LIVING THE FAT BODY: WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR BODIES AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Beginning from Foucault’s notion that “where there is power, there is resistance,” I uncover how fat people are at any given time accepting, resisting, and/or subverting the oppressive power embedded in social norms surrounding their bodies (95). Each chapter reveals a new layer, a new complication as to how, why, and when individuals are (un)able, (un)willing, and/or (un)certain about how they can and are treating their own and other people’s fat bodies. In my study, I take as a given that behavior is fluid, ever changing, shifting, and in progress. My study demonstrates how media messages are being accepted, resisted, re-appropriated, altered, internalized, and/or ignored by individuals; thus, my study brings focus to the complex relationships fat people have surrounding their subjectivity, their sense of power, agency, and ability to resist, as well as the interplay of the intersections of their social identities, and their sense of embodiment and the performance of their fat body.
For my Mom.
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INTRODUCTION

American culture has a problem with fat bodies, soft bodies, dimpled and rippled bodies, and jiggling bodies. Within our media saturated world, representations of fat bodies are typically negative as scholarship has shown us (cf. Bordo, Wolfe, LeBesco, Farrell). The pervasive negative representations of fat people in popular culture make it clear that they have not consistently been regarded as capable human beings. For my dissertation, I spoke with women and men who identify as overweight or fat and asked them about their experience. These individuals complicated notions of acceptance, resistance, and subversion, as well as notions of internalized oppression. Despite the negative cultural messages, these individuals found various ways to resist and even subvert fat shaming messages. Based on the variety of voices featured in this dissertation *Living the Fat Body* is a complex, difficult, recursive, and ongoing process. Resistance is not easy, nor is resistance static. Resistance does not come without doubt, guilt, or shame. Yet, even in the current fat shaming and fatphobic climate and culture in which we live, the individuals with whom I spoke still found ways to resist hegemonic beauty norms, fat phobic discourses, and behaviors which seek to constrict their lives as fat people.

Beginning from Foucault’s notion in *The History of Sexuality* that “Where there is power, there is resistance…” I uncover how fat people are at any given time accepting, resisting, and/or subverting the oppressive power embedded in social norms surrounding their bodies, specifically how their resistance and subversion is enacted within various power structures (95). The participants’ stories, experiences, and feelings often reveal how they negotiate their resistance within the cultural and social institutional structures of which they are embedded. Resistance happens in relation to power and happens *everywhere* that power exists. Resistance happens in small, individual ways and in larger systematic ways, at varying degrees, times, and instances
It is important to note the complexities of power and resistance as Foucault theorizes. As he posits, resistance must operate within the current power structures, which are all around us and which we are a part of, and that resistance manifests itself in different ways, at different times, and in different spaces (Foucault 95). As my participants disclose their complex experiences and feelings surrounding their relationships with their bodies and popular culture, each chapter reveals a new layer, a new complication as to how, why, and when individuals are (un)able, (un)willing, and/or (un)certain about how they can and are treating their own and other people’s fat bodies. Each person’s experience, as told here, exposes the complexities of acceptance and/or resistance and how, as Foucault asserts, “…the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities…” (96). My dissertation, as a ground-up feminist study, adds a level of experience to Foucault’s theory surrounding power and resistance.

In my study, I take as a given that behavior is fluid, ever changing, shifting, and in progress. My study demonstrates how media messages are being accepted, resisted, re-appropriated, altered, internalized, and/or ignored by individuals; thus, my study brings focus to the complex relationships fat people have surrounding their subjectivity, their sense of power, agency, and ability to resist, as well as the interplay of the intersections of their social identities, and their sense of embodiment and their performance of their fat body.

These stories are powerful and important. These participants let me into their lives. It was not always easy for them to do. For example, the participants may suffer from anxiety, depression, and/or eating disorders/disordered eating and yet they still were open to talking to me about their experiences as fat people. They willingly provided me with stories that reflect their lived realities, experiences, hopes, and fears. Their stories reflect how years of living stigmatized
and oppressed affect them, their sense of self, their relationships, and their ability to love themselves. These individuals, especially the women, often internalize fat shaming messages, and in turn those internalizations have an impact upon many aspects of their lives, including where and what they eat, what they wear, who they spend time with, and their emotional, physical, and mental well-being. In addition, many participants both explicitly and implicitly showcased how deeply embedded their internalized oppression is even when they know and understand where that oppression stems from, and how it is maintained.

It is important to understand the ways in which culture embeds fatphobic messages in our everyday lives, and the ways in which fat hatred is currently operating in our culture. Fatphobic messages influence and shape how we all understand and engage with our bodies.

**Fat Shaming**

I have had people ask me if fat shaming “really happens” or if it is just something that fat people have made up to “excuse their weight.” When I get questions such as this, I find myself trying not to scoff at the notion that fat shaming may not be a “real” thing, or that it is just an excuse to “be fat.” In my experience, it has often been a thin person who poses this question. What they apparently do not know is that fat people like myself frequently receive comments from strangers, family members, partners, teachers, and others. While perhaps often unconscious, these kinds of comments do in fact shame fat people precisely because it suggests a fat person cannot be shamed because their fatness allows/requires shaming for them to lose weight. By asking if fat shaming is “real” it also nullifies and seemingly ignores our experiences and feelings as we move through the world.

My response is to often calmly tell the individual that fat shaming does happen and that while sometimes it is subtle or covert, other times it is explicit. I try to explain that fat shaming is
not just hurtful/hateful words someone might say to a fat person but that it derives from a combination of influences upon on our beliefs discursively constituted and propagated through popular culture, medicine, the government, and even interpersonal family relationships. Through discourse and the social construction of the fat body, women’s fat bodies in particular are constructed as abject, unworthy, gross, disgusting, lazy, undisciplined, and so on.

An example of explicit fat shaming is provided by a 2015 video by Nicole Arbour that went viral called “Dear Fat People.” Her stance on fatness is that fat people are lazy and eat too much. She makes fun of fat people throughout her video, making jokes about our size, and health. In the video, Arbour claims that fat people are physically slow and incapable of running. She states “Some people are already really mad at this video…what are you going to do fat people? Chase me? I can get away from you by walking at a reasonable pace” (“Dear Fat People”). She claims, “Fat shaming is not a thing. Fat people made that up. It’s the race card with no race” (“Dear Fat People”). She continues, “Fat shaming. Who came up with that? That’s fucking brilliant. Yes, shame people who have bad habits until they fucking stop” (“Dear Fat People”). She continues, “If we offend you so much that you lose weight, I’m ok with that” (“Dear Fat People”). She describes a family of fat people she saw in the airport as smelling like sausages, and saying “I don’t think they ate sausages, that’s just their aroma…Crisco was coming out of their pores like a play dough fun factory” (“Dear Fat People”). Then, she brings race into the video saying that genetics plays a part and that, “Fat sassy black women in church dresses are her favorite thing in the world,” thereby stereotyping black women and being fatphobic at the same time (“Dear Fat People”). While perhaps this video is an “extreme” example of fat shaming, it nevertheless exemplifies how fat(ness) is viewed in American culture and stands as proof that fat shaming happens.
One story from an interview participant stood out to me about a fat shaming experience because, while simply trying to eat a meal, she was fat shamed by the waiter and it made her feel terrible in that moment. Abi explains,

I was at a conference in Indianapolis. I've traveled a lot, and I go out a lot on my own and I'm fine going to restaurants alone. I'm a little more introverted and enjoy alone time.

There was a restaurant in Indianapolis that I had heard people talking about that had a great breakfast and brunch. So, the morning I was like I'm going to go have breakfast… I decided to get two things on the menu. I’m at a restaurant that I am not going to be again, and I'm from out of town. They were two breakfast entrees. Something that was a little sweeter and something that was like an egg sandwich. I just felt like the second I ordered it he looked at me like ‘Are you going to eat all that? Do you need that much food?’ I didn't get great service for the rest of the time and at the end, I didn’t eat it all, and he asked me if I'd had enough to eat. That experience in Indianapolis is probably the worst anyone had ever made me feel. That was the most blatant experience I’ve ever had.

People experience fat shaming in various ways, in different contexts, and both implicitly and explicitly. My participants vary in their responses to fat shaming messages, a fact that demonstrates how individuals, of course do have agency. However, how individuals navigate their agency is influenced by their intersecting social identities, including gender. While not everyone does (and/or can) resist fat shaming messages, some do and do so forcefully and without apology, as shown in chapters two and three.

Understanding that fat shaming happens and acknowledging it, recognizing it, and disrupting is only part of the equation. In order to help us grasp the historical, cultural, and social constructions of fat phobia, fat shaming, and fat hatred, it is important to also acknowledge the
ways in which these institutions purposefully shape how we understand and engage with our own and other people’s bodies.

The Sociology of Knowledge

I sink into my big comfortable couch with the remote by my side and a plate of Havarti cheese and buttery crackers. I think to myself, “Finally, I can relax.” I feel as if I have finally found a moment to turn off my brain from thinking about all the things that are happening in my life right now; after all isn’t that what the television is for? I turn on the television and start flipping through the local channels, stopping on Ellen. As I sink further into the couch, letting the noise and glow of the television wash over me, I think back to when Ellen DeGeneres was on the cover of Time magazine with the huge tagline “Yep, I’m gay,” and how I found it odd at the tender age of 13 that being gay was seemingly a big deal. As she begins to dance in her now very successful talk show I begin munching on my soft, creamy Havarti cheese and crisp buttery crackers. I slide deeper and deeper into the couch, and become immersed in Ellen. Suddenly, as I begin to drift off during a commercial, I am snapped back into reality when I hear Marie Osmond’s striking feminine voice commenting on how unflattering a fat person might look in a black dress. She says, “We all want that little black dress moment. That look good, feel good moment. But when you’re overweight it’s more like, “Little black dress? I don’t even want to get dressed. I’m tired, my knees hurt, I’m not going up those stairs again…” moment. You know what I’m saying? I’m Marie Osmond and I lost fifty pounds on NutriSystem.” For what feels like an eternity she looks me dead in the eye and talks about how we must be miserable and in pain at all times and how NutriSystem can give us our life back.

While grumbling under my breath at the fat shaming happening during this commercial, and eating another piece of cheese, I look up only to see a Hardee’s commercial for their “All-
American burger” which is described as a thick cheeseburger, with a hot dog on it, topped with potato chips, and served with all the fixings. By this point I am outraged. How are people supposed to make sense of these conflicting messages? I am yelling at the television while my dogs tilt their heads back and forth trying to discern to whom I am talking and why I am so angry. All I can do is close my eyes and think, “I hope my study can make a difference for someone who cannot make sense of these messages, and that the dissertation provides a space where voices of individuals can be heard.” It is at this moment, along with a combination of hundreds of other ongoing quotidian moments, that I realize a threefold understanding of what my participants reveal collectively despite their many differences and the uniqueness of their experiences: their bodies are constrained; they are cautious; they desire change.

When we think about the ways in which we as a culture treat, understand, and engage with the fat body, whether that engagement is with our own or someone else’s fat body, it appears that stigmatizing the fat body and viewing it in a negative way (unhealthy, lazy, etc.) is taken for granted as justifiable. However, as Berger and Luckmann point out in their germinal text, The Social Construction of Reality, ideology is “…the understanding that no human thought is immune to the ideologizing influences of its social context” (9). In other words, the ideology of the thin body as the moral body, the clean body, the best body seems natural to many of us because for most people that way of thinking about the fat and thin body is all they have ever known.

It goes without saying, our world is socially constructed. In view of this, in this dissertation I consider how these individuals who participated in my study understand their lives within a socially constructed world that has situated fat(ness) as marginalized within a bifurcated system of domination/oppression. As Berger and Luckmann state “…commonsense ‘knowledge’
rather than ‘ideas’ must be the central force for the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this ‘knowledge’ that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist” (15). While discussions surrounding the medicalization of fat, social inequalities associated with fatness and the fat body, embodiment, and stigma have been discussed within Fat Studies, an intricate combination of social identities, media affect, embodiment, corporeality participation in and resistance to cultural messages about bodies has not been fully explored through ethnographic methods, such as qualitative interviewing. What is not hitherto available in existing scholarship is a ground-up study that accounts for people’s experiences, and as such, a very important source of information has been ignored and effectively marginalizes the very people for whom the stakes are greatest.

In this dissertation, the voices of people who live as “fat” persons are brought to the page so that their experiences can support, contest, and collide with contemporary scholarly conversations about the fat body. By using qualitative interviewing, and survey data,¹ I examine the different perspectives of how fat people live in this world, people who encounter images in the media – and other larger cultural institutions such as family and medicine – that can (or perhaps could) affect their sense of self and their agency in the world. My study originates from the ground up by putting focus on people’s experiences to discover how individuals resist and/or subscribe to cultural norms surrounding body size, and how individuals seek and perform agency in their lives concerning their bodies with, and/or against, pre-determined cultural scripts. The voices from the interviews and surveys, as well as my own, serve as the basis for the study, and help me debunk problematic conceptions, and enable me to reconfigure how individuals engage with images and representations of the fat body within (and perhaps outside of) popular culture.

¹ A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A
While there are several macro-level studies/analyses including discourse and historical analysis about how the media and the medicalization of fat has historically, and presently, had an impact upon bodies and (re)producing a fatphobic culture (cf. Farrell, Schwartz) my work distinguishes itself from these studies by providing a smaller, more intimate, micro-level analysis through interviews that inquire about how fat people engage with, respond to, are shaped by, and embody different forms of popular culture. My aim is to raise additional awareness of and thereby decrease fat shaming on a larger cultural level. In this study, I endeavor to break down binaries that have been used in the past and showcase the fluidity and complex ways in which people engage with culture and their own bodies, and to showcase just how pervasive fatphobic attitudes and behaviors are, as well as the ways in which individuals experience and grapple with internalized oppression.2

Literature Review

Fat Studies scholars, along with cultural studies scholars, sociologists, and the like understand how influential various elements of culture can be on our bodies and how we feel about them, how others feel about them, and how we understand how our bodies are to be in the world. When thinking about individuals’ histories and experiences with their bodies, I believe it is important to first understand the heavy influence culture has on our bodies, both in shaping how we understand/view our body and its size, shape, and/or weight, and also how culture seeks to shape our bodies into something smaller, thinner, and sleeker through various products.

2 Using Griffin’s working definition of internalized oppression is useful here when considering the various levels of oppression including oppression at the individual, group, and systematic level. “Internalized oppression is a concept currently widely used across a variety of disciplines and critical projects, including contemporary critical pedagogy…to describe and explain the experience of those who are members of subordinated, marginalized, or minority groups; those who are powerless and often victimized, both intentionally and unintentionally, by members of dominant groups; and those who have “adopted the [dominant] group’s ideology and accept their subordinate status as deserved, natural, and inevitable” (Griffin, 76).
Cultural Studies

Scholars such as Hillel Schwartz, Peter Stearns, and Sander Gilman discuss the historical and cultural “creation” of fat as stigma. Schwartz covers the history of dieting while Stearns traces the history of fat, both medically and culturally in the West and France. Gilman on the other hand equates the demonization of fat with various cultural aspects, including (mainly) our relationship to and fear of food that arose from food borne illnesses such as swine flu, and avian flu. In addition, according to Gilman, there is a race/ethnicity element because these diseases are “exotic” and “come from” different (Eastern) lands.

Hegemonic discourses, like the ones put forth by popular culture about bodies, convince people that behaviors are innate, natural, and/or common sense. Judith Butler’s article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” discusses these normalized behaviors, such as performing gender (femininity/masculinity), as performative, explaining that the social construction of gender is performative in that through repetition people begin to regard gender as “natural” and innate rather than socially constructed (519). While Butler recognizes the power of the social construction of gender, she also recognizes that individuals have agency concerning whether or not they choose to remain inside these socially constructed boundaries (521).

In a similar vein to Butler, John Storey analyzes post-Marxist cultural theory, by recognizing the powerful agendas set by culture (including popular culture), and yet recognizes that people are not cultural dupes. Storey states,

…dominant ways of making the world meaningful, produced by those with the power to make their meanings circulate in the world, can generate “hegemonic discourses”, which may come to assume an authority over the ways in which we see, think, communicate, and act in the world and becomes the “common sense” which directs our actions or
become that against which our actions are directed. However, although post-Marxist
cultural studies recognize that the culture industries are a site of major ideological
production, constructing powerful images, descriptions, definitions, frames of reference
for understanding the world, it rejects the view that “the people” who consume these
productions are “cultural dupes,” victims of an up-dated form of the opium of the people
(90).³

Because we are not “cultural dupes,” it is important to hear the stories and experiences of people,
people who engage with messages about communication, actions, and behaviors, in order to
understand, if they are not swallowing the messages whole, how they are engaging with them.

There are long cultural, medical, economic, political, and social history that have helped
to shape not only behavior and how individuals are supposed to act, but cultural and social
constructions have also shaped how individuals perform their gendered and raced body. While
the social construction of gender has been discussed by many feminist theorists (c.f., Butler,
Connell, Zimmerman and West), Susan Bordo positions the body at the center of that argument.
She states,

…the “direct grip” culture has on our bodies, through practices and bodily habits of
everyday life…Through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is “inner” and
what is “outer,” which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or
inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body can be
claimed, and so on (16).

³ Originally, Anthony Giddens used the term “cultural dopes,” in 1979 not dupes in his work and Storey,
using a similar phrase, may be referencing this.
People receive messages about their bodies on a regular basis when they watch television, watch a movie, scroll through Facebook, read comic books, watch music videos, and so on. These messages we encounter seek to shape and discipline our bodies into what is referred to as the mythical norm (Shaw). We learn and understand that to violate the constructed norms concerning body size, shape, and/or weight have real consequences. These consequences range from bullying and ridicule, to internalized feelings of shame (Giovanelli and Ostertag 290).

Giovanelli and Ostertag theorize that docile bodies, bodies that are created in part through internalized notions of constant surveillance, are created by the media in two ways. The first way is through quantity, and the second way is through quality. They theorize,

…the media serve as a cosmetic panopticon by suggesting both the value of women’s body size in the United States and how viewers are to feel and act according to body size.

Women do indeed resist and reject these discourses, yet their ubiquitous and incessant nature creates an unyielding tide against which women must constantly swim (original emphasis 290).

Giovanelli and Ostertag’s study analyzes representations of women in media, both qualitatively and quantitively. In the study, they recognize the deeply rooted messages that dictate how people feel about represented bodies and also dictate how people are to feel about our own bodies. My study differs from theirs in that I speak to women about what those messages mean to them, how those messages affect their sense of self, and how those messages make them feel about their own and other’s bodies. I have also interviewed a few men as their perspective augments my

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4 Foucault uses this term in his germinal text *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault suggests that docile bodies arise in part through manipulation (136). He continues stating “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (136).
discussion on gendered experiences. As Giovanelli and Ostertag point out, people resist these discourses, but it is a battle to do so.

The Sociology of the Body

The social construction of our bodies, sexual orientations, genders, races, and so on happen in part through the policing and surveillance of others, and through self-surveillance. Recognizing that power is not linear, Susan Bordo summarizes Foucauldian notions of power stating, “Where power works ‘from below,’ prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity. . .are maintained, not chiefly through physical restraint and coercion, but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms” (27). Not only do individuals often surveil other people’s bodies, as well as their own, they evaluate whether or not people are “doing” their bodies “right” (thereby reinscribing an oppositional binary of right/wrong). Because for women the thin body is the norm (and more increasingly this is true for men as well), fat women often think they should constantly be striving toward that norm, not necessarily through any particular means, but because women have been convinced that the thin body is the best body. To acquire and have the best body (i.e., the thin body) is to have the “right” body. The cultural messages women receive concerning their bodies, the “right,” and “best,” body all help to constitute hegemonic discourses around the “ideal body” (Sobal and Maurer) and also reproduce oppositional binaries of thin/fat for women or muscular/strong for men, right/wrong, acceptable/unacceptable which oversimplify why someone might be fat, or why someone might be thin.

The voices of fat women have remained largely silent and/or ignored and marginalized by scholars regarding how they feel about the representations of fat women in popular culture. When marginalized voices are given space to be heard, what can be revealed are more complex ways of understanding not only how limited the current portrayals of fat women in popular
The fat body has a long social and cultural history and it is important when considering social constructions of the body to map out how the body, in particular women’s bodies, have been viewed, and shaped through various institutions. In *Fat Shame* Amy Farrell explores the cultural constructions of the fat uncivilized body in the early 20th century by examining the widening cultural, economic, social, and political gap between white people and marginalized people including the poor, women, and people of color. She examines cultural products including physicians’ pamphlets and political cartoons to show the ways in which the fat (black; poor; female) body has been constructed as abhorrent and uncivilized alongside the thin, slender white body. The cultural message is clear: to be thin is to be morally sound.

The idea of a moral body functions as a regulating discourse. How this concept functions were emphasized by one of my participants, Stella, a professor in her late 40s. She spoke about how her family sees her weight as a moral issue. In particular Stella told a story about her mother-in-law and how the mother-in-law lost a significant amount of weight and then equated it to being an inherently better person. Stella said,

Kind of like my mother-in-law was just visiting who is also weight obsessed by the way, who said to me at one point ‘You're going to be so proud of me.’ I was like ‘Oh? What did you do?’ She said ‘I am now down to a size 8!’ and I held my tongue and later texted my friend and said ‘So what? That is morally better?’ What does that say?! That's just ridiculous. So I had to hear about how she gave away her size 10s because now she is a size 8.

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5 Pseudonym for interviewee.
Stella felt like her mother in law was saying these things because she understood that by losing weight and dropping down to a size 8, she was morally superior. For Stella it is not an abstract concept that people in her life feel she should be “proud” of them for losing weight and Stella, as showcased by her text to her friend later, personally feels they are conveying that they are somehow more morally better. Bodies are hierarchized. Samantha Murray, a researcher in the Gendered Violence Research Network at the University of New South Wales in Australia, furthers Eve Sedgwick’s argument surrounding the sociology of knowledge stating,

…Sedgwick suggests that our culture relies on discursive constructs as systems of knowledge that are deployed constantly as “truths,” ideas that have become naturalized.

We are only able to understand our interaction with others, and with the world, through this “lore” of knowledge that enables us to locate ourselves within a social framework and to hierarchize ourselves accordingly. In this way, we are aware of a negative discourse around fatness circulating in Western societies (266).

Linking morality and thinness has sprung from a variety of discourses and institutions. In American Fat Studies, scholar Samantha Murray’s book, The “Fat” Female Body, discusses how through medicalized discourses and the medical institutions themselves, pathologizing the fat body has become commonplace and has also reinforced the linkage of morality and thinness. Murray states,

The moral undergirding of public health campaigns and discourses is demonstrated here, demonstrating the tactic assumption that a “healthy,” “slender” role model embodies morality and an ethical lifestyle thus relegating “obese” subject to the position of immoral, irresponsible citizens (30).
We fat women encounter messages such as this not only in our daily lives – messages that convince us that thin women are morally, inherently, better than fat people – but also, we encounter them within popular culture on a regular basis. To be thin means individuals are disciplined as it is assumed they exercise and “take care of” their body, where to be fat is assumed to be lazy, undisciplined, and uncaring of one’s body. In short, we are seen to be morally inferior because we are fat.

Jeffery Sobal and Donna Maurer edited a sociological anthology on weight called *Weighty Issues: Fatness and Thinness as Social Problems* where they map out four distinct areas of how fatness and thinness have been socially constructed. They point to historical foundations, medical models, gendered dimensions, institutions, and social movements such as the size acceptance movement. They question when and how weight, once considered a personal issue, became a social problem, and the multifaceted cultural elements that have helped to shape weight as such. Using a social constructionist approach, Sobal and Maurer recognize the subjective nature of constructionism, and attempt to analyze fatness and thinness from a perspective that does not favor, or subscribe to supposedly objective standpoints. Seeking to help explain the pathology of the fat body through institutions such as the diet industry, and how the body is now surveilled and policed, the authors approach the construction of fatness in a multifaceted way. Their work helps me explain how the body has been shaped historically and how fat shifted from a personal issue to a cultural/social one. Furthermore, this text brings focus to how institutions significantly shape and discipline the body.

*Feminist Scholarship*

Feminist scholarship has engaged with issues of the body, including the social construction of the gendered, raced, and fat body, and hegemonic beauty standards for decades
(cf. Butler, Braziel, Lorber). While understanding the deeply embedded cultural and social messages surrounding gender and body size is important (cf. Bordo, LeBesco, Fallon, Katzman, and Wooley) as well as theorizing about what popular culture does to us, it is also important to ask what are we doing with popular culture? As LeBesco states in Bodies Out of Bounds “We must explore how people understand themselves through their shifting, fabricated locations, tolerating their changes in identity as they cross borders to know and create themselves in acts of affirmation and resistance” (“Queering Fat Bodies/Politics” 84).

Current discourse has the effect of making people continuously question their size, shape, and weight (cf. LeBesco, Wolf, Gimlin, Grogan, Stearns, Schwartz, Bordo, Braziel and LeBesco). For example, a still very popular commonplace that has been around for almost a century (cf. Schwartz) is that there is a thin person trapped in every fat body. Fat bodies have almost always had a place in popular culture, however representations typically usher in feelings of disgust, rage, or the abject (cf. Sukator in Bodies out of Bounds). In Naomi Wolf’s work, The Beauty Myth, she theorizes that in the 20th century beauty evolved into a powerful and sophisticated institution. Wolf moves through issues of work, culture, religion, sex, hunger, and violence to discuss how images of beauty are used to repress and oppress women. In her chapter entitled “Hunger” Wolf states “…women feel guilty about female fat, because we implicitly recognize that under the myth, women’s bodies are not our own but society’s and that thinness is not a private aesthetic, but hunger a social obsession about female obedience” (187). Wolf recognizes the larger social and cultural implications concerning women, their power (or lack thereof), and how women are valued and legitimized in Western culture only through their beauty. Wolf claims, “It [the beauty myth] is actually composed of emotional distance, politics,
finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power” (13).

Fat Studies

The body and the myriad socio-cultural issues pertaining to it has been and remain the subject of widespread scholarly interest. For example, Foucault explores the disciplining of the body, and Feminist scholars have long discussed subjectivity and women’s bodies. Both Sociology and Cultural Studies have discussed embodiment and the detrimental side-effects of popular culture’s shaping of the body including hyper-thinness, and other hegemonic beauty norms that range from hair length to breast size. One discipline, Fat Studies, has dedicated itself to the study of the fat body. Fat Studies, as a discipline, is a relatively young discipline that it is only about ten to fifteen years old. Taking its cues from Marxist theory, Feminist theory, Cultural Studies, and Sociology, Fat Studies entails interdisciplinary scholarship that explores the intersections of not only social identities including gender, sexual orientation, class, race/ethnicity, and ability, but also explores intersections of politics, medicine, economics, society, and culture. Fat studies as a discipline explores why fat shaming occurs, and attempts to unravel the deeply embedded stigmas that surround fat, the fat body, and fat identity, and to expose the ways in which fat shaming is used to discriminate against individuals. Fat Studies critically examines cultural artifacts to unpack why and how fat has become stigmatized. Currently the literature argues for a variety of different solutions, if any are presented, to help reduce fat shaming. These suggested solutions include more diverse representations of fat people, and critical analyses of fat – including the medicalization of fat, debunking myths surrounding health and weight, and the political and economic implications of false correlations,
causes, and statistics – as well as a focus on how thin privilege works and the detrimental effects it has on everyone.

While historical and contemporary cultural constructions of fat have been analyzed, other scholars, such as Amy Farrell, examine how intersecting identities including race, class, and gender both govern and continually shape normative body standards. In her book *Fat Shame* Farrell examines how fat shaming arose out of the early 20th century due to not only concerns about excess and consumption, but also coincided with concerns about civilization, race, and evolution. These “concerns” helped to fuel fat as stigma, and (re)produce a new way of solidifying the civilized/uncivilized binary between white people and people of color, poor people, and women. Using a variety of primary sources, Farrell examines cultural artifacts from political cartoons, to postcards, to physicians’ manuals to show links between obesity, weight, and fatness in the 20th century and how they have informed our contemporary thoughts on the fat body, excess and consumption, and obesity.

Fat Studies scholarship not only covers a wide range of disciplines, it explores a myriad of types of fat bodies. One of the most important scholastic texts within the discipline of Fat Studies is *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco. *Bodies Out of Bounds* is an anthology that explores the fat subjectivities of the authors, representations of fat people, the intersections of nationality, gender, and sexuality, corpulence and performativity, and fat as carnivalesque and grotesque. It is modeled after Pater Stallybrass and Allon White’s work in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Braziel and LeBesco ask questions such as “How can we transcend the restrictive constructions of corpulence within discourses – medical, psychological, and capitalistic – that have accumulated around the site of the “fat body” ...and “How are these discourses deployed in order to contain fat bodies, fat
people?” (Braziel and LeBesco 1). Braziel and LeBesco engage with discourses that would otherwise render the fat body invisible and thereby position the fat body as “...seen, rather than unsightly” (1). Seeing the fat body as something that has been pathologized and problematized, Braziel and LeBesco bring together scholarship on the discursive productions of fatness and how bodies can (and do) transgress and transcend a seemingly endless parade of opposition. My study has benefitted from this text because it charts agency and resistance on the part of fat people.

It’s clear Foucault’s work has been extremely influential amongst feminist scholars and for good reason; his meditations on discipline, power, sexuality and subjectivity are particularly pertinent to feminist analysis.” (King 29). Foucault’s work, which has been deeply influential in various disciplines including feminist scholarship and Fat Studies (cf. Hetrick and Attig, Huff), explores the genealogy of the body as well as how the body is both biologically and historically constructed, resisting binaries of biological determinism, and social constructions and is thereby relevant when considering the fat body. As Foucault suggests, in modernity medicalized discourse is far more likely to be found which (re)produces ideologies of the self-disciplining body, similar to the personal choice/responsibility frame, which includes new phrases such as “eating right” and “healthy lifestyle” versus “diet”. Foucauldian approaches to the body help me unpack meanings that my participants apply to institutions and to concepts surrounding “health” and medicalized discourse.

One of, if not the most prominent current academic text in Fat Studies is the *Fat Studies Reader*. The scholars in this anthology analyze the fat body and fat(ness) from multiple angles including historical constructions, medical models, representations within popular culture and literature, fatness as a social inequality, and the embodiment of fat. Collectively the volume also has an activist intention, as at the end of the book there is a call to action to start a
revolution. Moving through the historical and social constructions that have shaped what fat means, the essays in the *Fat Studies Reader* engage with issues affecting the fat body including physical spaces – such as airplanes and classrooms – inequality in the workplace, fat queer zines, representations of fat women on television, and performance art by fat women (5-7). This reader helps render Fat Studies as a discipline and to thereby shore up the omission of the fat body from disciplines including Sociology, Cultural Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, English, and Post-Colonial Studies. While these disciplines have considered many social identities, they have often failed to include “fat” as a social identity. This text is important for bringing focus to the interdisciplinarity of Fat Studies and clarifying the importance of examining multiple standpoints and angles, and avoiding the binaries that have restricted disciplines in the past.

Popular culture puts on display what’s in and models how to behave through cultural products such as cartoons, sitcoms, movie, etc. The social construction of such attitudes and beliefs into social norms is arguably generated through these cultural products. While people do not always duplicate the exact messages popular culture puts forth, they encounter similarly coded messages about gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and bodies nonetheless. A chief aim of this dissertation is to explore how fat people feel about certain messages contained in popular culture. For example, how do fat people respond to images of stereotyped fat people who are fat because they eat too much? Do they adopt and apply those stereotypes to other fat people? Do they ignore messages that promote the thin body and demonize the fat body? Do fat people resist the culturally constructed messages about bodies by not participating in regimens that seek to change their body size? Do fat people accept these messages as the norm, and find themselves believing that as fat people they are less valuable than thin people? In other words, what are the ways in which fat people negotiate culturally constructed messages about fat bodies? I want to
know how actual individuals might engage with these messages (or not) at a micro, not a macro, level. These are questions that have not been deeply explored within Fat Studies.

Methodology

To get at the questions above, I employed qualitative interviewing within a feminist praxis so that people’s voices are heard through their own words and experiences, and thereby bring new insights to Fat Studies, as well as to social justice movements for fat people. Carol Gilligan, a Psychologist, wrote about the ethics of care in her book *In a Different Voice*. She critiques research which suggests the researcher should always remain neutral and “objective.” Gilligan states,

> The search on the part of many people for a voice which transcends these false dichotomies represents an attempt to turn the tide of moral discussion from questions of how to achieve objectivity and detachment to how to engage responsively and with care (xix).

In this study, I do not attempt objectivity nor do I attempt to detach myself from my participants and their experiences, as their experiences collide with my own. I also put into practice a feminist ethics of care by allowing participants to ask questions about the interview questions prior to meeting, by performing check backs – which allows participants the opportunity to address any inconsistencies and/or more accurately reflect their meaning – at the end of the data analysis with the participants. By interviewing individuals who self-identified as fat (or large(r) than “normal” societal standards for weight) I co-constituted the narratives with the participants in my study through qualitative interviewing. My aim with this method is to get at the heart of their lived experiences with and surrounding popular culture representations that seek to shame them.
Culture is messy and complex. Without the voices of people, theories are just, well, theories. As John Van Maanen, a professor of organizational studies at MIT, says, 

Culture is not to be found in some discrete set of observations that can somehow be summed up numerically and organized narratively to provide full understanding. Events and conversations of the past are forever being reinterpreted in light of new understandings and continuing dialogue with the studied (118).

This point is furthered by Steiner Kvale, when he describes the significance of using qualitative interviewing: “The sensitivity of the interview and its closeness to the subjects’ lived world can lead to knowledge that can be used to enhance the human condition” (11). By using contemporary voices through qualitative interviews, I (re)engage with meanings that people place on popular representations of the fat body, and assess how people have come to understand their bodies through these representations. Fat Studies scholars, such as Katariina Kryola, point to the current gap in the literature concerning ethnographic work that would bring forth “...complexities that [only] differently positioned viewers would provide” (25).

I interviewed sixteen people who self-identify as fat, overweight, or above average weight. The subjects were both male and female, however I focused on the women’s voices because women’s experiences, much like men’s, are gendered. However, for women in Western culture our bodies experience higher rates of bodily surveillance. In addition, women’s experiences are deeply rooted in our gendered society, a society where women and by extent their bodies experience oppression and domination. Women’s lives and experiences often reflect the powerless positions they are in, and are strategically shaped by a culture and society, which seeks to continue to oppressing women in order for men to retain their power.
Throughout this dissertation, I also often include my voice to outline my experiences because I identify as a fat person. My subjectivity has relevance to my study as I necessarily should reflexively engage on my positionality to explore what I take for granted and whatever biases I may have.

I recruited subjects two ways. The first way was through asking individuals I know if they felt they would make an acceptable participant for the study. If they self-identified as above what is considered a socially acceptable normal weight, I then gave them a consent form, gave them time to read it over and ask questions, and then asked them if they would like to be a participant in the study. The second way was through participants contacting me through solicitation from a recruitment flyer. I corresponded with them and gave them an opportunity to read over the consent form, ask questions about it, sign it, and finally return it.

The consent form helped the subjects to understand the study, its purpose, and their role within it. Upon consenting to the study, the participants were asked to set a designated time and place to be interviewed one-on-one by me, and they were provided with an opportunity to view the questions to be asked. The time that was set worked as best as possible with their schedule. In addition, the participants were asked to pick the most comfortable location for them to meet with me. I provided as much information about the study and process as possible to all participants. For example, individuals were given the opportunity to read over the interview questions first, and excuse themselves from the study without penalty. In addition, participants were given access to read the final draft of the analyses of their interviews prior to my submitting the analysis to my committee members.

By allowing participants to read the analyses they had the opportunity to clarify, explain, or correct anything that may have be misinterpreted or misconstrued. This “check-back” has the
potential to bring the participant and researcher closer together, closing (some of) the gaps between participant and scholar. In addition, by doing a check back, my hope was that participants felt more in touch with the study, and felt as if they were part of the process rather than a piece of the puzzle that once placed, is moved past.

Upon meeting, I asked them a series of questions\(^6\) and video recorded the interviews. I was able to get to know the individuals through a series of questions about their demographics, and life experiences. At an appropriate time, I showed them a clip from a chosen piece of television or film and then asked them to reflect on it. The number of clips shown, varied from participant to participant. However, showing these clips and asking for their responses to them proved useful to my study as they provided contexts for the participants to reflect upon.

I then transcribed the interviews. Unless otherwise specified by the participants that they wanted to use their real names, pseudonyms were used. As I noted earlier, reflexivity is key to qualitative methods. Thus, it is important for me to recognize my world-view when analyzing the narratives the participants and I co-constituted. Practicing feminist principles in my methodology, I have taken the time to deeply reflect on how my world-view is, or may be, having an impact upon the individuals who participated in my study. As per H. Lloyd Goodall, Descriptions of the outward world come from deep inside us. Because each of us has been shaped and informed by different deeply personal experiences, our descriptions of the same scene are likely to be as distinctive as they are personal (95).

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6 Interview questions can be found in Appendix B.
For myself, it is of the utmost importance to recognize my positionality within the study, and remaining self-reflexive helps me to continually ground the voices in, what I can hope is, their truth.

Finding patterns and themes between participants and what they have to say, or even what they discover along the way, is an important part of not only the analysis but the method as well. The execution of finding patterns comes from my theoretical frameworks, as well as my chosen method. As Goodall states,

The story’s narrative and rhetorical supporting structure (for example, its form or genre, episodes, passages, conflicts, turning points, poetic moments, themes, and motifs) are constructed out of ordinary and extraordinary everyday life materials that, from a reader’s perspective, allow meaningful patterns to emerge and from which a relationship develops. What makes that pattern “meaningful” is the writer’s ability to piece together the everyday life events...as if he or she were reading clues to a larger mystery (83).

My aim, therefore, is to provide readers with the ability to see these patterns and also to reveal why these patterns are meaningful.

In addition to open-ended, qualitative interviews, I sent out a survey online. This survey allowed me to reach people beyond northwest Ohio, and expand the social identity range of my study from numerous college students, both graduate and undergraduate, to people across the globe of various ages, backgrounds, races/ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations. I used Google Forms to create and send out my survey via Facebook. I received 49 responses from across the United States as well as internationally with responses from Canada, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom.
Primary Sources of Data

My primary sources of data come from the interviews I conducted with the participants who qualified for my study. I used an open-ended interview format wherein after a pre-established question, depending upon the participant’s response, I could follow up with additional questions, if needed. The interviews were, therefore, unstructured so as to permit the participant and me to co-constitute the interview narrative with more latitude than what might occur in a more structured interview format.

As I have indicated above, I begin from the premise that the body is historically and socially constructed. Thus, as we engaged in the interviews, the participants and I go on a journey together. I want to know and understand how they have come to understand their bodies over time and explore how the movement(s) of their bodies have been impacted upon by popular culture. It is important for me to walk with them as they recount their experiences with their body. It is also important that I also understand specific examples, times and spaces, or texts that influence how they think about their own bodies, and to unpack and discover how those texts (perhaps) unconsciously shape(d) their social, cultural, physical, emotional, and political body. I hope as a result of their participation that they experience some development in how they understand their bodies that can help them to overcome stigma and social shaming. I hope they come to therefore appreciate their bodies more and come to understand how media and culture exact a negative (or even positive or neutral) influence upon them as well.

Prompts

During the interviews, clips of certain types of popular culture, were shown to provide visual prompts for the participants. The clips included films such as Bridesmaids and Precious,
and from television shows, such as 30 Rock, and Roseanne Each of these clips provides examples of characters from various classes, races/ethnicities, and genders.

I often chose to show The Bridesmaids clip first. The clip is a scene where Megan (played by Melissa McCarthy) enters her friend’s home to console her after she had a fight with her other, best friend. Megan is a fat woman, who is dressed in pleated black pants, and a button-down shirt. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail and looks greasy. She wears a wrist brace as well for unknown reasons. The first thing she says to Annie (played by Kristen Wiig) is, “I’m coming in” and she does so rather forcefully. This action establishes Megan as a boisterous woman. The two have a brief discussion about how Annie (Wiig) has not been returning Megan’s calls. Annie points out that she would not have much to say other than, “Hi, I can’t get off the couch. I got fired from my job. I got kicked out of my apartment. I can’t pay any of my bills. My car is a piece of shit. Uh, I don’t have any friends…” Megan interrupts Annie, standing up from where she was sitting on a couch and says, “You know what I find interesting about that, Annie? It’s interesting to me that you have absolutely no friends. You know why it’s interesting? Here’s a friend standing directly in front of you trying to talk to you and choose to talk about the fact that you don’t have any friends.” Annie attempts to interrupt saying, “You know what I mean…,” to which Megan replies, “No. Nope. I don’t think you want any help, I think you wanna have a little pity party.” Here Megan pokes Annie in the chest a couple of times with her index finger and Annie says, “Ouch!” Megan continues to poke at Annie saying “Annie wants a little pity party.” Megan pushes Annie over on the couch and says, “You’re an asshole, Annie!” Annie exclaims, “Oh my god! What are you doing?” Megan walks over to her and starts poking her again saying, “I’m life. Is life bothering you?” She throws Annie around on the couch, pushing her and poking at her. Megan continues to
harass Annie saying repeatedly, “I’m life, Annie. Am I bothering you? You better learn to fight because I’m life…” and Megan picks Annie up and tosses her over her shoulder, positioning Annie’s butt in Megan’s face continuing “…and I’m gonna bite you in the ass!” Annie cries out. Megan pins Annie down and sitting on top of her, she says, “I’m trying to get you to fight for your shitty life! And you just won’t do it.” Megan takes Annie’s hand and starts hitting her head with it saying “Stop slapping yourself…I’m your life, Annie. I’m your shitty life.” Annie manages to get an arm free and smacks Megan across the face. They both stop and sit up. Annie apologizes to Megan to which Megan replies,

Nice hit. Alright. I’m glad to see you got a little bit of spark in you. I knew that Annie was in there somewhere. I think, I think you’re ready to hear a little story about a girl. A girl named Megan. A girl named Megan who didn’t have a very good time in high school. I’m referring to myself when I say Megan. It’s me Megan. And I know you look at me now and think, ‘Boy, she must have breezed through high school’ that’s not the case, Annie. No, this was not easy going up and down the halls.

She points to her body, motioning up and down her own body suggesting that because of her body size, shape, and/or weight she had a difficult time in high school. She continues,

They used to try to blow me up. They threw firecrackers at my head. Firecrackers. I mean literally. I am not saying that figuratively. I got firecrackers thrown at my head. They called me a freak. Do you think I let that break me? Think I went home to my mommy crying, ‘Oh, I don’t have any friends…oh, Megan doesn’t have any friends.’ No, I did not. You know what I did? I pulled myself up, I studied really hard, I read every book in the library and now, I work for the government and I have the highest possible security
clearance. Don’t repeat that! I can’t protect you. I know where all the nukes are and I know the codes.”

Annie sheepishly says, “I won’t say anything.” Megan continues,

You would be amazed. A lot of shopping malls. Don’t repeat that! I have six houses. I bought an 18-wheeler a couple of months ago, just because I could. Ok, so you lost Lillian, you got another best friend sitting right in front of you if you’d notice. Now, you’ve gotta stop feeling sorry for yourself because I do not associate with people who blame the world for their problems. Because you’re your problem, Annie. And you’re also your solution.

Megan says all of this with love and compassion in her voice. Afterwards, Annie and Megan hug. This moment between these two women is captivating. While Bridesmaids is a comedy, in this very real heartfelt moment I identified with Megan and identified with the bullying she endured and how she could situate a better life for herself because of it. I chose this clip because I feel it showcases the complexities of a fat character in that Megan’s description helps to shape her into a complex and successful woman. However, simultaneously the clip shows her dressed in unflattering, dull clothing, and also situates her as having “overcome” her fatness, suggesting that her fatness (not the bullies in her school) has created trauma in her life. This clip simultaneously highlights fatphobic attitudes and the notion that as fat people we must “overcome” our trauma and make something of ourselves despite our fatness.

The second clip that I show is from the television show, 30 Rock (Wigfield). In this short scene, Liz Lemon (Tina Fey), Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin), and Angie Jordan – the fat black woman in the room played by Sherri Shepard – are in Jack’s office discussing Angie’s reality show, Queen of Jordan, and her new single, “My Single is Dropping.” Jack suggests that Angie
perform the single on the stage where TGS, Liz’s show, is normally filmed. However, TGS’s star, Tracey Jordan, is in Africa which prevents the show from being filmed. Liz tells Angie they need to get Tracey back to which Angie responds, “Are you giving me orders? Am I the waiter? Is this the restaurant I am opening up with Denis Rodman and Webster?” While this clip is only a couple of minutes long, I selected it because I wanted to show a fat woman of color in a strong(er) role. Angie’s personality as someone who takes care of her husband, Tracey, shines through. In this clip, she appears to be a no non-sense, businesswoman. This clip is multi-faceted in that Angie is portrayed as a caricature of a fat black woman who is “sassy” and dressed in skin tight clothing, and also a strong, independent business woman, even though her single title, “My Single is Dropping” suggests audience members are not to take her too seriously. While it is a seemingly positive representation of a fat black woman, peeling back some of the layers reveals her portrayal is still an old stereotype. This prompts participants to look deeper at the ways in which the large(r) black body is represented in popular culture.

The third clip that I show was from the television show Roseanne, a sitcom that ran from 1988-1997 about a working-class family (Jacobson and Safford). The clip opens in a beauty parlor. After some discussion, it is revealed that Debbie, a thin, white woman who works in the salon with Roseanne is not ordering lunch. Debbie reveals that her eating has gotten completely out of control. She says, “I mean, I’ve been having breakfast, then lunch, and then I have dinner.” Roseanne jokes, “Well, you just described my morning.” Then, Roseanne’s boss pipes in and says, “You know, Roseanne, you have such a pretty face. It’s a shame you keep it hidden by all that extra weight.” Crystal, Roseanne’s best friend, responds with “Roseanne doesn’t have to worry about keeping slim. Dan’s crazy about her no matter how she looks.” Roseanne, picking up on how Crystal’s comment is insulting and suggest that women’s bodies exist to please men,
states sarcastically, “Thanks, Crystal.” Crystal apologizes but Roseanne understands the deeper meaning behind everyone’s comments and says she is going to lose weight. Roseanne then declares, “I’m gonna start right now by picking a day next week to go on a diet. Alright. Next week’s bad. March is out…” and then the intro to "Roseanne" fades in.

In the next scene Roseanne is trying to put on a pair of pants that have, as she claims, shrunk “in the dryer.” She looks at Dan her husband, played by John Goodman, and exclaims, “We have got to go on a diet.” He responds, “What’s this “we” jazz? My pants fit fine.” Roseanne, exasperated says, “Well, my pants don’t fit me.” To which Dan responds, “Well, your pants don’t fit me either!” Roseanne sarcastically laughs, “HA. HA. Dan. Let’s burn the weight off with humor. Look at yourself. You are too fat! You’ve got to go on a diet.” They leave the bedroom and enter the kitchen where dinner is waiting. Roseanne says they should not be eating the way they do and one of the kids asks if they are going on a diet again. Then one of the kids says, “I guess this means we’re gonna have roast chicken for three nights until they get back to reality.” Roseanne, still trying to convince Dan to join her on her diet says, “We’re gonna look better, and we’re gonna feel better. Dan still disagrees and argues “Hey, Roseanne, you know what? We don’t go out a lot. We don’t have a big house. Food is the one luxury we can afford. The kids are asked if their parents should lose some weight. DJ, the youngest and a boy, says he likes his mom mushy, while Becky the oldest girl says that Roseanne could stand to lose a few pounds. Then Becky explains that, “Men are supposed to get heavy when they get older. They all do it. But it doesn’t look good on women.” Darlene, the middle girl, says ,“Aw face it. You’re both tanks.” Roseanne tells her to quiet down and then blames the weight gain on her three pregnancies. Roseanne is sticking to her guns as she exclaims, “This whole family has got to start eating better, I swear. That’s ‘cause I’m gonna start shopping better ‘cause the whole place
is full of junk! Look at this: chips, pretzels, macaroni and cheese…oh, we got Mallomars! The kitchen is full of junk.” Roseanne starts throwing food in the trash. Dan tries to talk her down stating, “Listen. Just ‘cause your pants are tight one day doesn’t mean we’re gonna throw away $40 worth of groceries.” Roseanne justifies her stance saying, “Well, hey, drastic times are gonna call for drastic measures. I mean, I can hardly go on a diet having to look at all this horrible, hideous, yet delicious food.” Dan takes the food from her hands and places it in the cabinet. “Here. Out of sight, out of mind.” Roseanne says thank you and says she is going to “…fix herself something good to eat” and opens the fridge. Dan replies, “I believe what you’re looking for is in that cabinet” and nods towards where he just stashed all the junk food. This clip touches on several issues including fat shaming, backhanded compliments like “You have such a pretty face,” and issues of class and food scarcity.

The fourth and final clip I show is from the film Precious. There is very little dialogue in this scene. Precious, played by Gabby Sidibe, is looking in a mirror. However, the reflecting image is a thin, white woman with blonde hair. Precious is a very dark skinned, fat young woman. She goes downstairs and opens the fridge, but it is empty. She asks her mom for some money because she is hungry, but she receives no response as her mother is shown masturbating in her bed. Precious asks for money again, to which her mother responds, “Come take care of mommy, Precious.” Precious’s voice comes over and narrates, “I wish she’d stop that shit.” Again, narrating her story Precious says, “The other day I cried. I felt stupid. But ya know what? Fuck that day. That’s why God, or whoever, makes new days. Still hungry though.” She walks into a local restaurant and orders a basket. When asked what sides she wants Precious says, “I don’t know yet, still trying to decide. Trying to watch my figure.” As a 10-piece bucket of chicken is placed on the counter for another customer, Precious grabs it and flees out the front
The waitress exclaims, “Oh, hell, no she didn’t! Get her ass! Get that big bitch.” Precious is now running down the street attempting to eat some of the fried chicken. This scene, like the Roseanne clip, also touches on class and food scarcity. However, in Precious there is an added dimension of race, and physical and sexual abuse.

In addition to the interviews however, the survey data proved to be rich as well. Survey participants were asked several open-ended questions to which many replied to at length. This survey data was used in concert with much of the interview data to help solidify responses across various identities including race, location, class, age, and gender.

Conclusion

As a person living in a fatphobic culture I went into my interviews with certain expectations. I expected to hear stories of weight loss, internalized oppression, fat-hatred, and low self-esteem. I expected these kinds of responses because my lived experience, and living in a fatphobic culture, has taught me that is how fat people are supposed to feel. I found that people have much more complex and powerful relationships with their bodies and with the media messages, which they engage (or do not engage) with. Interviews revealed various levels of acceptance, resistance, and subversion.

The subsequent chapters are thematized in a way that explores three elements of a fat person’s personal journey: constraint; acceptance and resistance; subversion and utopian visions. Each chapter reveals the fluidity of these participant’s relationships with their bodies; at certain times they may accept and internalize fatphobic and fat shaming messages, and at other times they resist. They may even do so simultaneously. As I stated earlier, behavior is fluid. As individuals, we move through our worlds adapting, changing, learning our behavior(s). The stories that follow specifically showcase the fluidity of these individual’s relationships to and
with their bodies as shaped through and by fat shaming and fat phobic messages in popular culture.
CHAPTER ONE: WOMEN’S FAT BODIES AND ISSUES OF CONSTRAINT

There is much scholarly discussion about what popular culture does to people living in our current culture, but there is limited discussion on what people do with popular culture. Fat bodies are often represented as the body that constrains our true selves, our active selves, our healthy selves, our *thin* selves. Fat people are often represented in popular culture as being the unhappy fat person, for example. Yet, the people I spoke with understood their bodies in many ways, and in ways that were not always negative. They understood their various social identities as intersecting with their body shape, size, and weight at virtually all times. While some felt constrained by the messages they received in popular culture and felt these messages negatively affected their confidence, others felt constrained by their clothing options and still others felt popular culture representations constrained their bodies in ways of which they disapproved. Overall, many participants complicated the binaries of fat/thin, happy/sad, healthy/unhealthy and other dichotomies, many of which have risen out of popular culture’s representations of fat bodies.

Representative Constraints

In many ways, we are constrained by cultural productions of the fat body/fat person as incapable, so our accomplishments (outside losing weight) are not considered desirable, regardless of what those accomplishments might be. Melissa,7 who is a white, lower to middle-class professor and lesbian living in northwest Ohio, spoke at length about how as fat people we must continually prove ourselves as capable human beings, suggesting popular culture has a role in shaping how fat bodies and capability are perceived. Melissa states,

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7 Participants were given the choice to given a pseudonym or to use their real name on their consent form. Some participants, such as Melissa here, chose to use her real name. Others, who wished to remain anonymous were assigned pseudonyms and will be designated with a footnote.
With *Bridesmaids*, it's funny because that speech that [McCarthy] gives is incredible and yet even as a fat person I don’t believe her. I believe her, but it feels like a pity speech, I know it's a movie so it's throwing her a bone to do something like that because she isn't very attractive [in the movie]. So even then I'm waiting for the joke on her and her being a loser. When she's talking about her story of people making fun of her in the halls it's because she's fat and looks like that. People get bullied all the time and it's not necessarily about their weight and yet [the weight] is huge, because it's visible. It's like you automatically know that she's had a shitty life, she's a loser, she has been bullied and it's *because* she's fat and look at what she's made of herself aside from that. Or carrying that burden for all of us to see, look at what she's done with it anyway. Look at how terrible my life is set up to be, yet I was able to take this shitty shell that I have and do something that seems like it's ok enough for the world so that I can still be here and worth something.

It seems society wants fat people to be themselves, but only if they can take this “shitty shell” and make something of themselves. Melissa continues, I have those same sad sob stories in my youth. Going through with my education, leaving home when I was 18 and having a successful career and earning a PhD, and it's always like what's next? What's the next thing I can do to keep proving that I'm worth it…in that speech it's like let me remind all of you audience members that my life has been shit because I look like this and yet I have been able to salvage something. And we have to do that as fat people because we don't matter. I'm always waiting to just tell someone, or show someone that I've done something that counts. I've done all these things, I've worked in these places, I've ran marathons, I'm not just a loser who's coasting on fried
chicken or cheeseburgers. I've tried, I've done it, and I’m not just giving up because I haven't tried.

In this moment Melissa rationalizes that she is only putting certain expectations on herself, while simultaneously she recognizes the role popular culture plays in how fat people’s experiences, lives, goals, and accomplishments are perceived. Melissa understands this and accepts the messages put forth in this instance.

Given that representations of fat bodies in popular culture constrain how individuals are often viewed, understood, and “assessed” by other people, as fat people we often feel the need to qualify our existence. For example, Laura, a white 54-year-old Sociology Professor stated, “We're full people, with a full spectrum of interests and abilities and activities, yet on TV and in movies we are confined to an extremely limited set of mostly-negative roles.” Here Laura feels the need to assert fat people’s worth, while also noting how popular culture negatively circumscribes accomplishment.

Some individuals feel they must undermine what popular culture is attempting to sell them; in this case, it is that fat people are a prop to be mocked and judged, never viewed as valuable or whole human beings. Per my participants, representations are not complicating and complimenting the complexities of people’s lives. One stereotypical trope that fat actors are often cast in is the “funny fat friend.”

The Funny Fat Friend

The disciplining of bodies through performativity happens on many levels, through various social and cultural institutions, and has very real-world consequences for individuals who seek to resist those social and cultural norms including but not limited to experiencing acts of violence. Bodies themselves are often disciplined based on gender, sexual orientation, and/or
size. For example, little girls are taught (through various institutions such as family and school) to take up less space and to be smaller in their space than little boys who are encouraged to engage in the world around them by running, jumping, skipping, playing, and being loud. Through social and cultural disciplining of little girls’ bodies, for example, little girls learn how to “perform” their gender (female) “correctly” in their culture. Performativity itself however, goes beyond performing masculinity or femininity. Performativity is the repetition of feminine or masculine acts/performances to the point that to be feminine or masculine feels innate (c.f. Butler). Therefore, in this case, the gendered body is disciplined through these institutions to perform femininity (which means a variety of things from being smaller and taking up less space, to thinness being equated to “proper” femininity) and to deviate from those social/cultural norms on what it means to be feminine and what it means to be masculine can have very real, often adverse real-world consequences such as violence (c.f. Butler). In this way, I have learned that to be funny is acceptable because my idols have all been fat funny successful women including Roseanne, Melissa McCarthy, and Rebel Wilson. Popular culture frames fat women as funny, and “down to earth” rather than as sex symbols. Fat people encounter many messages about their bodies as unattractive and unworthy of love and affection. Simultaneously, they receive messages that to be funny provides a sort of social permission and it provides positive reinforcement. Being funny allows fat people to have at least some kind of positive personality. Consequently, it can be difficult to resist adopting the funny fat person persona. Individuals with whom I spoke find themselves constrained by how they are socially permitted to perform not only their gender, but their fat(ness). Katrina Bertz, a 27-year-old, straight, Caucasian woman, from Napoleon, Ohio who is also a nurse’s aide, stated “I feel like I am hideous to the opposite sex. I feel like I need to compensate my looks with my personality.” Katrina, who did not
specifically say she uses humor to position her fat(ness) as something acceptable, still reveals that she feels her personality – whatever that may be for her – she still needs to compensate for her looks because she is fat. Such social expectations govern what behaviors are acceptable for fat people. Fat people are constrained by what they can imagine their bodies doing, saying, and/or participating in.

After viewing the *Bridesmaid* clip, Paige, a white, working class, mother in her 30s living in San Francisco, stated, “Size was irrelevant to her [Melissa McCarthy’s] character, but she is part of the joke (fat funny lady) and [Kristen] Wiig actually is the main character looking for romance,” with Wiig’s character being a thin white woman. Melissa states, “Fat people *have* to be funny, [the fat is] a joke...and as somebody who's fat and thinks they're hilarious, I also feel bad about that all fat people have to be funny and that we have to make our fat a part of the joke.” Cassandra, a 25-year-old college student, adds that characters are limited to “…comedic roles because that seems to be really popular. There are certain stereotypes where a woman is overweight and she has to be the funny one.”

Popular culture would have us as fat people believe that in order to be visible as a fat person we must be funny in order to compensate for our lack of a beautiful, thin body. It is the idea that if we are not “beautiful” *at least* we are funny. However, while large(r) fat actresses have always had roles in film and television, there have been films and television shows that feature a thin actress in a fat suit. Often, based on what I have seen, the “fat version” of the actress marks her as a buffoon, laughable, making her fatness the butt of the joke.

*The Fat Suit*

We have entered an era where fat bodies are now visible within popular culture and being played by actual fat actresses not thin women in fat suits. When a thin woman in a fat suit plays a
fat character the implications include that there is a thin person inside every fat person, and if during the film the fat suit is shed, that action implies that to lose a significant amount of weight is not difficult, and that the weight loss is permanent.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s thin actors including Courtney Cox (Friends), Gwyneth Paltrow (Shallow Hal), and Eddie Murphy (The Nutty Professor) played fat characters. While I would argue there have been a few prominent fat actors in Hollywood (Kathy Bates, Queen Latifah, Oprah, Mae West) I remember experiencing a surge of thin actors in fat suits in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Kathleen LeBesco argues that the fat suit can transgress boundaries: “the power and possibility of fat drag, it seems, comes in denaturalizing the thin ‘original’ body of the actor” (233). The fat suit serves to showcase that the fat body has a place on the screen. However, while LeBesco recognizes the potential of a represented fat body to disrupt performances of fat, she also understands that “…whatever critical consciousness might emerge in the form of a ‘size prejudice is bad’ vibe of Shallow Hal or The Nutty Professor ultimately finds itself sacrificed for cheap laughs at the expense of fat people” (237).

These kinds of representations with fat suits constrain how fat women can imagine their bodies as one survey respondent spoke about. A 32-year-old, white, straight middle-class Psychologist from New Orleans states,

I love the show Friends, and I especially like to watch it when I'm feeling sad or upset, it cheers me up. However, I can't stand the shows in which Monica wears a fat suit in flashbacks to her adolescence, before she lost all the weight. Watching “fat Monica” brings up strong feelings of self-loathing, and I think, ‘See how everyone is laughing at Fat Monica? That's how they're laughing at you. The way they feel about her body, that's how much they are disgusted by yours, and you should equally disgusted by your fat
body. And look how easy it was for Monica to lose weight - so easy, they don't even need to talk about it, they just need to show her, a year later, looking like a stick! See, if you really cared about yourself/your health/other people you would become a stick too.’

The show has an obvious impact upon the respondent in how Monica on Friends is represented when she is “fat Monica.” This individual’s experiences with these feelings speak back to the deeply rooted ways in which representation impacts how we understand our bodies, and in this case, weight loss. The shedding of the fat suit reveals the thin person inside, and the act of shedding the weight is not one of struggle but is presented as an overnight vanishing act.

While the popularity of the fat suit has diminished since the early 2000s, and fat actors and actresses such as Melissa McCarthy and Jack Black are being cast, fat characters continue to be represented through stereotypes. Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John, in their chapter The Roseanne Benedict Arnolds: How Fat Women are Betrayed by Their Celebrity Icons, discuss how we have entered a new era of representations of fat women:

A new wave of fatsploitation films has arrived: portrayals that ostensibly provide fat women with representation but in reality simply recycle damaging stereotypes (the big mother earth, the glutton, the funny fat girl who’s everyone’s best friend and no one’s girlfriend, etc.) (268).

Although we may be seeing more fat people on screen, these representations still fall almost exclusively within the genre of comedy, thereby furthering the stereotype of the funny fat friend. These kinds of representations have an impact on how fat people feel about and engage with their fat bodies. One aspect of engagement with participants’ fat bodies that the interviews revealed was the contested idea that one could be “fat and happy.” While the comedic sidekick may be funny, that sidekick it is not necessarily genuinely accepting of and happy with her body.
It is possible that humor, as I have suggested here, is deployed as a defense mechanism. Either way, women’s abilities to live in a fat body and be happy and proud of their fat bodies is not yet culturally normalized. Individuals are not only their fat bodies however; there are other identities at play which shape fat people’s abilities to be happy with their bodies.

Intersecting Identities

When fat people regularly receive fat shaming messages, being fat is never our only identity. Fortunately, I was able to speak to people, such as Ellen, Clitha and Brock, who identify as other than the heteronormative, cisgender, white privileged identity positions. As human beings who live in a culture that has social constructed many of our identities (race, gender) and placed meaning upon those identities we are never just a woman, or just a fat person. We are a combination of all our identities, and we must recognize that our multiple identities cannot, and should not be, parceled out.

**Intersecting Identities: Gender, Race, and Size**

Intersecting identities of gender, race, size and so on has an additional impact on how we are perceived and thereby has the effect of making black bodies culturally more invisible. Because the thin white body is idealized, given the dearth of scholarship about non-white bodies, it makes it appear that only white women deal with issues of body image. Notions that eating disorders are a “white woman” problem are exacerbated through various outlets including popular culture. For example, doing a quick Google Image search of “PSA Eating Disorders” I found that most of the images in the first few rows of Google Images were of white women. There are also public service campaigns, such as The Elisa Project, where most of the images featured predominately young, white women (“The Elisa Project”).
According to one study that analyzed race and body dissatisfaction, “White girls were more dissatisfied with their bodies than black girls, and white girls’ dissatisfaction with their bodies rose more sharply with increasing BMI than was observed among black girls” (Striegel-Moore et al., 61). However, another study disproves this argument concluding that “The findings [from the second study] directly challenge the belief that there are large differences in dissatisfaction between White and all non-White women and suggest that body dissatisfaction may not be the golden girl problem promoted in the literature” (Grabe and Hyde 662). In addition to black women struggling with eating disorders, black bodies are marked and are targets for racism.

As I, and other scholars such as Bordo, Braziel, and Jean Kilbourne have shown, representation matters. Ellen, an African American woman in her late 30s states, “And it [the body positivity movement] makes the claim that larger black people are just naturally more accepting of it because they are just naturally more accepting of it, that black females don’t have body image issues…” and here Ellen shakes her head no as if to signal that is not the case. She proceeds to tell her story of being in Weight Watchers and using her weight loss within the confines of the program to cover up an eating disorder. She says,

...on Weight Watchers, trying to do crazy shit so that the white lady behind the scale wouldn’t like shame me...well how did I get there? I probably got there because I was using this weight loss program to cover up an eating disorder. Black women, we have issues; we have body image issues and there are a lot of black women who have eating disorder issues. There are a lot of black women out there who binge, and there are a lot of black women who restrict, there are a lot of black women who do these things to their

8 Pseudonym for participant
bodies because they are attempting to fit into this images of what is the desirable black woman, the thin waist with the big hips.

Ellen understands the ways in which popular culture shapes the black body. She speaks directly back to the notion that although black women are expected to be curvy and/or thick in certain areas (hips) they still need to obtain a thin waist. As noted above, Ellen used Weight Watchers to cover up her own eating disorder, although she never disclosed what kind of eating disorder she had (anorexia, bulimia, overeating, etc.). Ellen brings an added dimension of complexity to participating in diet programs. Beyond a consideration of the external influence of culture for women to lose weight, her situation brings consideration to the internal psychological issues women face concerning their bodies. She brings into focus the complexities of eating disorders and the great lengths individuals may go through to hide a disorder. However, while participating in a socially acceptable program such as Weight Watchers, having an eating disorder seems unlikely because it appears the individual is losing weight “the right way.” Ellen’s story makes it very clear that black women also suffer from eating disorders and self-esteem issues.

As a black woman, Ellen sees her body and understands herself in different ways than what she encounters in popular culture. Popular culture has helped to stereotypically shape the black female as either a mammy or a man-eater or its related equally sexualized stereotype of the “sassy black woman.” Angie, in the 30 Rock clip is portrayed as a “sassy black woman” who is dominant and uncaring about the individuals around her – she is a self-proclaimed attention seeker. At one point in another 30 Rock episode Angie explicitly asks Liz if she needs “…a sassy black friend” (“The Collection”).

female archetypes that exist in America including the mammy and the jezebel. In addition, as per Sarah Grogan, a Psychology Professor at Manchester Metropolitan University,

Gen Doy and Linda Nochilin have documented the history of the objectification and sensualization of the black body, which has continued to the present day in mainstream media images of black models and actors, which portray black women as “shameless, sensual, and available” (159).

Where white, fat actors are asexual and fat black women are jezebels, these representations of race have an impact on how individuals understand and engage with racial issues. These negative representations can lead to systematic and individual racism and racist attitudes and beliefs.

I want to note that not all representations of black bodies are inherently negative, however. Andrea Elizabeth Shaw, Assistant Director of the Division of Humanities and Assistant Professor of English at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida explains in her text, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*, that the fat black female body enacts a resistance to Western colonization over her body by being (and remaining) fat. Shaw states,

Her resistance to authoritative cultural requirements does not necessarily signal that she is not capable of complying; her fat may indicate an *unwillingness* to comply, or an *indifference* to those norms. Accordingly, her disruptive and unruly behavior becomes her way of effecting control and order within the confines of the circumstances she encounters. Her size further illustrated her chosen disobedience since its corpulence may also be read as sufficiency and therefore a lack of desire to ingest the alien ideologies that have already rendered her beyond the periphery of the dominant culture. The fat black woman’s body poses a dual challenge to the colonially inspired dominant aesthetic norms
that are instituted as a political mechanism for control; these norms symbolize the
hegemonic force from which they arise. Her fat black body resists both imperatives of
whiteness and slenderness as an idea state of embodiment (9, original emphasis).

The spaces where large black bodies can exist are often confined within stereotypical roles such
as the mammy and jezebel, and are also lacking in roles altogether because large black bodies do
not meet societal standards for beauty by both being big, and being black. However, being fat
can be read as both an act of resistance, as Shaw theorizes, or as a way for culture to continue to
hold the black body as unacceptable, undesirable, and unfitting as a standard of beauty. I will
discuss the idea of fat(ness) as an act of resistance further in Chapter Two.

*Intersecting Identities: Gender and Size*

Although scholarship within many disciplines, including Women’s Studies, Fat Studies,
and Ethnic Studies, attempts to complicate binaries of gender (male/female), size (fat/thin), and
race (black/white) among others, oftentimes cultural products and messages continue to
reproduce bifurcation of identities and thereby oversimplify the issues. Bordo understands that
although we may want to transgress binaries, culture often restricts our abilities to move past
them. She states,

> Today, one often hears intellectuals urging that we “go beyond” dualisms, calling for the
deconstruction of the hierarchical oppositions (male/female, mind/body, active/passive)
that structure dualism in the West, and scorning others for engaging in “dualistic
thinking.” But it is not so easy to “go beyond dualism” in this culture… (15).

Bordo considers the ways in which postmodernism, poststructuralist thought, and some new
wave/third-wave “feminisms” embody thinness as empowering, seemingly transcending cultural
expectations of size, when these interpretations are just new iterations of our sizest culture.
Various institutions including medicine, education, family, and media all perpetuate, and support these various binaries. What Bordo recognizes however, is that these institutions are so deeply embedded that we may think we have transcended them, but in fact, we have not as shown by the participants here. One example of a participant recognizing this is Aundy, a 36-year-old, white, straight, cisgender, female from Bowling Green, Ohio. She states,

I feel that the medias’ desperate need to make it seem that they aren't fat shaming is a source of fat shaming. For example, a television show makes a big deal about having a woman on who is “plus sized” (i.e., Mad Men). It is a source of pride. It's still singling her out because of her body and telling the audience that identifies with her that even though she is “accepted” she really isn't – she is still getting attention for being fat albeit “acceptance” for being so. Same with fat women in movies – a leading lady like Melissa McCartney [sic] – while the media wants everyone to understand it's fantastic [because] she's a leading lady – what's the use in that if she's still playing characters who are just awful caricatures of what mainstream media feels that fat women are – funny, weird, wacky, sarcastic, bumbling- etc.?

My study is limited to a small sample of participants and it is therefore not an exhaustive study. Nevertheless, I find the women tend to respond to the representations of fat-shaming question in more self-directed internalized way. Scholars at the intersection of linguistics, discourse, knowledge, and gender studies have often considered the ways in which gender shapes how individuals think about and speak about their experiences. They have also considered the larger social and cultural implications of gendered language (cf. Holmes and Meyerhoff, and Hall and Bucholtz). While some women in the survey9 expressed that they could “ignore it [fat

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9 These women wished to remain anonymous.
shaming]” or alternatively, they speak about how it showcases how important their fat activism is, many of the women, as shown below, nevertheless internalized the fat shame. For some, they report that fat shaming led to detrimental consequences such as self-harm, and contemplating their value as human beings.

For example, some female responses included, “sometimes [fat shaming] makes me feel bad about myself and makes me want to reduce calories and exercise more,” “since I am consistently told to lose weight for various reasons, I feel less than,” “It's hard to escape internalized negativity, especially since both you and everybody internalizes it. You're taught to not like yourself. ‘Fat’ is used very negatively, like it's the worst thing you could be, instead of just the adjective it is,” “It belittles me and makes me feel like I don't deserve the things other people deserve,” “It makes me feel less confident in my own skin. It makes me feel that being myself isn't okay and that I need to make a change. I'm embarrassed,” “I don't deserve to look nice or feel attractive,” “It makes me feel different from other people. I feel like I am hideous to the opposite sex.” and finally, “I feel like a lower-class citizen due to my ‘plus size status.’”

Here, these comments showcase internalized oppression, including low self-esteem. However, not only are notions of what “appropriate” feminine bodies look like is in part shaped popular culture, so is masculinity.

Notions of hyper- and toxic masculinity in American culture is detrimental for boys, young men, and men in different ways than femininity is detrimental for girls and women but that is not to say this detriment is equal. Because “male-ness” and masculinity are stratified above femininity and remain part of the mythical norm, masculinity is valued, where femininity, except perhaps for its sexualized aspects, is not. So, while masculinity can be detrimental to boys and men (and in turn to women) it remains a valued trait and one that signifies superiority.
The cisgender, straight men that I interviewed spoke about masculinity in terms of having strong, tight, muscular, and rugged bodies. Chad, a cisgender straight black man, spoke about when he watched the third *Batman* movie and how seeing images of Bane affected him. Chad states that after he watched the movie, he “...started working out and stuff and [he] lost over 177 pounds and that was [his] motivation. [He] wanted to be a superhero.” For Chad, and the socially constructed ideal, masculinity is contained in the hyper-muscular, toned male body. In his eyes, to be a hero, a man should look like Bane. He was so affected by this image he proceeded to lose 177 pounds.

Garrett, another male participant, explains how representations of masculinity are detrimental the same ways representations of femininity are when it comes to the body. He says, I love the memes on Facebook where it says, ‘Barbie degrades women...’. It's ok that Heman is out there and I was actually somewhere talking to somebody about how these movies degrade men the same way Barbie degrades women…I've been learning that what is portrayed to us is the best. And every stereotype has a hint of truth in it. And money brings most of that [provisions] and what does being physically good-looking do? It brings money. Let's just put it this way: Do women want to bang Bill Gates or Thor more? Bill Gates owns the world; Steve Job owns the world. Who do all the ladies want? Thor.

Of course, this is both not true and a distinctly heterosexual way of figuring women’s desire. For Garrett, looking like Thor means one will make more money, but one cannot just make money, they also should look like Thor. For him, it’s a three-pronged approach: first get the looks, then get the money, then get the girl. His perception about bodies, sexuality, and love/attraction which he has obtained through popular culture have obviously shaped how he believes masculinity
should be performed, how it is culturally valued, and what measures of success are socially sanctioned. As he sees it, individuals who are not constantly striving to be their best self, which based on his description is their thin, hegemonic beauty standard self, they are therefore settling for something less, something less desirable.

When it comes to performances of femininity and masculinity in our culture, which includes body size, we have not transcended the bifurcated system in which we live; we have not created new, safe, space for bodies who do not willingly or unwillingly fit in this world. We are still operating within historically created systems that situate our bodies into the binary of a “good body” and a “bad body” inside the binary of masculine/feminine and to some extent, the heterosexual view. These binaries operate within systems of power and dominance. For example, in Garrett’s case the “right kind” of masculinity is a masculinity embedded in power. This kind of thinking is intentionally situated within our patriarchal system of men’s power and dominance. So, as I stated before, this mentality perpetuated by popular culture that the “right kind” of masculinity equals power (fame, money, sex) automatically situates femininity as its opposite in binary terms.

**Intersecting Identities: Gender, Sexuality, and Size**

It is important to consider the ways in which body shape, size, and weight, and sexuality also intertwine when discussing the fat body because as Audre Lorde said in her text *Sister Outsider*, “There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (138). Melissa, a self-identified gay woman, is very aware of her body and her sexuality. She understands the two are intertwined, and her experiences rarely, if ever, hinder only her body, or only her sexuality. For example, she speaks about how she resists conversations in everyday
settings about food, dieting, and weight loss, but only does so after assessing her safety in that particular situation because she is gay. Melissa’s fears are not unfounded either.

Statistical information collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation consistently shows that lesbian, gay and bisexual people, and those perceived to be LGB, are attacked more than heterosexuals relative to their estimated population size in the United States (Marzullo & Libman, 5).

At the beginning of the interview she spoke about her sexuality and always having this feeling that she did not belong. She was outside the “norm,” trying to find a way in and that in part contributed to her body-dissatisfaction; she felt she would belong if she were thin. She spoke about femininity, sexuality, and fatness all coming together when she spoke about being a lesbian. She discussed how lesbians in the media are often portrayed as fat and how they are also represented as non-feminine, or masculine. While seeing representations of fat lesbians in popular culture helped her to accept her larger body, she did not like the representations that situated her body as either/or. Melissa felt at times that she could not be a fat feminine lesbian.

She states, “…lesbians are [portrayed as] fat anyway so I think in that way I just always kind of felt like, ‘Hey! I’m a lesbian so I’m probably just going to be fat!’ Fat and not feminine. Those always go hand in hand. You cannot be feminine and fat.” While she sees connections between popular culture, her fat body, representation, and her sexuality, only part of the equation is acceptable: she believes that the world in which we live teaches people that a lesbian can be fat, but a lesbian cannot be feminine. As clarified in a follow up with Melissa she explains that her quote is about the social and cultural construction of what is appropriate for lesbian expressions and behavior. She explains,
I definitely felt growing up and certainly at times that fat and feminine don’t go together, but those are the message received from world we live in that I was subjected to and conditioned to believe, but not views that I hold as fact or for others. I do believe that a lesbian can be fat and feminine and anything else. I don’t think I thought I could be fat and feminine at certain points, and it’s still something I think about at times.

How one performs his/her race, gender, and sexual orientation, alongside what shape and size his/her body is determined by the level of acceptance within American culture. For example, a light skinned black woman who is of average size (size 14) is more accepted within African American culture than a dark skinned black woman who is a size 28. In other words, ranking occurs across and within genders, races, ethnicities, classes, abilities, and so on.

The acceptance of fat bodies does in fact vary by community membership. One openly gay survey respondent states, “As a male, I feel that [fat shaming] is more directed at females. As a gay male, I feel [fat shaming] more than other [i.e., heterosexual] males, I think.” The survey respondent continues,

I wouldn’t feel comfortable dating someone who had a “fetish” for me because I am overweight. I try to find people who like me for me, and who would encourage me to have a healthier lifestyle and therefore lose weight.

Even though this individual speaks openly about the politics of fatness within his scope of the gay community, he is nevertheless unquestioning about the normative equation between health and weight. That said, his statement clarifies how fat shaming and fat acceptance operate differently for the members of these communities.

The closer an individual comes to the mythical norm, the more likely an individual is to be accepted within our culture. However, this mythical norm often compartmentalizes social and
cultural identities flattening the complexities of people’s lives and the ways in which their various identities intersect. To understand the complexities of people’s lives we must continually consider the ways in which their social and cultural identities intersect, including how those various identities are shaped historically, culturally, and socially, and how those identities position our worldview and in turn shape how we understand our own and other people’s fat bodies.

Diet-Talk and Constraint

Just recently I saw another Nutrisystem advertisement with Marie Osmond talking about what it is like to be fat. She looks at the camera and says, “You buy clothes with stretchy elastic. You wear your sweatpants because it’s more comfortable, and you don’t realize how out of control you get.” Later in the commercial she says, “My husband is awesome. He loves that I take care of myself and I love when he says, “You’re lookin’ hot.” This commercial implies not only am I out of control with my eating, if I am not taking care of myself my husband will no longer find me desirable. This commercial implies that as fat women we literally cannot control ourselves when it comes to eating and food. Second, it suggests that to remain desirable to our partners, we must remain or become thin. This also implies that our male partners are interested in us looking “hot” – and that this “hotness” is associated with being thin.

As a fat woman when I saw this and other NutriSystem commercials I could not help but think that Marie Osmond was speaking directly to me. I wrinkled my brow at how confused I was that she would say those things about me, things that were not true. I rolled my eyes at the notion that people buy into messages about how their bodies are broken down, unhealthy, undesirable, and must be changed. However, after a few days of thinking about the fat shaming messages from the NutriSystem commercial, I realized that even though I currently have no
desire to alter my body, especially with a diet program such as NutriSystem, I was still thinking about the commercial. I began to think about how I rolled my eyes at the notion that people buy into these messages, while I proceeded to carry around the very same fat shaming messages with me over the next few days, even while constantly thinking about how ridiculous the messages were. I was also thinking about how at one point in my own life I would have bought into the very same messages about my own body. After all, we all live within the same culture that oppresses bodies in various ways, whether through racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and fat shaming, so how could we possibly continuously, consciously, and consistently resist and/or ignore the messages we encounter that tell us our bodies must change?

Fat shaming positions fat people as automatically miserable, automatically unhealthy, and in desperate need of change; fat shaming stigmatizes fat(ness) as the worst thing a person can have and be. As shown below, many of my survey participants spoke about how fat shaming personally affects them. An anonymous responder to the survey, a thirty-nine-year-old, white, middle-class, lesbian responds to the question “In what ways does seeing fat shaming personally affect how you feel about yourself or your place in society?” stating “[Fat shaming] made me doubt my value as a person.” While another anonymous survey participant, a thirty-two-year-old white, middle-class, straight female, says “[Fat shaming] makes me feel like I don’t have a place in society...It makes me want to crawl into a hole and never come out, because at least then no one could look at me and be disgusted.” A self-identified thirty-one-year-old, white/Middle-Eastern, straight, female admitted that fat shaming nearly led her to suicide and it “certainly led me to self-harm.”

While these individuals report similar socioeconomic status and all are in their 30s, they are, of course, not the same; yet they have similar responses to how fat shaming affects them:
they feel devalued, subhuman, and not worthy of living. I feel it is important to note that these respondents are all women.

Notions of the fat body as in constant need of “betterment” is something many of my participants spoke about. Popular culture frames our fat bodies as something that must be temporary and that if only we tried, it would be so easy for us to “fix” our fat bodies. One thirty-two-year-old white female survey respondent, in response to the questions “What might have an impact on how you feel about your body on any given day” stated,

‘Diet’ talk at work – who's on a diet, who's losing weight, who wants to lose weight, etc…. Food commentary at work ‘good’ foods, ‘bad’ foods, co-workers saying ‘I shouldn't be eating this,’ complimenting others for eating ‘better,’ etc. Are my foods ‘good’ or ‘bad’? I must eat ‘bad’ foods because I'm fat? I honestly try to stay away from [print media] as much as possible at this point, as it just makes me crazy. But when you’re in line at the grocery store, you can't help but see five different articles on the ‘new miracle diet’ and at least one on celebrity cellulite. Facebook is filled with friends undertaking ‘diets, lifestyle changes, etc.’ with copious ‘before and after’ photos depicting how much weight the person has lost.

For this individual, encountering “diet-talk” in various situations (ranging from break rooms, to medical institutions, to the internet) had an impact on how she felt about her own fat body on any given day. As fat people, we experience comments about our bodies, our shape, and/or weight and for my participants it was common to encounter comments that situate their bodies as needing to change and that change usually meant becoming thinner. Many participants, mostly the women, spoke about how they were approached by people who had advice about diets, and weight loss, whether or not they invited such comments. Their larger bodies were automatically
thought to be in a need of change. For example, a 39-year-old, white, lesbian from Cleveland, when asked what might have an impact upon her body on any given day, responded, “…who I'm around (my work colleagues tease me and each other and engage in a lot of negative body/diet talk so my feelings about my body suffer).” A 32-year-old straight, white female from New Orleans expressed,

> Medical professionals feel like the most difficult to interact with of all. Regardless of what the issue is that brought you into the office, it seems like the appointment will always come to focus on your weight, in the end. It is frequently hard to bring myself to go to the doctor at all, and I frequently choose not to go in order to avoid these unhelpful conversations.

Unsolicited messages happen on a regular basis to people everywhere. The same way that thin people are often thought to be “health nuts” or to regularly diet and exercise, fat people are often thought to be regularly dieting as well or at the very least thinking about going on a diet, looking to lose weight, or to have body image issues and/or low-self-esteem. 22% of the survey respondents\textsuperscript{10} mentioned some kind of comment, or “body talk” can alter their mood on any given day, supporting that while individuals may not have self-esteem or body image issues at all times, their body image is in flux falling somewhere on a spectrum from positive to negative.

Mood alteration, for these participants, is not restricted to body-talk, but rather a combination of various external forces (fashion) and internal forces (health). Yet, these forces are not mutually exclusive. Genetics and external forces such as access to fresh produce, and environmental factors including proximity to toxic waste have an impact on health.

\textsuperscript{10} n=49
Carly, a 22-year-old white, cisgender, middle-class woman stated, “I would be fine with my body if others were. But, since I am consistently told to lose weight for various reasons, I feel less than.” A 20-year-old white cisgender female, queer from Rockford Illinois responded, “…if you're fat, you internalize that you're a joke, or you aren't worthy ‘till you lose weight. Even if you rationally know that's not true, it still gets you.” Not only are fat people represented as unhappy within their fat bodies, a fact that perpetuates negative discourse surrounding happiness and fat bodies, it also jeopardizes confidence for fat people. While a few people in the study expressed becoming unhappy with their bodies due to a constant barrage fat shaming messages and the consequential internalization of those fat shaming messages, one expressed the issues she feels fat people concerning the internalization of messages across her answers to numerous questions in the survey. This 20-year-old, white, cis, queer, female from Illinois revealed that

Most things that have impacted me are more internalized things – such as magazines, movies, TV shows, any given ad, conversations about food, etc. I never saw someone who looked like me growing up who wasn't made into the butt of a joke. Being a fat kid growing up, you internalize that you're a joke, and that being fat is wrong and somehow makes you worth less. It's something that's been reiterated constantly, every day. It makes liking yourself a challenge, because you're told you can't be likable unless you're skinny. It's hard to even shop for clothes without feeling depressed. I have a strange and terrible relationship with food, you're made to feel guilty about eating. It's terrible.

She reveals later in the survey when asked about how she feels when she sees fat shaming happening in television and/or film that she feels “Bad! Like I said, if you're fat, you internalize that you're a joke, or you aren't worthy till you lose weight. Even if you rationally know that's not true, it still gets you.” And furthermore, when asked how seeing fat shaming affects how she
feels personally she states, “It's hard to escape internalized negativity, especially since both you and everybody internalizes it. You're taught to not like yourself. “Fat” is used very negatively, like it's the worst thing you could be, instead of just the adjective it is.” As with the anonymous woman from Rockford, even when fat individuals want to embrace and celebrate their bodies it can be very difficult to do so in a culture that constantly barrages fat people with fat shaming messages.

Many of my participants spoke at length regarding issues of happiness, health, weight loss, body size, self-esteem, and their relationship to food. Reactions concerning food from participants in the survey varied from their expressing how food altered their mood, to feeling bad for extremely thin people in popular culture. Aundy expressed, “If I actually weigh myself that would directly impact how I feel all morning. If [the weight is] down, I will feel good, if [the weight is] up I will chastise myself for my food choices the day before and vow ‘to do better today.’” Abigail, a 31-year-old, white American female living in the United Kingdom stated that when she sees a person smaller than her, she feels bad. She states, “If she is dangerously underweight, I feel bad for her because I too have a fucked-up relationship with food.” In addition, Abigail said when she sees fat shaming it does affect her personally. She states, “It makes me feel like, because I'm fat, I deserve to be fat. Despite the fact that I actually eat healthy food most of the time, and don't drink much alcohol or surgery drinks. I don't deserve to look nice or feel attractive.” Becky, a 46-year-old, straight, white woman from Columbus, Georgia expressed when she sees fat shaming happening she finds it …really disturbing. To be honest, I have a fear of being fat. I think this came from having an overweight mother who lost a bunch of weight when I was young. Thankfully, I have
a decent relationship with my body and with food, but it bothers me that fat is scary to me.

One of the more complex reactions after watching the *Roseanne* clip came from Melissa. After watching the clip, Melissa spoke about how she relates to all the characters, from Roseanne to Dan, and to the children. She sees herself in each of them at different times in her life. She stated their experiences were all too familiar to her. I asked her what was familiar about them and she described how she feels pressure from people, popular culture, and society, and noted that by just *being* fat her body seems to invite comments about her body. She stated,

> From the beginning, people sharing their opinions and thoughts about your body with you and then immediately believing it. Immediately, it's confirming...you don't even have to think about it, or wonder if it makes sense, or how you feel, it's just ‘of course I'm fat and need to lose weight.’ Having friends backpedal and thinking that because you're in a relationship, or because you have a job, or a pretty face, or whatever, that one, comments don't affect you, or two, that your physical appearance does not matter in the world that we live in. All the way to going to immediately control everything in your environment: the people, the things, the food. I've thrown so much food away in my life because of that. Buying things, throwing things away, picking diet days, judging the people in my life whether it's my intimate partner, or my parents, and knowing what everyone needs to do in order to lose weight and this is a legitimate goal. Looking better and feeling better. She [Roseanne] said ‘We'll look better and feel better’ and you know it's like you can't separate them. Of course, when you lose weight it's for health, you'll be healthy.

Through her response, Melissa demonstrates the complexities of seeing and hearing messages about fat bodies within popular culture and interacting with them specifically surrounding food
and dieting, even if we do not want to actively engage with those messages. Melissa conveys a similar sentiment to the woman from Rockford. Even though individuals may not want to allow fat shaming messages to dictate how they feel, these messages still affect us. Melissa in particular attempts to grapple with various elements from the *Roseanne* clip that reproduce notions of weight loss, health, aesthetics, and often unfettered reactions fat people have to these messages, reactions that often come naturally because notions of happiness, health, and weight are so deeply embedded in our culture. As fat individuals, we cannot remove our self from the culture in which we live. The same way it took years to learn behavior(s), it takes years to unlearn detrimental behavior and that includes how fat people react to and engage with messages of fat shaming in popular culture.

Sociologist Jeannine Gailey touches on the struggles with attempting to embrace what she calls a “discredited identity” (147)\(^\text{11}\) in her work *The Hyper(In)Visible Fat Woman*. She states,

> The women who have begun to identify with the size acceptance’s ideology are beginning to overcome the self-loathing and hatred that they have dealt with for years, but it is still an extremely trying process. At one moment, they embody their fat and are working toward self-acceptance, yet at another, they struggle with the cultural messages and social forces that reinforce the hegemonic view that fat is unhealthy, unattractive, and something to lose at all costs. Fatphobia is entrenched in the discourse and institutionalization within North American culture (147).

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\(^{11}\) It is possible Gailey is spinning out of Goffman’s work in *Stigma* (1963) and the idea of a spoiled identity.
This discursive injunction to lose weight through dieting, specifically caloric intake, for health reasons, happens within popular culture on a regular basis. Marie Osmond (in a NutriSystem commercial), and Roseanne both say the phrase “you’ll feel better,” implying emotional betterment, physical betterment, and “you will also look better….”

Comments such as these do more than hurt fat people’s feelings. As Melissa points out comments can have real-world consequences for individuals. As an individual digests the often-unsolicited comments their bodies inadvertently solicit, they may begin wasting food, start a diet when they may not be ready or able to do so, and then potentially fail at it. They may also start linking health and the “beautiful” body, encouraging or even demanding family members, spouses, and/or partners participate in diets with them, as well as experience feelings of shame and disbelief, and lowered self-esteem. While eating well-balanced, healthy meals is not a bad thing, virtually all forms of “dieting” including but not limited to caloric intake restrictions, exercising to burn the same amount of calories one is taking in, and/or “fad” diets including certain weight loss supplements and only eating cabbage soup, have been proven to not work (Mann). In Traci Mann’s book *Secrets from the Eating Lab: The Science of Weight Loss, the Myth of Will Power, and Why You Should Never Diet Again* she explains that diets not only do not work, they often result in weight gain. Critiquing studies on weight loss, concepts of willpower, and examining biological as well as cultural aspects of “weight” and “weight loss” Mann stresses over and over “Diets don’t work” (1).

Betrayal: Fat Heroes on Diets

While participants did at times resist fat shaming in a variety of ways, ways that I will discuss in the next chapter, there were very few individuals with whom I spoke that had *fully embraced* their fat body. This inability to be satisfied with their body may stem from a lack of
representations of confident fat women in popular culture who not only embrace their fat(ness) but stay fat and don’t lose weight with the rise of their fame and celebrity.

Melissa spoke intimately about these widespread messages and how living in a fat shaming culture is something none of us can actively avoid. She spoke about how she feels when she sees representations of larger bodies in popular culture:

I live in this world and I feel persecuted against a lot of the time even though nobody is actively persecuting or shaming me...It's a constant issue. On one hand I feel great, I feel comforted and grateful, but they're [fat actors] just being themselves, but on the other hand I feel sad that we live in this world we live and I am also waiting for the other shoe to drop wondering, when the actor is going to go on their diet and lose their weight.

That's how it goes because the world is a gross place.

She trails off here, looking defeated. Melissa recognizes that although we may be seeing images of large bodies in popular culture, she constantly anticipates behaviors, mannerisms, comments, and conversations about their weight, or fat shaming to happen and for that individual who is fat to go on a diet and lose weight. I started to think about Melissa McCarthy and how she has been losing a lot of weight now that she can prove she can carry a movie and it does not have to be linked to her weight, as in her film, Spy. Jennifer Hudson is another example of an actress who found fame through her voice, but over time lost weight (and became a spokesperson for Weight Watchers) to be more marketable in her roles. When a celebrity loses weight, it may be portrayed as for their health and wellbeing, but it seems when this happens the message becomes clear: when celebrities diet they perpetuate the recursive spiral of body norms governing what is right, moral, healthy, beautiful, thereby propelling fat shaming.
Fat people in popular culture, however, have always had fluctuating weight. In Bernstein and St. John’s work they discuss how celebrity icons that are fat, such as Roseanne, Ricki Lake, Oprah, and Carnie Wilson, eventually succumb to cultural pressure and lose weight, thereby in essence betraying their fans that might be admiring them because they are fat. The authors’ use the notion of “Celebrity Wasting Syndrome”\textsuperscript{12} to situate their argument stating,

For the fat viewer already feeling demonized for their [sic] size, it can be demoralizing never seeing anyone who resembles them portrayed as normal. To add insult to injury, many female celebrities who once picked up the torch for fat girl pride are putting it down. The Hollywood epidemic of gastric bypass surgery is helping to fuel a string of celebrity defections from “fat and proud” to “thin and repentant” (263).

Melissa agrees with this notion of celebrity wasting syndrome saying,

Then you have Rebel Wilson who is the good fat. She's the good fat because she talks about that she's fat and there's the hint: you know Rebel's going to lose weight soon, she's going to be on Jenny Craig soon, you hear it in some of her comments and I'm just like man that's so disappointing...I think \textit{Pitch Perfect 3}\textsuperscript{13} will be Fat Amy has Bariatric surgery.

For myself, and in this case, Melissa, we are anticipating the weight loss. Not only do we anticipate that the story will be based around her character’s fat, or that the fat will be the joke, that the fat(ness) has to be funny, we also anticipate being betrayed by our fat icons. Melissa,\textsuperscript{12} This term may have originated in Marilyn Wann’s book \textit{Fat? So!} \textsuperscript{13} Melissa is referring to a third installment of the \textit{Pitch Perfect} films; \textit{Pitch Perfect}. Directed by Jason Moore, Universal, 2012. DVD, and \textit{Pitch Perfect 2}. Directed by Elizabeth Banks, Universal, 2015. DVD.
myself, and many fat women know and anticipate the cultural script: individuals who are fat cannot be fat and happy.

The anticipation is an important feeling here. As fat people, we are let down even before anything happens because of the ways fat people are both represented and treated within popular culture. When we anticipate the inevitable weight loss of fat people in popular culture our own confidence surrounding our fat bodies is situated as also being in limbo, and in flux; our weight is then felt by us and recognized by others as always in progress.

When fat people are given these messages, we fat people not only see images that represent an unattainable mythical norm concerning body size, shape and weight, we also feel these messages. Images and messages make us angry, sad, frustrated, happy, and relieved and once we process the image (should we do so) we often subvert, ignore, rationalize, accept, and/or resist the messages. We experience and engage with all these emotions and reactions often at the same time, sometimes finding ourselves wanting to ignore the messages but becoming frustrated by them, and even using these messages to practice self-harm, self-hate, and other damaging emotional, physical, and mental harm.

Fashionable Constraints

Virtually every female participant spoke about fashion and clothing, shopping, and/or having to deal with finding clothes that fit their bodies in some way. In addition, almost 39%\textsuperscript{14} of survey respondents said how their clothes look, how they fit, or how they feel in their clothes will have an impact on how they feel. A 20-year-old, straight white female from Charlottesville states, “The clothes I wear and how I feel in them has a pretty big impact on the way I feel about my body (if I had to change because something was too small then I'll feel more frustrated with

\textsuperscript{14} n=49
my body).” Laura, a 54-year-old, white, straight, female who is a Sociology Professor from South Carolina stated, “I always wear comfy clothes, because I've learned that otherwise too much of my energy goes to feeling self-conscious.” Samaa, a 38-year-old, bisexual, African American female from Portland, Maine said, “How my clothes happen to look on me that day. I try to avoid checking my outfits in a full-length mirror if I'm feeling particularly sensitive that day.” Aundy, the 36-year-old straight, white, female from Bowling Green, Ohio said,

I used to be attracted to a much more “styled out” look- for example, vintage and expressive – but now that I am heavier, I look for clothing that cover up the imperfections – large shirts so my rolls don't show- pants that are too big so I don't have a muffin top. Right now, I have been wearing the same stupid pair of dress pants every single day because they are the only pants that are comfortable and I feel confident in. I refuse to buy new pants that fit because I know the emotional tailspin involved in buying the next bigger size.

Liz, a 35-year-old, white straight female from St. Louis said,

I don't know how to describe my style. I like things that I feel good in, so I won't wear shoes or clothes that don't feel comfortable. I have a large belly that I am not comfortable drawing attention to, so I try to dress in a way that balances my body with this large tummy. I am drawn to lots of kinds of clothing, but my closet is mostly full of sleeveless shirts, cardigans, dresses, skirts and slacks. I hate anything that binds or is movement restricting, like blazers, or really structured clothing, but I also hate clothes that just hang on me or that make me feel like I'm wearing a tent or a mumu. I'd rather my jiggly bits show than be wearing a “tent.” I love bright colors, funky geometric patterns and layers.
In addition to these comments, one participant\textsuperscript{15} spoke about crying in dressing rooms when she goes shopping and how it is not as much as the movies make it out to be. Kristen spoke about the segregation of plus-size clothing from straight size clothing and how that is just another way that large bodies are marked as other, different, and excluded from general society. She states,

\begin{quote}
I almost wish there didn't need to be a plus-size category…I wish you could go to a clothing store and go to the same section as everyone else and just find the clothes that are in those sizes. Why does there need to be clothing that is up to size 16 or 17 and then a size, other clothing that starts at 18? It's awkward. I mean sometimes it is awkward to go into a store and to have to walk over to the plus size section and you think to yourself “Gosh I don't feel plus size all the time.”
\end{quote}

At this point in the interview, she visibly moves around, turns a little red, puts her hand on the side of her cheek apparently upset by the thought of walking to a separate section of the store. She continues, “I don't know, I just wish manufactures could make clothing that is those higher sizes and not have to \textit{categorize} you separately for it.” Her hands are moving at this point. She has not moved much the entire interview and now she becomes more animated, moving her hands as she speaks and emphasizing words like “categorize.”

Plus-size clothing sections in stores are a metaphor for larger bodies; like the segregated sections for our clothes, we don’t fit in, we are not worthy of being included with the general population; instead, we are to be placed in a corner thereby be reminded that we are different, we are marked, we are other. We are both visible in our fatness and invisible. Again, Gailey’s work on hyper(in)visibility is useful here when thinking about what makes these binaries so robust and seemingly innate rather than socially constructed. Gailey explains,

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{15} This participant wished to remain anonymous.\end{flushleft}
Fat presents an *apparent* paradox because it is visible and dissected publicly; in this respect, it is *hypervisible*. Fat is also marginalized and erased; in this respect, it is *hyperinvisible*.... To be hyper(in)visible means that a person is sometimes paid exceptional attention and is sometimes exceptionally overlooked, and it can happen simultaneously (7, original emphasis).

Jerri, someone whom I consider to be very in touch with her body and size, as well as very conscious of the influences of culture on how she is able to feel about and understand her body, still self-surveilles. When I interviewed Jerri, who identified as a 34-year-old, straight, white woman from Toledo, Ohio, she spoke about her body in very intimate ways as if she was very in tune with her own body and what it is capable of doing. I think that one reason she is so in tune with her body is because she is burlesque dancer. In addition, she spoke very plainly and clearly about the impact culture on how she feels about her body. In addition, Jerri approached her own and other people’s identities in nuanced ways, often incorporating a variety of identities when she spoke about issues of social justice. She understands what it means to look fashionable, even within her fat body. She expresses that certain supposedly plus-size labels do not flatter her body and that it becomes easy to think, “If I just lost some weight…” but as she continues it is apparent that she understands how the media influences individuals into thinking that losing weight would make like easier. She expresses,

Isn't everything portrayed in the media what the ideal is? Even if you look at Lane Bryant's “I am no angel” plus size lingerie, even those plus size women were hourglass shaped, flat belly, and so we still see that and [takes a big sigh] still not even the right kind of plus size. It shapes that because it shows us what our ideas are. And it gets hard sometimes because there are things that don't flatter me when they're supposed to be plus
size. And the other thing is the absolute limited plus size apparel which kind of makes you feel like maybe if I just lost some weight I could go to the store and just buy something instead of having to look online and take my measurements every three weeks and hope for the best. And there's still kind of that, fat shaming happening in the media. It happens all the time. I think it's easier in the media...I want to say depending on my mood and how I'm feeling that day it's easier in the media for me to ignore because I'll just change the station put the book down, whatever.

Even though as fat people we are often on the receiving end of judgments such as these and we know how it feels to be judged, the fact that we too assess others’ bodies proves the power that culture has on shaping attitudes: even though we do not want to be judged for our size and what we look like, we often judge others, particularly for how they dress. Foucault’s deployment of the panopticon metaphor is useful here. Akin to Bentham’s institutional panopticon, Foucault’s metaphorical panopticon works as an internal judge in our own minds that rigidly surveils ourselves and others, often unconsciously, due to the persistence of repeated cultural messages. Many of my participants spoke about how Melissa McCarthy’s character in the *Bridesmaids* clip looked masculine, and they criticized her clothing saying such things as button downs do not look good on big girls, or pointing out how terrible her slacks looked on her. Some participants brought up how frumpy Roseanne looked in the episode clip. Thus, even while these participants feel constrained by the social sanctions for fat bodies, they too participate in fostering negative surveillance of other fat bodies and ultimately reproduce hegemonic beauty standards. However, the wardrobes for both Roseanne and Melissa McCarthy may signify the limited options for fat women.
We know, as people who exist in a culture obsessed with physical appearance, how important clothing and fashion is. When someone is “doing it wrong” we judge him/her based on his/her appearance. So, as fat people we know that people are judging us based on how we are dressed (especially if we have not put forth much effort to look good) so fashion and dress takes on special importance given how the world thinks about us as fat people. When we dress, we fat women might ask, are we being too masculine? Or similarly, we might ask are we being feminine enough?

Scholars have pointed out how individuals do their gender and how various institutions (re)produce gendered identities. The performativity of gender has been explored by scholars through exploring the social constraints socially imposed by the binary of masculine/feminine (c.f. Butler, West and Zimmerman). Cassandra challenged notions and representations of the strictly masculine or feminine gender performance when she said the following: “And then also in terms of being mannish, you see either very glamorous women who are heavy or very butch or just have more masculine characteristics, but never a good combination of both [glamor and masculine].” At the same time, Cindy, a white woman and mother and wife in her mid-40s, spoke about how she did not identify with Angie’s character in 30 Rock because she was too feminine and Cindy stated she could never dress that way in “real life.” As a culture, we accept degrees of femininity and masculinity, but too much, too little, or any kind of combination remains undesirable.

Scholars such as Sobal and Maurer, and Bordo have examined how popular culture (re)shapes masculinity and femininity in American culture. These ideas are borne out by the individuals with whom I spoke. They specifically discussed how they feel the constricting

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16 Pseudonym for participant
notions of masculinity and femininity and what it means to know their fat bodies fit (or do not fit) within these social constrictions. For some, being feminine is something they desire, and yet they felt constricted as to what kinds of “femininity” they as fat women have access. For example, clothing was a recurrent topic during most of my interviews. Fashion has remained a central part of popular culture from “Best Costume Design” at the Academy Awards to “Who Wore It Best?” articles in People magazine. Movies such as The Devil Wears Prada even feature fashion at the center of an industry deeply rooted in our culture. Fashion is, without a doubt, a central part of Western popular culture and shapes facets of image, beauty, and style.

For some women, their use of clothing is how they express their gender. For example, in Iris Marion Young’s essay “Women Recovering Our Clothes” she explores what it means to subvert messages of domination and oppression within the patriarchy using imagination and aesthetic freedom, specifically through clothing and how women subvert clothing into powerful messages of liberation. Yet they feel limited in their ability to conform to cultural standards of femininity. As I have shown in this section, women expressed their frustration with not being able to be feminine enough within the confines of their fat bodies. Some participants spoke about how clothing in particular hindered their ability to perform their femininity. Again, Aundy expressed that,

Modern TV is the worst, especially reality television and television revolving around “powerful” women. Really? I have to wear heels to be taken seriously? I have to wear a tiny dress in order to be heard? I have to have my hair just perfect and my makeup flawless to be given respect? I have to be feminine AND beautiful, because if I'm not then I must not be straight, must not “care” about myself, or the way people see me.
A 39-year-old white, heterosexual female Professor from Wisconsin spoke powerfully in her survey response about how popular culture influences how she feels about fashion, especially concerning “professionalism”:

I was addicted to one show with a wonderful actress who is considered “plus-size.” The show was *Drop Dead Diva*, and I loved it, partly because the character dressed professionally, in well-fitted suits. I liked the reminder that no matter what body you have, you can find ways to accentuate it and feel not only comfortable and confident, but stylish. I think people often forget how important clothing fit and tailoring is, no matter their physical size.

These kinds of responses signify, to me, that fat women want to be fashionable, desired, and sexy in their current bodies. They appear to want to feel comfortable in their own bodies, but nevertheless feel constrained by the fashion industry and the limited options for fat women. It is important to recognize issues of professionalism, size, and gender, especially when it comes to women because cultural expectations surrounding women and fashion are higher. For example, in many career sectors, “business professional” dress is essential, and sometimes required. At my former job, we were required to dress in what they deemed “business professional” clothing while at work, and at events where we represented the company. Business professional often means suits and ties for men, and pantsuits, dresses, and/or skirts and high-heels for women. If one does not already possess a wardrobe full of business clothing, it can be an expensive investment. Women are expected to wear something different all five days of the workweek, where men’s outfits do not garner the same amount of surveillance. Men can, for example, wear the same suit two or three times in a week with a different shirt and/or tie. An example of men
not being as surveilled as women was demonstrated when a male Australian News Anchor wore the same suit for 365 days and no one commented on it. According to the *Huffington Post*, Co-host of the Australian morning news show “Today,” Stefanovic became frustrated with the unsolicited fashion advice and appearance-based criticisms viewers regularly offered his female co-presenter, Lisa Wilkinson. He then decided to conduct an experiment. He wore the same blue suit on air every day for a year, and, as the TV personality revealed to Fairfax Media, absolutely nobody said a thing“ (Karlin).

Fashion is part of gender expression and when a fat woman does not conform to notions of femininity in the socially sanctioned ways she is devalued both for not conforming to gender norms, but also for not conforming to weight/size and body norms as well.

Of course, such questions derive from a heteronormative, cisgender way to think about clothing and gender performativity. Thinking about gender in binary terms (male/female) and only seeing representations of heterosexual love, intimacy, and representations in popular culture further propagates compulsory heterosexuality and removes spaces of inclusion for people who identify outside the binary of male/female. In addition, by erasing entire groups of people within popular culture, the erasure of understanding and empathy is also removed from our culture. Understanding what it is and what it means to *be* a woman through only notions of masculinity and femininity is detrimental to individuals and groups of people who do not feel (n)either masculine/feminine.

My participants expressed the idea that negotiating messages about weight is complicated. Doing so entails a combination of both evaluating the meanings and judgments coming from popular culture as well as evaluating their lived experience. These factors shape
how they feel about their own and other people’s bodies. For example, the professor from Wisconsin said,

It's a shame that men and women over a certain weight seem to dress nearly identically (large knit shirts and shorts without accessories). If the only clothes you can find that fit you and are affordable are baggy and shapeless, it probably reinforces the idea that society doesn't consider your size and shape normative (or professional), which cannot be good for anyone's confidence.

Clearly it is more than just movies and television that have an impact on our affect. Hence, my reason for focusing on popular culture rather than just “media.” Fashion is part of popular culture and can make us feel good, bad, and/or ugly. We are constrained literally by how our clothing fits (too tight, cuts into our bellies, too small) and the fashions available to us, and figuratively by how society judges our fashion choices. As fat people, we cannot shop just anywhere; we must find stores that carry plus-size clothing. We have to try on sizes that range from 16 to 24 because actual fit is inconsistent with the sizing labels; we have to walk to the back or side of the store and we do not get to see the clothing on mannequin bodies that look like us.

Fat(ness), Constraint, and Relationships

Relationships are complicated. Representations in popular culture often oversimplify these complexities reducing men down to sex-fiends and women are only there to be objectified. What we believe others see in us, understand about us, appreciate and even love is an important part of a relationship. How these thoughts are shaped can come from numerous external sources including popular culture with its penchant for oversimplifying romance and love between two (often) straight, white, thin couples.
Melissa was not the only person I interviewed who recognized how living in a fat body and how outside factors, interactions, and influences can strain relationships. Another participant, Cassandra, spoke about watching television with her boyfriend and how she would think about how he must be gazing upon the thin female bodies on the screen, desiring them, and then how it has an impact on her self-esteem. Cassandra states, “When I'm with my boyfriend...I'm picking up on ‘Oh this woman is so beautiful,’ like I wonder if he thinks she is attractive and I'm not, I don't look like her, is he thinking ‘Oh I wish she looked like her,’ things like that.” Later in the interview Cassandra elaborated on her feelings stating, I'd like to see more regular bodies, more cellulite on legs, more stretch marks, and realistic images because I think that's the hardest thing. That's what has bled over into my feelings in my relationship because even though my boyfriend is supportive and is never telling me ‘you're unattractive’ or ‘I wish you looked like this woman on TV,’ I feel like it still affects me and makes me think about it. It hurts our relationship because that's a thing that I'm insecure about like, ‘Oh you're seeing my body which doesn't look like these beautiful women on TV’, or the women that you have been primed to think are sexually attractive, who are in porn.’ This is the standard that guys are seeing and expecting. ‘How can you possibly find me attractive when you're seeing these other images?’ You are basically being sold to think that is the ideal. Cassandra struggles with notions of how she thinks her boyfriend must feel about the women on television and in porn. She struggles with how she believes he compares her body to their bodies and she believes, therefore, that he could not possibly be interested in her body, even though she described her boyfriend as “supportive.” Her comments exemplify the dynamics of the Foucauldian panopticon. Her fears may be all in her head. Her boyfriend has said nothing but she
fears her boyfriend desires these “other” women. She has internalized the norms so much that she cannot even imagine him not feeling this way.

Even if a person does not act on or out concerning his or her judgments of other bodies, internal messages of wanting to police someone else’s body can be detrimental to one’s psyche. Through cultural and social constructions of the body, we have learned how to treat the fat body, how to treat the thin body, how to treat the female body, the black body, and so on. In doing so we also learn how to engage with other bodies. Melissa said, “I don’t live in the magazine, I don’t read that crap, but I still have to exist.” We all do. Even when we want to resist fat shaming messages, when we do not want to engage with messages about how bodies are supposed to look, we still have to exist here, in this place/space. The messages that we encounter about bodies, even when implicit, are virtually endless. From all aspects of popular culture, we receive and then interpret messages about bodies. However, for the individuals here that interpretation bleeds over into their understanding of their partners, ultimately affecting their relationships with others.

**Fat Love**

In films, fat women are rarely the *romantic lead*. As discussed by participants, this lack of representations as fat, loving, and deserving of love makes fat people feel certain ways about their own bodies and the role they play in their own romantic (or lack thereof) lives. Becky, the straight, white, female from Columbus, Georgia said, when asked how which medium (television or film) has more influence over how she feels about her body, “Romantic comedies tend to showcase women with perfect bodies (or at least they make them appear that way), so that's not always the best influence.” Aundy elaborates how seeing people larger than herself in popular culture makes her feel. She states,
I am usually annoyed when I see previews for movies involving “larger” women—specifically those with Melissa McCarthy because the previews always seem like she's playing an idiot. Like, because she's fat she has to be weird and wacky and disorganized and sarcastic. She can't be the romantic lead; she has to – for some reason – be goofy as if her fatness only allows her to make a fool of herself. Same with Rebel Wilson. On TV I honestly don't notice larger women. They just aren't there or I'm not noticing they are there because they are never the powerful character or the beautiful lusted after character. If they are there they are in the background, insignificant, quiet. If they do have a speaking roll they are the comedic relief as if a fat woman's only redeeming quality is to make fun of herself or be goofy or funny.

A 52-year-old, white, cisgender, straight female from Fort Collins, Colorado when asked “When you see a person on TV &/or in a film who is above average weight and/or larger than yourself, how do you feel?” expressed, “I am especially annoyed when the idea of sex or romance involving fat people is treated as ridiculous or non-existent. I would love to see more heavy characters treated as people with a full range of emotions and experiences, as they are in real life.” Katrina, a 27-year-old, straight, white, female from Napoleon when asked the same question responded,

I see them as unattractive and more comedic than anything else. The actress, Melissa McCarthy comes to mind. I don't enjoy watching overweight actors (male or female) being romantic, because I feel like it isn't real. I feel like the other actor is disgusted by having to perform this.
A 34-year-old, white, cisgender, heteroflexible,\textsuperscript{17} female who is also a University Instructor in Women’s and Gender Studies in South Carolina, when asked about feelings she has had while watching a television show and/or film, responded,

There's a steamy sex scene in an episode of \textit{Carnival} featuring a large woman and that made me feel very good about my body. It made me feel like I was capable of being loved and it gave me confidence in lovemaking. It's pretty rare to see a plus-size woman in a sex scene, usually if they have romantic partners the sex is only kind of implied.

Many of my participants expressed frustration and sadness that a fat leading character could also not be in a romantic relationship, and when one is in a romantic relationship, such as Melissa McCarthy at the end of \textit{Bridesmaids}, that character is portrayed as a hyper-sexual man-eater, for example, done again for comedic effect. Even when Melissa McCarthy might be the center of attention, or even the lead, she is either asexualized, or hyper-sexualized through humor, thereby reinforcing a stereotype about fat women. Melissa McCarthy’s characters have often adopted the paradox of being \textit{either} hypersexual (Megan in \textit{Bridesmaids}) or nonsexual (Tammy in \textit{Tammy}).\textsuperscript{18}

Gailey explains the effects of this conundrum:

To view fat women as both hypersexual and nonsexual suggests an interesting paradox...the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility positions fat women at these two extremes. In other words, fat women are relegated by the culture and relegate themselves, through the embodiment of fat hatred, to the status of hyper(in)visible” (112)

\textsuperscript{17} Heteroflexibility is the notion that some same-sex romantic, sexual, and/or inclination is present in an individual’s sexual orientation, but it is very slight (Diamond).

\textsuperscript{18} One possible change in this binary is the film \textit{Spy} starring Melissa McCarthy. She is attracted to the FBI agent (played by Jude Law), however she is portrayed as neither hyper, nor asexual in this film. In my opinion, it is a more realistic portrayal of love, sexuality, and romance by a fat woman.
Fat people in popular culture are constrained into a certain kind of persona: a persona that is not to be taken seriously, a persona that is asexual/non-romantic or hyper-sexual and because of her size, her desires are to be seen as anathema; moreover, she is a person who must constantly acknowledge her weight as an issue and something she needs to work on.

Such representations affect fat people’s self-perceptions. Many participants expressed that they were not deserving of love because they were fat, thereby acknowledging their acceptance of the cultural and social constructions of fat(ness) presented in popular culture. Many participants felt popular culture constrained their ability to be viewed as romantic, and to be deserving of love and romance. When asked what roles he would like to see larger people in, Chad, a black man, said, “Action adventure, drama, and romantic love. Plus, like once you learn people are together holding hands, it is like they're happy, they love each other, cherish each other. Love's love.” Jerri, a cisgender heterosexual white woman stated,

Further, why are we not represented as aside from Mike and Molly, as love interests? There was this poet on Facebook, her video was going around, but she was talking about being fat and beautiful and one of the things her theater director told her was that you will never play a love interest. And this really hit home to me. She said why can we suspend our imaginations enough to think that birds will come in our house and fold our laundry but a fat girl being loved is…we can't fathom that.

When we do get fleshed out, amazing, strong, female characters that happen to be fat, these representations resonate with audience members. Melissa discusses how she and her partner talked about how Melissa McCarthy’s weight is not an issue in her new film, Spy:

It's always a huge deal when fat people are in movies, when fat is not the thing. In Spy that was totally the case. I'm glad to see her, or any fat person on screen, I'm happy to see
diversity, minorities, people with disabilities, racial diversity, sexual diversity, etc. but as I identify in the fat group I am just waiting for that to be the joke because that's what we're here for. *Spy* was awesome like that. There was a little bit about her appearance and not getting this guy, but not really. It was not about her weight it was just kind of like this guy is so cool, he's like James Bond, he's too cool for everyone, but not like you're fat and ugly. So, it wasn't like you're fat and ugly so you would never get that cute guy. It's like he's so hot, no one can get that guy. That was it. And she was awesome and it was never a thing and in that movie, her character, *she* got the guy; she does these cool things without it being a big deal.

For Melissa, it was important to see a fat actress in a role where not only is her weight not the focus of her character, it is never even mentioned. However, I would argue that her weight is still a part of her character. Her weight as a downfall is implied because Melissa’s character never quite believes she could get the guy and we assume she believes that because he is super cool and she is fat, and while her fatness is not talked about specifically she is portrayed as “goofy” or again, the funny fat friend. We, as audience members, are poised throughout the film to assume that she could never get Jude Law’s character because he is portrayed as a perfect, male beauty. At the end of the film however, the notion that she could not get Jude Law is transcended because she does get him and she turns him down.

I have also seen the movie *Spy* and I had similar feelings to Melissa. Throughout the entire movie I waited with bated breath for someone to mention her weight, for her weight to somehow get in the way of her action scenes, for her weight to make her less capable, or for her weight to become the butt of a joke, and none of this happened explicitly. However, the
implications of her (non)relationship with Jude Law, and the portrayal of her at the beginning of the film as goofy and kind of unkempt, implies her fatness is the reason for all this.

Simultaneously however, her character is not only an action hero (fat action heroes were also something my male participants mentioned as missing in popular culture) but she is a complicated character in that she has to learn how to be a secret agent and is successful at it; she is a friend and partner, and at the end of the film, she chooses friendship over the guy (Jude Law) signifying that she does not need a man in her life. When McCarthy’s character walks away from Law’s advances in the film, a man she had been lusting after for years, the character’s rejection of him was as important to me as it was for Melissa; she got the guy and she had the agency to no longer need or want him. Melissa McCarthy’s character was neither hyper nor asexual within the movie; she was neither weight obsessed nor incapable within the movie. While the explicit fat shaming messages were not there, this remains a pyrrhic victory because they were still bubbling right under the surface. Nonetheless, for me at least, Spy broke some of the molds that fat women have been bound within for so many years within popular culture. Moreover, it was successful at doing so, for it opened at number one and grossed over one hundred and ten million dollars (“Box Office/Business for Spy”). This perhaps indicates that people’s concerns about representations of fat women in popular culture are being heard, or someone perhaps Melissa McCarthy is using her star power to shift representations.

In the case of Spy, I experienced Melissa McCarthy’s character to be a positive representation of a fat woman. However, I could also argue that by discussing the character as an active, action hero type character with fight scenes, I am also implying that it is surprising that a fat person could “be” such a thing. It seems, therefore, that while we appreciate representations of fat people portrayed as they are in Spy, we simultaneously (re)producing discourse around
capability. However, considering the representations of fat women I have encountered in popular culture, it should be unsurprising that I am enamored by Spy.

Melissa spoke about how fat people are often positioned as not deserving of love and that it is difficult for people to think they could be in meaningful relationships. Perhaps this expectation stems from a lack of romantic roles for fat people, in concert with how femininity and masculinity are shaped through popular culture, fashion, and who routinely has access to “correct” gender performances. So, for example, thin women have more access to clothing and accessories that help them perform acceptable cultural standards of femininity and they also have access to more messages and representations of what appropriate behavior with their kinds of bodies is concerning femininity. I state earlier hegemonic norms (regardless of what “kind” they are) have an impact on how individuals understand and value themselves. Popular culture has in part so rigidly shaped how we can be and feel as individuals that to fall outside of those norms and/or boundaries makes individuals feel devalued and incapable of being their authentic selves.

Conclusion

Fat bodies are almost always viewed in everyday life as well as in popular culture as repulsive, abject, and undesirable. We fat people are inculcated through social conditioning to think negatively about our fat bodies because to be fat and happy is regarded as abnormal. Moreover, the implication is that we should be working toward a thin goal, toward the better goal, toward society’s idea of what we should be. We (dis)invite comments about our bodies from people we know and from strangers. As fat people, we find ourselves unable to perform our masculinity or femininity (or anything in between or a combination of) in ways that culture finds acceptable whether through fashion, success, or love and romance. Cultural constructions of our bodies as abject, immoral, and raced, classed, and gendered constrain our abilities as fat people
to be viewed and treated as whole human beings, as people who are at the best of times, not just a “pretty face.”

Clearly, the fat person is shrouded within a network of social and cultural constraints. What we fat people do about living within this situation is important to consider if breaking this network of constraints is to occur. As this chapter has revealed, feelings of constraint are real and have real-world consequences. So, the question arises: what can we do about it? In the next chapter, I discuss how my participants actively resist fat shaming messages constructed by popular culture and (re)produced through popular culture.
CHAPTER TWO: NEGOTIATING CONSTRAINT

Recursive Experiences with Resistance

Our negotiations with and feelings about our bodies are not linear; they are recursive. There are moments when those of us in both fat and non-fat bodies feel more comfortable and there are situations when we feel uneasy within our own bodies. There are moments when we are proud of our bodies, and there are moments when we are feel shameful about our bodies. For us, there are moments when we accept fat shaming messages, and there are moments when we resist.

Within the discourse of Fat Studies there has been some discussion on strategies for resisting fat shaming messages and for transgressing the socio-cultural boundaries placed on fat bodies (cf. LeBesco, Braziel and LeBesco, Sobal and Maurer). Something that is missing from the current literature however, are personal stories from individuals about their resistance. People’s lives are complex and messy at times and how individuals resist fat shaming messages in various facets of their lives can shift from moment to moment and from space to space. This chapter explores how people resist what I consider to be very purposefully placed and reinforced fat shaming messages.

Resistance and Social Identities

Resistance happens in a variety of ways. Individual experiences of resistance vary as well. For example, Abi, a 35-year-old straight, white graduate student resisted the stigma that was placed upon her fat body in many aspects of her life including her dating world, travel, and her assumed (in)ability to do things. Abi resists general fat shaming by claiming, I’m not going to sit at home and feel sorry for myself because of what my weight is. I know there are things that someone might tell me I can’t do but I’m going to travel and
have fun and live my life. That’s an overall sort of resistance. I know friends who are like I’m going to have a new body. I’m not going to go out until I lose weight. Or I’m not going to do this until I get my new body…I’m like I am not going to do that. I am going to go out with my friends and do whatever I want…I don’t want to have say ‘until I do this,’ ‘until I am skinny again,’ or ‘lose ten pounds,’ or ‘fit into such and such size.’

For Abi, it was important to resist the stigma that if a person is fat he/she should stay home, stay hidden, and “work” on his/her body until it fits the ideal size, shape, and weight. She is resisting the implication that only once fat people have lost weight are they “allowed” to move around in the world.

It goes without saying that race, gender, and class intersect to create opportunities for some, while limiting others. Abi could resist the stigmatization of her weight in these ways perhaps in part because of the social privilege that comes with being white and having the money to travel. Resistance strategies such as Abi’s may not be accessible to all individuals of various positionalities. It is important to note that individual identity affects how much resistance one can muster. For Abi, a white woman, choosing to “live her life” and being able to focus on having fun may not be an option for women of color, for example. In Kathleen LeBesco’s book Revolting Bodies, she states,

Statistics from the Center for Disease Control that show that the highest proportions of overweight people are African American women (49.5%) and Mexican American women (47.9%) support Richard Klein’s (a French Professor at Cornell who in recent years has shifted his scholarship to American eating habits, the origins of words associated with fat(ness), and dieting) assertion that ‘you get fatter in this country as you get poorer, thinner as you get richer...’ (LeBesco citing Klein 35).
One of LeBesco’s points is that women of color who are overweight/obese are more likely to be poor, and being poor can mean that priorities are different than people who are not poor. According to the University of Maryland Medical Center, being African American means you are more likely to receive lower wages than one’s Caucasian counterpart, and lower wages cause stress and stress related illnesses (“Stress”). Therefore, notions like Abi has for travel and “having fun” may not be a priority in the lives of women of color. Perhaps then, resistance in Abi’s particular way (traveling, for example) cannot and/or does not happen for some individuals who are people of color or indeed for anyone who is poor.

Gender also plays a role in people’s ability to resist fat shaming in American culture. Men, traditionally, are “allowed” to gain weight later in life where women are expected to remain fit, and thin. There are numerous examples in popular culture of larger adult men’s bodies being represented and thereby implicitly deemed socially acceptable over larger adult women’s bodies, for example in television shows such as *The King of Queens,* and *According to Jim.* Tina Fey’s character, Liz Lemon, even explicitly mentions this idea on her show, *30 Rock,* when she states, “How come men can be heavy and be respected? Like James Gandolfini or Fat Albert” (“Jack Gets in the Game”).

My overall point here is to note that while sometimes subtle and sometimes not, people’s abilities to resist fat shaming messages can vary based on their social identities such as race, and gender. For Clitha, a black woman, her resistance was to simply embrace and embody the term “fat.” Clitha states, “I purposely use ‘fat’ in resistance to [negative] ideas: ideas which say that as soon as we identify as endomorph, individuals who have propensity towards body fat, it’s a bad thing.” For Clitha being an athlete positions her to claim the term fat without (as much) consequence as perhaps a non-athlete because she understands athletes are valued in our culture.
Clitha actively resists notions that fat is a “bad word” and uses her athletic background to situate her fat as something positive, natural, and part of who she is.

Here, because of Clitha’s athletic background, she can claim a different kind of fat body, one that is fat and athletic, which is culturally more acceptable. So, again, one of Clitha’s identities allows her to resist fat shaming in a different way than a non-athletic person, a person without the same knowledge and experiences of Clitha, can.

Resisting Diet Culture

Cultural theorist John Storey recognizes that while consumers have agency it does not mean that cultural institutions are not attempting to shape normative behaviors and (reproduce hegemonic norms. Storey states, “…to deny that consumers are cultural dupes is not to deny that culture industries seek to manipulate” (53). While people, fat and thin alike, often accept negative messages about the fat body as the norm, as I have shown in chapter one, people also recognize how incredulous it is to fully accept them.

While most of my participants mentioned they had dieted at some point in their lives, only Garret mentioned that he was currently on a diet. In fact, some, such as Abi and Cindy, expressed their refusal to engage in dieting, strenuous exercise, or shaping their body through wearing shapewear. While messages in advertising, movies, film, television, and magazines perpetuate the idea that dieting is the “answer” to all our problems as fat people, there are those of us who resist.

Abi specifically takes a strong stance by refusing to diet, and in going to the gym in tight clothing as acts of resistance. She states, “[I do not participate in] extreme dieting.” However, she does reveal that,
…my options were I could do something like Weight Watchers, which I enjoyed. I enjoyed it because I connected with people and the accountability of going [in] and weighing in, and writing stuff down, helps me. When I did it alone and online it didn't work. I liked the people I was meeting with. Now I make almost no money and can't afford to do it. Or you can do these shakes and eat like 800 calories in a day, and I'm like ‘That sounds miserable and no I don't want to do that.’ Or a weight loss surgery. I know I'm of a weight where I qualify for weight loss surgery, but I'm not unhealthy except for my weight.

So, while Abi reveals she does not participate in “extreme dieting” she has participated in Weight Watchers and reveals she enjoyed it. This complicates the notion that she is supposedly comfortable in her body and her being told to lose weight even though it is, at the time of this interview, not impacting her health. Aside from Abi, Cindy also explicitly expressed that she no longer diets. I asked Cindy, “Do you remember the last time you were on some kind of diet that restricted what you ate?” and she replied,

It was almost three years ago. And I specifically was following a certain plan, while it worked for the couple of weeks I followed it, it wasn't sustainable because it included taking some supplements that were supposedly all natural. Spending the money and feeling comfortable [taking supplements] was not what I wanted to continue to do. Cindy could look past the temporality or weight loss with supplements in particular because she recognized spending money on them was not sustainable. In this case, Cindy resists the notion that even a temporary fix may not be worth the money, and uncomfortableness of taking them long-term. Here, Cindy and Abi understand that diet programs and extreme dieting, as Abi puts
it, are often unsustainable practices whether physically, emotionally, mentally, and/or financially.

What these individuals’ acts of resistance do is complicate notions of dieting as our culture has constructed it. The current construction is diet, lose weight, be happy. These participants however see dieting as something that is perhaps more detrimental to their health and/or happiness than simply living in their fat body. Cindy expressed the economic factors that played a role in her quitting a diet, and Abi also expressed how she cannot currently partake in Weight Watchers, which she enjoyed, due to economic reasons. What these experiences point towards are notions of what diets mean to individuals. As a culture, we regularly only see images of people who have lost weight (through whatever means) and how happy and “healthy” they are, not to mention because they are now thin, they are considered more attractive. It is also worth noting, most diets such as NutriSystem, Weight Watchers, and others cost money. The interview participants here understand the long-term negative effects that dieting can have because they have lived them. As a result, they have found ways to resist dieting even though they simultaneously recognize their bodies do not comply with social norms. These participants grappled with notions of economics, culture, health, and weight have found ways to live diet-free lives and ultimately resist an entire diet-culture.

Resisting Fashion, Shapewear, and the Hourglass

When people resist fat shaming messages, they not only resist messages that seek to shame them into reproducing hegemonic (often unobtainable) beauty norms and ideals, they may simultaneously resist a patriarchal and capitalistic culture as well. Resistance includes the freeing of the fat body from the corset, the waist clincher, the tummy tucking panties, all of which seek to literally (re)shape the female body into a form that renders it small, without movement, and
sometimes without breath, as corsets can restrict one’s ability to breathe. Therefore, this
resistance may even shake the patriarchy's bodily surveillance free from women’s thighs,
stomachs, and breasts, to name a few. When fat bodies, or for that matter any bodies, refuse to
participate in the restricting of their bodies through fashion accessories, individuals
simultaneously resist the capitalistic consumerist mentality that dictate as a culture that we must
collectively spend money on items that seek to alter fat bodies temporarily, but rarely
permanently. Cindy spoke about her lifelong issues with her body size, and shape. While she
wants to embrace her body, I could see the pain on her face when she spoke about her body.
When she did talk about her own body, it was almost always in the negative. For Cindy, proudly
embracing her fat body does not seem like a viable option for her. However, she still resists both
consumer messages about shapewear and hegemonic beauty standards that often dictate that
women need to be uncomfortable to be beautiful by wearing high heels, shapewear, and other
constricting fashions, along with dieting as I discussed earlier. Cindy asserts, “I just think, ‘Why
should I be so uncomfortable?’ I'm like, ‘Why should I put those on just so I can wear
something, a particular style and I just refuse to do that.’” By not wearing shapewear Cindy is
resisting the disciplining of her own body, which has taken place for centuries through fashion.

Bordo summarizes the use of corsets in 19th century fashion as a way to restrain and
discipline women:

It was in the second half of the nineteenth century, too, despite a flurry of efforts by
feminists and health reformers, that the stylized “S-curve,” which required a tighter corset
that ever before, came into fashion…Described by Thorstein Veblen as a “mutilation
undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject’s vitality and rendering her
permanently and obviously unfit for work,” the corset indeed did just that. In it a woman
could barely sit or stoop, was unable to move her feet more than six inches at a time, and had difficulty in keeping herself from regular fainting fits…The connection was often drawn in popular magazines between enduring the tight corset and the exercise of self-restraint and control. The corset is ‘an ever-present monitor,’ says one 1878 advertisement, ‘of a well-disciplined mind and well-regulated feelings.’ (162)

The act of refusing to don prosthetic constraints illuminates the tensions that exist between an historical/cultural proclivity to shape women’s bodies and women’s agency in defying these cultural impetuses. Cindy’s refusal to wear shapewear points to women’s agency in opposing centuries of cultural oppression of women’s bodies.

How we feel about our bodies is neither static, nor necessarily always progressive. How people feel about their bodies is both regressive and progressive, sometimes simultaneously. During my conversation with Lola¹⁹ I realized that often individuals might simultaneously accept and resist messages about their own bodies. For example, Lola spoke about the importance of fashion and dress in her life at first, but then later reverted to resisting messages that seek to smooth, shape, and alter the size and shape of her body. Initially, she spoke about how she attempts to look polished and smooth; how she checks for “back fat,” and that she attempts to dress “smoothly,” especially when she teaches, because she believes that if she “looks like a slob,” the students will think she is stupid. She continues “…[fat people] are [thought to be] dumb or lazy when they don’t put forth the effort, so I want to make sure…I look very polished and sophisticated.” I then asked her how she resists the assessment others make of her and she said,

¹⁹ Pseudonym for participant
...I don’t care if I have back fat or that I have fatty armpits. Although, I don’t like my fatty armpits. I guess that’s how; I don’t cover up. In fact, I probably wear less clothing now than I ever did. I mean, if we’re going to go out for a special occasion, even if it is super genderqueer, I will wear like a really dressy dress, with short, short hair and makeup and glasses. I’m a fat gender queer lady in a dress with makeup on.

When it comes to teaching, she understands looking polished is important, including smoothing out her “back fat,” but then her very next response is that she does not care if she has back fat. This moving “back and forth” between contested concepts was revealed in the responses of many participants from both the surveys and interviews. In addition, I would add that desiring to look “polished” and “smooth” is a gendered way of thinking about how one looks. Women are often taught that to be desired, sexy, beautiful, and so on, we must look smooth, and polished, and have an hourglass shape yet, ideally, be thin and toned as well. Rarely, if ever have I seen an advertisement, or clothing marketed towards men that seeks to “smooth them out” or “flatten their tummy” the ways women’s garments are marketed from bras that flatten back fat to the billion-dollar Spanx industry created by Sara Blakely (Farzan). I will add, however, that there are now Spanx for men but while doing research for this dissertation no sales figures were available.

Although I have dedicated my life to fighting fat shaming, diets, and negative body-talk, when I am with other people, I still find myself making judgments about fat people, in particular women. I not only do this with strangers, I do this with myself as well. I consistently hear an internal dialogue that says: “Your back fat is unattractive; your breasts are too saggy and big; your cellulite is out of control; your stomach is sagging to the point that it is disgusting; your stretch marks are getting worse; how could anyone find you attractive; just stop eating altogether; go on Slim Fast and lose some weight.” Although I want to resist those messages, and
often succeed in doing so by *not* going on a diet and practicing self-love and care, I am still exposed to and affected by the deeply entrenched messages about fat bodies with which I come in contact. I, of course, am not the only person to express this sentiment. As the professor from Wisconsin admitted,

I do notice how other women dress (I'm a clothes and jewelry junkie), and I will admit that occasionally I find myself making snap judgments and assumptions about morbidly obese women wearing what I call shapeless clothes. The way you style and present yourself is important, and it's a fun way to express your identity. It's a shame that men and women over a certain weight seem to dress nearly identically (large knit shirts and shorts without accessories).

For this Wisconsin Professor, style and dress is an important factor when she is “assessing” someone. She admits to making judgments about “morbidly obese” women who do not dress well.

I would argue that women who are “morbidly obese” have *very limited* options concerning fashion and dress. As a “plus-size” woman, I myself find that even specialty stores only carry clothing up to a size 26. A 26-year-old, female, bisexual, white and Puerto Rican survey respondent from Granada, Spain reflected on the judgment of others by stating,

It makes me realize what a precarious position women are in - if we age, gain weight, lose weight, we’re at the mercy of deeply entrenched negative judgment and others’ entitlement over our bodies and spaces.

Living with a fat body means receiving messages of shame and guilt, whether externally or internally, but often these messages are received simultaneously. Individuals face fat shaming in not only physical spaces, from institutional/medical/corporate discourse, and from individuals,
they also experience it from themselves through their internal judgmental dialogues, and through the policing of their own, and other people’s bodies as expressed by the survey respondent living in Spain. In various ways, however, participants resist some of the fat shaming messages that they encounter, messages that seek to shape their bodies through diets, exercise, and/or shapewear. Some of the resistance, as I have noted here, manifests itself through fashion.

Negotiating Health and Weight

There is very little evidence that being overweight is inherently unhealthy. In fact, people who are deemed “overweight” based on BMI have a lower mortality rate than people who are not “overweight” as it is thought that fat cells protect the body from disease (Flagel et al.). While this is not necessarily the case for people who fall into various ranges of “obesity,” it is important to recognize that contrary to popular belief, simply being overweight does not automatically mean someone is unhealthy, the same way that simply being thin does not automatically mean someone is healthy. However, repeatedly, in all types of situations I hear, “It’s unhealthy to be overweight.”

In Fat Shame Amy Farrell briefly discusses the medicalization of fat. She reports, Government literature regularly touts the statistic that obesity causes three hundred thousand deaths a year, despite the fact that the research on which this figure is based suggest a “link,” as opposed to a “cause”; and that many reputable scientists challenge the validity of this study. Indeed, the top editors at the New England Journal of Medicine called the three hundred thousand figure ‘by no means well established’ and ‘derived from weak and inconclusive data.’ In May 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a refined study that called into dispute the 300,000 figure,
estimating the deaths linked to obesity at a much lower 112,000 per year and indicating that being moderately overweight actually was linked with improved longevity (13).

However, Farrell continues by explaining that amid the backlash against the CDC’s finding, they retracted their findings stating, “…even when the scientific data looked challenging to the earlier statistics, the CDC was going to stick firmly to its war against obesity” (13).

I frequently encounter comments designed to shame me into losing weight grounded on the claims that were I to do so, it would automatically be beneficial to my health. When people urge me to lose weight for my health without knowing my health status, they are assuming I am unhealthy and they are making a potentially erroneous assumption that thin people are healthier.

I asked Jerri, a burlesque dancer and fat activist, if she has experienced negative comments about her body veiled under concerns about her health. She responded,

Yes, and people's comments are geared simply towards my weight. But from people at work and from my own family [it is], ‘We’re just worried about your health.’ Well, are you worried about that beer you're drinking right now, or that cigarette you're smoking right now? Ok, then I invite you to shut up. Because there's nothing to be concerned about. I've been to my doctor and he says I'm good.

Jerri recognizes the hypocrisy people harbor when it comes to health and weight. Jerri resists the notion the health and weight are intricately tied, pushing back on cultural, medical, social, and even economic standards that purport these deeply embedded myths surrounding weight and health. I specifically asked Jerri how she deals with conversations about health and weight. She spoke at length about the role that social media – an integral part of popular cultures – plays in her life. She states,
Social media is everywhere. I follow [American Plus-Size Model] Tess Holliday on every social media that I have, which is Tumblr, Instagram, and Facebook. ![Image](image.png)

...[conversations] usually progresses to, well it's unhealthy to be fat. And then I say, ‘Well I actually weigh more than Tess Holliday, I am a size bigger than Tess Holiday and my doctor says I'm healthy.’ It starts off so rationally like, ‘Here are the facts, why can't you just see that you're wrong? This is why you're wrong: facts, facts, facts, judge and jury, you're guilty.’ And people just escalate from there and it turns into being fat is ugly, or you're trying to promote obesity and an unhealthy life, [when it is more about Tess] trying to love herself for who she is, I'm trying to love myself for who I am.

This instance is revealing in that it showcases how even though Jerri may convince an individual that being fat does not automatically mean being unhealthy, as the layers are peeled back, the individual reveals his/her bias is based in aesthetics, specifically beauty aesthetics, that have been constructed socially and culturally in the West in part through the same social media outlets Jerri uses. Jerri continues, stating,

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Part of being healthy is mental health. If I revert to something mentally unhealthy and I start starving myself, I'm no better. I'm killing myself in another way. And it goes from there and the name calling starts, ‘You stupid fat cow’ [or I’m] a bitch, or ‘you'll never have a man’...and who says I want one?
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The example Jerri provides here reveals explicit examples of fat shaming discourse directed at her, as well as heteronormative and sexist taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding relationships. Furthermore, she not only identifies the hypocrisy of people who judge someone before examining their own lives, but she also points up how quickly a conversation about weight and health reveals itself to just be about policing hegemonic beauty standards. As John
Stearns argues “…interests in weight control and elimination of fat surpassed medical concerns over corpulence and health” (p. 47). Jerri’s experience proves Stearn’s point, even while a majority of people claim that losing weight is about health and not beauty.

Online spaces, such as the ones Jerri mentions, play an important role when it comes to resisting fat shaming messages about health and weight. In these spaces, an interesting thing is happening. On those sites, I see fat shaming happening (such as the previously discussed “Dear Fat People” video by Nicole Arbour) and an increase of fat acceptance messages and posts. Comment sections are often filled with a range of responses (for both the fat shaming videos and the fat positive videos) that range from full support of Arbor’s shaming of fat people, to full support of the fat acceptance movement. In Jerri’s case, these spaces are a space of resistance in that she resists non-medical opinions about her body specifically, and they simultaneously become a space of subversion. Jerri’s response is subversive because it attempts to present new ways to think about fat(ness) and health. Her strategy subverts messages about her own body and her own health, and she does so through showcasing her medical history of being deemed medically healthy. She thereby attempts to shift her detractors’ opinions by showing how an increase in weight does not automatically signify that she is unhealthy.

However, fat shaming that happens under the guise of “health” happens in off-line spaces as well. Laura, 54-year-old, white, cisgender, heterosexual female, who is also a sociologist, in South Carolina expressed in her survey response,

I cancelled my many-year subscription to *Better Homes and Gardens* when they started taking space away from, you know, HOMES and GARDENS and devoting it instead to diet tips under the guise of “healthy families.” I corresponded with the editor a few times when they first changed the format, telling her that there were 50 million other magazines
spouting that stuff and that I had subscribed to BHG for what the title promised. Didn't do any good, so I don't read or buy them any more [sic].

The fat acceptance movement is likewise attempting to subvert fat shaming messages that situate fat people as unhealthy and inactive through campaigns such as Health at Every Size. This campaign showcases active, fat people engaging in yoga, biking, and even aerial acrobatics. Organizations such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) and Health at Every Size (HAES) are two such movements that have been fighting to reduce fat shaming and the stigmatization of fat. NAAFA for example, focuses on “...community, environment, and policy – rather than searching for genetic causes of behavioral changes in the host – in the quest for health for fat people” (LeBesco 36). Fat acceptance groups including NAAFA and HAES both focus on how American culture has come to define fat(ness) as abject and how that attribution directly has a negative impact on fat individuals’ lives, including discrimination (NAAFA, “The Issues”). However, while fat acceptance groups have endeavored to make change, and have simultaneously resisted and subverted fat shaming messages, socially constituted attitudes are very robust. It is very difficult to convince the public, including both people who are fat and those who are not, that being fat does not automatically make someone unhealthy and that being fat in itself is not causational of any disease or condition, but rather may only be correlational. Dr. Deb Burgard, a psychologist and Health at Every Size advocate, states,

One of the a priori assumptions that does not seem to require evidence is the idea that being fat is unhealthy. Variations on this idea include the assumption that fat itself causes the disorders with which it is often associated, the assumption that one can tell by looking at a person’s weight what they must be eating or how much exercise they get, the
assumption that losing weight will improve health, and the assumption that successful
and lasting weight loss is possible (46).

It has become commonplace to take it for granted that being fat is unhealthy and to do so
without any real engagement with conceptions of health, disease, genetics, environmental
factors, ethnicity, class, and gender, all of which contribute to individual health. To explore
medicalized notions of health and weight in depth is outside the scope of my dissertation;
however, germane to my discussion and what is distinctly evident, is that popular culture relies
on a normative conception of health and weight as being connected. Consequently, popular
culture disavows consideration of health, ability, age, genetics, access to food, and environment
(including safe, healthy neighborhoods) and so on. As Joyce L. Huff, an Associate Professor of
English at Ball State University states in her essay, “A “Horror of Corpulence,” both fashion and
the diet industry have produced such deeply embedded hegemonic discourse surrounding health
and weight that we find it almost impossible to look beyond that discourse:

…the combined voices of the diet and fashion industries have achieved hegemony; they
call out relentlessly from magazines and television. While the diet industry has not
succeeded in erasing other voices, it has been able to manage and partially neutralize
competing discourses, so that any position assumed by a corpulent person today involves
negotiating the primary role offered to him or her within a prevailing narrative that seeks
to define corpulent bodies as weak-willed, unhealthy, and out of control (42).

In the 1970s when the government enacted the first set of dietary guidelines for the American
public, they simultaneously started a chain reaction where they were, perhaps, unintentionally
promoting the consumption of low-fat and fat-free products (Aubrey). However, further studies
have shown these kinds of caloric-intake restrictions can be more harmful than beneficial. In an
interview with *Frontline*, Dr. William Willett, the Chair of the Nutrition Department at the Harvard School of Public Health stated,

In fact, the percentage of calories from fat in a diet has not been related to any important health outcome…The amount of fat had no relationship to risk of coronary heart disease, but the type of fat was extremely important…The evidence that we accrued really suggested not only that the type of advice that people were getting was not useful, but it actually could be dangerous, because some people were eliminating the very healthy types of fat that actually reduce heart disease rates.

What we have learned as a culture concerning weight and health is not black and white, rather it is correlated on a spectrum. A major theme throughout my interviews connected health and weight.

For example, Paige\textsuperscript{20} explained how fat acceptance literature and her own bodily experiences with weight, especially recently, have helped her to complicate notions of health and weight. She has, therefore, at least in part, accepted nuanced notions of health and weight based on her lived experiences. Paige recounts,

I used to go the gym a lot with a friend of mine who is a fat woman and very proudly fat. And she would run circles around me. I didn’t have even a fraction of the stamina. And that really changed my perception a lot. [I started] feeling like, you know society thinks she is the one that is unhealthy, when I can barely stand ten minutes on the elliptical. Her interactions with her fat friend at the gym helped to challenge her perspective on weight and health, or at the very least weight and stamina. She continued by talking about her experiences as a woman who has gained weight due to her medications, and how popular culture appears to

\textsuperscript{20} Pseudonym of participant
reflect a singular reality of fat women in particular. Paige stated that the popular culture she engages with often show the fat women as overeating, or eating all the time. Such images imply that she is fat because she eats all the time. However, Paige explains that that is not her story and that that is not a lot of women’s stories.

Paige also expressed that moving from a thin body into a fat body changed the ways in which she thought about health, weight, and representations of fat bodies in popular culture. Paige recounts,

When I first came to [Bowling Green] I was 125 pounds, size 2…Certainly, reading fat positive scholarship also had a huge impact. But now that my body has changed, it's really a whole different thing. Before it was sort of in the abstract to me and based on friendships with people who are fat women; I never felt negative about them, but I kind of do about myself now. I think because of all of these things: fat positive literature, because of my friendships with fat women, because of my body change, I just felt like it's changed my perception about weight and about media. I felt I could give you a different perspective than perhaps women who have always been fat women, giving you a perspective of someone who has gone through a significant change.

For Paige, her thoughts around weight, shape, body size, health, and representations of fat bodies in popular culture coalesced over time and throughout various stages in her life as her own body shifted from thin to fat.

Many participants spoke about how if they were to lose weight, they understood it would make them “healthier.” Participants including Garret, Abi, Cindy, Finn,21 Chad, Cassandra, and

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21 Pseudonym for participant
Stella all spoke about wanting to be “healthier.” While participants wanted to embrace fat acceptance and be free of guilt and shame for being fat, the powerful cultural forces at play make it very difficult for that to happen. For example, Finn admits he could eat healthier and exercise more, but recognizes the external influences that make him think that way. He mentioned he has had high blood pressure since he was 17, and he hates that medicalized institutions correlate his high blood pressure with his weight. Whether his high blood pressure and his weight are causational remains to be determined. But Finn does understand the external influences such as the media and medicine that seek to make him think his weight and health are directly related. While they might be related in certain ways, it is very difficult to prove that they are causational.

As fat studies scholars continue to explore notions of health and weight, I believe it is important to recognize and analyze how medicalized discourse works in concert with consumer culture, and how representations of fat bodies within popular culture create bias and stereotypes that appear to leak into medical discourse. For example, a rise of the medicalized discourse surrounding the “obesity epidemic” in the 1980s corresponded with a rise in “low-fat” and “fat free” foods in the marketplace (Willett). Strangely enough, that rise in fat free and low-fat foods ultimately led to higher rates of obesity (Willett). Even though we now understand that weight gain and the consumption of fat free products are correlated, fatuous cultural discourse surrounding health and weight before, during, and after the 1980s, still holds a tremendous amount of sway in Westernized cultures.

Complicating Resistance and Acceptance

Identity and individuals’ positioning in the world can often determine how, when, and why they may accept fat shaming massages and alter their body, and how, when, and why they

22 ibid
might resist those very same messages at a different time, under different circumstances. My study reveals that acceptance and resistance often happen simultaneously based on individuals’ social identity, safety, age, and the assessment of their own body, as well as other people’s fat bodies, and how others around them feel about and understand fat(ness) and fat bodies.

As I stated before, individuals may not be cultural dupes as Storey points out, but that does not mean various institutions are not trying to influence people and the messages these institutions produce must have some influence since they continue to do (re)produce them, and they must recognize that the messages do in fact have influence over people. It is with these negotiations that many people struggle. For example, Cassandra complicates notions of acceptance by expressing that she knows hegemonic beauty standards are unobtainable, and yet, when she thinks about what she truly wants, her greatest desire is to lose weight and be healthier; again, she implicitly links weight and health as causational. Cassandra expresses,

> There’s a part of me that’s like I want to feel healthier and there is this part of me that wants to look different and be slimmer and that wants all these areas of my body to be changed. Then there's a part of me that's angry about that, like “No, here you are,” and then there's also a part of me that just wants to be more accepting and loving, and compassionate towards who I am and my body.

Cassandra wonders, “How can you feel so strongly about something but also buy into it?” In response I ask “How if at all, have you resisted the assessment that others make of you, when it comes to your shape, weight, or size? Have you actively pushed back on some of the messages we receive?” She responds,

> I feel like I do, I don't know how much I do within myself, but I feel like I talk a lot about it…in terms of personal push back. By rejecting those standards, it's a real conflict for
me, because although I know [objectification is] happening and I know that the images aren't realistic…there's still this part of me that's like, ‘If you could be like that would you?’ and hands down, of course, I would. I hate that.

Like other participants in the interviews and survey responses Cassandra articulates how it is a constant battle to resist cultural messages about our bodies. It often feels impossible to fully resist fat shaming messages, especially ones couched in concerns about “health,” without feeling guilty about it because we are so engrained with the idea that to be fat means to be unhealthy. Fully resisting fat shaming, including the pathologizing of fat bodies, has become more and more difficult, especially with cultural and medical discourses shifting from a concern with thinness to a concern with being “healthy.”

While our bodies change, our feelings about them change as well over time, from day to day and moment to moment. People have agency and power in what they do with messages, while simultaneously they may be restricted in how they resist those messages. How that resistance is received in culture is also delimited by social custom and cultural presumptions. For example, race plays a role in whether individuals are allowed to resist certain cultural standards, and it also has an impact upon what resources they have with which to assert dominance over messages in popular culture representations.

In my survey, respondents were asked, “Describe feelings you have had about your own body when watching a particular television show, and/or a film.” One response, from a 56-year-old, white, lesbian from Canada stated, “I don’t believe I have strong feelings about my body when watching television.” Another person, a 41-year-old, who self-identified as a “mostly white,” and “mostly heterosexual” female living in Arizona said, “Television shows and films never make me feel bad about my body.” While a 19-year-old, straight African American from
Chicago stated, “I am ashamed of myself. I feel like I need to lose weight asap.” Liz, from St. Louis, when asked about her feelings when she sees someone smaller than her on television and/or film responded,

 Mostly I don't give it a lot of thought because in the context of visual media, this is “normal.” I do NOT like seeing women who are clearly too skinny (no breasts, ribs showing, bony hips, etc.) because I think glorifying excessive thinness is gross and sick. I sometimes feel wistful like ‘I wish I looked like that’ but mostly then think ‘well maybe if I worked out 6 days a week, and ate spa food I would’ and move on. I also get irritated when I see people who have clearly been “worked on” because I really want to see a world where the infinite versions of human (the way we already are) is all accepted as ok.

Liz’s response in particular is interesting because one hand she states she does not give certain messages much thought, and then immediately points out how messages which glorify excessive thinness are gross, an analysis of thinness. She also highlights that certain messages do in fact impact how she thinks about her own body, albeit fleeting, and how the reality of her lifestyle/situation impacts her ability to obtain a thin body. Liz’s response complicates notions of resistance and acceptance.

Ellen, a black woman, spoke about her positive experiences within her black community growing up and being able to see and engage with positive representations of larger black bodies in popular culture. Ellen said,

 I guess when I was growing up seeing those images made me feel better about my body. Those images were competing with the voices that were around me telling me that I was fat. And those were acceptable images because people watched those shows and gosh, I can't recall anybody who didn't like Queen Latifah when I was growing up and nobody
called Queen Latifah fat or ugly or undesirable. There were people who said I looked like her when I was younger. I guess, that character in particular just made me feel better about myself and as her popularity and her celebrity grew and she was unapologetically a larger beautiful woman. [I thought] ‘Well yeah I can be that way too.’ But I still struggled because the voices that were around didn’t allow me to internalize those images in the way that I do now, I suppose.

Ellen’s story reveals that while she had positive role models in the media to look up to with regards to diversity in size, it did not mean other social and cultural factors automatically guaranteed her the ability to internalize those positive messages. This distinction is important because it is theoretically easy to assume that seeing diverse representations in popular culture will help with self-image, diversity and inclusion, body image, and overall representations of marginalized groups of people. Practically doing so is rife with socio-cultural challenges.

External factors – including family members and peers and how they influence our ability to not only engage with positive representations of diverse body sizes for example – challenge how we can embody those body positive messages, whether those external factors be explicit or implicit.

Abi expanded on this issue and provided a specific example.

I think it was after I moved here; I'm living in Arkansas now. I moved here in October so I don't think it was when you and I talked. After Oprah took over as spokesperson for Weight Watchers, I was super pissed off about the way that she portrayed women. And why would I want to join weight watchers? And I have been part of Weight Watchers and it's been successful and I liked it. And as soon as some of her commercials came out I was like, “I’ll never do it again!” The one line I remember is something like, “There is a skinny woman inside of every fat woman, like, dying to get out.” And I was like,
seriously? That bothered me so much and I was like, “Why can't I be the woman I am right now, no matter what size?” It bothered me so much and it was like, nope, I won't ever do Weight Watchers again because I just hated how it was portrayed, by her – a woman who we've seen struggle with weight...

The ambivalence we often feel from moment to moment in our bodies was revealed in Abi’s next response. When I asked, “What would you like to see changed in yourself, if anything?” Abi, whose interview revolved around her talking about her body in mostly positive ways, said,

I want to lose weight. I don’t want to feel like I have to... and remind myself, going to the gym doesn't have to be about dropping a bunch of weight. There is a lot of other things that I am doing. And I do feel better when I'm there and that it helps with my mental health and it helps me sleep and it helps with other things. My endurance and strength is different. I couldn’t even go down a set of stairs confidently [after breaking my ankle]. Now I did a new exercise last week, and [the physical therapist] was like, you couldn’t have done this when you started, and I was like no... when I'm on a new set of stairs or stepping off something, I have to assess it…. Even when she hands me a weight that is too heavy, [I have to] remember that I can do more than I think I can do. That is what I want to keep reminding myself about. Yes, I want to lose weight but I need to keep reminding [myself] that it's not going to make me happy or change things in myself either. There's a lot of things that my body is capable of...more than I think it is, regardless of what I weigh.

Here, Abi struggles with the cultural constructions of weight loss (constructions that often focus on the number and aesthetics) and her own internal sense of health and weight. Abi’s
experience highlights the constraints individuals are up against. She reaffirms that even when people want to fully embrace their identity as fat, curvy, or plus-size, the world in which we live consistently and constantly reminds fat people that they do not belong, that there is no space for them, and that they need to adhere to the current cultural standards of beauty.

There has been much scholarship dedicated to the power of seeing images that are representative of the group(s) to which someone belongs, including their social identities, and their levels of self-esteem (cf. Irving, Milkie, Stice and Shaw, Tan and Tan). However, just as Ellen’s story reveals, while people may begin to encounter more positive representations of women – including fat women, women of color, women with disabilities, and so on – that does not mean that people around them will “allow” them to fully embody that positivity. To suggest that there are institutions such as family and government to consider means that nothing less than a full cultural shift would need to occur for people to fully embrace fat bodies. While this is unlikely to happen in my lifetime, these pockets of resistance and even just talking about fat bodies as something that is and can be positive means change is happening, and hopefully there is more to come. We cannot ignore the conflicting messages that people find themselves constrained by, because these often-contested constricting messages limit our abilities to resist and subvert the stigmatization we experience about our bodies.

**Conclusion**

The power of the fat shaming discourses that often act in concert with cultural prejudices toward hyper-thin bodies as highly desirable create the conditions for resistance. These cultural discourses attempt to convince us fat people, and sometimes do convince us, that we should look like that, by any means necessary. Moreover, if we do not at least attempt to look like that, we are made to feel that we have failed ourselves and sometimes others. However, some of my
participants could speak back to the negative affects produced by images of hyper-thin women and challenge the consequences these images have on their self-esteem and affective experiences about their bodies. The currency of desire to have another body and yet its unobtainability that dynamically funds popular cultural images creates the contested experience that so many of my women participants voiced: they both love and hate their bodies.

As I stated before, these constraining discourses are powerful and can be difficult to fight against; yet people do resist. However, resistance is not static, unwavering, or unchanging, just as acceptance is not static, unwavering, and unchanging. The experiences, feelings, and emotions people navigate concerning the relationship(s) of their bodies to the outside world are recursive. People’s feelings about their own and other people’s fat bodies (and non-fat bodies for that matter) shift over time, and can be affected by several factors from weight to age to class to geographic location. For example, in my personal experience, it is easier for me, at times, to be fat in the Midwest than it is to be fat on the West Coast. I find that in the Midwest there are more people who look like me, whereas when I visit the West Coast many people are thin and I feel I am being judged, and I also judge myself more because I feel out of place in my large, round body as compared to the thin, tan, “California bodies” which I encounter.

While beauty standards, have become virtually unobtainable to the vast majority of people, individuals continue to complicate what it means to resist and/or accept fat shaming messages. People not only resist and accept fat shaming messages, but they also, at times, subvert those fat shaming messages produced by popular culture. To subvert fat shaming messages it requires action: a conscious decision to (re)produce/(re)create meaning around fat(ness), women’s bodies, and representation. Currently, there are several ways in which women are subverting fat shaming in their own lives. In addition, popular culture, in my opinion, is
attempting to find ways to subvert fat shaming messages even while those current subversions remain problematic. In chapter three I investigate the various ways in which women are subverting these messages, as well as how popular culture is addressing a call to action from fat women to produce more fat positive representations.
CHAPTER THREE: SUBVERSION AND UTOPIC VISIONS

The subversion of fat shaming messages in numerous forms by individuals, and groups, allows for fat and non-fat people alike to see fat bodies in a new way, a potentially positive way. In people’s attempts to subvert fat shaming messages, they repurpose products, discourse, and performances that were formerly used to shame fat people. In this chapter, I explore the participants’ and my own utopian visions for a future free of fat shaming.

First, I explore participants’ visions for shifting discourse including, changing the ways in which fat people talk about their bodies and other people’s bodies. Second, I explore how participants envision the (re)purposing of cultural products including clothing, representations of fat people in popular culture, and social media’s role in cultural products. Finally, I examine participants’ utopian visions for subversively performing the fat body, such as wearing revealing clothing that unabashedly puts the fat body on public display, embracing one’s fat body in all situations, and by purposefully having healthy, active sex lives.

As is widely understood, Judith Butler wrote about the effects of subversive performative acts on gender identity in her germinal text *Gender Trouble* and other texts. For Butler, subversive performative acts, particularly if they are enacted outside the status quo, are a potentially powerful force for change. In her revised 1999 preface, she states,

> There is no political position purified by power, and perhaps that impurity is what produces agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes. Those who are deemed “unreal” nevertheless lay hold of the real, a laying hold that happens in concert and a vital instability is produced by that performative surprise (xxviii).

Butler understands agency as an ability to work on opposing forces, which is also a performative act that can potentially alter current “regimes.” Fat bodies here can be understood as the
culturally “unreal” bodies which society deems are to be destroyed/removed. When individuals resist, and subvert fat shaming messages, they create new ways for themselves and others to understand and engage with the fat body. Unlike the forms of resistance as discussed in chapter two, subversion has the potential to shift cultural meanings. Subversion can also (re)create new(er) cultural representations and products as it is a form of activism. Moreover, subversion has the potential to repurpose current socializations of the fat body.

Understanding Subversion/Subversive Acts

Subversion is an act. Subversive language, subversive acts, and subversive products all help to revalorize the fat body in positive terms. Subversion goes beyond calling attention to problems with fat shaming. To subvert fat shaming messages means producing new cultural products, new and/or shifting current discourses, shifting beliefs and knowledge about the fat body, and subverting performative actions which then become fat positive, and accepting of fat(ness). Cultural products (film, television, toys, greeting cards, fashion, etc.) act as representatives and constitutive forces of what is deemed culturally appropriate, acceptable, and desired. Cultural products secure and (re)produce the status quo. To produce fat positive cultural products means to rebalance the power and shift the status quo, which has hitherto been white, cisgender, thin, able-bodied, and heteronormative.

In LeBesco’s “Queering Fat Bodies/Politics” essay, she uses Butler’s notions that the margins of all social systems are vulnerable and that those margins are also dangerous. She notes that it is within this marginalized space that “…fat people can tap into the resources of abjection in the margin in order to strengthen their claim to the kinds of entitlement felt only by those bodies deemed natural, healthy, and beautiful” (75). She explains that her goal is to move scientific and medical discourse about fat to social and cultural ones, thereby producing “…a
different way of looking at, and living in, fat” (75). In similar terms to Butler, LeBesco, places emphasis on agency as a conduit for social change. LeBesco states,

Instead of simply venerating or denouncing fat subjects, my aim is to theorize fat embodiment in a way that alters the relational topography around body size and shape. This task calls for theorizing the simultaneous construction of fat people as choice-making, self-defining subjects who are also subjected to fat oppression in an attempt to understand the “diverse and conflicting practices, pressures, and possibilities that provide the context for political struggle and social transformation” (75).

LeBesco understands that while people have agency, they are also simultaneously restricted by their options to emancipate themselves in a culture that is so deeply entrenched with the hatred of fat. Subversion, when it happens, still happens within the same culture that situates fat as abject.

Subversion is an important component of social change. Without subversion people continue to point out the problem with fat shaming without necessarily creating new representations or in any way altering the cultural condition of fat people. This is not to say that critical engagement with oppressive discursive regimes is unimportant or somehow less valuable than other methods of resistance. What I am pointing towards is the notion that resistance is only a part of the equation concerning creating and maintaining cultural change.

Utopian Visions

A utopian world is perhaps by definition not attainable. But asking, what would a world with no fat hatred, no by shaming, and pure, complete body acceptance look like, is a worthy question nevertheless. To ask this question is to ask, what would it mean to not be a marked body? Of course, when considering utopic visions, it is important to note that what is utopic for one person may not be utopic for another person. Intersecting social identities have an impact
and have bearing upon what a utopic world would look like for everyone. Considering intersecting social identities means considering our own position in the world and how social identities, including how gender, race, class, ability, and sexual orientation, shift the ways in which we could collectively envision our “perfect” world. Notwithstanding these important variables, revalorizing fat bodies as positive is the pervasive characteristic for a utopian vision was desired by most participants across all social positioning of the fat people in my study.

As a fat, American woman, I imagine this utopian world looks like a place where I could go through my daily life without interruption and/or contemplation about how I am being treated because of others’ prejudice about my size. I imagine I could walk into any clothing store and browse the aisles for clothing without wondering if I am in the “wrong” section/sizes. I imagine that my sex life would improve because I would no longer be concerned about what my partner thinks about my body in various stages of undress and in various positions. I imagine I would go swimming in public. I imagine eating in public and not worrying about what the waiter is thinking of me when I order, regardless of what it is. For example, currently if I order a salad I perceive that other people (onlookers, the waiter) are thinking that I am “doing good” because it is now “obvious” I am trying to lose weight whether or not I just want a salad. If I order dessert (which I rarely do because we can rarely afford it, but sometimes I don’t for fear of judgment) I perceive people think that because I eat dessert I am fat and will always be fat. I imagine going to the doctor and being able to have a conversation about the symptoms I am there for without the diagnosis coming back as being due to my “being overweight/obese,” regardless of whether or not my body size might be related to my symptoms. I imagine having conversations with people completely absent of body shaming talk about their own, or others’ bodies (i.e., “I should not be eating this,” or “I am going to have to go for a run tonight after this piece of cake” or “I
can’t believe she eats like that. It has to be so unhealthy”). I imagine traveling without fear of not fitting into to the airplane seat, or being too big to fit into an amusement park ride.

As a working-class woman, however, I also think about what it means to have access to foods that are healthier, yet more expensive. I think about an ideal world where everyone has access to fresh, affordable, diverse, local produce, and to resources that teach people how to use those items in their everyday lives. Thinking about my utopian world and considering race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality I think about how my utopian world would not judge a woman based on her size, or a fat queer person based on that person’s style of clothing, or a black woman for being thin and not having a “booty.” A fat person with a disability would be able to find fat friendly therapists (mental, emotional, and/or physical). Medical equipment would accommodate fat people, and gym equipment would be more accommodating for fat people. Thinking about how class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability intersect with the fat body, I feel it is important to note that my “utopian visions” are just that. They are mine. And my positioning in this world as a fat, working-class, pansexual, white women impacts what my perfect world looks like.

These are the things I imagine in not only a world free of fat shaming, but also a world that is in fact, fat positive. My fat positive world means that people would not talk about fat bodies in ways they do now (lazy, ugly, unhealthy, etc.) but rather embrace, and appreciate all bodies including fat bodies whether fat and curvy, fat and flat chested, or fat and round like an apple on a stick, as one participant, Lola, described herself. Bodies, regardless of their shape, weight, and/or size would not only be embraced in this world but desired as well.
While perhaps my vision is utopian in that it “could never happen,” I see these utopian visions as a necessary step toward shifting cultural perceptions surrounding fat(ness). After all, history has shown that fat has not always been viewed as abject (cf. Schwartz, Farrell).

_Utopian Visions: Shifting Discourse_

By subverting fat shaming messages (regardless of their source) fat acceptance activists, individuals, and groups, help to change the discourse which surround fat as unhealthy, abject, gross, lazy, disgusting, unattractive, and as being something individuals need to avoid at all and any cost. LeBesco’s usage of Monique Wittig’s and Judith Butler’s work concerning notions of language as a tool to subvert messages and shift discourse is useful here. She states,

Language, according to Monique Wittig, ‘is a set of acts, repeated over time, that produce reality-effects that are eventually misperceived as ‘facts.’” Thus, fat people (scholars, nonacademic intellectuals, activists, and lay people alike) can begin creating and regulating a new social reality through the use of words – spoken as well as written. Butler believes that language is capable of enacting material change ‘through locutionary acts, which, [when] repeated, become entrenched practices and, ultimately, institutions’ (76).

Bonnie, a Professor at Bowling Green State University, when asked what activism should be taken responded,

No marked images in the media. Melissa McCarthy is not that, she is as marked as Roseanne…There’s a little more flexibility for people of color to be heavier, and for men as well. It’s not [that] men have cart blanche to be bigger, but there’s not the same level

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23 Butler’s argument derives its force from J.L. Austin’s notion of performatives.
24 Pseudonym for participant
of scrutiny for men’s bodies…there needs to be zero tolerance for people saying negative and/or stereotypical things about fat people…a fair number of people have learned not to say fucking hateful things about gays and lesbians and about people of color. I think maybe that’s what we need for there to be progress on body issues…if somebody says in a personal ad, “No fat chicks need apply,” they [should] get fucking called out on it. Because [if] somebody who posted in a personal ad, ‘No black women, black women aren’t attractive,’ they would get shit for it and rightly so. Maybe that’s what we need with bodies. The problem is that at this point, it’s not just a social justice kind of issue because the goddamn medical profession is so caught up in “weight is unhealthy.” So long as they’re going to follow that path, then I don’t see how we can have a zero tolerance policy, and therefore I don’t see the possibility of improvement.

Bonnie points out the intersections among subversive discourse, cultural products, and how institutions work in concert to maintain and (re)produce fat shaming discourses such as the medical industry, and popular culture. In addition, Bonnie believes that gendered and raced aspects of fat bodies in that women’s bodies are more heavily surveilled, and also that women of color (in particular black women) have more “flexibility.” It is arguable as to whether or not black women are less surveilled than white women. Certainly, this is Bonnie’s perception. Yet, as I pointed out earlier, Ellen’s story reveals that black women also suffer from body image issues, eating disorders, and other issues related to their bodies. Additionally, while I understand Bonnie’s concern, it remains debatable as to the political efficacy of a “zero tolerance” policy against negative attributions. Silencing those “opposed to us” also silences the feelings, emotions, ideas, and thoughts of others. Such acts may drive the prejudice underground and permit those beliefs to remain within the individual (and potentially fester there) rather than
permit discussion where one person can challenge another person’s feelings, beliefs, and
thoughts on issues of body size, health, and weight. Of course, such conversations are
uncomfortable, complex, and difficult; they may, however, be productive in shifting some
beliefs.

Challenging beliefs can be difficult for anyone. For example, I struggle with bringing up
issues of diets (in particular) with friends because I know they feel they are bettering themselves
even if I know that whatever they are participating in might not be “healthy” in the same ways
they think it is. However, I often argue with myself about how if I bring up my contrary views, I
will simultaneously hurt them by casting doubts on their efforts to “become healthier.”
Furthermore, I will have to deal with a barrage of people spouting “medical facts” that I likewise
find spurious. So, zero tolerance seems like an impossibility given the reach fat shaming
messages have across the media.

I am not alone in my ambivalent feelings concerning shifting discourse in various spaces.
For example, please recall my discussion with Jerri, the burlesque dancer, and her subversive
acts of engaging in discussions online with individuals. Jerri said she was not actively cutting
people out of her life, but rather asking them to make a conscious effort to think about their
behavior, actions, and how they interacted with her. I view this strategy as placing the “burden”
back on the person who needs to educate himself or herself about an issue. This strategy is
reminiscent of what Audre Lorde says concerning how oppressors need to learn to empathize and
understand the issues marginalized people face, rather than those marginalized groups taking on
additional time and energy to educate those who oppress them about the struggles they face.
Lorde states,
Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy, which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future (115).

Jerri speaks specifically about how she actively aims to shift discourse and how she resists the assessments about her and about fat(ness) in the following story about her interactions with family members and a co-worker. She recounts,

There are two ways [I resist comments]. I do it passive aggressively because I am the queen of [passive aggressiveness]. I make little comments. I will send little memes. There was one recently of Jess Baker. She did the attractive and fat campaign after Abercrombie and Fitch did the whole ‘Oh we only sell to cool kids’ thing, so she did this great “Attractive and Fat” campaign where it was her with all these really hot guys with next to no clothes. It was beautiful. The photos were absolutely gorgeous. So I'll send things like that, or I will send pictures of myself in my corset, like ‘Oh look at me,’ and I'll say ‘The people cheered and everyone was hooting and hollering [at the burlesque show]’ so it's passive aggressive. And it tends to be with the people I'm closer to…Or my sister will make one of those little health comments, and I'll just tell her to shut up. The other mode I go into is aggressive aggressive. This happens with people I am not as close too, and maybe not aggressive aggressive because I'm not yelling and screaming and ready to throw down or anything, but I will absolutely stand up and say my piece until you've heard every word…It's happened at work. I mean everything got resolved just
fine. The gentleman and I have a great working relationship now. He's kind of on the extreme end of things…He's a tiny little man. And I don't mean height, he's exceptionally thin. He'll work out for like 3 hours in the morning before he comes into work, and if that's where your priorities are that's fine, but don't come talk to me about the obesity epidemic and how we have to get these people to dah dah dah...healthy lifestyles, blah blah blah. You're not going to come talk to me like that because not only will I tell you to shut up, but I will tell you that I am a burlesque dancer, that I can play competitive volleyball, that I can play competitive softball, and that my doctor says I'm healthy as a horse and that you cannot judge a book by its cover. I don't do that to you; therefore you should have no entitlement to do that to me. And I go into things at work with him.

Working in Human Resources and organizational development I start to talk about diversity and how diversity is not just race and religion, diversity also has to do with ability, disability, body size, sexual orientation; diversity is diversity and I have more to offer than just what my physical appearance is and that I am going to make the best use of what is humanly possible, and if you don't want to be around me because of the way I look, I invite you to not be.

While Jerri may not want people to judge her for her size, and she claims to not judge others including her co-worker, she can’t escape making a negative assessment on her co-worker’s masculinity. In addition, Jerri very specifically says she is not going to physically fight anyone but will stand up for what she believes in, and yet she labeled that “aggressive aggressive.” Culturally, based on numerous factors from gender to geographic location, assertiveness may be viewed as a negative trait. There are several studies ranging across disciplines such as STEM disciplines and business which claim that assertive women are often viewed negatively and it can
even impact their futures in a company (hiring/firing) as well as their wages (cf. Maxfield, Grenny, McMillan, Kamps, O’Loughlin). Jerri, rather than being told she is aggressive, bossy, or confrontational, has self-identified as such. This implies that even though Jerri appears very confident and steadfast in her fight against fat phobia, she views her tactics in that fight as negative.

I follow up with the question, “Do you find yourself responding online to ignorant comments and things like that?” Jerri leans to the side, hangs her arms at her side and slouches forward, seemingly exhausted and annoyed and responds, “Yes! Why? I don't even know. I just, I have to go ‘Somebody on the internet is wrong.’ And I don't know why I choose to do that because you're never going to win with those people who are making those ignorant comments. But I do [respond] a lot.” For Jerri, it is important to at least attempt to shift discourse even if her efforts may ultimately be in vain. Circling back to Jerri’s earlier conversation about Tess Holiday and people equating weight to how healthy a person is Jerri talked about how discussions surrounding weight often start with people bringing up (false) issues surrounding weight and health to ending on an aesthetic note (i.e., “You stupid fat cow”). What Jerri points out here is that people often devolve into name calling with fat people, thereby resorting to even more superficial arguments rather than seemingly substantive arguments about “health,” as it started out in this case. As Jerri points out, many people may initially feel that they are arguing a side that is steeped in “facts” and “figures,” when in reality they do not like fat people because they apparently feel that fat people are gross and lazy. Whether consciously or not, individuals who are equating health and weight as causational, and thinness as beautiful, are subscribing to the cultural norms that they take for granted. It becomes difficult to shift cultural discourses that situate fat as unaesthetic when arguing with someone about his or her subjective opinion on
beauty. While many people say they prefer this or that in an individual, conceptions of the so-called “ideal beauty” (thin, white, small waist, large breasts, long, straight hair, tall) are, of course, socially constructed. What Jerri alludes to here, especially at the end, is that individuals do not want to admit they are superficial. No one wants to openly admit he or she is only interested in how a person looks. In fact, often through family and educational institutions, individuals are taught, usually from a young age, that they should endeavor to see everyone’s “beauty on the inside.” However, as people grow-up and engage with messages around them, including popular culture, it becomes clear that this message is not reserved for fat people.

What Jerri understood, and what many of us as fat women understand is that the people who criticize us are not interested in our health, or how active we are, or how happy we are as individuals. They are only (un)interested in us because we are fat and they see the fat as something ugly. To make the utopia vision a reality, we, as a culture need to retrain ourselves to see the fat body as beautiful. To begin, fat women must reclaim fat as a positive identity marker.

As a fat studies scholar, I have attempted to reclaim the word fat as a positive identity marker for myself and to work towards dispelling the myths about fat people and their health, self-esteem, and/or perceptions of themselves. Many of my participants spoke about breaking down those same assumptions about fat(ness) and fat people. For example, when I asked Clitha “What would you like other people to stop saying or feeling about fat people?” she replied,

To stop assuming that because you're a fat body that you want to be thin. I would rather people think that you want to be fit and healthy. I want to be the best fat body I can be because time has shown me that that is the body I am going to be. I have not been thin ever. Ever! Even when I tried to be thin, it was horrible. My body does not maintain thinness; my body prefers to be fat. I don't want people to always be thinking that every
time they see [me] or look at [me] that [I] probably want to trade places with a thinner person. Or that the word fat is a bad thing. If you call yourself fat, or talk about fatness [it is assumed] that you have low self-esteem. It's just body fat. It's not like you blew up the world. You just have fucking adipose tissue under your skin. More so perhaps than others. And maybe not! I've done body tests on people who look thin, but that have more body fat than I had looking like I look. So, body fat percentage again, it's on the inside and you can't see it. Some of us have great inner workings, but you can see fat on the outside. I would like for people who are not in fat bodies to quit thinking they are the best thing since sliced bread and consider that I may be [the best thing since sliced bread] too.

Clitha understands what it means to live in a fat body and how the fat body is no indication of health, stamina, and self-esteem. For Clitha reclaiming fat as a descriptor is important. This action taken on her part, in and of itself, is an attempt at shifting negative connotations with “fat.” Clitha does not go so far to exclaim that it must be a “positive” descriptor, just that people need to at the very least nullify the negativity associated with fat(ness).

Much of the fat studies and fat acceptance scholarship and activism revolves around revalorizing “fat” as a positive identity marker. Eve Sedgwick pointed to the necessity of this revalorization when she proclaimed in her 1993 book, *Tendencies*, that “There is such a process of coming out for a fat woman…it [using the word fat] is a way of staking one’s claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of the representational contract between one’s body and one’s world” (222). While I personally agree with much of this scholarship, I also deeply considered Clitha’s notion that fat can be seen as neutral and how that neutrality may be effective in diminishing powerful negative discourse and feelings surrounding fat(ness). However, as Samantha Murray, argues in one of her earliest articles “Doing Politics or Selling
Out?” even “coming out” may be problematic in ensuring individuals remain empowered after “coming out” (270). She states,

…returning to Sullivan’s point about the problematic acts of “coming out” as relying on the declaration of an unambiguous identity, the ways in which I live my fat body are \textit{always} multiple, contradictory, and eminently ambiguous” (270).

She goes on to discuss how she might leave feeling empowered and strong in a sleeveless top only to catch a glimpse of herself in a store window and become defeated again. Murray understands this notion of coming out as recursive. Furthermore, Murray speaks back to an example in Marilyn Wann’s fat positive book \textit{Fat? So!}. Wann is an American author and fat acceptance activist. There Wann suggests people can change everything about themselves if they just (re)claim fatness. Murray states,

Wann’s model of subjectivity is founded on a humanist principle whereby one’s identity is located in one’s mind, and that through the act of changing one’s mind, it is then possible to change the way one’s body is received. By uncritically and unproblematically calling for a change in your personal mindset in overturning the way the fat body is read by Western culture, Wann unwittingly suggests that the society that originally positioned her body as negative one has ceased to exist (271).

Murray’s critique of Wann complicates the notion that simply revalorizing the term fat into a positive identity marker \textit{is subversive enough} to change how fat people feel about their bodies at all times. While I argue that part of subverting fat shaming messages includes re-appropriating the term fat, it is important to recognize, as Murray and many of my participants point out, we still live in our fat bodies within this culture and we are rarely, if ever, static in our approaches to our own bodies.
This is all to point out that individuals such as Clitha deeply understand the discourses surrounding weight, shape, size and the negativity associated with it. Discourse (re)produces rhetoric that positions fat bodies in a constant state of peril. Clitha understands that to reclaim our fatness, as even a neutral term, would help to shift this cultural discourse and expectations for fat bodies. Yet unlike Wann, she does not oversimplify how the world around her can have an impact upon how she feels about her body from moment to moment. I asked Abi if she wants changes to take place concerning what people feel/say about fat people. Abi responded, …we have to talk about it. We can't stay silent about it; so we need to name what we think the change is; we need to name either the injustice or what we’re seeing as a problem. I think we need to challenge that in other people, if it's language, or youth. Even, I think I was talking with my mom and a family friend not too long ago – we're all over weight – and the friend was telling a story about a co-worker; I think it was that she described herself to this co-worker as fat and the co-worker was shocked that she used the word and I kind of acknowledged, like well yeah, in some way we've made this word super negative and…but really it's more descriptive. Like I'm over weight, I’m fat. You telling me that doesn’t need to hurt my feelings…And let people know we are owning it. It shifts the conversation and takes the power of that word as an insult and as something that has to be negative. Where if I say I'm fat, I am putting myself down. I am not putting myself down. I am just acknowledging what I am and I think with that making sure that in other conversations when we're talking about social justice for everything else we are including that and acknowledging that there is bias in the medical world, there is bias in the clothing world, and on TV and what overweight people look like and even how we talk about ourselves. The typical ideal is to be skinnier and that we all should be wanting
to lose weight. And if we're happy with the way we look and we're ok, there's something wrong with us in some way.

Abi’s experience reveals that we live in this culture and we cannot (and perhaps should not) remove ourselves and our bodies from it. We engage with various forces at various times which will shape the ways in which we feel about our bodies, and how we understand our bodies.

However, while I do not want to oversimplify the subversive effects produced by revalorizing the term fat, I do feel this kind of discursive subversion is a step in the right direction. That said, however, it must happen in concert with other cultural shifts, including our consumption and creation of cultural products.

_Utopian Visions: Cultural Products_

As I have pointed out, cultural products hold weight; they (re)produce systems of power, domination, oppression, and difference. Cultural representations matter. Many participants spoke about their desire to see shifts in popular culture representations of fat people specifically, while others voiced a desire to see changes in women’s fashion.

Some survey respondents, when asked specifically about the changes they want to see in the media responded that they wanted to see more diverse bodies. Laura, a 54-year-old white professor from South Carolina responded, “First I would actually represent them. In kinds of roles (leading and secondary, romantic, funny and serious, heroic - we've had enough fat villains for a while - dramatic, intelligent, capable, caring, and in all age groups).” Liza, a 31-year-old pansexual from Brooklyn stated, “I would like more fat characters that just exist like normal, without their weight being a constant topic or obstacle.” A 21-year-old queer female from Illinois said,
Make them main damn characters! Without fat jokes, and especially stop having fat women being “redeemable” characters just because they're funny/self-deprecating. That's some bullshit! Fat women don't have to be funny to be valuable. Not as jokes or problems or corpses or stereotypes, but in a large variety of roles, doing all the things (fat) people do in real life. Working at all kinds of jobs, caring for their families, pursuing hobbies and outside activities, doing volunteer work, etc.

For these individuals, and for myself, representation matters. Not only does representation of fat bodies matter but representations of other intersectional identity positions matter as well.

In an interview, Paige connected ageism with issues of body image and outlined what she feels needs to happen in popular culture in particular. She states,

Certainly, a wider range of body types. A wider range of ethnicities. More women. More women that are the lead character in particular, which is my focus. Age is my focus because actresses have a shelf life of about 35 years. You get to 35 and nobody wants to put you on the cover of their magazine anymore, so you don't get the roles. Definitely a wider range of people from all categories. Get past the stereotypes of people.

When I spoke to Clitha, I followed up with the question, “What would you like to see changed in popular culture?” to which she responded,

I would like to see more fat bodies, more diverse sizes, be included at the intersection of other categories. You see the fat guy get the girl, like Kevin James, but rarely do you see the fat girl get the guy and when you do it's always within comedy. There is always some comic relief that's there, with *Mike and Molly* for instance. Why couldn't Molly have an average size boyfriend? It's ok that she has Mike, but it is always assumed that fat people like each other. It's always around comedy. It's not the fat girl as a romantic interest, it's
going to be like that with the new Amy Schumer [movie], but it's still a romantic comedy and she's still self-effacing at some point about her size and body.

I added “But in Bridesmaids she is hyper sexual. We’re either hyper or asexual.” Clitha followed up with,

The thing is with hyper sexuality it often comes off as desperation. I'm hyper sexual but I’m not getting any play. I'm trying very hard. It's like she's hypersexual and [we] see her getting fucked, or going off with a guy. I want to see more diverse bodies size, age, race, at the intersection. I want to see fat black women, older black women, white women that are older and fat, Latina women who are fat, I want to see intersections other than youth and white, or youth and black.

Seeing complex, diverse characters was at the top of these individuals’ lists concerning shifting cultural products, within popular culture.

Lola also provided a fresh perspective on how representation matters with celebrity, influence, and power. I asked Lola, “What images would you like to see changed in the media?” Lola responded,

I'd love to see Gabby [Sidibe] with like Ryan Gosling. I would like to see a romantic relationship where it is Gabby with Ryan Gosling or some other like hot piece of ass dude and they never get asked about...like who's gonna ask the question, ‘What's it like fucking her? She's real fat.’ No reporter is going to ask that.

I followed up by asking her if she meant in a fictional love scene. She replied,

Real life! Like Melissa McCarthy...nobody knows who her husband is. [McCarthy and her husband] met when they were improvisers...he's not real famous and also not all that

25 Here Clitha is citing the Amy Schumer movie Trainwreck.
attractive. Maybe they got divorced and she bounced back, and Clooney divorced Amal for McCarthy…that would be the great like, ‘Fuck you!’ And he's like, ‘I'm the happiest I've ever been.’ Then there would be articles in *GQ*, *Esquire*, *FHM* like, ‘How fucking a fat lady can change your life for the better,’ and ‘Where to pick up fat chicks.’ There would be a paradigm [shift] where ‘Fat ladies are great…look how happy George Clooney is.’

Lola’s comment is multi-layered. She grasps the ways in which celebrity is situated in American culture and simultaneously she cites the power celebrities have to create real cultural change. In her example, Clooney divorcing his wife for Melissa McCarthy would be a subversive act that could produce discursive change within magazines and how they report on fat women. Per Lola’s utopian vision, fat women would become all the rage. What she appears to be envisioning is a potential not only to shift discourse about fat(ness) but to shift cultural products and representations of fat women in popular culture as well. However, on the flip side she is also positioning thin, white men (Gosling and Clooney) as the kind of standard of male-attractiveness. Although she’s calling for a shift in the judgment of fat women’s bodies, she is also subscribing to cultural norms for men’s cultural norms for attractiveness. In doing so it may seem that she is positing that only thin men can position fat women as beautiful. However, I feel her point is that if what American culture considers to be the epitome of beauty for men (Gosling and Clooney) were to date and thereby find fat women attractive, it would shift the discourses and cultural products would embrace fat women surrounding their fat(ness), beauty, and love.

Melissa also discussed the power of celebrity. I asked Melissa, “Do you think a more public platform is more likely to create larger cultural change?”
As somebody who is gay and who is accepting of LGBT rights and people and everything, I honestly cannot fathom how straight people needed Ellen DeGeneres to accept people being gay. So in that way it makes no sense to me that people would need Melissa McCarthy to make being fat not a punishable offense… I think being fat is still largely seen as being a choice, and while being gay is still thought of as by a lot of people of being a choice, that’s changing and there’s more evidence and people know people who are gay or this or that, and so it is all helpful to change that [assumption].

These individuals I have quoted above were able to clearly speak about the change(s) they want to see in not only themselves but also in the representations of fat people in cultural products, including popular culture and fashion.

This section, which recounts potential ways to subvert repressive cultural products and representations reveals a much more abstract way to think about utopian visions of cultural products than the ways in which the other women in the previous section spoke about shifting discourse. For example, concerning cultural products, their visions revolved around Hollywood shifting the representation of fat women from abject bodies requiring derision to well-rounded, complex characters. In addition, they want to see Hollywood produce more of these characters and also have them be responded to positively.

It is apparent by the responses there that representation matters and that changes in representations can lead to large cultural shifts. Aimee Taylor, in her dissertation *Fat Cyborgs: Body Positive Activism, Shifting Rhetorics and Identity Politics in the Fatosphere* stated,

Alongside other textual elements, such as images and videos of fat bodies performing, smiling, and living fulfilling lives, written and spoken, or performed, textual markers help to normalize the fat body and give people a language for talking about bodies that does
not erase, silence, or discriminate against them. Most importantly, though, disseminating these textual markers makes way for more positive discourse about fat people to take place online, as well as in homes, classrooms, medical offices, and on our television screens. Ultimately, positive consideration, viewing, and representation of fat bodies, of all bodies rather, continues to be a necessity in our cultural and social discussions and rhetorical practices (28).

Recently, I started to think about the success of programs such as Netflix’s *Dear White People*, and *Master of None*, and Hulu’s video serialization of Margaret Atwood’s novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where social constructions of race, sexuality, class, and gender are being challenged and discussed on screen. However, when it comes to body shape, size, and weight I feel American culture has a long way to go. In these shows, for example, while characters can grapple and engage with multiple identities, they are still all thin and what I would consider attractive according to social norms. Although the participants in this study were not, at the time of the interview, involved in any television or film production, casting, or writing, at least in what they divulged to me, they all are consumers of popular culture, they all recognize the importance of shifting representations of fat bodies into more positive, complex realms. Consumers are capable of demanding, requiring, and requesting that studios cast, write, and produce stories that are more diverse. Recently, through various social media campaigns, shows like NBC’s *Community* were renewed based on the demands of fans (Murphy). Currently, as I write this, there is a petition circulating with over 413,000 signatures to reverse the cancelation of ABC’s *Last Man Standing* (Matt) but it has yet to be revealed what ABC will do, if anything. While subversive acts can take on many different forms, my participants reveal that they can
imagine what they want to see changed even if they struggle to explain how to create that change or even though they may not currently participate in fat activism to help create that change.

*Utopian Visions: Performances*

Not only do the people that I spoke with want to shift discourses surrounding the fat body – which is also how we understand and then represent the fat body – people want to be able to perform their fat bodies freely without restriction. Restricting one’s fat body happens in several ways: how fat people eat in public (they may restrict their food intake); literal restriction through clothing and shapewear; restricting the exposure of the fat body, such as when fat people choose to choose not to visit a public beach or swimming pool. As a fat person, I understand that I am regularly required to “check” my fat body in various spaces. When I fly I need to make sure I am as small as I can be on the plane so as to not disturb the person next to me. When I go swimming, I need to be in a one-piece swimsuit and need to be sure not to expose my belly. When I go out to eat, I need to make sure I don’t order too much food, and also that I do not eat all of the food that is brought to me. While I am in a constant state of flux with how, where, and when I perform my fat body in various ways (like many people regardless of weight), I am also hyper aware that my gender as a woman also has an impact on how I am able to perform my fat body in any given context. While I wade through life with one eye astutely open concerning my body and how I can and do perform my fat body, others I spoke with find themselves fully resisting how they are *supposed* to perform their fat body. However, even resistance requires an astute consideration of one’s own body. Many subvert fat shaming messages that seek to limit how they perform their fat bodies. When fat people subvert fat shaming messages, they simultaneously put in motion new ways to see, understand, and engage with the fat body.
Abi, who insists on living her life however she sees fit, whether or not she is fat, resists the assessment others make of her by how she performs her fat body. She subverts the messages that fat bodies should be put in hiding, that fat bodies should be covered up, and should perform a certain way. She states,

Even [with] clothing, not wearing what some people think I should be wearing. I don’t walk out in nothing, and I don’t show off anything out of the ordinary. But I’m not afraid to show some cleavage, or wear a dress, or things that I am comfortable in. I don’t think it should be an issue, so I think some of that is that way…I think some of it is acknowledging my own fat body, that I’m a big person, that I’m overweight, acknowledging some of that but owning it, but also showing I’m comfortable in loving my body. I’m not constantly berating myself over it. We just came from dinner, we're doing summer staff training and we were at a pizza buffet and I was like I want more dessert, ya know? Like, owning, like, I'm going to eat and I'm not going to be ashamed or apologize, or feel like I have to eat the salad to make up for this other stuff. I like to dress [up] and it can be difficult to find the right thing or owning what struggles I’ve had and not feeling like when I talk about having to go to the doctor that I have to be ashamed of things that are a part of life and who I am…I am turning 36 next week and I am in a very different place in my mid 30s with my body and who I am and how I feel about myself than I was 16 years ago as a sophomore in college feeling myself out. And trying to empower [my female students], like yeah you can wear certain things. Like women will say they can't wear shorts or I don't wear dresses or…

For Abi, while she acknowledges that she must still be somewhat modest in the dressing of her fat body, she also understands that by wearing certain low-cut tops, and/or dresses, she is
subverting the message that fat bodies should be covered up at all times. She is performing her fat body, through fashion, in subversive ways, and thereby creating new spaces for her body to be exposed in ways that have typically been considered unacceptable in Western culture. She is using cultural products such as clothing to transgress social norms and shift her body’s “performance.” Lola subverts cultural norms by employing fashion in a similar way.

I feel like I put my fat body out there. I wear a lot of tank tops. So I have big fat arms with like armpit fat. I don't give a fuck. I wear a lot of off the shoulder stuff too. Because I got big-ass shoulders and back fat. I don't care. I go all kinds of different places like that. But I will not bear my midriff. I am not going to do that. I will wear like short-ass shorts. But my stomach no, that is deeply problematic for me, like shameful.

I inquired about how Lola might actively shape how people feel about fat bodies. After asking Lola specifically, “How might we enact change?” I rephrased the question and asked her, “What do you do that you think is actively trying to shape others’ perspectives on fat bodies?” She responded,

Well, not only am I fat but I’m also old, so I think I dress really inappropriately for my age and size. So, I will frequently go outside...or go to the dog park, or Kroger, wherever in short shorts and a tank top. Showing a lot of skin like arms and legs and stuff. And probably some people might be like, ‘Maybe she shouldn't be wearing that’ and I'm like ‘Well, I don’t really give a fuck.’ I also eat a lot! Like when we go out. I probably eat more here [in northwest Ohio] because whatever I can cook is better than anything this area serves. I do enjoy cooking and eating.

While Abi and Lola perform their fat bodies in subversive ways through fashion, Jerri, the burlesque dancer, performs her fatness on stage with a local burlesque group. I went to see their
show and to experience their perspective on fatness, performance, sex, burlesque, and empowerment.

I ventured up to a local city to see a burlesque show that featured women of all shapes and sizes. Sitting at a small table with two friends in a dimly lit arts space on a Saturday night, I watched the dancers perform to various songs and incorporate local traditions, geographic locations, and jokes into their performance. While some women were visibly nervous, others seemed very at home on stage. These women courageously stood up on a stage, flooded with bright lights, and rejoiced in their bodies in front an audience. After the show, I walked around handing out my recruitment flyers to the dancers in the hopes that one might be interested in being interviewed.

When I spoke to Jerri I asked about her performances as not only a burlesque dancer, but as a fat woman as well. I asked her to share her experiences with her dancing and with her “Tassel Sisters,” as she calls them. We also spoke about how her thoughts about her body have changed over time. Jerri explains,

[The Tassel Sisters] probably had the greatest influence. I didn't know really what burlesque was, but a girlfriend of mine called and said, ‘I'm going to go audition for this burlesque at Collingwood [a local arts center] and I don’t want to go by myself.’ So I said, ‘Let me think about it,’ and I called my sisters and I said ‘Hey. I need you guys to talk me out of this,’ and they did not. And then I talked to my boyfriend and I said, ‘You really need to talk me out of this and tell me it's a stupid idea and don't go; I'll be making a fool out of myself,’ and he did not. And I did the same with my mom and again, she did not.

She smiles, as she is talking about this, looking very happy and proud. Jerri continues,
So I came and I auditioned and I got a call before I was even home that I had made it and I was like, ‘Awesome, that's great!’ One of the very first things we were told was a) there's going to be a lot of people being naked around you, deal with it, and the other thing we were told was you do not talk badly about yourself or your body in the confines of this building. You don't. You don't even get to say, ‘I'm fat.’

I asked Jerri if they could talk about their fat bodies in positive ways. Jerri said,

Nope. Because not everybody sees that as a positive…the words are so controversial. So that took a lot of really getting used to. But there's something amazing when 15-18 women of all kinds of come together and do nothing but support one another. And I know I said earlier that my boyfriend said, ‘Oh yeah, you can do it,’ and my sisters were like ‘Why couldn't you do it? Of course you can.’

Jerri trails off here continuing,

…but you feel like those people say things to you because they’re obligated to. Even though that's not the reality of it, that's just the feeling [you get], so when you have 15, 18 complete strangers kind of rally around you and tell you you're wonderful and tell you you're beautiful and tell you, ‘Yes, show these people your body,’ and then you do and people are yelling and screaming and cheering and not because they want to do nasty things to you or grab you or anything like that. It's the hardest thing to overcome to be able to do that. It was hard, but once I did [it], I was like ‘Man, oh, ok, I've been missing this for 34 years. Crap.’ Liberating isn’t even a strong enough word for it. It's everything. And then when 15 to 18 strangers become your friends and are now your sisters and [they]start to tell you you're enough and that you're good and that you're beautiful, you start to believe that. You start to believe that because when you surround yourself with
these people who say these things to you constantly who are not “obliged” to say them to you, well then, they must be telling you the truth. It's been good.

Jerri’s story is powerful for how it speaks to the possibility of subversion. She grew up in a home where fat bodies were not accepted, a point she expressed earlier in our interview. As she aged and tried to be social, she realized that people were not always looking out for her best interest and that her body, while hypervisible, also somehow invited touching, which she did not like. Jerri understands how she wants to perform her fat body (both on and off stage) and what is expected of her to perform as a woman with a fat body. These two things do not always align. In fact, they rarely align.

Noting that for Jerri, her Tassel Sisters, not positive popular culture representations of fat women necessarily, had a huge impact upon her self-esteem. This suggests that the utopian themes presented here must be multi-faceted. Change cannot come from only one source such as family and friends whom we surround ourselves with, but rather from a variety of sources working in concert to uplift marginalized and oppressed community members.

Both Jerri and Abi came to perform their bodies in different ways over the course of their lifetimes. Both expressed how they have not always been happy in their bodies, harkening to Sedgwick’s notion of “knowingness” in that we understand ourselves within our cultural contexts (222).

With this in mind, Lola, Jerri and Abi are up against those social frameworks, hierarchies, and discourse and have, at various times, decided to not only resist them internally, but externally as well through the performances of their fat bodies and what has been culturally deemed as appropriate/inappropriate for fat bodies.
Systematic Changes: Subversive Acts

When resistance happens, the possibility for subversion arises. However, subversion cannot happen without a simultaneous awareness of resistance, even if on an interpersonal level (rather than a cultural one) and/or on an internal level (as in the person refusing to diet). Subversion is an action fomented by resistance to the messages.

While subversion may happen before, during, and/or after encountering negative messages about fat bodies in popular culture, doing so through messages on a screen or in writing is a much easier task to undertake than to subvert messages person to person. Also, various forms of subversion must happen in concert with one another. So, in the case of my study the shifting of discourses, cultural products, and performances would need to happen simultaneously and would happen simultaneously because the institutions that help to control discourse and products are interconnected. A shift in one, or two, would resonate across culture.

Melissa shares her ideas for change which embodies the interconnectedness of shifting discourse, changing cultural products, as well as how people perform their fat bodies. Melissa states, Some of the things I mentioned before, like I don’t actively participate in any of that [fat shaming]. So, anybody shaming, any food morality, any ‘I was good today,’ any exercising to earn things, any Fitbit bullshit, any posting my garbage online so everybody can see it, any flashback photos to when I was fat or thin. I don’t like people’s photos who talk about stuff like that. I often actively hide it on Facebook. I actively unfriend people for comments and photos and things like that. Sometimes I say something, but I am more likely to say something in person because I am online [and] people’s online spaces are their spaces, and so I can choose to participate or not. So, for me to come into every person who posts a horrible “before picture” of them, that this isn’t really a positive...
way to like promote body image. Or when I ask them what they’ll look like in five years, that’s not a great way to activate open conversations. Most of my comments come in person for people.

Melissa continues by talking about all the various ways in which she might encounter fat shaming, and how she attempts to combat it in her everyday life. She explains,

I will be confrontational about it. In my office, I will post things about it that this is a “Fat free zone” [and] little cartoons about that. I mean I work with students [and] a lot of my students are 18-24, so when they come in and say [fat shaming things] I listen, and I totally understand and then I shut it down. Not in the ‘I don’t want to hear it way’ but in the like, ‘Listen. Have you heard of this thing?’ I’ll strive for neutral most of the time. But being aware of the role I play in creating change…you never know who you’re going to affect.

There is a unique difference between resistance and subversion, especially in Western culture, which is a very individualistic culture. In Bordo’s work on the discourse and cultural analysis of advertisements aimed at women and fitness, she argues that the ads are resistant and yet nevertheless convince women to participate in and embody dominant ideals of beauty and fitness. Bordo argues that

… [the ads] pretend to reject the sexualization of women (‘I believe that ‘babe’ is a four-letter word’) and value female assertiveness (‘coloring my hair with Nice and Easy made me feel more powerful!’) while attempting to convince women who fail to embody dominant ideals of (slender, youthful) beauty that they need to bring themselves into line (298).

She continues,
To resist this is not merely in textual “play,” but at great personal risk – as the many women who have been sexually rejected for being “too fat” and fired from their jobs for looking “too old” know all too well. Subversion of dominant cultural forms, as bell hooks has said, ‘happens much more easily in the realm of ‘texts’ than in the world of human interaction…in which such moves challenge, disrupt, threaten, where repression is real (298-299).

To resist dominant ideals, messages, and norms within one’s own life is considered a choice, a choice that still has personal risk, as pointed out by Bordo. But it is a personal choice nonetheless. However, to subvert those dominant ideals and attempt to convince someone else to do the same can have consequences. Individuals would have to actively fight back against their oppressors. Because people are in varying degrees of power and there can be real consequences for doing so, it, therefore, becomes a very difficult and potentially risky task. While risk may be a factor, Bordo also asserts “…no culture is static or seamless. Resistance and transformation are indeed continual and creative, and subversive responses are possible under even the most oppressive circumstances” (295).

Conclusion

For cultural shifts to take place, various systems need to act and work together, in concert. Fleeting images of supposedly fat positivity is not enough, nor are only shifting discourses at the individual level by reclaiming fat as a positive identity marker, for example. All level of oppression towards fat people – individual, group, and institutional – need to be subverted towards more fat acceptance.

However, even imagining utopic visions for a fat positive world can be difficult because of how deeply embedded fat phobia is in American (and other global) culture. Even I have a hard
time imagining seeing bodies like mine in magazines, on television or film, and even in
pornography, which serves to teach people (in part) what to desire, and is often very
heteronormative as well. But why are these fat positive visions so difficult to conjure?

As I bring this dissertation to a conclusion in the next chapter, I theorize as to why
myself, and numerous individuals as shown here, complicate and often negate our own positions
surrounding fat positivity, and how deeply embedded fat phobic attitudes are in our culture.
CONCLUSION

I would love to be able to say at the writing of this conclusion that fat women (and men) have united on a front to battle fat shaming and fat phobic attitudes and that people everywhere are now embracing their fat(ness) as a beautiful, positive thing and even representations in popular culture are shifting with the discourses. But I cannot. The individuals in this dissertation are up against deeply embedded social, cultural, medical, economic, and political institutions and messages that say, “You’re not good enough.” Even when individuals here found themselves in some cases able and willing to resist certain messages, they also revealed their acceptance of other fat shaming messages. For example, Abi resisted fat shaming messages in all kinds of ways only to reveal at the end of the interview she still wanted to lose weight. Lola, in one moment, revealed she did not care about her back fat, and in the next spoke about how she prefers to “look polished” for students so they do not think she is stupid because she is fat. She finds herself in a double-bind of sorts: on one hand she wants to fully resist fat shaming messages about things such as back fat being unattractive, and on the other hand she knows she has to work even harder on her looks in order to be taken seriously. Wanting to lose weight, or to feel good about how they look (including becoming thin to feel good) is not inherently a bad thing. Individuals should be able to live in the body they most desire. I, and many other fat studies and feminist scholars, argue that the problem lies in the pervasive and systematic shaming of fat bodies as less valuable than thin ones, and some participants expressed similar feelings.

In chapter one I discussed how individuals feel constrained in how they are “allowed” to feel about their fat bodies. Individuals revealed that the fat shaming messages they encounter in popular culture do in fact impact how they feel about their own bodies. However, as I discussed in chapter two, that did not also mean that those same individuals embodied those messages by
participating in the consumption of consumer products that seek to somehow change their bodies’ size, shape, and/or weight. In chapter three, I reveal that individuals are able to speak very clearly about the “utopic visions” they wish to see for themselves and for representations of fat bodies in popular culture. However, in numerous conversations it is shown and/or suggested that while they can envision a fat-friendly future, they are unable to subvert fat shaming messages in order to help create that utopic vision. Examples of what my participants are doing to help create, sustain, and maintain social justice for fat people were limited. I argue that one reason individuals are not fully resisting and subverting fat shaming messages is due in part to the fear associated with acting outside of the cultural boundaries concerning weight, size, and body shape. It is not as simple as embracing one’s fat body and then moving through life fat and happy. These institutions, including family, shape how well we are able to resist. Everyone is embedded within institutions that help to shape and situate how we see ourselves and how we understand the world. If these institutions are working the way they are intended to work (and they are), we should be scared to push back on all the varying messages that explicitly and implicitly tell us, as fat people, that we are not worthy, that we are not valuable.

Within my scholarship, I recognize my own inability to fruitfully subvert fat shaming. I have written extensively about the issues I have with representations of fat people in popular culture. However, even I, a scholar of fat studies, have trouble embodying subversive performative acts. What my participants and I are up against is the robust resilience of social norms and fat hatred. Being able to think about real social and cultural change is easier than actually getting out there and doing the subversive work. It is easy enough to imagine a fat-friendly world, but there is real danger – whether emotional, mental, physical, and/or financial – to call out and subvert messages which powerful institutions, such as the medical institution,
need to survive and exist. While many participants were able to clearly articulate the changes they wanted to see, they were not necessarily active in trying to foment that change. Some never circled around to how they themselves might enact change, but rather they spoke about what is being done outside of themselves to help promote/create fat acceptance. Based on the participants’ responses in this dissertation, these individuals want to resist and subvert fat shaming messages, and some do. But powerful social forces often keep our resistance and subversion at bay. These systems are doing *exactly* what they are intended to do. So, perhaps, it becomes not a question of whether or not we desire change but rather whether or not we are able to grapple with these powerful, complex, multifaceted, social forces which seek to oppress us.

One participant, Stella, expressed how complex these systems are, and how deeply intertwined they are as well. Stella pushed back on the notion that she could create change, as well as her desire to create change even though she simultaneously recognized that change is important and necessary in order for fat people to live healthy, safe, vibrant lives.

**Stella’s Story**

Stella’s story has stuck with me through the entire process of writing this dissertation. Stella’s story about her struggle with weight, visibility, and both her ability and inability to accept her fat body over time spoke volumes concerning the precarity she experiences due to her fat body. Stella’s story reveals the powerful social forces she encounters and how they stifle her ability to resist and/or subvert fat shaming messages. As I listened to Stella’s story, I thought as though her story revealed the complexity and precarity we all face when it comes to resisting the current structures that are in place: we all operate within the same systems which seek to oppress us, systems that also often provide rewards for doing so. Therefore, resistance can be viewed as a political act: embodying fat acceptance in and of itself is a political, and cultural act that seeks to
create new ways of living in the fat body. Stella’s story reveals, as do many others, that it is
difficult, if not at times impossible, to resist internalized messages about fat shaming. When I
asked Stella what she would like to see done differently in popular culture she stated,

I do get very frustrated that at 47 I am still struggling with this. I thought I would have
figured this out. I would think being very well educated and being a smart person and
understanding feminist theory...it pisses me off that it's still something I struggle with. I
can't just say ‘This is who I am, fuck all y’all.’ or I can't just lose the weight and be done
with it and that internal struggle of why can't I do either, why can't I be happy with one or
other, why can't I do both, why can't I be like ‘Ya know what, this is me,’ let's look at all
these good qualities, let's look at all these really skinny obnoxious people in the world
and in my mind it still would be better to be thin. For me it feels like failure because of
how many times I've gained and lost, and lost and gained, and I know it's not just me, I
know the diet industry is completely fucked up.

Stella takes a long silent pause as she seemingly contemplates the possibility of change.

She continues,

…Why don't we talk to people about diets, why don't we stand up for what we believe in,
and I can only speak for myself but I find [talking to people] to be something that's
embarrassing, [and] that's shameful and so I don't want to bring it to people's attention so
ummmm...so it's like you said, ‘Why don't people reclaim the word fat?’ It's because I
don't like it. “Fat.” I don’t want to be it. And I still find it shameful for the many times
I've lost weight gained weight, lost weight gained weight and it seems to be one of those
identities in our culture that people are individually responsible for even if I logically
know that diets don’t work. And I can buy that and say that and believe that but it still
feels like a personal failing to not be able to meet the cultural standards. And so why would I want to talk about that? And so, I think there has to be a personal level of acceptance before I can ya know, walk out into the public and talk about it…I’m 47, why is this something I still struggle with? How do I kind of live my life being ok with me and still enjoying life and not being obsessed? Like, I could talk about with you because I would know that it would be accepted, but in kind of general conversation if I talk about it I always think that the people are looking at me going ‘Why am I taking advice from the fat girl?’

I follow up with the question “So if you're not in this public sphere, what do you do that you think is actively trying to shape others’ perspectives of fat bodies, even if more in a private sphere?”

I deliberately went on all my social media and unfollowed people who I thought had messages that were negative for me. And I follow a lot of planner people, scrap-bookers, and crafters, on Instagram and once they start on a new diet and that's all they want to talk about, I unfollow. Because I'm like I can't…I can't. And I don't post those things and I try not to say those things and I try not to engage in those conversations…I think with us not reinforcing the ideas, maybe somebody is like ‘Ya know, what? Fuck this. I'm going to stop talking about my diet’…When I was in my 20s I said I can't be in my 40s and still dealing with this crap, right? So now I'm in my 40s going I can't be 70 and still hating myself.

I ask, “But what about social movements like Health at Every Size, or NAAFA where you're with likeminded people, you said you can talk to me about this, so you're with like-minded
people, you're a part of that movement, do you feel joining a movement would ferment change and if yes, why haven't you done so?"

It's even weird to talk about. I have done an online group; it's like an online . . . I guess she's like a “life coach” or whatever. I've worked with a couple different ones. One I did recently and she was really into body acceptance and listening to your body and eating what your body wants and so that fear, ya know everybody's fear is, ‘I'm going to eat all the time’ and she's like ‘No, it doesn't work that way you just need to [practice] intuitive eating.’ And I've done a few of those kinds of things where you are talking to women around the world in a couple of these smaller groups, and so I mean I'm not particularly good with that because I don't...I'm not a good joiner. I always kind of feel all ‘Oh, everyone else bonded but me.’ Ya know, that sort of BLLAAHHCK…[but] when you know you're not the only one experiencing it, that's nice…I've never been a joiner even on things I strongly believe in, I'm not usually a...

As Stella peters out, I ask “How come?”

How come? I said it jokingly earlier, but [I] don't [like to] make waves, I fly under the radar, I don’t like spotlight, I don’t like to be the center of attention. I don't want to be one of those people, even if it's something I believe in, where other people go, well tell me why you believe that?

I point out that those are skills people can develop to which Stella replies,

I never have. And I guess things that I believe firmly about, I will talk about, but it's like debating with people, arguing with people never changes people's minds, and so if you're anti-whatever and I'm pro whatever, neither of us are going to change our minds. And I don't think most people just want a dialogue to learn about the other person's perspectives
so I guess the same thing here: putting myself on the front lines is something that never would occur to me. Which doesn't mean that if I'm around somebody and they say something ageist or sizest or whatever that I wouldn't speak up, but I'm probably not going to seek it out. God, that sounds horrible. So you'll find me under my desk hiding from the world.

While Stella seemingly contradicts herself when she talks about speaking up and hiding under her desk, I try to clarify asking “So if somebody says something sizest, ageist, sexist, racist, you speak up?” She looks at me and says “Uh-huh.”

I pry a bit further asking, “Do you think by speaking up that enacts potential change?” She says,

It depends. Isn’t that always the answer? I guess it depends on the circumstance and it probably depends on...I mean if somebody standing in Wal-Mart makes a comment I’m going to walk on. I am not going to engage with some blowhard at Wal-Mart who's just going to take it upon himself to call me fat names, which of course is always my fear walking anywhere that I am going to get harassed. So I'm probably more likely like if it’s a student, or a maybe a colleague. Charlie is much more likely to call people out on things which I always have admired. I’m sounding more and more like a big weenie…I don’t want to become the focus. I don't like to be in the spotlight. And I think part of that goes back to that insecurity…I just feel like this is one of those issues unlike race, or sexual orientation, or gender, or... that [being fat] feels like so much personal responsibility, that there is so much shame associated with [being fat]. But, of course I

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26 Participant’s spouse.
I can say that because I am part of the dominant discourse in other areas. Yeah, so you started out by saying for someone so highly educated, yeah I don't know...

Stella again peters out at the end of the discussion. Stella’s story – in many parts – mirrors what other participants spoke about, from family issues to feeling surveilled. Stella’s story, for me, captures the essence of why people do not resist and/or subvert fat shaming messages. At times we are afraid because as fat individuals we are already hypervisible and it is so easy for others to attack us. She even tells a story of her shopping for clothing and how she feels hypervisible in that space. She says,

I feel like people are looking at me when I go into stores. Like, ‘What are you doing here?’ I’m always ready to say ‘I'm shopping for my daughter.’ in case they say, ‘Why are you shopping in here? You're too big for these clothes.’ I'm ready to say ‘I'm shopping for my niece, I can be in here.’ I don't know how many people are out in the world watching me, giving a crap what I look like. I think that most people, me included, are just too self-absorbed…People don't give a shit but it feels like it. I feel like I’m on display…

And the complexities of that fear is revealed here. Stella is afraid to be seen, to be judged, to be harassed, to be amplified, to be secure, and not feel a personal responsibility and shame about her fat body. In addition, fat(ness) is seen as a personal choice, and that it is our “fault” that we are fat so we must take personal responsibility for it and if we do not, we have failed. Notions of success and failure, in this case, are constructed by the very industries and institutions (systems) that benefit from our actual inability to succeed. As I have shown, diets do not work. Yet, the fault of our failure is on us. We cannot ignore the very real fear that comes with resisting social and cultural norms.
Much of the current Fat Studies scholarship talks about notions of shame that comes with being fat (cf. Bordo, Murray, Farrell). Stella’s story is not theorized, or articulated for her, but is in fact told by her. Her story and experience, as shown here, prove the theories about fat(ness) and shame. Stella’s story serves as the evidence for these theories. I feel it is very appropriate to requote Giovanelli and Ostertag regarding their theory of internalized feelings of shame (290).

They argue,

…the media serve as a cosmetic panopticon by suggesting both the value of women’s body size in the United States and how viewers are to feel and act according to body size. Women do indeed resist and reject these discourses, yet their ubiquitous and incessant nature creates an unyielding tide against which women must constantly swim (290).

Their work is not just theoretical, but reflect what is happening for people like Stella. Other stories that I heard push back even on Stella’s story, thereby complicating notions that fat people feel shameful, and are insecure because of their bodies. For example, during my conversation with Ellen she also highlighted her inability to be resolute in her thinking about her body. When asked what she would like to see change Ellen stated,

One of those things is that heavy people are just naturally insecure. That's not true. Yes, I have my insecurities, I don’t think there's a human being walking the earth that doesn't have insecurities, but that doesn't mean that because I am of a larger body size doesn't mean I am insecure about my weight and that I always need you to give me these passive aggressive comments to try to make me feel better about the fact that I am a heavier person. I'm sorry but, just keep your shit to yourself, I'm ok with me and I don't need you to try to make me ok with me.
Ellen explicitly points out that everyone has insecurities but they vary by the individual. She continues,

I would really love for the world to recognize and understand a woman with a heavier body actually can feel sexy and can enjoy sex and desire sex and not be concerned about turning the lights off, and keeping her body covered, which is sort of the thing you sort of see in TV and film, ‘I'm ashamed of some aspect of my body so if I'm going to have sex let's keep the lights off and let's make sure we're under the covers,’ or ‘I have to keep some clothing on because I don't want you to see me.’ If I’m going to have sex, you're going to see it all, because I want to be able to enjoy the experience and I know there are a lot of women out there who are not a size 2 or a size 4 who enjoy sex, who have healthy sex lives, and don't feel ashamed of their bodies or their sexuality, so please stop making the larger black, not just the black, body but just the larger female body asexual. Gosh, um, I would also like people to stop saying that because I have a heavier body that I lack discipline or that I don't eat healthy, because that's not true. Yeah I have my days where I eat Chipotle, I have my days where I hate everything Chick-fil-a stands for but oh, I love that chicken sandwich. I put good food in my body. I put healthy food in my body. I'm not sitting on that sofa all day eating chips. I'm not in here eating unhealthy because I have a larger body so I wish people would stop saying that. And just because I'm bigger doesn't mean I am always on a diet or trying to lose weight.

In addition to Ellen, Abi spoke at length about how we often attach value to fat people, claiming they are somehow less valuable than thin people while also recognizing that in order to create change, we have to shift current discourse surrounding fat(ness) even by simply acknowledging that fat people exist. Abi stated,
I don't want there to be value attached to weight; that you're better or worse based on how much you weigh. Or that I don't have something to offer…I don't want there to be value and making good or bad choices. I still do it. I say, I made a bad choice or chose bad food. We don't have to say it's good or bad. [We can say] I ate something; it's fine….

Abi envisions a world where she can be in the world and not have value tied to her weight. Abi and Ellen are both attempting to resist those negative discourses, whereas Stella showcases that she understands how deeply embedded fat shaming messages are both within herself and within others; she just cannot push back on them because she feels her inability to lose weight or her inability to resist is a personal failure.

To me this inability suggests layers of complexity, which need to be further unpacked within fat studies and other interdisciplinary scholarship, as well as the fat acceptance movement. Some people want to resist, but cannot or will do not do so, where others are resisting. As with any movement, cultural and social change comes slowly and perhaps this is why we recognize that a change needs to happen, but we are not ready to participate because with the fat body we have, we believe we have only ourselves to blame.

The Complexities of Resistance

Considering these very real, and often personal, barriers, how can we overcome fat shaming, fat phobia, and fat hatred? Perhaps we are shifting the discourses already. Recently I was sent a trailer for a new film called *Patti Cake*$ about a fat, white, female rapper.\(^27\) The trailer

\(^{27}\) I will add that I am extremely disappointed in the premise of this film because a white actress, and therefore a white experience, is being told through the appropriation of rap music. I feel my critique of this film reveals just how difficult it is to push back on current representations: on one hand we *might* be featuring a fat body in a positive way, but on the other hand we are simultaneously having that fat white body appropriate black culture and in doing so we are participating in the erasure of black culture, experiences, and lives. I want to harken back to Bordo’s point about transcendence: while culture may seemingly be creating new and positive representations of fat bodies, right under the surface there are deeply problematic representations, or lack thereof.
suggests that her weight is a positive part of her identity and one in which she fully embraces which would be a refreshing change from what we typically see. However, for every successful movie with a fat person in it, it seems there are hundreds of successful movies featuring thin people. As much as I want to believe that our culture will one day come to accept fat people, I am fully aware of the barriers that we face to make that a reality, and so are these participants. It is going to take more than embracing fat as a positive identity marker, or being unapologetically fat. It is going to take years of undoing the historical constructions surrounding fatness in virtually every single institution that we all participate in from media, to medicine. Entire billion dollar diet industries will need to be toppled (“100 Million Dieters, $20 Billion: The Weight-Loss Industry by the Numbers”). Individuals will need to grapple with their fat phobic attitudes and behaviors and want to change/challenge them, and recognize to do so is an ongoing process. People in positions of power within popular culture (writers, casting agents, directors) will need to cast fat people and not just in parts where their fat(ness) is the butt of a joke.

Fully exploring the complexities that entail on resisting our fat shaming culture are multifaceted and therefore exceed the scope of this dissertation. However, as I have shown here, individuals are finding ways to resist fat shaming messages, and they are doing so with the recognition that their thoughts and behaviors surrounding their bodies are recursive, and are ongoing processes. The way in which these participants resisted included refusing to participate in fad diets and engage in negative body talk, and to order whatever food they desired and to not wear shape wear. Others, such as Jerri, directly subverted fat shaming messages by becoming a burlesque dancer and allowing herself, and others, to experience the fat body as sensual, desirable, and sexy. Many of these individuals, while embedded in the same systems which seek to oppress them, find meaningful ways to resist and subvert fat shaming messages. To circle
back to Foucault’s notion of where there is power, there is resistance, these individuals highlight how “…the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities…” (96). Through further research, some of which may take place in studies such as this, we can continually assess the resistance of fat shaming at the individual level, and help determine what that resistance means at the group and institutional levels in which those individuals operate.

Limitations

This study investigated how individuals make sense of the popular culture messages they are exposed to regarding body weight. I looked for patterns and themes among these participants’ perspectives to consider what these patterns and themes might suggest for reducing fat shaming, for increasing body positivity, and for how we might better understand our bodies. The limitations of this project included my inability to interview people across cultures and across various geographic locations, as I was limited to Northwest Ohio. Moreover, I had limited access to a people of various nationalities.
Each of the clips I showed the participants addresses various issues concerning weight, health, relationships, food, class, race, and gender. I chose these movie and television clips in an attempt to showcase a variety of fat women (and in the case of *Roseanne*, also fat men) and their various lifestyles, personalities, struggles, and triumphs. I feel a major limitation concerning these clips is a lack of diversity including featuring Latina women, Asian women, and Indigenous women as well as women with disabilities. I feel that this study could be greatly expanded if I were able to feature more races/ethnicities in the clips, as well as LGBTQIA+ fat women, and disabled fat women. I would be able to ascertain the cultural differences among U.S. women of a variety of social identities to thereby compare their experiences and produce a more nuanced understanding of fat women’s experiences. In addition, while I was able to feature two genres, comedy and drama, I was unable to feature any romantic scenes in my clips. While not generalizable to broad cultural claims, my study nevertheless interrogates the lived experiences of those individuals who participated in my study. I consider and engage with multiple social identities represented in my participants. My aim, however, is not to assert that my study is generalizable beyond the insights provided by this particular set of participants. The participants of my study are individuals and as such, what they say is particular to our co-constituted narratives.

Future Research

Melissa McCarthy, Rebel Wilson, and Queen Latifah (to name a few contemporaries) have had very successful careers as large(r) women in Hollywood. However, having a few fat actors working at any given time cannot serve as a substitute for true progress. As shown here,
fat women in particular must operate within an entire system of fat shaming messages. From television and film, to fashion, advertising, medicine, and family and educational institutions, all of these continuously reaffirm that fat people are not accepted and/or desired.

I assert that future research – both within and outside of Fat Studies – needs to continue to analyze fat shaming through an interdisciplinary lens, and through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectional identities including race, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, age, socioeconomic status, and geographic location must be considered in future research with more focus than I was able to in my study. To so do would be to showcase how identities intersect with one’s understanding about their own and others’ body shape, size, and/or weight. An analysis of intersecting identities along with body shape, size, and/or weight may reveal new insights as to how fat shaming shifts between and within different spaces based on varying social identities, and how different communities are combating and/or perpetuating a fat phobic culture. For example, cultural analysis of gay men and their feelings towards and/or about fat(ness) could prove beneficial to both Fat Studies and Sexuality Studies scholarship.

In addition to intersectional work, scholarship must use an interdisciplinary approach to studying fatness. It is important to consider the various ways in which fat people encounter fat shaming messages from the individual to the systematic level. Cultural Studies scholars might consider how social, cultural, historical, and economic forces shift cultural mindsets on fat(ness) for better or worse. For example, there is little research on how upper class and wealthy people view and understand fat(ness) in their own lives. Combining a historical analysis of fatness as previously having been a status symbol and comparing that analysis to present day
considerations of fatness by wealthy individuals may shed insight into things such as the wage gap for fat people. If wealthy people are often in positions of power, and they hold bias against fat people, what does that mean for the economics of fat people?

Overall there is much more to be said in Fat Studies in particular and Cultural Studies more broadly about how the fat body is culturally understood and about the struggles fat people have in overturning the rampant cultural degradation fat people undergo. To create real cultural and social change at the individual \textit{and} systematic levels, scholars must embrace the idea that people of varying ages, races, cultures, backgrounds, sexualities, and abilities have something to say about fatness; we must explore what it is that these individuals have to say and attempt to understand how acts of acceptance, resistance, and subversion are shifting the current cultural, social, economic, political, and medical discourses surrounding fat(ness) today. Exploring questions that reveal bias from both thin, fat people, and everyone in between going forward could provide invaluable insight into not only the complexities of how we have become a fat phobic culture, but also how to combat fat phobic attitudes. As scholars and activists, we must try to understand what people – of all shapes, sizes, and weights – are already doing to resist and subvert fat shaming attitudes, beliefs, and products. Through various methods including discourse analysis, qualitative analysis, historical analysis, and interdisciplinary cultural analysis, scholars and activists can help to construct solutions. By helping to construct solutions alongside the most vulnerable populations being affected, fat people can remain empowered in their resistance.
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APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

The survey was distributed through the social media site Facebook. The following are the questions there were asked on the survey.

Part One: Understanding Your Body

What does a typical day look like for you (daily routine)?

If the way you feel about your body is affected by (good, bad, or otherwise) on a regular basis, describe what might have an impact upon how you feel about your body.

Part Two: Wardrobe

Describe your style? What kinds of clothes are you attracted to buy?

How would you describe how you typically dress for each season?

If you swim, what do you typically wear to swim in?

Part Three: Eating Habits

If you go out for food, either to pick up and bring home or to dine in, where do you go?

What do you feel influences your choice of eatery when you go out to eat?

What do you feel influences your choices about what food to order?

When you dine out, do you prefer company or to eat alone?

   Why?

Part Four: Popular Culture

What television shows do you watch on a regular basis?

What kind of movies do you like to watch?

Do you feel one medium (television or film) has more influence over how you feel about your own body?

If so, describe why you think that is.
When you see a person on TV who is above average weight *larger* than yourself, how do you feel?

When you see a person on TV who is above average weight *smaller* than yourself, how do you feel?

When you see a person on film who is above average weight *larger* than yourself, how do you feel?

When you see a person on film who is above average weight *smaller* than yourself, how do you feel?

Describe feelings you have had about your own body when watching a particular television show, and/or a film.

When you see fat shaming happening in television, how do you feel about it?

When you see fat shaming in film, how do you feel about it?

How do you feel when a character in a film or television is put down because of his/her weight?

In what ways does it personally affect how you feel about yourself or your place in society?

If you could change how fat people are represented on television or in film, what would you change?

*Part Five: Demographics*

Age:

Race/Ethnicity:

Gender:

Sexual Orientation:
Geographic Location (City, State):

Type of Employment:

If you had to describe yourself would you say you were?

a) working class  
b) lower middle class  
c) middle class  
d) upper middle class  
e) upper class
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Primary Sources of Data:

My primary sources of data came from the interviews I conducted with participants who qualified for my study. I used an open-ended interview format wherein after a pre-established question, depending upon the participant’s response, I followed up with additional questions. The interviews were unstructured so as to permit the participant and me to co-constitute the interview narrative with more latitude than what might occur in a more structured interview format.

The following are examples of the topics and types of interview questions I intend to ask:

**Demographics:**

1. Tell me about yourself.
   
   1. Age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, any disabilities, where did you grow up, where do you live, profession, hopes & dreams

2. What do you think made you decide to participate in this study?

3. How do you currently feel about your body size, shape, and weight?

4. How, if at all, have your feelings about your body size altered over time?
   
   1. Can you give me an example of when and why you think that may have happened?

**Identification with the Media**

5. Can you recall a time where your body size/shape, or weight, was influenced by an outside force?
1. Tell me about a time where you felt your body size was affected by something beyond you.

2. What do you think was the force that changed you? And, how did you feel during that experience.

6. Give me an example of some image that affected you? How did it do so? What did you remember? What did you feel?

7. Do you feel media images of larger people affect how you understand your own self?

8. Tell me about a time when you saw something, some media experience where you feel like it had an influence on your understanding of yourself. Describe the experience as best you can.

**Resistance:**

9. How, if at all, have you resisted the assessments others make of you, or that implicate who you are?

**Utopian Visions:**

10. What would you like to see changed in yourself?

11. What would you like to see changed in media?

12. What would you like other people to stop feeling/saying about fat people, or about you in particular?

13. What activism should be taken?