies (Gay 247). She cannot overcome her culture, since "I live in a world where the open hatred of fat people is vigorously tolerated and encouraged. I am a product of my environment" (153). She cannot overcome her self-hatred, since she feels a double bind to lose weight and to be a role model for fat women: "I hate that I am letting down so many women when I cannot embrace my body at any size" (148). Gay's ambivalence opens up a space for resistance that does not rely on the rhetorics of overcoming.

## Conclusion

From a glut of documentary films (*Fed Up*, *Super Size Me*, *Fat*, *Sick & Nearly Dead*, to name only a few) to the ever-ballooning diet section at your local Barnes & Noble (*The Obesity Code*, *The Fast Metabolism Diet*, and the perennially popular *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual* by Michael Pollan), Americans consume at a dizzying rate answers to the question of the fat body. The answers offered include bad genes, metabolism, or mothers; an overabundance of cheap and processed foods; the sugar lobby; school lunch programs; the greed and ingenuity of food corporations; food addiction; and various psychological issues, such as fear of male attention. Fat studies scholars—see in particular LeBesco's work on the "obesity gene" and Julie Guthman's

analysis of “foodscape” arguments—provide insightful critiques of causes and pose a different question entirely: who or what does an etiology of fat serve?

I frame my analysis of the fat memoir genre in the context of authorization because it acknowledges the fat memoir as a social negotiation delimited by larger cultural forces. In an effort to implicate all of us in the culture of fat shaming and to create a more inclusive fat politics, I stay away from scholarly conversations that characterize (albeit often inadvertently) fat women as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on their individual level of emancipation. In this way, I undermine a particular version of identity politics that is based on the very self-help discourse that fat studies scholars criticize. To put it another way, I argue that we need to stop equating autonomy with credibility.

The book jacket for *Always Too Much and Never Enough* hails Singer’s memoir as “one woman’s journey to find herself through juicing, veganism, and love, as she went from fat to thin.” Along the way, however, Singer starved herself, ingested dubious laxative teas and herbal fen-phen, spent twenty years dieting through programs such as Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig, and endured one summer of complete abstinence from food, during which her hair fell out. Because it ‘worked,’ however, Singer describes juicing as “a healthy obsession” (226), though it too requires an enormous investment in time and money and produces physical symptoms such as dizzy spells, fatigue, swollen lymph nodes, and having to allow “more time to go from sitting to standing” due to lack of calories (222-225). The point here is not to criticize fat memoirists for a purported contradictory consciousness but to recognize the value of a genre that reveals our cultural assumptions about who can qualify as a liberal self, and the extent we are collectively willing to go to earn that qualification. After losing weight, when looking at photos of her “rounder face and fuller cheeks,” Singer “can’t seem to find [herself] . . . looking back”

(226). Her self *is* her body, only it is a thin body; this is because the self “is always found as close as possible to the normative body” (Paasonen ctd by Kyrola 73). Despite popular belief, authentic bodies are not individual achievements found through introspection or the plastic surgeon’s knife but rather symptoms of a cultural logic that declares certain bodies more moral than others.

Fat—like black, female, or disabled—is a social construction without any prior, ontological meaning, but the social meanings of fat, however contingent, nevertheless affect fat women’s lives in profound ways. As for many fat women, for Roxanne Gay becoming fat meant losing her *self*. Gay laments that her parents harass her about dieting and exercise “as if all I am is my big fat body” (117). Most people in her life “saw my body before they ever saw or considered me” (8). When fat speaks for you, you must find a way to be heard as more than a body. This essay explored the gendered ways that fat memoirists employ the rhetorics of overcoming—willpower, imagination, and choice—in an effort to be taken seriously as liberal individuals. For women, these rhetorics most often revolve around bodies and emotions. Unfortunately, whether they’re fat or thin, “hot” or “not,” sexualized or asexualized, women remain trapped because they are still seen primarily as bodies. In its current formulation, fat positivity often exacerbates instead of solves this problem. Ambivalence about the meaning of fat offers a much-needed standpoint, one too often silenced by the authority ceded to science and medicine and by the pressure within fat acceptance movements to display fat pride. To be heard by the mainstream culture, however, the fat female memoirist must authorize herself. She does so by communicating some version of an overcoming story, packaged in gender-specific ways—a requirement that obscures ambivalence and a requirement that, though fulfilled by some, excludes many others.

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## **APPENDIX 1:**

### **FAIR USE AND PERMISSIONS**

I have included images of tweets in this thesis for the sole purpose of scholarly research and analysis. The tweets I have reproduced consist of very brief statements about how the Twitter user feels—it is unclear if these factual tweets are in fact copyrighted material. Moreover, these tweets were originally posted in a publicly accessible location online (on the free website Twitter.com) for social networking purposes. I, however, reproduce these tweets in an entirely different context, for a different purpose, and for a different audience; I therefore have transformed their use. I employ the tweets for the purpose of making a scholarly argument about cultural attitudes towards femininity, consumption, and body size. My analysis is for nonprofit and research/scholarship purposes and directed toward cultural studies and other scholars. I have reproduced each tweet in its entirety because the image of the hashtag “feelingfat,” and the emoticons, fonts, and photographs attached to these tweets help to convey both the tone and meaning of the tweets, which are crucial to my argument. Finally, my use has no effect whatsoever on the market of these tweets or the market of Twitter.

I have also included two memes in this thesis for the sole purpose of scholarly research and analysis. Although the memes are copyrighted material, they were originally posted in a publicly accessible location online (on the free website someecards.com) for entertainment purposes. I reproduce these memes in an entirely different context, for a different purpose, and for a different audience; I therefore have transformed their use. The two memes were not originally published in tandem. I, however, have joined them together for the scholarly purpose

of illustrating cultural contradictions regarding consumption and self-control. My analysis is for nonprofit and research/scholarship purposes and directed toward cultural studies and other scholars. I have reproduced the memes in their entirety because the images and the text taken together are what supports my argument. Moreover, my use has no effect whatsoever on the market of these memes or the market of someecards.com.

Finally, for the sole purpose of scholarly research and analysis, I have included in this thesis a before and after image originally published in the beginning pages of a memoir. I reproduce this copyrighted image in an entirely different context, for a different purpose, and for a different audience; I therefore have transformed its use. I employ this image for the purpose of making a scholarly argument about the marketing strategy of the memoir and how this strategy speaks to larger cultural ideas about weight loss and self-help. My analysis is for nonprofit and research/scholarship purposes and directed toward cultural studies and other scholars. I have reproduced the image in its entirety because I analyze this image at length in my thesis, and both the before and the after portions of the image are crucial to my argument—they cannot be separated. Moreover, my use has no effect whatsoever on the market of the memoir.