Changing Shape: The Evolution of Fat Female Characters in Contemporary American Film

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Abstract

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Changing Shape: The Evolution of Fat Female Characters in Contemporary American Film

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The purpose of this thesis is to elucidate the fluid conception of fat women within contemporary American culture from the early 1970s to the present. Due to their non-normative embodiment, fat women typically face denigration and marginalization. Most mainstream film narratives reify the negative social positioning of fat women, often through assimilationist characters that resign themselves to fatphobia or otherwise compensate for their fatness. On the flipside, carnival and camp narratives foster liberatory fat characterization, as exemplified by the figure of “the unruly woman.” In his portrayal of both assimilationist and liberationist women, Divine functions as a barometer for subsequent fat characterization. Overall, this thesis critiques fat assimilation, argues for the importance of fat liberation, and projects a future where fat acceptance becomes the norm.
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**Introduction: Figuring the Fat Woman**

As a largely representational medium, film has an intrinsic relationship to the human body. This relationship is particularly apparent in contemporary American cinema. Typically couched in the personal responsibility ethos of neoliberalism, these films reflect and reproduce social conceptions of embodiment. They reify norms of bodily acceptability through the frequent deployment of white, male, able-bodied, and/or thin actors. As a result, nonwhite, female, disabled, and/or fat individuals remain in the margins of society and film alike.

Among these non-normative forms of embodiment, fatness is arguably the most at odds with a neoliberal ethos. The pervading logic is that, while nonwhite, female, and/or physically disabled individuals cannot overcome their markers of oppression, fat individuals can. Through sheer willpower, the corpulent can eventually reclaim their respect. They can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” shrink themselves to more comfortably fit within a narrow ideal.¹ Therefore, a failure to slim down registers as a failure to adhere to dominant culture. This relegated a fat individual to a life of pity, derision, or outright hatred.²

When faced with such negativity, the fat have two options: assimilation or liberation. Kathleen LeBesco articulates and weighs these two options in her text,

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¹ In “Neoliberalism, public health, and the moral perils of fatness,” Kathleen LeBesco writes about fatness in the public imaginary as well as the related social pressure for fat individuals to take “responsibility” for their bodies. Julie Guthman and Melanie DuPuis provide a similar viewpoint in “Embodying neoliberalism: economy, culture, and the politics of fat.”

² Fat is fluid. It is not a fixed weight, shape, or body mass index. Nonetheless, it is immediately recognizable. Within this thesis, “fat” is used as a qualitative, not quantitative, term. It refers to a body size that exceeds norms and subsequently faces oppression.
Revolutioning Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity. The fat person who chooses the former “works to secure tolerance for fat rights and experiences and tries to raise consciousness about fat oppression but still possibly conceives of fat as a problem” (42). In contrast, the “fat ‘liberationist’ celebrates fatness and tries to secure for the fat a positively valued experience of difference from the norm; she or he recognizes fat as a problem only to the unenlightened and as a boon to fat people with ‘abundant’ experiences” (42). As a leading figure within fat studies, LeBesco favors the liberationist, whose disavowal of normative body and beauty standards is conducive to the project addressed in her title: redefining fat identity.

As LeBesco routinely acknowledges in her body of work, and as Amy Farrell elaborates in Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture, redefinition is not an isolated, ahistorical phenomenon. Fat liberation has its roots in the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s, but it branches into subsequent generations. It is a process, one that ebbs, flows, and otherwise unfolds in a variety of settings and scales. Liberation occurs when a fat person decides to wear tight or revealing clothing instead of garments that conceal, or when one learns that personal worth cannot be measured by numbers on a scale. Liberation occurs through decades of fat activism, in the form of writing, speaking, and demonstrating. In short, fat liberation occurs whenever phobic cultural narratives are challenged.

By definition, as cultural products with a narrative structure, films act as useful litmus tests for redefinition of fat identity through the years. While normative reification
(assimilation) remains a top priority for many, others privilege normative disruption (liberation). For those in the latter category, carnival or camp narratives are essential.

In *Rabelais and His World*, literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin elucidates the tenets of carnival, a narrative tradition with origins in folk—rather than official—culture. Above all, Bakhtin notes a reliance on the grotesque body to signify carnival’s guiding principle of debasement. Through debasement, “all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images” (370-371). Rabelaisian monsters like Gargantua and Pantagruel most notably take up this project, but they are not the definitive examples of the grotesque body. This classification extends to any body that satirizes norms of acceptability through glorification of excess, bodily processes and overall impropriety (*RAHW*, Chapters Five and Six). In their sheer material abundance, fat bodies become logical figureheads of carnival. This is especially true of fat *female* bodies, those that Bakhtin posits as sites of reproduction and renewal.³

Kathleen Rowe unpacks the grotesque narrative figuration of fat female characters in *The Unruly Woman*. Using Miss Piggy and Roseanne as case studies, Rowe expounds upon salient traits of the unruly woman, such as fatness, dominance, lasciviousness, irreverence, unconventional morals, and marginality (31). Though Rowe’s particular exemplars appear on television, film is equally conducive to unruliness. That is because so much of the unruly woman’s characterization is tied to physical visibility, which includes her ability to be seen as well as “her ability to affect the terms on which she is seen” (11). In this sense, she is a true update of Rabelais’ literary giants, monsters, and

³ Outside of its engagement with Bakhtin, this thesis uses terms like “male” and “female” to refer to a character’s prevailing gender presentation rather than their biological classification.
hags. Her unruliness is made visually explicit, not just supplied through words. The unruly woman bursts forth from the tableau containing her.

Though carnival is responsible for the birth of such a character, the unruly woman’s autonomy and unapologetic visibility make her capable of existing elsewhere, i.e. in camp narratives. Susan Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp’” supports this notion. More of a sensibility than a rigid framework, camp counters cultural values of propriety and tastefulness through an affinity for exaggeration and celebration of character. Camp does not entirely upend established norms (à la carnival), but it does offer “a different—a supplementary—set of standards” (49). It “relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of ‘character’” (52). In other words, camp defuses phobia by treating fatness as a mere intensity of character, a unique physical trait that can coexist with dominant ideological norms.

This thesis traces the evolution of fat identity through a chronological survey of fat women characters in film, from the early 1970s to the present. Chapter One takes up Bakhtin’s conception of carnival and Rowe’s figure of the unruly woman to highlight the ways in which Divine operates as a liberatory model of fatness, particularly within Pink Flamingos and Female Trouble. Chapter Two, as well as the end of Chapter One, focuses on the proliferation of assimilationist narratives during the late 1980s through the 2000s. It critiques the way these narratives perpetuate pitiful, derisive, and phobic stereotypes, either through tragic framing (What’s Eating Gilbert Grape, Precious) or the use of fat suits (Shallow Hal, Big Momma’s House, Diary of a Mad Black Woman). Chapter Three redirects its attention to fat liberation, this time in the form of recent films starring
Melissa McCarthy and Rebel Wilson. It explores how the deployment of carnival tropes within deliberate camp narratives results in a culturally sustainable figuration of the unruly woman.
1. Divine Liberation

During his brief lifetime, Glenn “Divine” Milstead made a tremendous impact on drag culture as well as fat characterization. His irreverent, histrionic approach to femininity made him uniquely qualified for the productions of John Waters, particularly *Pink Flamingos* (1973) and *Female Trouble* (1974). In their deployment of carnival, these two films encapsulate Divine’s penchant for unruliness and fat liberation. Likewise, they call attention to the fatphobia that permeates official culture.

This process of highlighting and countering fatphobia is at the very core of fat studies. Given that fat discrimination is an oft-overlooked issue, writers and activists within this discipline are tasked with elucidating it to the public. Amy Farrell does this particularly well in *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body*. In her critical and historiographical text, Farrell lays out the long history of fat discrimination as well as the considerably shorter history of fat acceptance. She argues that dominant contemporary attitudes towards fatness have been more or less the same since the onset of modernity. From approximately the turn of the century onward, individualism and progress have been held in increasingly higher esteem while fatness has been increasingly denigrated: “A fat body came to be seen less as one that was successful, healthy, or wealthy, but rather as one that was ineffectively managing the modern world” (Farrell, ch. 2). Whereas a fat body signified a person’s shortcomings and disobedience, a thin, controlled body illustrated one’s upward mobility and conformity.

For nearly a century, the ability to manage in the modern world has persisted as a universal concern. Those who seemingly do not take up this concern are deviants, threats
to the social order. Fat people continue to fall within this negative framing, even if they subscribe to cultural values of success, health, and wealth on the level of action. Many fat individuals may have jobs, families, and lives that align with norms of respectability, but their bodies still speak louder. These people do not have to do anything to be deviant; they simply are.\(^4\) Fatness serves as the prevailing determinant of their character.

Thus, the fat person has two choices: assimilate to the dominant phobic framing of fatness via apology and shame, or liberate oneself from such framing via intentional defiance and self-acceptance. The former frequently wins out. It is easier to accept defeat, after all. Nevertheless, there remains a significant few who see the value in fighting an uphill battle.

These few, whom Kathleen LeBesco considers “fat liberationists,” refuse to view their fatness in a negative light. Instead of making amends for the discomfort and contention brought on by their appearance, they actively try “to secure for the fat a positively valued experience of difference from the norm” (\textit{Revolting Bodies} 42). In other words, they say “So what?” instead of “I’m sorry.”\(^5\) This shift from apology to acceptance is central to their power.

In a culture that upholds thinness as an ideal, the denigration of fatness, and the subsequent internalization of body hatred, is normalized. The inferiority of fat people is a given. Therefore, a fat liberationist’s unwillingness to subscribe to this belief is revolutionary. Their defiance illustrates their autonomy and forces arbiters of fatphobia to

\(^4\) Kathleen Rowe makes a similar observation, though hers is presented more as a critique of patriarchy: “Men transgress in their actions; women transgress in their being, through the very nature of their bodies, not as subjects” (34).

\(^5\) It is no coincidence that one of the most well-known fat liberationist books is Marilyn Wann’s, \textit{FAT!SO?: Because You Don’t Have to Apologize for Your Size}. 
reflect on their discriminatory perceptions. By challenging the negative framing of their fatness, liberationists remind oppressors that they are more than just bodies. They are more than repositories for cultural anxieties and character judgments. They are human beings with unique experiences and valid histories.

Prior to its millennial resurgence (which will be discussed later), fat liberation and activism were most prominent in the late 1960s and 1970s. Farrell traces the movement back to this era, a time when civil rights were of foremost importance in the public consciousness:

Fat activism as a movement emerged in the late 1960s, at the same cultural moment as the gay liberation movement, the second wave of feminism, the welfare rights movement, the student and antiwar movements, and the black power, Chicano, and Native American movements. In the same ways that each of these groups—women, gays and lesbians, African Americans, college students, and so forth—identified and challenged the oppressions they faced, fat people began to examine the ways that society discriminated against them. (Farrell, ch. 6)

In 1969, the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA) formed. In its nascent stages, this organization took a non-confrontational approach towards fat liberation. It sought mainly to raise awareness of fat experience rather than radically reshape society’s

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6 “For many fat activists, their work seems not radical but rather a matter of survival. For them, the war on fat is really a war on fat people” (Farrell, ch. 6).
7 This is a common argument in fat studies. An iteration that reads particularly close to the one here can be found in Kathleen LeBesco’s “Fat Panic and the New Morality” in *Against Health*.
8 NAAFA later changed its name to the “National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance,” which helped to clarify its aims and purpose.
phobic attitude towards fatness. A confrontational approach became key to the Fat Underground, an offshoot of NAAFA that formed in 1973. That year, the Fat Underground, intentionally abbreviated to “FU,” published “The Fat Liberation Manifesto.” This document acted as a call to arms for frustrated fat people, particularly those whose womanhood and/or queerness further alienated them from the thin, male, and heterosexual hegemony.

Though fat activists took aim at serious offenses, they did not always do so through written works and demonstrations. Constituents of NAAFA and FU (then and now) tapped into the potential of “humor and satire… to counter fat stigma and to encourage a fat-positive point of view… an alternative way of thinking about fat, about beauty, and about health” (Farrell, ch. 6). Subversion did not need to be serious. It could be joyous and irreverent.

This revelation creates a parallel between the social phenomenon of fat liberation and literary tradition of carnival. Mikhail Bakhtin’s interpretation of carnival is useful to draw upon in making this comparison. For instance, he hypothesizes that the “cosmic terror” of the Renaissance generated carnival as a coping mechanism. The widespread existential reckoning to which Bakhtin refers is similar to the more recent panic surrounding fat bodies: fear of mortality and materiality is at the heart of both.

Carnival and fat liberation not only share the same type of genesis, they also take up common modes of expression and types of imagery. Just as carnival relies on laughter (via humor and satire) to mitigate terror, fat activists use it to defuse phobia. In his analysis of Bakhtin, Renate Lachmann notes that laughter is a regenerative principle
(134). Bodies, as well as their processes and meanings, need not be sources of terror. They are just as suited, if not better suited, for levity and celebration. Glorifying bodies, in all of their grotesque earthliness, provides “an alternative way of thinking about fat, and beauty.” It lends to the “positive point of view” so sought after by fat activists. In other words, carnival is the key to fat liberation.⁹

To date, the strongest examples of liberation-through-carnival are perhaps Pink Flamingos and Female Trouble. Though they are often written off as the products of director John Water’s own twisted imagination, these films clearly fall within the aforementioned folk tradition. They not only reflect the principles of carnival on the level of content and theme, they also perfect the form. By virtue of being cinematic works, Pink Flamingos and Female Trouble transform the literary into the representational. Gone are François Rabelais’ imagined monsters of Gargantua and Pantagruel; in their place is Divine, a flesh-and-blood incarnation of the grotesque. Just as the films take on the duel project of reflecting and reinventing, so do Divine’s characters. Babs Johnson and Dawn Davenport simultaneously recall depraved creatures of old as well as give life to Kathleen Rowe’s contemporary figure of “the unruly woman,” who “disrupt[s] the norms of femininity” and acceptable embodiment “through excess and outrageousness” (30). The unruly woman’s rejection of oppressive norms not only aligns her with fat liberationists; it also positions her as a model of fat representation and narrativization. She sets the bar for all fat characters that follow.

⁹ Angela Stukator regards carnival similarly in her essay, “‘It’s not over until the fat lady sings’: Comedy, the Carnivalesque, and Body Politics.” Rowe also references carnival in her initial presentation of the unruly woman figure, though she does not argue that carnival is essential to the characters’ effectiveness.
1.1 Pink Flamingos: “Filth are my politics; filth is my life!”

The premise of *Pink Flamingos* is as simple as it is radical: the reigning Filthiest Person Alive (Divine) works to maintain her title in the midst of opposition from a corrupt couple, Connie and Raymond Marble (Mink Stole and David Lochary). Ordinarily, tales of superlative filthiness would take on a cautionary or judgmental tone. With *Pink Flamingos*, the tone is immediately reverential. The narrator has awe in his voice as he introduces “the notorious beauty, Divine.” He explains that, in the wake of tabloid exposure, Divine has changed her name to Babs Johnson and gone into hiding. Yet, it soon becomes evident that she is not the type to keep a low profile.

Babs makes her debut foot first: a close-up of feathered, metallic mules precedes a shot of the buxom heroine strutting into her living room. There, she delicately perches on the settee next to a playpen, where her mentally ill mother resides. Despite the conventional femininity of Babs’ maternal tone and demure posture, her appearance marks her as grotesque. Her body speaks louder than her actions. The first areas of note are her bust and belly. The pattern and cut of her figure-hugging dress turn all attention to these ample protrusions. Instead of attempting to conceal them, like most fat women, she puts them on full display. She treats her fatness as fashion, turns a common insecurity into an accessory that harmonizes with her clownish makeup and tatted tresses. Babs’ red lips and blue eyelids are capped off by severe black brows, which draw the eye up to a shaved hairline. There, a matted yellow mop rests like a crown before cascading down to her shoulders. From the outset, she is positioned as a queen of excess and degradation.

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10 The clownish makeup is significant in this context, considering Bakhtin pinpoints clowns as “the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit” (*RAHW* 8). They act as signifiers of carnival even in the everyday.
Babs first exercises her perverse sovereignty at a corner store downtown. The song “I’m Not a Juvenile Delinquent” blasts over footage of her perusing the shelves and ordering a steak from the butcher. When the butcher turns his back, Babs shoves the slab of meat up her dress and exposes a generous thatch of pubic hair in the process. She rolls her eyes in ecstasy, adjusts to the sensation of contraband between her thighs. She resumes a feigned interest in foodstuffs when an unkempt man, brandishing a pack of wieners, wags his tongue and ogles her. Babs looks down at him in disgust before scuttling out the door.

She strolls around town for a little while longer, stopping briefly to relieve herself in someone’s yard. Once home, Babs grills her stolen steak over charcoal. She wears only cigarette pants and an animal print bra, which allows her ample midsection to freely protrude. She sears the steak and serves it to her family. When one of them remarks on the delectable aroma, Babs rubs her crotch and admits to having “warmed it up” in her own “little oven.”

Babs’ food-centric sequences call attention to the “lower stratum” of the body, such as the “belly and the reproductive organs” (RAHW 21). The editing of the film encourages a link between consumption and defecation by pairing a scene of smuggling meat with a scene of a bowel movement. This visual association conjures up the concept of “downward movement” that unites a person’s body with the earth (RAHW 21). The lower stratum grounds and debases; it celebrates the materiality of the body. By taking pleasure in her body, by caressing and carrying her fatness with confidence, Babs becomes a transgressive, liberatory figure. She embodies the key concept of renewal.
through degradation. In her earthliness, she operates on the “fruitful” lower level that the carnival tradition so esteems.

From this lower level, Babs represents not only this tradition but also more contemporary trends in fat characterization. While her behavior evokes that of carnival hags and monsters, it also conjures up a modern equivalent, the “unruly woman, an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of carnival” (Rowe 10). Babs espouses the key tropes and signifiers of “female unruliness”: corruption, lasciviousness, corpulence, irreverence, gender ambiguity, and liminality (31). She delights in disorder, indulges her excessiveness, and relishes filth. Norms of propriety do not faze her. When she follows her steak stashing with a stroll down a crowded sidewalk, Babs exercises her dominance. As Rowe puts it, “She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place” (31).

The prominent use “The Girl Can’t Help It” highlights this. Babs makes participants out of passersby, implicates them in her personal carnival act. With every wiggle, with every heavy step, she takes command of her visibility. She exerts the power bestowed on her by grotesque realism.

The relationship between the concept of the unruly woman and the narrative mode of grotesque realism crystallizes as the film goes on. Babs holds a birthday party to “out-filth” her rivals. Hippies, drag queens, Nazi sympathizers, and other misfits congregate in the yard, imbibing various substances while Babs opens her gifts: a treatment for venereal disease, a parcel of vomit, a giant cleaver, a pig’s head, and poppers. A bohemian band
performs while a burlesque dancer wrangles a snake. Finally, a naked man takes to the stage and flexes his anus in time to music.

Police officers eventually threaten to disband the party. Before the cops can act, the partygoers ambush them. As Bakhtin notes, those who are “not in the banquet spirit must be eliminated” (*RAHW* 407). Babs leads the army of deviants while wielding her newly gifted cleaver. The assembly beats, stabs, and shoots the policemen. Their assault soon gives way to a variation of what Renate Lachmann calls the “slaughter feast,” during which “the interior of the animal body (the innards) are ‘exteriorized’; they are torn out of the animal body and immediately consumed and incorporated into the human body, an act performed in the carnival by the gigantic mouth, the gorge” (147). Here, of course, metaphorical “Pigs” stand in for the “animal bodies.” This subversion makes the banquet all the more carnivalesque. The revelers do not just partake in cannibalism, the most depraved and unchecked form of consumption: they literally feast upon authority. It is a type of uncrowning that Rabelais could only have dreamt. As the camera pans to the bloodied and sated guests, a sense of triumph washes over the scene, accented by Babs’ jovial waving of a severed femur.

Babs’ birthday sequence presents carnival in its most literal form. It provides a “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” as well as “temporary liberation from the… established order” (*RAHW* 9-10). The differences of the guests are subsumed by their universal adoption of depravity. They eat, drink, and are merry. They literally feed upon opposition; they rejoice in the removal “from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (*RAHW* 10). They do not abide by the established order;
they upend it. This is a trademark of the unruly woman. As such a figure, Babs “enjoys a reprieve from those fates that so often seem inevitable to women under patriarchy, because her home is comedy and the carnivalesque, the realm of inversion and fantasy where, for a time at least, the ordinary world can be stood on its head” (Rowe 11). The carnival world she inhabits preserves her perversions and fortifies her filthiness. It frames her anti-authoritarianism as heroic rather than deviant.

She strengthens her position as a carnival heroine during the climax of the film. After repeatedly being undermined by the Marbles and learning about their corrupt baby ring, Babs sentences the couple to murder before a kangaroo court. In lieu of a powdered wig or black robe, Babs wears a lurid, body-hugging gown and chandelier earrings. She looks less like a judge and more like a flamboyant master of ceremonies. This corresponds with the tone of the farcical trial, which begins with press interviews rather than opening statements. Though these interviews have little bearing on the predetermined verdict and sentencing, they explicitly round out Babs’ characterization.

First, Babs admits a surplus of lesbian experiences and a fetish for blood. She then speaks of her small following, a “minor cult” that she claims is “growing faster than you can imagine.” Lastly, she proclaims her politics: “Kill everyone now. Condone first-degree murder. Advocate cannibalism. Eat shit. Filth are my politics; filth is my life!” To punctuate this announcement, she strikes a variety of lewd poses for the reporters. As she gropes her breasts, spreads her legs, and sticks out her tongue, she suggests that one of them use her pose as a center spread. Her vulgar, abundant body is suited for display and visual consumption; the average pin-up hardly compares.
While Babs welcomes interviews as a way of perpetuating notoriety, Babs’ son sees them as an opportunity to defend his mother’s hostile treatment of the Marbles. According to him, “[Babs] was not the aggressor in this little war [they] had; she only did what had to be done.” For the most part, Babs and her family engage in benign filthiness. They delight in impishness and impropriety, but they maintain a set of guiding principles. For instance, Connie and Raymond kidnap and impregnate innocent women for their own selfish gain, while Babs and company only target those they perceive as a threat (i.e. the Marbles and policemen).

Additionally, when Babs and her cohort commit crimes and feast upon law enforcement, it is done with carnival’s communal spirit in mind, a spirit that imbues Divine’s avowed political beliefs. Babs’ actions and words support the universality of grotesque realism. She encourages all to participate in a depraved lifestyle; the Marbles disdain others who do. Their mean-spiritedness runs counter to the carnival’s joyful spirit. They want to “make [Babs’] life miserable,” prove that she is “shit” compared to them. When it comes to filth, they are exclusionary. By placing the Marbles in opposition to Babs’ egalitarianism, the narrative preserves the tradition of carnival as well as Babs’ rightful reign.

That said, the joyful ambivalence of Babs’ body is still her most carnival aspect. It is not a behavior she adopts, but rather an identity she wears at all times. Babs’ politics are made clear only through extensive exposure to her character; her body, and all of its contradictions, are transparent from the outset. When the narrator introduces Babs, he applies the label of “notorious beauty” in the same breath as “filthiest person alive.”
Before she even appears, Babs is framed as equally beautiful and depraved. Only in carnival is this ambivalent characterization possible. By “replacing a negation by an affirmation,” the narrative mode of grotesque realism reveals mainstream “prohibitions and limitations” (RAHW 412). The conflation of praise and abuse, positive and negative, high and low—it works to dismantle the divisive valuation of bodies and people within normative culture.

In the epilogue to Pink Flamingos, Babs eats dog feces. This establishes her transgressive materiality once and for all. The reprised interplay of consumption and defecation highlights the processes of the lower body; Babs’ literal shit-eating grin marks said interplay as celebratory. Her actions blur the line between human and animal, a divide that the fat body challenges through its very existence. In this most material of bodies, “all obsolete and vain illusions die… and the real future comes to life” (RAHW 376, 378). Babs’ fatness liberates her from exclusionary models of being. Furthermore, Babs’ embrace of her fatness abolishes the notion that a fat person must be spoken of in terms of “either, or.” She proves that fat can be beautiful and filthy, earthly and divine.

1.2 Female Trouble: “I’m a thief and a shit-kicker, and I’d like to be famous.”

With a transgressive conception of fatness set in place, Divine is able to dive deeper into the narrative tradition for his next film. In Female Trouble, Dawn Davenport’s fatness serves as a visually striking backdrop to other forms of unruliness.

In contrast to Babs Johnson, whose narrative begins at the peak of her depravity, Dawn climbs the ranks of carnival. The film is separated into multiple parts that chronicle
Dawn’s restless youth, burgeoning life of crime, and dysfunctional marriage. She starts out as a disgruntled hair-hopper who rebels by eating sandwiches in class and coveting scandalous cha-cha heels. It is when her parents fail to present her with said footwear—and opt for loafers instead—that Dawn’s carnival ascent truly begins.

Distraught, and clad only in her pajamas, she flees from home and accepts a ride from a pervert named Earl. He leads her to a garbage dump and impregnates her on a soiled mattress, revealing his dirty underwear in the process. Months later, when Dawn rings him up for child support, Earl calls her a “fat bitch” and equates her to a cow, then demands that she “Go fuck [her]self.”

Though this scenario is bleak on the surface level, it boasts a great deal of subtextual humor and carnival influence, namely through a conceit that Bakhtin calls “turnabout,” which manifests first on the level of apparel/appearance, and later through bodily action and object interaction (RAHW 410-11). In turnabout sequences, such as the one between Dawn and Earl, “Men are transvested as women and vice versa, costumes are turned inside out, and outer garments replace underwear” (RAHW 411). The explicit visual emphasis on Dawn’s revealing sleepwear and Earl’s stained underpants sets these two apart from more “respectable” characters, such as the mother and father Dawn forsakes. The setting for their tryst furthers their debasement.

The most significant component of this sequence, however, is Earl’s suggestion that Dawn fuck herself. The joke is that Dawn already has, given Divine’s dual characterization.
By playing both a man and a woman, Divine embodies carnival ambivalence. He alternately brings his male presentation inward, and his female presentation outward. By accessing both sides, rather than suppressing one or the other, Divine liberates himself from the “prohibitions and limitations” that govern everyday gender expression. Instead of his personas remaining separate and controlled, they entwine.

This is made possible through his fatness, which, by nature, transgresses the limits of acceptable embodiment. In accenting the lower stratum of equally corpulent characters, Divine accesses a multitude of grotesque bodily possibilities. He protrudes and penetrates, consumes and regenerates. He gives and receives life. In short, he posits “mankind’s real future,” one in which the appearance and processes of bodies are as material as they are freeing. Instead of acting as reminders of human limitations, bodies encourage renewal.

The evocation of renewal through appearance and dual characterization is later achieved through Dawn’s interaction with objects. While navigating the ins and outs of single motherhood and “crime modeling,” Dawn settles into a lackluster marriage. Her husband drinks, philanders, and verbally abuses. Their relationship is dysfunctional, to the extent that they only manage to copulate with the help of unconventional aids, such as hammers and pliers. Though this is a seemingly minor detail, it subtly builds upon the turnabout conceit. Just as Divine’s fluid characterization changes otherwise limited gender perceptions, Dawn’s interaction with objects changes their typical function.

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11 Although gender spectrums and/or gender disavowal is becoming a more prevalent concept, the term “both” is used here in reference to the gender binary that currently dominates mainstream gender perception and discourse. Earl and Dawn are distinctly marked as masculine and feminine, which further calls for the use of “both.”
Outside of carnival, a hammer is just a hammer. Pliers are merely pliers. Their functions are limited and taken for granted. Inside of carnival, these objects take on a new life. They are divorced from preexisting roles and placed into new ones. These tools of benign labor become tools of perverse pleasure.

Bakhtin expands on this phenomenon in his analysis of Gargantua, a hedonistic giant who uses everyday objects—textiles, plants, and animals—as genital swabs. When “utilized in the wrong way,” such objects are “reborn in the light of the use made of them… renewed in the sphere of their debasement” (RAHW 374, 411). Once they reach this sphere of debasement, the objects then come to represent carnival’s larger theme of downward movement. This is what happens to the steak in Pink Flamingos, as well as to the tools in Female Trouble. They emphasize downward movement through an association with the lower stratum. As a result, their neutrality ceases to exist.

This same fate befalls liquid eyeliner and mascara brushes in Female Trouble. The Dashers (Mary Vivian Pearce and David Lochary), Dawn’s modeling patrons, introduce alternative uses for these objects; eyeliner takes the place of injectable drugs, while brushes become crudités. As with the hammer and pliers, these objects transcend a neutral external use and take on a subversive internal one. Instead of ensuring Dawn’s conformity to feminine beauty ideals, makeup fuels her unconventional self-indulgence. In Dawn’s “realm of inversion and fantasy,” makeup becomes a means of bolstering her unruliness and standing the ordinary world on its head. It becomes a weapon against patriarchal restrictions.

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12 The inverted treatment of cosmetics recalls the title of John Waters’ earlier (unreleased) short film, Eat Your Makeup (1968).
The more Dawn uses makeup in this manner, the further she removes herself from the role of the dutiful female consumer. Her “beauty treatments” lead to the feeling of “exhibitionism pumping through [her] veins.” Rather than resigning herself to limited perceptions of femininity and beauty, she cultivates her own. Just as she refuses to accept loafers instead of cha-cha heels, she also refuses to accept submissiveness instead of dominance. She fashions herself an object of spectacle. Like Babs before her, she sets out to “affect the terms on which she is seen.” Even when she receives a bottle of acid to the face, Dawn maintains her affinity for glamor. Like fatness, Dawn’s disfigurement becomes a means of liberation. These attributes—combined with her consumption of makeup and the Dasher’s patronage—encourage Dawn to take up the notion of “visibility as power” (Rowe 11). The world transforms into her personal runway. Once again, “the girl can’t help it.” Her aesthetic becomes wilder than ever, with garments that accentuate her abundance and cosmetics that amplify her imperfections. When paired with her intentionally outrageous mannerisms, the “staring and gawking” of passersby make her feel like a “princess.”

Dawn’s inflated self-perception carries over into her climactic one-woman show. During her backstage preparations, she injects eyeliner, poses frantically, and commits murder. With her adrenaline piqued, she is ready to take the stage. Mr. Dasher introduces her as “the most beautiful woman in the world,” a title she fulfills the only way she knows how: through outlandishness and depravity. She sullies her white sequined jumpsuit by miming masturbation with fish carcasses. She shows off topsy-

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13 Her husband’s aunt Ida (Edith Massey) lashes out upon hearing of Dawn’s intention to file for divorce.  
14 She kills her daughter Taffy, after learning that she has become a Hare Krishna.
turvy trampoline stunts that emphasize her rotundity. She revels in her own beauty, foretells of her overnight fame and notoriety. She claims that she is crime personified and rattles off a list of offenses as support. With her subversive superiority established, Dawn transitions her solo spectacle into immersive carnival. She invites all to participate by brandishing a gun and asking the crowd, “Who wants to be famous? Who wants to die for art?” As soon as someone answers, she releases a string of bullets. With that, her performance gives way to chaos.

For Dawn, an ensuing arrest, conviction, and imprisonment are simply the culminations of her “career.” When one has adopted the mantra of “crime is beauty,” there is no greater compliment than a death sentence. She speaks of her appointment with the electric chair in glowing terms: “It will be my final curtain call. The most theatrical moment of my life.” She reasons that her life may end, but her legendary beauty and criminality will live on. She seems to echo Bakhtin: “Where death is, there also is birth, change, renewal” (RAHW 409). Approaching death with gaiety dispels terror and reinforces the power of the individual. It ensures the longevity of Dawn’s influence. Thus, when she finally sits upon the electric chair, she treats it like a throne. She launches into an acceptance speech dedicated to her supporters. With a final maniacal laugh, Dawn assures that she “loves every fucking one” of the people who made her fame possible.

Unlike her predecessor, Babs, who successfully escapes the arm of the law, Dawn succumbs to mainstream authority. Though this seemingly posits Babs as the superior carnival figure, it is important to note that Dawn remains true to her character until the end. She embraces her “temporary liberation from the established order,” regardless of its
brevity. From her teenage rebellion through her adult corruption, she lives according to her own laws, laws that contribute to her sense of freedom (RAHW 7). Her life suggests that self-perception is key to liberation. Once she regards imperfections as assets and negatives as positives, she is invincible. Death poses no threat to her mortal influence; her legend is secure. Thus, she greets death with acceptance and laughter. 

1.3 Conclusion

Although Divine appears in two more of John Water’s films, the actor’s liberatory potential—along with carnival narrativization—stays behind. Couched in normativity, Divine’s previous subversion gives way to assimilation. Fatness no longer uplifts his characters. Rather, the narratives of Polyester (1981) and Hairspray (1988) treat fatness as a problem. Body size contributes to victimization and subjugation. It is something for which characters need to apologize. Or, at best, something they need to make palatable.

The first exemplar of this assimilationist trend is Francine Fishpaw, the woebegone matriarch of Polyester. The lyrics of the film’s title song prime audiences for Divine’s change of character: “You know about abundant women. Well, this girl only aims to please.” The use of the term “abundant women” recalls the excess of carnival and its figurehead of the unruly woman, but the line following it suggests that Francine is different. She espouses submissiveness and order rather than dominance and disorder.

John Waters’ Desperate Living (1977) presents a limited carnival vision the world, one that is narratively and geographically demarcated from its initial normative position. The film’s carnival operates at the expense of its fat characters, particularly Queen Carlotta (Edith Massey). As the fascist ruler of a marginal burg called Mortville, Queen Carlotta delights in the subjugation and humiliation of her subjects. She does not deign to participate in their filthiness; she merely enforces it to bolster her sense of superiority. Her maliciousness leads to an eventual overthrow by Mortville’s filthy denizens. This ushers in a new era of freedom. The film ends with a carnival feast, where Carlotta is the main course.
The action accompanying the title song provides the first glimpse of this character shift. Within the confines of her pristine home, Francine conducts a lengthy beauty ritual. She wiggles into her girdle before sitting in front of her vanity mirror. There, she rearranges her bouffant then painstakingly removes stray hairs from her eyebrows and nose. She douses herself with perfumes and deodorizers. Sufficiently primped, she slips into a sensible white shift dress and tugs a scale out from under her bed. When she steps onto it, the dial spins all the way around, revealing a total weight of approximately 300 pounds. She lets out a whimper that soon becomes her character’s default utterance.

Francine’s internal dissatisfaction is merely a precursor to her external dissatisfaction. Her husband, Elmer (David Samson), is an adulterous peddler of pornography who criticizes Francine’s appearance and treats her like a servant. Her daughter Lulu (Mary Garlington) carouses with delinquent boys, and her “criminally insane” son Dexter (Ken King) derives sadistic sexual pleasure from stomping on the feet of unsuspecting women. To top it off, Francine’s nagging mother (Joni-Ruth White) routinely steals money from her. The combined depravity of her family repeatedly prompts Francine to pray. She proclaims before anti-pornography protestors that she is a “good Christian woman” and pleads with her family to say grace before eating. Francine’s attempts at moral superiority are all for naught; her relatives continue to take advantage of her submissiveness.

The only person who provides a respite for Francine is Cuddles (Edith Massey), her fat former housekeeper-turned-friend. With Cuddles, Francine freely expresses her anguish, often over bountiful portions of food. Invariably, Cuddles responds to Francine’s
confessions with dismissive comments or the suggestion to “get out more.” These remarks are generally unhelpful to Francine, yet they illuminate the disconnect between Cuddles’ newfound social prominence and Francine’s oppression. Cuddles has everything Francine does not: money, esteem, and love (in the form of her loyal limo driver, Heinz). In other words, she successfully manages the modern world. Cuddles is the best-case scenario for fat women. How telling, then, that she exists only on the margins of the story. The primary narrative belongs to the woman who cannot manage and to the individuals who perpetuate her distress.

Elmer is the most significant of these individuals. His antagonism towards Francine has its roots in fatphobia. He takes on a mistress because he sees Francine as nothing more than a “fat hunk of cellulite.” While the dissolution of their marriage sends Francine into an alcoholic depression, it fortifies Elmer’s abusive tendencies. He calls Francine at all hours simply to make pig sounds. He has copious pizzas delivered to the house as a joke. Most offensively, he drives around the neighborhood with a megaphone, proclaiming that Francine weighs 300 pounds and “eats an entire cake in one sitting.” He criticizes her stretchmarks and her body hair, as well as her alcoholism, which he claims is the cause of Lulu and Dexter’s delinquency.

Elmer’s string of abuses prompts Francine to tearfully close the curtains and shrink to the floor. While she wallows in pity, Elmer acts as a (literal) mouthpiece for discriminatory cultural norms. He posits Francine’s fatness as a character flaw. He associates her body with failure, paints her gluttony and self-indulgence in a negative light. Instead of embracing excess and autonomy, Francine crumbles under Elmer’s
criticism. Francine does not “affect the terms on which she is seen.” She is not unruly; she is overruled.

*Polyester’s* phobic framework reappears in Divine’s next (and final) Waters’ collaboration, *Hairspray*.16 At this point, the feathered mules that introduced Babs in *Pink Flamingos* are a distant memory; Edna is introduced with an iron. The camera pans up to reveal her frumpy muumuu and hair rollers, a look that sets her apart from her fashion-forward daughter, Tracy (Ricki Lake).

The younger Turnblad is immediately positioned as the more vibrant fat woman of the two. While Edna blathers on about household chores and diet pills, Tracy and her friend, Penny (Leslie Ann Powers), dance enthusiastically to a broadcast of *The Corny Collins Show*, a fictional reimagining of *American Bandstand*. In between songs, the girls critique one of the regulars on the show, a conventionally attractive blonde girl whom they deem “spastic” and “queer.” The once celebratory implications of these labels are abolished through Tracy and Penny’s derisive tone. As the two follow up these remarks with a mutual longing to be on *Corny Collins*, and subsequently vie for the Auto Show Queen title, assimilation begins to materialize as the motivation for the film’s characters.

When Tracy attends a *Corny Collins* dance contest, it is out of the desire to be like the rest of the young dancers on the show, in both appearance and ability. Amber, the model of American beauty ideals—thin, white, and blonde—is tough competition for Tracy. When the reigning teenybopper witnesses her pudgy opponent take the floor, she

16 In between Waters collaborations with Waters, Divine co-stars as Rosie Velez in *Lust in the Dust* (1985), a Western parody by director Paul Bartel. Rosie’s one-note characterization as a former “dance hall girl,” combined with the film’s relative obscurity, make for a less compelling case study than Divine’s other work.
says, “Okay, fatso. Let’s see what you’re made of.” The disparaging nature of this comment sticks with Tracy, even after she has won the favor of the crowd. Mr. Corny Collins personally recommends that Tracy audition to be on the show as a regular. She asks, “Do you really think I’m good enough?” She is skeptical of mainstream approval, considering it comes more naturally to people like Amber.

Once Tracy is convinced of her favorable social standing, she goes to great lengths to maintain it. She bleaches and straightens her hair. She dates Link Larkin (Michael St. Gerard), a current Corny Collins participant and Amber’s former beau. Additionally, Tracy takes on an egalitarian manner. This plays out during the question and answer period of her Corny Collins audition. Tracy responds to each query like a seasoned pageant contestant. Her responses show compassion for acne-riddled adolescents and express accepting views in regards to integration.

Annoyed by Tracy’s rising status, Amber once again zeros in on Tracy’s weight: “Aren’t you a little fat for the show?” While Tracy does not dissolve into a puddle of self-pitiful tears like Francine Fishpaw, she does not spew vitriol like Babs Johnson either. She takes a decidedly middle-of-the-road approach, saying, “I would imagine that many of the home viewers are also pleasantly plump or chunky.” This response turns negative connotations into positive ones; “fat” becomes “pleasantly plump.” This spin tactic shows Tracy’s ability to work within the norm. Acknowledging dominant attitudes towards fatness, while inoffensively presenting her own, is Tracy’s way of securing equal footing with her more conventionally attractive peers. It lands her a permanent spot on
the show and endears her to her peers, who ultimately deem her a star and Auto Show Queen.

Tracy’s diplomacy and non-confrontational body positivity also make her a suitable model for Hefty Hideaway, a local “house of fashion for the ample woman.” This shop exists on the margins; Tracy and Edna seemingly know about it only because they are fat and thereby cannot fit into most sizes at department stores. It is demarcated from its normative counterparts. Unlike exclusive retailers that reinforce limited beauty standards, Hefty Hideaway acts an inclusive utopia where dress sizes are accommodating, bodies are large, and éclairs are ready to be eaten. Thus, when Tracy models Hefty Hideaway fashions on *Corny Collins*, she expands the limits of the carnival-coded space. Its ethos of abundance and liberation become accessible to everyone. Yet, accessibility does not equal acceptance. This applies to the film’s treatment of Hefty Hideaway, as well as Tracy herself.

Despite Tracy’s superficial likeability, she remains a problematic character. She talks the talk of fat liberation without walking the walk. Her motivations differ from those Divine puts forth in *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*. Tracy does not strive for filth-laden superlatives or famed criminality; she longs for notoriety within normative society. Diegetically speaking, Tracy achieves this notoriety. She becomes the “big, blonde, and beautiful” star of *The Corny Collins Show* as well as the Auto Show Queen. In a broader sense, however, Tracy’s actions fail to break from an assimilationist paradigm. She models for Hefty Hideaway, but only to appear fashionable and charming to her peers. A desire to fit in underlies her perennial change of hairstyles as well. Tracy
routinely relinquishes her sense of self in exchange for mainstream peer approval. Subsequently, she obliterates her liberation potential.

It is not coincidental that *Hairspray* has garnered the most positive mainstream reception of all John Waters’ films. In the near thirty years since its release, *Hairspray* has inspired a cinematic remake as well as a Broadway production. This speaks to the timelessness of assimilationist narratives versus the ephemerality of carnival. The immersive debasement of the latter is seemingly untenable for extended periods of time. Waters acknowledges this in his memoir, *Shock Value*. He reasons that a departure from certain narrative conceits (such as the carnivalesque consumption of dog shit) is necessary in order to avoid “being seventy years old and making films about people eating designer colostomy bags” (94). In other words, he favors professional evolution over carnival perpetuation.

While the disavowal of carnival narrativization works to the benefit of Waters in particular, it is nonetheless detrimental to fat characters as a whole. Sans carnival, fat characters are unable to function as empowered agents of satire and degradation. They cannot control their visibility or public perception. Simply put, they cannot upend the established order; they can only surrender to it. This surrender leads to an inevitable upswing in fatphobia, both on and off the screen.
2. A Fall from Divinity

Two weeks after the film debuted, Divine’s death from a heart attack was met with mournful fatphobic rhetoric. Around the same time, Ricki Lake shed a dramatic amount of weight, which effectively countered the “big, blonde, and beautiful” proclamation of her onscreen persona. As a shrinking fat icon, Lake was not alone. Fellow fat pop cultural figures such as Roseanne Barr and Oprah Winfrey embarked on well-publicized weight loss journeys throughout the 1990s. One by one, these women worked towards the abjection of their threatening bodies. Their pursuits aligned with a burgeoning diet and fitness culture that socially conceptualized fat bodies as embarrassing and shameful. Their bodily reformation put them in the company of various already-thin celebrities who produced exercise tapes, in which they invariably sported revealing Spandex ensembles and spouted off condescending encouragement to those watching (or presumably working out to) the video at home.

One of the most prominent exercise gurus of the period was not a celebrity at all, however. Small and furry, tender and exuberant, Richard Simmons stood in stark relief to his more manicured, mainstream counterparts. During his energetic routines, Simmons welcomed people of size to join him—whether they were with him in the studio or at

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17 Even now, over 25 years later, Divine cannot escape these types of sentiments. The documentary, *I Am Divine* (2013), includes numerous regretful commentaries from those who knew him, those who wish he had not weighed what he did, eaten what he did as often as he did, etc.

18 LeBesco discusses the ramifications of celebrity weight loss in Chapter Seven of *Revolting Bodies*. Often, when a celebrity is known and loved for being fat, that celebrity’s weight loss is interpreted as a form of betrayal to the public that had (however misguidedly) conceived of said celebrity as a fat advocate (94).

19 “The fat body is linked with death, and allowing fat into the body is thought to inevitably court death (the increasing concern about dietary fat in recent years may thus be read both as a displacement and as an intensification of the abjection of the fat body. The subject of the before and after pictures literally stands beside her abjected fat self, or drags herself out of it. Through the normative practice of dieting, millions enact the abjection of their fat bodies” (Kent 136).
home. He supplemented this acceptance with seemingly heartfelt monologues about his own weight loss and body image struggles. In short, he made his fat devotees believe there was a place for them so long as they were willing to change. If they acknowledged their faults and made amends through exercise, they could be socially redeemed. This message paid off. Simmons was able to build a virtual fitness empire, one largely populated with inspired fat women.

Darlene Cates, who would eventually star in What’s Eating Gilbert Grape, was one such woman. She lent visibility to Simmons’ following when she name-dropped him on a Sally Jesse Raphael appearance in 1992. As a 500-pound shut-in detailing her daily struggles and promising a thinner future, Cates embodied LeBesco’s profile of the fat assimilationist. Her story worked “to secure tolerance for fat rights and experiences and… raise consciousness about fat oppression” (Revolting Bodies 43). At the same time, Cates’ apparent humiliation and guilt suggested her fatness was a problem. The palpability of her anguish made Cates ripe for further—albeit fictional—exploitation.

As the matriarch of the Grape family, Cates is tragically coded from the start. Her son, Gilbert (Johnny Depp), introduces his siblings (Amy, Arnie, and Ellen) in voiceover before turning his attention to Momma: “Then there’s Momma, who, in her day, was the prettiest girl in these parts. Ever since our dad was hung out to dry 17 years ago, Momma has had her hands full. You see with Momma, there’s no nice way to break it to you: she

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20 Currently, the most accessible clip of Cates’ appearance comes from a retrospective episode of Sally Jesse Raphael in which Sally recaps “The Best of 1992.” It includes informational pop-ups throughout, accompanied by whimsical chimes. Overall, the editorialized rerun emphasizes the disconnect between Cates’ purported dignity and the exploitative nature of talk shows.
hasn’t left the house in over seven years.” Rather than expand on his mother’s apparent suffering, Gilbert assumes those listening to him will understand his implications. For him, a widowed, housebound, former beauty needs no explanation. For the film, she deserves no subjectivity.

Gilbert continuously asserts his contempt for Momma, in both overt and covert ways. When his friend, Tucker (John C. Reilly), asks about Momma, Gilbert simply responds, “She’s fat.” This puts Tucker in the awkward position of trying to defend Momma while being realistic about her size. He argues that she is “not all that big” compared to a man he saw on display at the state fair, whom he claims was “a little bit bigger.” Gilbert smirks as he repeats, “a little bit bigger.” Instead of obliging Tucker’s original good naturedness, Gilbert deliberately derails their interaction in favor of his ingrained prejudice.

When he is not explicitly dishing out offenses, Gilbert fosters fatphobia in more clandestine ways. In one scene, Tucker makes home repairs while Gilbert dumps dinner leftovers outside. A group of kids approach the property. Knowing that Momma is distracted by television and snacks, Gilbert lifts one of them up to the window so they can catch a glimpse of her on the couch. As the little boy runs back to his buddies, he exclaims, “I saw her! I saw her!” Tucker reprimands Gilbert for objectifying his mother; Gilbert pays him no mind.

21 “As Big as a House: Representations of the Extremely Fat Woman and the Home” by Caroline Narby and Katherine Phelps further unpacks the ominous relationship between Momma’s body and her physical setting.
In both of these examples, Momma is equated to a sideshow attraction. Her excessive fatness and immobility render her more of an object than a person. She belongs on the state fair circuit, where the curious, judgmental gazes of the public would not only be expected but also encouraged. Alas, as Gilbert (and, by extension, the film) sees it, Momma is merely a shameful burden, “attached” and “wedged in” to a house the family no longer considers home. Attempting to counter this dominant perception only makes things worse for Momma.

When Arnie, Gilbert’s mentally disabled younger brother, gets arrested for climbing the local water tower, Momma immediately asks for her coat. This shocks her children. Gilbert frantically clears the front seat of the family’s car, presumably because Momma cannot hoist herself up into the cab of the truck he drives more frequently. Shot from a low angle that emphasizes her enormity, Momma emerges from the house and plods heavily with help from her cane. Gilbert looks on blankly then gives her an encouraging smile. Amy and Ellen guide her the rest of the way to the vehicle.

En route to the police station, Momma appears sweaty and disheveled, covered with more of a patchwork shawl than a coat. Ellen lovingly strokes her hair. Gilbert jumps out of the car to retrieve Arnie. The camera cuts to the passenger side of the car, where an open door reveals Momma’s body spilling out. She adjusts herself laboriously then rises from her seat. Two neighborhood boys gawk with their mouths agape.

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22 The objectification of non-normative bodies is a key issue within disability studies, which Niall Richardson discusses in “Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture.” This text not only explores the social conception of fat bodies, but also bodies that are “hyper-muscular,” “transsexed,” and disabled.
Inside the station, as Gilbert mutters futile pleas for Arnie’s release, Momma’s voice booms from down the hall. She repeatedly shouts the name of the arresting officer until she reaches the front desk. She controls her panting enough to refuse paperwork and to yell for Arnie’s release. The intimidation she conveys during this altercation gives way to total softness as Arnie rushes into her arms.

With all of her kids accounted for, Momma begins her walk back to the car. She is met by a swarm of onlookers. Children giggle and stare, women talk in hushed tones, and an elderly man takes her photograph without permission. Gilbert, Amy, and Ellen struggle to hide their embarrassment; Momma looks ahead with resignation.

This sequence illustrates the conception of fat bodies as volatile and threatening. When Momma breaks away from the confines of her home, she becomes an unpredictable force. She stuns the crowd and disturbs the peace. Momma demands a level of courteous accommodation that normative society simply cannot fathom. Here, the best the public can do is return her son and hope Momma goes back into reclusion. After seven years of abiding by this edict, however, Momma proves she is fed up with her subordination. To be seen as more than a pitiful spectacle, she actively alter herself.

Thus, at the end of Arnie’s eighteenth birthday party, Momma opts for sleeping in her upstairs bedroom instead of on the couch. She waddles over to the staircase, clutches onto the railing with white knuckles. She heaves herself up, step by creaking step, panting all the way. The camera closes in on her feet, her hands, her face—all plump and flushed from exertion. The house and the very body she occupies struggle to support her
weight. Momma looks jubilant when she makes it to her room, but mere moments pass until she dies.

The Grape children pace around Momma’s body. They weep and contemplate at the foot of her bed. When Gilbert explains the difficulty of removing her body from the house, Ellen cries about the possibility of a crowd. With uncharacteristic sincerity, Gilbert assures, “I’m not going to let her be a joke.” The family moves all of their belongings to the yard. Gilbert douses the interior of the house with gasoline and lights a match. The family looks on as flames engulf the house and their mother within. This ending makes it clear that Momma is only worthy of reverence in her thin youth and noble death. Having shown a willingness to shed her pathetic exterior, the dignity of the former “prettiest girl in these parts” can be preserved in ash.

The world of What’s Eating Gilbert Grape—as well as the world that produces such a film—cannot entertain the notion of an extremely fat woman existing in a non-pitiful way. The corpulent woman is not representable or knowable unless she is an object, pariah, or joke. Thus, if she defies such characterization through liberatory fatness, she poses a threat that must be eliminated. This scenario is why the inclusion of fat women in mainstream film is so scarce and unsatisfactory. It is also why, in depictions following Gilbert Grape, the fat suit becomes a neat loophole: fabricated fatness allows filmmakers and audiences to indulge in prejudicial, insulting narratives without having to feign respect for the humanity of actual fat persons.

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23 The presentation of fictional fat women as threatening often manifests through the villain archetype. Annie (Kathy Bates) in Misery (1990) and (Anne Ramsey) in The Goonies (1985) are two well-known examples. Not only do they lack characterization beyond their villainy, their respective narratives end with the death and defeat.
2.1 Faking Fat and Laughing through the Horror of Authenticity

The Farrelly brothers took advantage of this loophole in *Shallow Hal* (2001). On the basic level of plot, the film operates as a parable about appreciating the inner beauty of others, even if it takes hypnosis to do so. After Hal (Jack Black), a superficial schlub, has a run-in with Tony Robbins the self-help guru, he begins to pursue a spectrum of women he otherwise avoided—because he has been literally brainwashed to perceive them as attractive. When the film takes on Hal’s point of view, these women appear as mostly white, thin, model-esque types. When the film takes on an objective point of view, these women carry stereotypical markers of homeliness—buckteeth, heavy brows, frizzy hair. As Hal falls for Rosemary, however, the most obvious marker of ugliness is fatness.

In total, actual fat bodies appear in *Shallow Hal* for approximately ten minutes and usually in long shot or fragmented close ups. For the rest of its runtime, the film relies on Hal’s perception of Skinny Rosemary—as played by an impossibly lithe Gwyneth Paltrow—to justify its occlusion of fatness. The privileging of Skinny Rosemary over Fat Rosemary is an act of sublimation, a means to contain the fat Other. Because Paltrow’s thin body is a normative ideal, since it is the type of “proper” body that viewers are used to seeing in film, it is more conducive to telling Rosemary’s story. Along the way, Rosemary breaks chairs, guzzles milkshakes, eats platters of cake, and causes tidal waves in pools, but her character remains nonthreatening because she appears to be thin. To show an actual fat person doing these things would make Rosemary’s abject embodiment too “authentic” and, in turn, threatening.
In her article, “Situating Fat Suits: Blackface, Drag, and the Politics of Performance,” LeBesco points out the paradoxical nature of authenticity, how it has functioned to equally repel and attract audiences since the days of circus freak shows. Then (and now) when a fat body is on display, “audiences wanted to see the genuine article, so different from them, while they simultaneously feared confrontation or attack. But since we all easily have the capacity to become fat, the threat is perceived to be from within” (238, emphasis added). While audiences ostensibly delight in authentic fatness, prolonged exposure to it sparks internal panic. The more genuine and human a fat person appears, the more audiences are exposed to fat persons, the greater the chance that audiences will reflect on their own embodiment and the nature of their sympathies. If these sympathies are on the side of the fat person, it prompts reevaluation so as to adhere to cultural expectations.

For Hal, reconciling internalized fatphobia is central to his character arc. Mauricio (Jason Alexander), Hal’s even shallower friend, is the impetus for this reconciliation. Since Mauricio has not been conditioned to perceive Rosemary’s inner beauty, he repeatedly criticizes Hal for taking an interest in her. It makes him personally uncomfortable to see Hal with a person he views as authentically fat, especially since the two of them are compatible. Hal and Rosemary have a natural, witty rapport. She is kind, smart, and generous; she makes up for what Hal lacks. Instead of recognizing and accepting his friend’s relationship success, Mauricio continues to see Rosemary as a frightening Other. He projects his anxieties and fear of fatness onto Hal, which prompts Hal’s own self-doubt and discomfort. Confronted with Mauricio’s parroting of the
fatphobic mainstream, Hal must decide whether further exposure to the abject is frightening or fulfilling.

When Hal ultimately chooses to ride off into romantic bliss with Fat Rosemary, audiences take comfort in knowing that she does not actually exist. Skinny or fat, Rosemary is a fiction. Whether unencumbered or padded in latex, Paltrow recalls the diet culture cliché of an imaginary thin woman inside a fat woman. Her renowned thinness functions as an antidote to the potential contagion of fatness: “The audience is granted reassurance that [Paltrow] needs a fat suit to become Rosemary—that she’s in no danger of a slide into obesity. This embrace of inauthenticity is revealing for what it tells us about the stability of fatphobic anxieties” (“Situating Fat Suits” 238). The fat suit, much like the conceit of Skinny Rosemary, creates a buffer for audiences. These fat fictions protect audiences from getting too close to authentic fatness, from unwittingly forming sympathies for the Other. It gives them the space and permission necessary to work out their anxieties through laughter.

The reliance on buffers continues in other fat suit franchises. However, while *Shallow Hal* attempts to imbue Rosemary with some form of believability and pathos, *Big Momma’s House* (2000) and *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) treat fatness as pure farce.24 In the former, Big Momma is nothing more than a weak plot device: Malcolm (Martin Lawrence) takes on her persona as part of his undercover work for the FBI. By emphasizing Big Momma as a superficial disguise rather than a human subject, the film gets away with falling back on base humor and problematic racial stereotypes.

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24 Sequels to these films also privilege farcical fatness.
As the title of the film suggests, the most prominent stereotype at play in *Big Momma’s House* is that of the Mammy. Hattie Mae Peters does not answer to slave masters like her predecessors, but she is narratively coded in a similar way. She puts others before herself; she offers food, companionship, and even midwife services to those in her community. When Hattie Mae gets a call in the middle of the night from a friend in need, she goes to her aid without hesitation. For the most part, this maternal behavior goes hand-in-hand with her physical appearance. In her billowing, patterned muumuus, Hattie Mae appears desexualized. Her defining bodily characteristics are largeness and softness. Even as a man with a poorly rendered latex face and padded body, Big Momma looks the part of the cuddly grandmother whom Sherry (Nia Long) remembers and loves.

Sherry’s inability to recognize the disguise requires audiences to suspend their disbelief. For black women, this can be especially hard to do. According to a survey from the University of Syracuse, the type of fat drag used in *Big Momma’s House* “heightened the ridicule of Black women for violating [the dominant beauty] ideal… The women said that depictions of male mammmies emphasized this mockery because they usurped a familiar image of a grandmother or matriarch and turned it into an absurdity portrayed by men, robbing Black women of the positive associations the familiar images might evoke” (“Male Mammies” 125). Sherry’s love for a faux Big Momma does not excuse the general absurdity of Malcolm’s masquerade, just as audience familiarity with mammy

25 The midwife characterization functions mainly as a form of situational comedy, since Malcolm is acting as Big Momma when an expectant mother goes into labor. His incompetence—as illustrated in his request for Crisco as a birthing tool—is meant to be the comedic takeaway. However, this scene also presents certain similarities to doting black women of the past, most notably *Gone With the Wind*’s Prissy (Butterfly McQueen) who admits, “I don’t know nothing about birthing babies!”

26 It is Hattie’s unexpected departure that inspires Malcolm to take her place, lest Sherry arrive to an empty house.
figures does not mitigate the harmfulness of the stereotype. The film fails to acknowledge this, however, as it continues its descent into insensitivity and fatphobia.

Before taking on the role of Big Momma, Malcolm does some reconnaissance around her home. As situational comedy would have it, he winds up in the same bathroom as a disrobing Hattie Mae. This is when he (and viewers) sees her fatness firsthand. A profile shot of her sagging breasts, stomach rolls, and protruding backside are countered with a close up of Malcolm’s repulsed facial expression. When he escapes from the house unseen, he gives his FBI partner a haunted report of his mission: “I’ve seen a lot of scary things in my day. But, damn, that was a lot of ass.” The woman who had previously been positioned as kindly and benign becomes “scary” and obscene in the flesh.

This apparent obscenity comes into play again, shortly after the actual Hattie Mae departs. When Malcolm’s FBI partner fits him for his fat suit, they appear as silhouetted figures in the window. One of Hattie Mae’s nosier friends witnesses the scene while walking her dog. As the two men struggle with the suit, all the friend sees is the rhythmic undulation of Big Momma’s body against that of a man. She walks away in disgust, convinced of Hattie Mae’s promiscuity.27

In both of these sequences, Hattie’s fat body is put under intense scrutiny. She recalls Sartjie “Sarah” Baartman, the “Venus Hottentot” whose fatness was both racialized and fetishized. Treated as a sideshow attraction in life and a scientific subject

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27 The friend’s assumption is partially validated when one of Hattie Mae’s suitors appears on the doorstep for some afternoon delight. Malcolm, as Big Momma, rebuffs him, but the suitor remains enamored. “She got every man in this town sniffing around like a bunch of dogs,” he remarks.
in death, Baartman never overcame her status as Other. 28 In a similar way, Hattie Mae’s characterization consistently panders to normative phobia. The comic obfuscation of her sexuality and femininity is principal to her persona, but it is also a point of contention.

While the women in the Syracuse study women did not show outright support for gender essentialism, some were nonetheless troubled by the lack of typical feminine characteristics present in “male Mammy” caricatures. In the words of one participant, “A man can’t portray a woman like a woman would, so it’s always their twisted spin on how a woman is. And still there is masculinity there. Black women are seen [as] a little bit more to be dominant or take on the characteristics of men” (“Male Mammies” 128). The inability for men to properly portray women is lampshaded in *Big Momma’s House*; Malcolm clearly fumbles to maintain a convincing impersonation. However, in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* and subsequent films, Madea (Tyler Perry) asserts a type of dominant black womanhood that is purportedly truthful behind its hyperbole.

When Madea makes her first appearance, she comes barreling out her front screen door with gun in hand. Her jilted granddaughter, Helen (Kimberly Elise), seeks shelter for the night, but Madea does not soften. She accuses Helen of being on drugs; she sees no other reason why a wealthy woman like her would be hanging around “the ghetto” so late at night.

Although Madea ultimately accepts Helen into her home, her aggressive demeanor persists. She convinces Helen to express her rage through the destruction of her ex-husband’s property. Helen tries to maintain rationality and civility; Madea takes a

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28 For a more detailed discussion of Baartman, see Collins’ Chapter Six, “The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood,” and Farrell’s Chapter Three, “Fat and The Un-Civilized Body.”
chainsaw to fine furnishings to ensure that Helen gets her “half” of everything in the divorce. This leads Madea and Helen to the courtroom, where Madea is on a first name basis with the judge. Her list of offenses is extensive: “criminal trespassing, reckless endangerment, criminal possession of a handgun, assault with a deadly weapon, suspended license, expired registration, reckless driving, and a broken taillight.” If Madea’s onscreen antics up to this point were not enough to convince viewers of her threatening, reckless persona, this list makes it explicit. While she shares certain maternal instincts with Hattie Mae of *Big Momma’s House*, Madea enacts them with a violence that reads as insulting and disingenuous to black women. It is clear that Tyler Perry does not possess an in-group status in regards to black womanhood, despite his supposed aim of staying true to the types of women he grew up admiring.  

When considering in-group identification and fat drag, it seems appropriate to return to Divine. There is a marked distinction between Divine’s drag and that of Martin Lawrence and Tyler Perry: genuine fatness. Despite prosthetic breasts, the girth of his female characters actually belonged to Divine. In that way, he was part of an in-group. His portrayals did not alienate fat women to the extent that thin men wearing full-body fat suits tend to do. Additionally, Divine’s public image as an effeminate, gay man allowed him to more convincingly portray women onscreen. The conflation of queerness and womanliness is, admittedly, problematic, but it is arguably the lesser of two evils when one considers that Lawrence and Perry deliberately do not pass. In fact, they bank on their knowability as normatively attractive, cisgender, straight men to make their caricatures more grotesque in comparison.

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29 Perry speaks of this admiration in a 2010 interview with Oprah Winfrey.
Lawrence is especially guilty of this. As someone playing both male and female roles in the same film, the outlandish and improper qualities of Big Momma positions Lawrence’s male persona as a respectable foil. When he is out of drag, Malcolm compensates for his poor imitation of Big Momma’s maternal qualities (cooking and midwifery, in particular) by being a smooth-talking charmer towards Sherry. Lawrence actively cultivates an attractive, straight persona that can stand on its own and be worthy of the penultimate romantic kiss.

Thus, the divide between the two personas is the source of humor—as is usually the case with drag—and the exaggerated fatness of the woman remains the punch line. Mary Russo briefly mentions this phenomenon in *The Female Grotesque*. She pinpoints the type of humor that operates at the expense of fat bodies as “general laughter” (ch. 2). In contrast to “carnival laughter,” which is “communal and spontaneous,” general laughter is “coercive” (ch. 2). Its effectiveness hinges on marginalized people internalizing phobia and admitting inferiority.

Carnival laughter is at work in *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*. Babs Johnson and Dawn Davenport are fat, loud, and grotesque. These attributes are affirming, not damning. They universalize, not marginalize. Babs is filthy, but the Marbles are, too. Dawn has an insatiable lust for fame, but there are others who share the same motivations. In other words, the worlds Babs and Dawn occupy are just as twisted and outlandish as themselves. Without that total diegetic support, Divine’s subversive characters would read as mere offensive caricatures.
This is what happens to Big Momma and Madea. They are padded puppets controlled by men. Situated within conventional romantic comedy structures, Madea and Momma simply cannot thrive. They are not supposed to. These films bank on general laughter, the type of laughter that fat women—especially fat black women—feel pressured to accept despite the mockery it entails. General laughter ranks supreme in the mainstream because it works within the status quo, pokes fun at the oppressed while it bolsters the dominant. It perpetuates stereotypes and ideals that are as normal as they are profitable. Filmmakers and audiences delight in the illusion of fatness because the reality is too much. Too vulgar, too obscene, too real. Malcolm glimpses this reality when Hattie Mae disrobes. Her body horrifies him. There is a reason actual, exposed fatness is limited to this one scene: to keep the threat at bay.

2.2 Conclusion

In the aforementioned assimilationist narratives, prolonged exposure to genuine fat bodies complicates the clear-cut parameters of general laughter. Fat bodies are entertaining, but only if they do not coincide with fat people. Darlene Cates’ turn as Momma Grape illustrates just how disconcerting genuine fatness can be. The longer a fat character appears onscreen, the heavier their humanity starts to weigh on the audience. This is particularly true of fat characters that possess additional markers of oppression.

In Precious (2009), Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) and her mother (Mo’Nique) do not just call attention to the marginalization of fat women, but specifically the marginalization of fat black women. In contrast to films like Big Momma’s House and
Diary of a Mad Black Woman, which primarily engage a singular controlling image of black womanhood, Precious engages images outside of the mammy, namely the matriarch and the welfare mother.\(^{30}\) Whereas fatness is at the heart of the mammy’s Otherness, the same cannot be said of these other two stereotypes. Instead, for Precious and her mother, dark skin, poverty, lack of education, and domestic abuse are more salient contributors to their oppression. Fatness is a part of their Otherness; it is not the source. Thus, analyzing characters like Precious and her mother solely in terms of fat liberation or assimilation is insufficient. It fails to acknowledge the extent of their marginalization.

On the flipside, for white women, race is an unmarked category. When it comes to marked outward characteristics, fatness takes the place of whiteness.\(^{31}\) Indeed, if she is cis and able-bodied, fatness is the predominant factor of a white woman’s marginality, the lone feature that contributes to her discrimination and oppression. This is why fat white women are more readily taken up as the face of fat liberation. Their innate privilege allows them to assert their value and beauty in ways fat black women cannot.\(^{32}\) Though fat, they are nonetheless treated with a level of baseline respect that eludes black women. White women’s body discourse can exist separately from their race, while the two remain inextricable for black women.

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\(^{30}\) For an in-depth discussion of controlling images and stereotypes of black women, see Chapter Four, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images” in Patricia Hill Collins’ Black Feminist Thought (69-96).

\(^{31}\) “In today’s terms, fat, if it had a color, would be black” (Farrell, ch. 1).

\(^{32}\) This privilege stems from socially constructed binaries that uphold white women as the norm and black women as Other. Collins acknowledges that women of both races face objectification, but it white women’s “skin and straight hair simultaneously privilege them in a system that elevates whiteness over blackness” (89).
Arguably, the only time it is possible to separate body discourse from black womanhood is when the woman in question is physically fabricated, as in Big Momma’s House and Diary of a Mad Black Woman. In these parodic portrayals, fatness precludes other identity markers such as race and gender. The men who participate in fat masquerade change only their body size, not their blackness. In turn, their evocation of the desexualized mammy stereotype ensures that fatness supersedes femaleness.

Although cinematic deployment of fabricated fat women has waned since the Big Momma and Madea zenith, the focus on fatness is stronger than ever. As fat studies gains traction within academia, so do fat activists within the mainstream. The phobic attitudes that give rise to assimilationist narratives are being met with an influx of body positivity. Technology is at the heart of this shift in social consciousness. The ongoing proliferation of online social outlets, publications, and digital media make community building among fat individuals possible. For example, hashtags like #NotYourAngel, #HonorMyCurves, and #EffYourBeautyStandards challenge dominant beauty ideals as well as make images and messages of fat liberation accessible to the masses.33 Tagging body positive media in such a way acts as a boon to fat activists; it disseminates their message further and more effectively than ever before.

Thus, the seeds of fat liberation are spilling forth from carnival and being sown within the mainstream. The glorification of bodily abundance, once relegated to a separate realm of inversion, is starting to crop up alongside the neoliberal emphasis on perfection. LeBesco notes this sea change as far back as 2004. In her chapter, “The Resignification of Fat in Cyberspace,” she observes that “those seeking to reconfigure the

33 These hashtags abound on Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr.
fat body” are learning how to “work in tandem with the kinds of ideas and ideal bodies they are trying to destroy” (Revolting Bodies 108). In the years since her writing, this cooperative approach has improved the public reception of fatness. Bodies are increasingly being regarded with ambivalence and acceptance, rather than divisiveness and denigration. Likewise, fat film narratives are starting to privilege the interplay, not the opposition, of contrasting social values. The line between assimilation and liberation is falling away, leaving a gap where the unruly woman can tenuously reemerge. The character of Tracy Turnblad was the first to broach this middle ground. Now, actors Rebel Wilson and Melissa McCarthy build careers there.
3. Welcome to Fat Camp

Before considering the ever-growing filmographies of Rebel Wilson and Melissa McCarthy, it is useful to consider certain factors of their marketability. After all, it is not coincidental that they dominate mainstream fat narratives. They are white women with conventionally “pretty” facial features; they are closer to ideal beauty than women with dark skin and/or unattractive countenances. Furthermore, unlike previously discussed actors Divine, Darlene Cates, and Gabourey Sidibe, Wilson and McCarthy fall on the smaller end of the fat spectrum. Combined, these physical attributes give them an advantage over other fat women, especially when it comes to securing prominent roles in popular cinema. That is why their perpetuation of liberatory characters is crucial. As the default representatives of fatness, they have a responsibility to affirm an otherwise denigrated population.

These women tend to accept the challenge, most effectively in films that favor a deliberate camp sensibility. As an intermediary between carnival culture and normative culture, camp simultaneously upholds the integrity of the established order and exposes its restrictions. In “Notes on ‘Camp’,” Susan Sontag articulates the most salient features of this narrative sensibility. She observes that camp’s objective is to “dethrone the serious” through exaggeration, extravagance, and the “glorification of character” (50, 48).

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34 Here, “pretty” appears in quotes as an nod to fat women’s familiar struggle to attain beautiful faces that compensate for their deviant bodies.
35 Melissa McCarthy secures her spot on the smaller end of the spectrum by continuing to lose weight.
36 The mutual involvement of Wilson and McCarthy in plus size fashion reflects this privilege—their respective clothing lines cap at a size 28. While more inclusive than some plus size ranges, they nonetheless exclude larger fat individuals. Additionally, the often high retail prices of their clothing keep the items inaccessible to those with lower-to-average incomes.
This understanding of camp forges a direct connection to carnival. Likewise, it fosters the renewal of the fat, unruly woman.

3.1 Bridesmaids: *Something Borrowed, Something New*

This era’s first, and perhaps richest, exercise in camp fat narratives is *Bridesmaids* (2011). Lauded for its comedic ensemble, *Bridesmaids* turns a keen eye to female friendship and the trials of adulthood.\(^3^7\) Crestfallen after the collapse of her baking business and long-term romantic partnership, Annie (Kristen Wiig) attempts to rally as maid of honor in her best friend (Maya Rudolph) Lillian’s wedding. As she meets the other members of Lillian’s bridal party—who are each more accomplished than the last—she becomes increasingly insecure. That insecurity subsides as soon as she meets Megan (McCarthy), the sister of the groom.

As the heaviest, dowdiest, and most verbose of the bridesmaids, Megan is both aesthetically and behaviorally disruptive. In contrast to the other maids, who wear figure-hugging, feminine ensembles, Megan wears an oversized golf shirt that emphasizes her girth. In an apparent attempt to offset her masculine attire, she accessorizes with a strand of pearls. Rather than contribute a sense of belonging, this token of sophistication only serves to highlight Megan’s difference. It acts as a reminder of the conventions she defies.

One such convention is social and sexual submissiveness. Within seconds of making Annie’s acquaintance, Megan launches into a story about falling off of a cruise

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\(^3^7\) Rebel Wilson plays a minor role in *Bridesmaids* as well. However, her turn as Annie’s eccentric roommate is brief and narratively inconsequential.
ship, breaking her bones, and communing with a dolphin. Though Annie is flummoxed by this anecdote, Megan keeps on rolling. She mistakes an older gentleman as Annie’s beau. Instead of apologizing for her faux pas, she rejoices in the man’s availability, confessing that she intends to “climb [him] like a tree.”

Megan once again displays her knack for irreverence and lasciviousness when the bridal party heads off for a bachelorette party in Vegas. On the plane, she is seated next to an undercover air marshal, whom she immediately barrages with presumptive commentary and lustful advances. She talks about gun concealment in graphic detail then straddles the aisle to prevent the marshal from passing by her. Similar to Babs Johnson’s mention of her meat-concealing “little oven,” Megan remarks on the “steam heat” coming from her “undercarriage.”

Megan’s euphemisms, combined with her lewd gestures, exemplify camp’s “relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms” (Sontag 44). Her uncouth self-presentation is a source of charm. It exposes the possibility of normatively acceptable disruption. Likewise, when Megan and the marshal end up dating, their union registers as a narrative attempt to unite unruliness with official culture. The film avoids painting this union as assimilationist via an end credit scene of sensual sandwich-based role-play. Equal parts silly and subversive, this scene illustrates that, while the air marshal professionally sides with the established order, he enjoys the reprieve Megan provides.

Megan does not toy with debasement solely within the confines of her romantic relationship. She is vulgar in the company of other women, too. Taking a cue from Pink
Flamingos, Bridesmaids plays up Megan’s physicality and propensity for downward movement through a sequence that marries consumption and defecation. At lunch with the bridal party, Megan freely indulges in the food before her. The other women tentatively pick at their plates and worry about fitting into their dresses, but Megan speaks confidently about her ability to digest food. Of course, she soon eats her words. Upon arriving to an upscale bridal shop, Megan exclaims, “This is some classy shit here!” She unexpectedly punctuates her praise with a combination belch-fart, which the rest of the group rebukes. She apologizes and admits she is unsure “which end that came out of.” Though the bridal party considers Megan’s gaseous outburst a character flaw, it is actually the harbinger of universal food poisoning. The longer the women try on dresses, the stronger the symptoms manifest. Their pale faces and gurgling guts give way to full-on abjection: Megan forcefully shits into a marble sink as the others projectile vomit and soil designer gowns.

This disastrous incident is one of many along Lillian’s journey to the aisle, but it is the last of Megan’s. For the second half of the film, she becomes a restorative force instead of a disruptive one. When the bachelorette party and bridal shower implode due to Annie’s unrestrained breakdowns, Megan takes the time to restore Annie’s spirits. She doles out some tough love, which she prefaces with a personal story of weight-based bullying and eventual career success. To further drive home the tenets of her bootstrap tale, she tells her new friend, “I do not associate with people who blame the world for their problems, ‘cause you’re your problem, Annie. And you’re also your solution.” In saying this, Megan simultaneously belies the large-scale oppression of fat women and
reaffirms blame frames inherent to neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{38} That said, her pep talk works on Annie, who gradually lives up to Megan’s example. She redisCOVERs her love for baking, makes amends with Lillian, and secures a new romantic relationship. In other words, she learns to manage the modern world, thanks to the intervention of her portly pal.

\textbf{3.2 Pitch Perfect and Pitch Perfect 2, Or, It’s Not Liberation Until the Fat Lady Sings}

As a film about a cappella, \textit{Pitch Perfect} (2012) is rife with the potential for theatricality. Yet, it opts to localize that potential in one of its lead characters, Fat Amy (Wilson), who acts as an exemplar of camp’s “Being-as-Playing-a-Role” conceit (Sontag 44). This character not only gives a (literal) name and face to fatness; she also gives fatness an identity. Her physical size is central to her figuration.

During her initial audition for the Barden Bellas a cappella group, Fat Amy shows off her talents by matching pitch, “mermaid dancing” on the ground, and holding notes exceedingly long. Through strained smiles, Bellas front women Aubrey (Anna Camp) and Chloe (Brittany Snow) ask for her name. When she says “Fat Amy,” their smiles give way to confusion. Fat Amy clarifies that she gives herself this label “so that twig bitches like [them] don’t do it behind [her] back.” Won over by Fat Amy’s candor and exaggerated character, Aubrey and Chloe tell her to proceed to auditions. Once there, she performs the requisite song—with some breast caressing and belly smacking for good measure. Even before Fat Amy learns that she made the cut, she congratulates herself.

\textsuperscript{38} Unpacking and critiquing obesity blame frames is the main project of Abigail C. Saguy’s 2012 text, \textit{What’s Wrong With Fat?} A preface to this project can be found in Saguy’s 2005 article, “Weighing Both Sides: Morality, Mortality, and Framing Contests over Obesity” (co-written with Kevin W. Riley).
Fat Amy’s self-assurance is not limited to performative arenas; it spills over into dating as well. At an a cappella mixer, she mingles with Bumper (Adam Devine), the lead vocalist of a rival singing group. Upon meeting Fat Amy, Bumper calls her “the grossest human being” he’s ever seen. He follows this insult with a proposal to make out. Without missing a beat, Amy says, “I sometimes have a feeling I could do crystal meth, but then I think, ‘Hm. Better not.’” Fat Amy’s high self-valuation prevents her from accepting negativity, whether it comes from potential suitors or from authorities within the singing world.

At a cappella regionals, longtime commentators John (John Michael Higgins) and Gail (Elizabeth Banks) remark on the difference between the previous year’s “fresh-faced, nubile” Bellas and the current year’s members. John notes that their tight skirts are “just not working anymore”; Gail argues that the display of body diversity is “refreshing” before she concedes that it is also “displeasing to the eye.” Naturally, Fat Amy is in the visual foreground for the majority of their phobic comments. Seemingly in answer to their criticisms, she goes on to belt out a solo, strut the stage, and tear open her blouse. Her extravagance elevates the Bellas’ otherwise monotonous performance and ensures their passage onto the next stages of competition.

As the Bellas prepare to take the stage at finals, Fat Amy breaks from her usual zaniness to deliver a heartfelt pep talk: “Even though some of you are pretty thin, I think that you all have fat hearts. And that’s what matters.” Whereas Fat Amy initially distrusted the thinness of her peers, she now accepts it. Diversity need not mean division.
Believing in oneself, and being open to others, turns out to be the hallmark of the Bellas’ success. They put their “fat hearts” into their final number and take home the victory.

*Pitch Perfect 2* (2015) begins with the Bellas singing at the Kennedy Center for the President’s birthday. Their hyperbolic routine builds until the women deploy props and Fat Amy descends upon the stage on a fabric swing. According to the commentators, it is the “overweight girl dangling from the ceiling” that tips the Bellas’ respectable number into pure spectacle. As Fat Amy attempts some aerial gymnastics, her leotard rips, which reveals her lower stratum in its entirety. The President—a stand-in for official culture—shows his disappointment, while the crowd and commentators shriek in horror. Fat Amy eschews embarrassment, however. She tells the shocked onlookers that they can either avert their eyes or “take it all in.” The media paints the incident in a negative light. It becomes a stain on the Bellas’ reputation, one they must wipe out.

Even though Fat Amy’s actions are framed as the reason for the Bellas’ hardship, she does not alter herself. She refuses to be penitent about her body. For instance, on their journey back to the top, the Bellas encounter opposition in the form of Das Sound Machine (DSM), a fierce German a cappella group. After DSM’s intimidating performance, the lanky front man makes Fat Amy the target of his trash talk. Pretending as if he does not know her name, he calls her “Flabby Abby,” “Obese Denise,” “Inflexible Tina,” and “Lazy Susan.” Instead of rebutting these monikers or taking offense to them, Fat Amy lends them credence: she says that she eats “krauts” like him for breakfast. This response recalls Fat Amy’s self-assurance from the first film. Her unwillingness to internalize negativity allows her to form strong bonds with the Bellas in
Pitch Perfect. In the second film, it is conducive to the Bellas’ comeback and Fat Amy’s continued growth.

While forming platonic bonds was Fat Amy’s most significant development in the first film, here her romantic bond with Bumper takes center stage. No longer satisfied with secret sexual encounters and mock-insults, Bumper asks to be Fat Amy’s boyfriend. He confesses his desire to “hold hands in public” and make matching Build-A-Bears (because hers “will be bigger than [his] and it will be cute”). At first, Bumper’s unabashed affection throws Fat Amy. She tells him that she cannot be confined to a monogamous relationship. She compares herself to a “free-range pony” and a firework, an unpredictable force that cannot be tamed. It is not until she is surrounded by the support of her Bella sisters that Fat Amy accepts her feelings for Bumper. She bestows a passionate serenade that evolves into an even more passionate embrace. Their peers look on in mild disgust, but the pair is too emboldened by their love to care. Thus, a future where Fat Amy can be both free and grounded seems possible.

3.3 Turning up The Heat: McCarthy Assumes an Unruly Position

The Heat (2013) opens with a sequence of thin, uptight FBI Special Agent Ashburn (Sandra Bullock) efficiently apprehending criminals and getting reassigned to a case in Boston. It then cuts to Detective Mullins (McCarthy), who immediately “converts the serious into the frivolous” (Sontag 42). As a disheveled fat woman sitting in a beat-up Rambler, she obscures the officialdom of her profession. When she approaches a man soliciting a sex worker, he mistakes her for a drug dealer. She flashes her police badge
with a smile, leading him to believe that the exchange will be genial. It is not. She proceeds to break the man’s hand, berate him for his choices, and then call his wife to relay the news of his infidelity. She drags him out of his car through the window and shoves him in her jalopy. En route to the station, she crosses paths with a known drug dealer and chases him through the streets, both in car and on foot. She loses the solicitor in the hullabaloo, but she takes down the drug dealer by chucking a watermelon at him.

When Ashburn and Mullins meet, their physical and behavioral differences only amplify. Ashburn continues to favor tailored suits and shapewear while Mullins keeps to her amorphous knits. Similar to *Bridesmaids* and *Tammy*, actions echo appearance. Ashburn actively avoids offensive language and confrontation; profanity and hostility are Mullin’s modus operandi. The women dispute protocol, territory, and career rank. They compete and undermine rather than cooperate and encourage.

Of course, in keeping with the buddy film ethos, their antagonism develops into partnership. They gradually learn to work together as well as look out for each other. Ashburn stands up to her superiors when they unfairly criticize Mullins’ capability and later saves the life of her brother. Likewise, Mullins provides Ashburn with back up, ammunition, and emotional support. They are so taken with each other by film’s end that when the opportunity arises for Ashburn to return to New York for a promoted position, she opts to stay in Boston to continue her work with Mullins.
3.4 Disciplining the Identity Thief and Taming Tammy: McCarthy’s Backslide into Assimilation

In *Identity Thief* (2013), a flamboyant Floridian named Diana (McCarthy) rides a wave of corruption and fraud. With a veritable Rolodex of stolen identities at her disposal, the seasoned criminal splurges on everything from perms and manicures to jet skis and industrial blenders. After she gets arrested for public intoxication under the alias of Sandy Patterson, the real Sandy (Jason Bateman) tracks her down. He offers to spare Diana from arrest so long as she admits her wrongdoing and restores Sandy’s reputation with his boss. Thus, they embark on a road trip from Florida to Colorado, supplying loads of pratfalls and snarky confrontation along the way.

The first bout of outlandishness occurs in Georgia, where Diana counters Sandy’s fatphobic dinner comments with false proclamations of his genital dysfunction. She further humiliates Sandy, and exploits his mandatory chaperone status, by having kinky, raucous sex with a stranger in their hotel room. While Sandy cowers in the bathroom, Diana makes a beeline for the car. Once inside, she intercepts a call from Sandy’s children, which makes her break down in tears.

Diana’s display of guilt goes against camp’s “mode of appreciation” and points to a mode of “judgment” instead (Sontag 52). Her narrative figuration steadily transitions from unruly to pathetic. Diana undergoes a physical and behavioral makeover. She rescinds her initial endorsement of theft and self-indulgence. Lastly, she surrenders herself to authority, which results in her imprisonment.
*Tammy* (2014) similarly forsakes liberation in favor of conformity. Within the first ten minutes of the film, Tammy (McCarthy) totals her car, loses her job, and gets rejected by her husband. All the while, she sports greasy hair, a rumpled fast food work uniform, and barbeque stains on her fingers. These realities lay bare the film’s heavy-handed assertion: the messier Tammy’s appearance, the messier her life.

For approximately half of its run time, *Tammy* indulges this situational and aesthetic disorder. It even provides an enabling character in the form of Tammy’s wily grandmother (Susan Sarandon), who accents dated polyester separates with cans of beer and bottles of whiskey. Together, the women drive drunk, wreck jet skis, and aggressively hit on men. Even though their relentless reveling garners mostly negative attention from those around them, their unruliness remains unshaken. They seem to relish their dominance and unconventionality. That is, until the narrative raises its romantic stakes.

With the sudden presence of a love interest, the onus is on Tammy to reform and conform. This makes her grandmother’s continued carousing a source of conflict instead of joy. Their once communal chaos becomes a stumbling block along Tammy’s road to straight, sober stability. Out of necessity, Tammy distances herself from her grandmother, as well as the hedonistic lifestyle they once shared. She becomes a chaperone instead of a sidekick. Tammy stays outside of their hotel room while her grandmother copulates inside. She bails her grandmother out of jail, calls out her alcoholism, and otherwise ensures her wellbeing.
Much like Diana in *Identity Thief*, Tammy’s behavioral makeover is concurrent with an aesthetic one. By complementing subdued, respectable behavior with makeup, coifed hair, and flattering clothes (i.e. garments that obscure, rather than highlight, her fatness), Tammy counters the film’s initial “disorder begets disorder” assertion. The more put together Tammy looks, the more her life falls into place. By downplaying her grotesque body, which “breaks down the boundaries between itself and the world outside it,” she allows an order-restoring “classical” self-presentation to take over (Rowe 33). By film’s end, she has a boyfriend, a job, and a rehabilitated grandmother. In short, Tammy embodies the contestable notion that good things come to those who assimilate.

3.5 Spy and How to Be Single: Affirmation through Sisterhood and Selfhood

McCarthy’s most recent film, *Spy* (2015), makes up for past shortcomings. It highlights the actor’s knack for comedy without treating her body as the joke and compensates for the assimilationist undertones of *Identity Thief* and *Tammy*. Whereas Diana and Tammy reform themselves in favor of normative respectability, Susan Cooper (McCarthy) does not. In fact, she does the opposite and still receives a happy ending.

As a behind the scenes CIA operative, Susan initially exhibits a “tame demeanor” and lives according to adages her mother instilled in her, such as “Blend in, let somebody else win.” This relative invisibility makes her a logical choice for fieldwork when the opportunity arises. Once in the field, however, Susan’s subdued persona gives way to a

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39 When asked about body positivity and Susan’s agency in *Spy*, director Paul Feig responded, “I only judge people by their talent, how funny they are & [sic] their screen presence. It’s all that really matters” (Twitter). While this reads partially as a pageant-like deferral, it also points to a potential shift in the casting of fat women.
“fiery side.” Though her mission is to track and report, Susan decides it is a chance for her to be seen and heard. She soon dismisses her instructions and ditches her disguises.

Through repeated displays of skill, Susan exerts her dominance over other operatives in the field. Ultimately, she frees herself from a life of blending in. This liberation pays off; her boss commends her and gives her further assignments. Likewise, three eligible men within the agency take a shine to her. In a final display of self-assurance, she prioritizes a longstanding female friendship over all of them.

With *How to Be Single* (2016), Rebel Wilson leaves behind the university setting of the *Pitch Perfect* films, but she maintains Fat Amy’s core qualities. As a self-assured, pleasure-seeking singleton, Robin (Wilson) stands in contrast to lead character Alice (Dakota Johnson), whose reserved, serial monogamy hinders her dating abilities. The former character represents camp frivolity; the latter represents conventional seriousness. The interaction of their respective sides gives the film its substance. Robin provides Alice with instructions on how to be single, complete with superimposed bullet points onscreen. In addition to verbalizing her advice, she leads by example—through relentless partying, primping, and flirting.

Eventually, the film (by way of Alice) acknowledges Robin’s distinct camp function. From her normative position, Alice cannot see the merits of camp. She accuses Robin of being frivolous and superficial. Robin acknowledges these traits, as well as Alice’s exploitation of them. Robin stands up for herself further, saying that she knows who she is. Unlike Alice, she does not compromise herself in order to be romantically

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40 The “tame demeanor” and “fiery side” valuations both come from Susan’s boss, Elaine (Allison Janney). Consistently believing in Susan’s spy capabilities, Elaine acts as Susan’s champion throughout the film.
appealing. She maintains her integrity despite her perceived artificiality, knowing that her eventual partner(s) will cherish it. This self-assuredness primes Robin for relationships but, more importantly, allows her to relish the single life that Alice merely resents.

Through a montage of soul searching and personal growth, Alice recognizes that Robin contributes more to her life than dating advice. She goes to Robin’s apartment to make amends, where she discovers that Robin has been secretly rich and successful throughout their acquaintance. Not only does Robin own an entire floor, she has multiple degrees to her name. This information solidifies Alice’s change of perception. She no longer treats Robin as a distraction or novelty. Knowing that Robin is self-sufficient and manage the modern world, Alice admires—rather than judges—her friend’s refusal to settle.

3.6 Conclusion

Although most of above characters espouse carnival and/or unruly traits to some extent, a few are more successful than others. Again, this success depends on the prevailing sensibility of their respective narratives.

Take Tammy and Diana, for instance. They initially appear to be the unruliest of McCarthy’s characters, the closest to Divine’s Babs and Dawn. They live on the margins of society. They sport unconventional aesthetics, delight in material and behavioral excess, welcome confrontation, and embrace criminality. This last aspect, though thematically similar to Divine’s deviants of yore, leads to the eventual reformation of Tammy and Diana. Unlike Babs and Dawn before them, these women cannot reach
liberation through anarchy; they can only surrender to assimilation. That is because their narrative worlds preference the laws of the established order, rather than the laws of a character’s own freedom. As platforms for mainstream values, including phobic conceptions of fatness, these worlds downplay fat subjectivity. Instead of remaining steadfast in their unruliness, Tammy and Diana give in to the pressures of conformity and appeasement. This brings them closer to Tracy Turnblad than to Divine’s carnival queens.

To truly register as liberationists, fat characters must strike a balance between the official culture in which they exist and the folk culture from which they derive. With the exception of Tammy, Identity Thief, and other minor film credits, McCarthy and Wilson seem to achieve this. They exemplify camp’s unique capacity to “offer for art (and life) a different—a supplementary—set of standards.” Furthermore, their characters learn to work in cooperation with “the kinds of ideas and ideal bodies they are trying to destroy.” Proving themselves respectable in some ways, through lawful obedience and interpersonal cooperation, means that they can be subversive in others. Showing an ability to manage the modern world, through professional or romantic success, means they can indulge unruliness. Strategic, measured concessions make fat liberation sustainable.

A deliberate camp sensibility prevents characters’ minor concessions from developing into full-blown assimilation. Sontag opines that “naïve” camp is purer and more satisfying than “deliberate” camp (46). However, when it comes to fat narrativization, naïve camp is detrimental: Tammy and Identity Thief—as well as
preceding films like *Shallow Hal*, *Big Momma’s House*, and *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*—perpetuate fat stereotypes without a trace of irony or self-awareness. In contrast, deliberately camp films like *Bridesmaids*, *Pitch Perfect 1 & 2*, *The Heat*, *Spy*, and *How to Be Single* engage with fat character tropes, not just regurgitate them. They strategically deploy a camp sensibility in order to disarm audiences and subtly subvert expectations.

In this latter list of films, Wilson and McCarthy embody the “continual incandescence” expected of camp characters; they mold their personas to reflect one “very intense thing,” i.e. fatness (Sontag 48). Wilson’s “Fat Amy” is the most obvious example. The other women in the *Pitch Perfect* ensemble go by their first names alone. Because they represent norms of thinness and conventional attractiveness, they need not qualify themselves as one thing or another. By virtue of her body size, however, Fat Amy is not held to that same standard. In the eyes of her thin peers, she is inevitably “fat” first and “Amy” second. Thus, while adopting “Fat Amy” as her preferred name seems limiting on the surface, it actually gives her agency. It expresses her personal identity. It preempts phobic criticisms and attenuates negative connotations tied to the term “fat.” In short, Fat Amy’s self-labeling signals her institution of a “supplementary” set of beauty and behavioral standards, which further aligns her with camp.

Fat Amy is not the only character within the recent spate of Wilson/McCarthy films to offer an alternative model for fat women. Indeed, each of their most liberatory characters does this to some extent. Megan (*Bridesmaids*) and Mullins (*The Heat*) appear equally frumpy and unfeminine, but they also exude sexual confidence and charisma.
They do not abide by fatphobic myths of undesirability or unattractiveness. Additionally, like Susan (*Spy*) and Robin (*How to Be Single*), Megan and Mullins are highly competent and successful in their chosen fields. Above all, these women are uncompromising and self-assured. Instead of conforming to norms of femininity and propriety, they remain true to themselves.

On a surface level, these attributes mirror Divine’s carnival heroines. Babs and Dawn are not conventionally feminine. They assert their sexuality and dominance along their journey to success. The big difference, however, is that the characters of Wilson and McCarthy supplement existing standards of beauty and behavior, whereas Babs and Dawn *upend* them. While Fat Amy, Megan, Mullins, Susan, and Robin suggest they are just as beautiful as their thin counterparts, Dawn Davenport strives for the title of “The Most Beautiful Woman in the World.” Likewise, while Wilson/McCarthy characters dabble in unruliness and mess, Babs Johnson aims for unmatched filthiness. *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* present a fleeting fat utopia; the films of Wilson and McCarthy present an ongoing fat reality.

While camp does not fully match carnival’s liberation potential, it comes close. It acts as a more viable alternative. Again, that is because it cooperates rather than combats. It wins over a potentially phobic public through its “tender feeling” and “love for human nature” (Sontag 52). It aims for equality over superiority; Wilson and McCarthy are able to assert their value without detracting from the value of their thin counterparts. This approach fosters fat acceptance and body positivity alike.
At the same time, camp dispels of carnival’s more controversial qualities (such as carnage and extreme criminality) while maintaining its exuberant spirit. Thus, while carnival is more or less contained to *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*, camp abounds. The many existing films of Wilson and McCarthy illustrate this, and the forthcoming release of *The Boss* (2016), *Ghostbusters* (2016), and *Pitch Perfect 3* (2017) lend further proof.
Epilogue: Making Do and Making Way

As this thesis has aimed to illustrate, fat narratives serve a variety of functions. Some uplift, some oppress, and some do both. Even carnival, with its supreme potential for fat liberation, has its share of limitations. These limitations come from the tradition’s fantastic basis. It is utopic, not realistic, in nature. As Bakhtin states, “While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside of it” (RAHW 7). No matter how appealing total escapism may be, it is not feasible long-term. Fat people cannot live off of shit and carnage alone. An engagement with official culture is necessary, both outside and within film narratives. Without this engagement, carnival would cease to exist; its capacity for debasement depends on real world hierarchies, norms, and values.

Doses of reality benefit camp narratives as well, even though Sontag argues otherwise. She maintains that camp is purest when it consistently preferences the superficial, when it values the “theatricalization of experience” over character development (48-50). Ironically, in attempting to argue camp’s strengths, Sontag exposes its weaknesses. The detached playfulness of camp is insufficient, especially in the context of fat narrativization. It does a disservice to fat women. Camp paints their lived experience as generally positive when, in actuality, it is often the opposite. Occasionally, Wilson and McCarthy testify to this disparity by interrupting the flow of their reductive narratives. Megan (Bridesmaids) talks about her weight-based oppression. Susan (Spy) expresses low self-esteem. Robin (How to Be Single) acknowledges her novelty status. These moments of interiority are commendable. They break from camp’s otherwise
unrelenting celebration of excess and “intensities of character.” They prevent fat characters from becoming caricatures.

That said, moments are just moments. Nuanced fat subjectivity has yet to take precedence in an American theatrical release. Films like *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?* and *Shallow Hal* devote substantial screen time to the struggles of fat women, but the narratives are nonetheless phobic and reductive.\(^4\) If fat women are to ever achieve mainstream acceptance—if the need for fat liberation is to ever subside—multifaceted film characters are essential. The humanity, not just the materiality, of fat women must come to the forefront.

Television and online media have taken up this challenge with increasing frequency. As many fat authors and activists have noted, *Roseanne* (and its eponymous lead) sets the standard for layered, unruly characterization on television.\(^4\) Through the course of nine seasons, Roseanne speaks her mind, works hard, and loves unconditionally. She accepts herself, fatness and all.\(^4\) *Roseanne’s* model extends to *Gilmore Girls*, where Melissa McCarthy makes a favorable first impression. As supporting character Sookie St. James, McCarthy rises above fat sidekick status. Her character carries a narrative weight equal to the leads. She excels in her field, champions

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\(^4\) On the surface, *The DUFF* (2015) appears to be an exception. However, it forgoes the potential for actual fat subjectivity in its casting of a slender, conventionally attractive young woman (Mae Whitman) as its so-called “designated ugly, fat friend.”

\(^4\) An example is Rowe’s second chapter in *The Unruly Woman*, “Roseanne: The Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess.”

\(^4\) In the wake of her show, Roseanne’s weight fluctuations and cosmetic alterations have routinely garnered media attention.
her friends, gets married, and has children. At no point during her arc does weight pose an obstacle.\footnote{Later, McCarthy’s turn in \textit{Mike & Molly} brings phobic weight struggles into the picture, but her positive influence as Sookie has persisted. The recent announcement of a \textit{Gilmore Girls} revival has compelled many to rally for Sookie’s return.}

The above examples boast multi-season potential for character development. Their presentation of well-rounded fat figures seems only logical. However, other productions have proven that progressive fat characterization can occur within a much shorter duration. Although it only lasted one season, Rebel Wilson’s \textit{Super Fun Night} imbued pratfalls with poignancy. Its lead character, Kimmie (Wilson), maintains a distinct voice. Granted, she often uses her voice for weight-based self-deprecation, but she more importantly uses it to encourage her friends, succeed at work, and secure romantic relationships. What results is a fairly honest depiction of a fat woman navigating the modern world.

In even shorter fashion, a twenty-minute episode of \textit{Louie} bestows fat women with a series’ worth of pathos.\footnote{Admittedly, this insight comes from a fat man who does not face the same sort of marginalization as fat women. As showrunner and star of \textit{Louie}, Louis C.K. indirectly acknowledges this by having the episode’s fat female character deliver a scathing speech about weight-based gender inequality. The gesture somewhat registers as patronization on Louis C.K.’s part—especially since Louie proceeds to court exclusively thin women—but the content of the speech is nonetheless profound.} “So Did the Fat Lady” hands over its narrative thrust to its featured fat lady, Vanessa (Sarah Baker). Her subjectivity supersedes that of the main character, Louie (Louis C.K.). As a confident, self-sufficient woman, Vanessa has no trouble enlightening her reluctant suitor about the disparate dating experiences of fat women and fat men. Vanessa calls Louie out on the ingrained prejudice he, and other single men, espouse. After feebly attempting to deny her claims, Louie accepts his
culpability. Diegetically and nondiegetically, this shift in power dynamics benefits fat women. It gives much needed insight into their experiences.

Of course, this insight can be achieved in less overt ways. Aidy Bryant exemplifies this in her independent online short film, *Darby Forever* (2016). In her turn as Darby, a meek-yet-imaginative retail associate, Bryant makes a marked departure from the heavy-handed unruliness of her *SNL* characters. Darby is neither a clear-cut assimilationist nor a liberationist. She eats meatball subs in private, yet she does not react in shame when her co-worker finds her. She indulges in daydreams, yet also finds ways to outwardly express herself. In short, she accepts her restrictive circumstances while holding out hope for a rich, fulfilling future.

There is a long way to go before fat acceptance becomes the norm and the need for fat liberation subsequently falls away. Likewise, some missteps are to be expected. Film narratives will surely make use of fat suits or tragic framings from time to time, just as some will continue to favor superficial unruliness over depth. It is difficult to forgo familiar territory, especially when it has proven profitable in the past.

Nevertheless, times are changing. Fat activists have greater influence than ever before. Body positivity has begun to reshape the way the media, advertisers, and retailers appeal to the consuming public. Therefore, from an ideological (and financial) standpoint, films can no longer afford to be phobic. Persistent fat denigration sullies the reputation of film creators; it brands them as problematic and out of step with the viewing public. More importantly, the peddling of phobia alienates fat viewers, viewers who represent a significant part of the American population. Thus, if cinema is to maintain its
function of cultural reflection and reification, it must turn its attention to inclusivity. Its narratives must make room for not only fatness, but all forms of non-normative embodiment. Film must honor people, not prejudices—or else risk obscurity.
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