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Body Composition: Reading, Writing, and Resisting Weight Loss Autobiography as Biopolitical Pedagogy

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BODY COMPOSITION: READING, WRITING, AND RESISTING
WEIGHT LOSS AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS
BIOPOLITICAL PEDAGOGY

Katherine Ann Browne

115 Pages

In this dissertation, I argue that autobiographical narratives of body size function as lifestyle guides based on an interpretation of obesity as an undesirable bodily condition. These narratives are anchored by the “weight loss success story” narrative trope, which represents the result of extreme weight loss processes synthesized as “Before and After.” This dissertation serves the dual purpose of historicizing weight loss autobiography in the United States from the late 19th century to present, and arguing that these texts have been taken up as instructional guides for living, or biopedagogical tools. After outlining my methodology in the first chapter, the next chapter looks at an early freak show pamphlet of a “giant” act to suggest that the contemporary weight loss memoir is derived from this manipulation of autobiographical forms to exploit bodily difference. In the second chapter, I move to the mid-20th century, when members of commercial weight loss programs began writing their own weight loss autobiography as a mandate of the program. I use my own autobiography as a member of Weight Watchers to show how the program teaches food journaling techniques. Next, I explore how body-based memoir can resist the imperative of weight loss in narratives of body size. In the last chapter, I show how teaching disability life writing in an undergraduate classroom can disrupt normative expectations of participation. I conclude by arguing that narratives that support the validity of one body size/shape/configuration over another, like weight loss memoir or the overcoming narrative of

disability memoir, authorize harmful practices of exclusion that impact how individuals are allowed to participate in public life. Therefore, including weight loss memoir and disability memoir as representing Othered embodiment under the broad category of what I call body-based autobiography can teach a new model of how to write a life.

KEYWORDS: Autobiography, Circus, Disability, Memoir, Obesity, Weight Loss

BODY COMPOSITION: READING, WRITING, AND RESISTING

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BIOPOLITICAL PEDAGOGY

KATHERINE ANN BROWNE

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BIOPOLITICAL PEDAGOGY

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K. A. B.

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PREFACE

I was on an airplane the first time I read sociologist Erving Goffman's foundational work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. I chose the window seat. I always chose the window seat. I boarded the plane as early as possible for the benefit of a few extra moments to adjust my seat belt. For the next four hours, I sat still in my seat studying Goffman's "spoiled identity" theory with my arms crossed in front of me and my legs crossed on top of each other, silently cursing every time my thigh accidentally met the thigh of my seatmate. In this moment, I existed in what Goffman calls a "mixed contact," a time when "stigmatized and normal are in the same 'social situation,' that is, in one another's immediate physical presence" (12). Goffman explains that in these situations of mixed contact, it is the responsibility of the stigmatized person to lessen the impact of their condition for the "normal" using techniques of passing or covering that minimize the negative effects of bodily difference for the normal as much as possible. This requires the stigmatized individual to be always "'on,' calculating about the impression he is making, to a degree and in areas of conduct which he assumes others are not" (14). I recognized my bodily contortion as an attempt at covering my obesity. Truly covering my sizeⁱ cannot be done, but I try. And in trying, I send a message that I know something is wrong with me, a message that I believe is very important to reassure the normal around me. I cannot recall ever receiving an explicit lesson in corpulent comportment that would have explained how I began to perform the behavior codes of moving among the normal, but the story about the fat woman flying was one I knew by heart.

I had developed a habit of reading weight loss memoirs, books in which women (almost always white women) describe how they negotiate air travel as a mixed contact space. In *Passing for Thin: Losing Half My Weight and Finding My Self*, memoirist Frances Kuffel describes how

she manipulates her body in public spaces in an attempt to cover her obesity: “Tuck my head to my chest and curl my shoulders and wrap my arms across my chest to minimize the protrusion of my breasts—especially in theaters, and on airplanes, where I would read with one arm clutching the other, book tensed in front of my face for the seven-hour flight from New York to Montana” (37). Memoirist Wendy McClure also chooses the window seat as a coping strategy. As she explains in *I’m Not the New Me*, “I have the window seat on the plane, which is mostly a good thing. I edge into the short row and buckle myself in long before I have to...I never feel like I’m supposed to, though I notice, in the tight rows, all the different things people do to fold themselves in, so many configurations of bent legs and arms held close” (209). McClure alludes to feeling a vague “otherness” on the plane, explained by Goffman as the ever-present sense felt by the stigmatized who are always unsure about their place in a social situation and how they will be perceived by others (*Stigma* 14). The anonymous author “Your Fat Friend” describes air travel as both a physical and mental contortion: “I grasp my arm and cross my ankles, making my fat body as small as possible. I have carefully observed what makes other passengers snap at fat passengers, roll their eyes, and complain to management. For me, these are inviolable norms” (“What It’s Like”). In other words, physical pain, emotional distress, and social ostracism should be expected when flying while fat, and there is only one way out: weight loss.

In the weight loss success story, comfortable air travel becomes shorthand for transcending stigma and making the transition to normal. Jen Larsen, author of *Stranger Here: How Weight-Loss Surgery Transformed My Body and Messed with My Head*, is conditionally initiated into the realm of the normal when she asks her psychologist for clearance to pursue weight loss surgery. “He caught my eye and winked. ‘It’ll be nice to walk down the aisle of a plane and not see that look on your seatmate’s face when they realize you’re coming, am I

right?” (76). Jennette Fulda extolls the virtues of weight loss as an escape from stigmatization in *Half-Assed: A Weight Loss Memoir*. “I live in less fear. I’m not afraid I’ll have to ask the stewardess for a seat belt extender on the plane” (233). Frances Kuffel also has a strong emotional reaction to pain-free air travel after a significant weight loss. “I cried the first time I didn’t have to ask for a seat belt extension on an airplane. I cried again when I delicately lowered the tray at my seat” (73). In texts that portray the obese body as miserable and suffering, the narrative arc completes when the subject’s body undergoes enough weight loss to occupy a normal body. The conflict of the misfit body resolves, and the subject receives a transcendent reward of ease and comfort while moving through the world.

For Goffman, the “sense” felt by the stigmatized that their presence is intolerable reflects the individual’s own internalized anxiety about their condition rather than the way “normals” have been conditioned to react to visible bodily difference (4). The stigmatized person then minimizes the effect of their real or perceived abnormality through augmentation processes that Goffman labels “covering” and “passing.” His reading of this internalized anxiety and the resulting attempts to make bodily difference imperceptible suggests that unease about the body is essential and inherent to the experience of living in an unusual body. This dissertation is based on a fundamental disagreement with Goffman, and an assertion that we are not born stigmatized by spoiled identities.

In this dissertation, I argue that autobiographical narratives of body size function as lifestyle guides based on an interpretation of obesity as an undesirable bodily condition. These narratives are anchored by the “weight loss success story” narrative trope, which represents the results of extreme weight loss processes synthesized as “Before and After.” Weight loss success stories appear regularly in a wide variety of genres including diet books, self-help books, weight

loss product advertisements, public health pamphlets, newspaper articles, films, magazine features, websites and blogs, reality television programming, and even pet food commercials.ⁱⁱ

The weight loss success story “makes the fat person into the ‘before’ that must be rejected for the ‘after’” (Levy-Navarro 340), and this rejection denies the experience of the fat, Before self as valid. This project seeks to unpack the rhetoric of compulsory diet discourse in these texts, and refocus the interpretation of weight loss memoir away from After self as hero in order to address the harmful effects of writing a fat life as one marked by misery, pain, and isolation.

I use theories from the field of life writing studies to support my claim that weight loss success stories are not spontaneous offerings of essential truth about the experience of living in a body of a particular size, but are instead purposefully constructed to support ideologies of health, productivity, and normalcy. The popular conception of autobiography as representing absolute truth about the everyday experiences of its subject has been frequently critiqued by life writing scholars who insist it is necessary to unpack the rhetoric of life writing production as an essential component of its function as discourse. Taken together, both the stigmatization of obesity authorized by these texts and their acceptance as lifestyle guides have the effect of teaching readers how to interpret and respond to bodily difference in their everyday lives. Repeated exposure to this singular narrative supports the commonplace belief that “everybody knows” fatness is undesirable, unhealthy, and even dangerous. We are taught again and again that the protagonist of the weight loss success story is the thin, After self who triumphs over the scourge of obesity, and that this same victory can be achieved by the readers by emulating the real person featured in the text. This instruction, recirculated through the promotion of reading the weight loss memoir and writing the weight loss autobiography as rhetorical instruments of dieting, becomes a tool of “biopedagogy,” a concept developed by Valerie Harwood based on Michel

Foucault's theories of biopower and Henry Giroux's definition of pedagogy as a complex cultural practice that extends beyond formal schooling. She argues that "[b]iopedagogies occur in myriad political sites involved in the construction of identities that instruct and form meaning. Biopedagogy, then, is the art and practice of teaching of 'life'" (21). I consider weight loss autobiography to be a tool of biopedagogy, one of many normalizing mechanisms that "impart knowledges that make meaning, and are attached to the shaping of identities and desires of life" (22). Based on this concept, this project examines three ways in which weight loss autobiography teaches the reader how to make meaning out of body size, and also how these lessons can be refocused to emphasize just and equitable representations of experience through life writing for people living in bodies of all sizes.

This study brings together three fields hinged by a shared concern for embodiment to argue for the inclusion of weight loss autobiography under the categorical umbrella of disability life writing. Representations of embodied subjectivity have been long considered a chief concern of life writing scholarship. Some scholars, including G. Thomas Couser, Arthur Frank, Georgiana Kleege, and Susanna Mintz, focus specifically on the function of disability in autobiographical texts, but obesity has not been included as part of this work. Disability studies scholarship addresses the disabled body as a figure in autobiographical literature, exemplified by the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Simi Linton, and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, but again, obesity has not been featured as an embodied condition represented in literature or popular media. Further, emerging scholarship in the field of fat studies based on civil rights activism work conducted by the Fat Acceptance (FA) movement complicates the inclusion of fatness as a category of analysis in life writing studies and disability studies. Weight loss is not an acceptable topic in fat studies, even when the practice or surrounding discourses are the

subject of critique. Also, the resistance to the medicalization of large body size deployed in the rhetoric of “the obesity epidemic” also resists categorization of obesity as a disabling condition. In part, models of understanding disability that rely on binaries such as disabled/non-disabled and visible/invisible impairment, on which prior scholarship relied, cannot adequately attend to the concept of large body size required by fat studies as not necessarily impairing an individual, but most certainly resulting in prejudicial representation. Therefore, I employ a political/relational model of disability theorized by Alison Kafer and summarized succinctly by Tobin Siebers to argue that obesity is a “social location, complexly embodied” (*Disability Theory* 13). Weight loss memoir fits within the scope of disability life writing as it represents Couser’s argument that “the new nobody memoir is also often the memoir of some body. Far more than the somebody memoir, the nobody memoir is often about what it’s like to have or to be, to live in or as, a particular body—indeed a body that is unusually odd or anomalous” (*Signifying Bodies* 2). However, my analysis insists that “what it’s like” to live in a body of anomalous size is not a natural given, but an experience shaped by historically and culturally situated ideologies, like those espoused in weight loss memoir, that teach us how to care for ourselves and others.

Chapter 1 outlines my methodology of reading weight loss autobiographies for patterns that reveal dominant ideologies of body size. Next, I bring together theories from existing scholarship in life writing studies, disability studies, and fat studies to locate weight loss autobiography generally, and “weight loss success story,” specifically, as biopedagogical tools. The Foucauldian base of biopower embedded in Harwood’s definition supports weight loss autobiography as a “technology of the self” that uses confession and surveillance to constitute the weight loss subject in these texts. Finally, I focus specifically on the treatment of the Before

self in weight loss autobiography to highlight the ways in which obesity is characterized as an abject bodily condition, and how weight loss is positioned as a “cure” for obesity. In this way, I argue that weight loss autobiography is modeled after the “overcoming narrative” frequently seen in representations of disability.

In Chapter 2, I begin the secondary goal of locating the historical context of weight loss autobiography. I argue that freak show performances of the late 19th century modeled a method of interpreting bodily difference marked by sensationalism and exaggeration. Popular opinions about large bodies shifted in the early 20th century from symbolizing health and prosperity to symbolizing moral depravity and wasteful excess, and this shift is reflected in the way the freaks were promoted. Drawing from the text of a “true life” promotional pamphlet, and subsequent promotional materials for “fat ladies” of the 1920s, I show how popular notions of autobiography worked in conjunction with freak show presentation modes to create the prototypical weight loss success story narrative that would form the basis for the genre in the mid 20th century.

In Chapter 3, I turn the attention to the ways in which weight loss autobiography was taken up as a practice of dieting in the mid 20th century. The development of commercial diet programs in conjunction with the rising popularity and easy accessibility of paperback books supported the conditions necessary for weight loss autobiography to become a consumable product. I focus specifically on the rhetoric of reading and writing autobiography as a feature of the Weight Watchers commercial diet program, and use my own history of producing autobiographical acts as part of the program as a case study for how Weight Watchers teaches its members to be good weight loss subjects.

In Chapter 4, I consider Samantha Irby’s essay collection *Meaty* as a site of resistance to the weight loss autobiography model, and suggest that using Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of

“carnival” might be a meaningful way to consider how authors/subjects can write a fat life while subverting the norms of weight loss autobiography. I argue that Irby’s use of “grotesque” language, non-chronological time, and non-human animal metaphors challenges the primacy of weight loss memoir as the only acceptable way to write about the experience of living with an anomalous body. The proliferation of the “some body” memoir written from an FA perspective shows that the work of subverting the dominance of weight loss narrative to model a new way to write a fat life is not only possible, but already in progress.

Finally, Chapter 5 chronicles the results of including weight loss memoir texts as part of the required reading for my undergraduate English Studies general education course centered on women’s disability autobiography. As an obese woman, teaching these texts required a high level of self-reflexivity, and in this chapter I describe a double pedagogy of teaching the texts and the emotional labor of teaching by my presence. In many ways, I disrupted students’ ideas about what obesity is, how it should be represented, and how body size and disability intersect and diverge in body-based life writing. However, this work is not without personal consequence, and I consider the often unrecognized, uncompensated emotional labor demanded of teachers by both undergraduate students and the world at large, who require lessons on how to respond to bodily difference with a sense of social justice.

This dissertation project contributes to the ongoing conversations about representations of bodily difference in life writing studies, disability studies, and fat studies. Although it is one of the first long-form studies of its kind, I intend for this project to respond to Levy-Navarro’s call to “take a step toward writing different narratives that make our lives matter in very different life-affirming ways” (“I’m the New Me” 354) as we learn how to write more diverse and equitable stories about body size. While some relevant topics are beyond the scope of this

project, such as an extended cultural history of dieting in the United States and contributions from posthuman and critical animal studies, this dissertation highlights the role of weight loss narrative as an important 20th and 21st century artifact of popular culture in the United States.

CHAPTER I: METHODOLOGY

The absence of the weight loss memoir from the categorical umbrella of disability life writing parallels the status of real, obese bodies moving through the world. Simultaneously hypervisible and marginalized, everywhere and nowhere, both these bodies and the texts that represent them do not fit neatly into existing interpretive paradigms. Throughout this dissertation, I hold space for the possibility that weight loss narratives can be considered disability life writing as representations of the particular experience of living in an obese body. At present, situating obesity as a bodily condition has not been readily accepted in the fields of life writing studies, disability studies, or fat studies, but this is starting to change. The inclusion of scholarship addressing fatness/obesity as a concern for disability studies has emerged as an exploration of the ways in which medical science perspectives interact with social and cultural interpretations of “health.” Kim Q. Hall’s *Feminist Disability Studies* includes April Herndon’s chapter “Disparate but Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies,” in which Herndon calls for fat stigma and weight discrimination to be part of larger discussions within disability scholarship and activism on intersectional oppression. Fat studies scholars who have addressed fatness as a disability generally avoid staking a claim on whether or not obesity is a disability. Overwhelmingly, Fat Acceptance (FA) activists and fat studies scholars reject body size as inherently disabling, while revealing a bias against disability as an undesirable embodied condition. As I will explain in more detail later, there are compelling reasons for a careful, nuanced treatment of the core issue of large body size and impairment. “Crip theory,” a political/relational theory developed from social models of disability, and recent scholarship in the field of “critical weight studies” offer more productive arguments that move beyond trying to answer the question of whether or not obesity is a disability. By highlighting the convergences in

these fields, and stressing the role of analysis through life writing studies as a way to articulate these connections, I theorize an alternate reading of the weight loss memoir. This alternate reading brings the obese body to the center to interrogate the ways in which it is made uninhabitable by stigmatization and inaccessible environments, and makes space for new types of autobiographical narratives that equitably reflect the experiences of life in a larger-than-average body.

In this chapter, I locate weight loss narratives within a broader concept of body-based autobiography by defining these terms and outlining the theoretical frameworks that influence this categorization. Life writing studies, disability studies, and fat studies all share a concern for literary representations of the embodied Other, but none of these fields have regularly included weight loss narratives or narratives of body size in broader analyses. Theories of embodiment in these fields often draw on the work of Michel Foucault, and I do this as well, focusing specifically on the function of confession and surveillance in weight loss narrative to explain how these texts teach readers how to govern themselves and others. This is the first long-form study of the weight loss narrative situated within life writing studies, disability studies, and fat studies. The goal for this dissertation is to show how weight loss narratives function not only as biopolitical technologies, but also as biopedagogical tools. In the next section I define the terms that appear throughout this project before explaining their theoretical underpinnings.

Definitions

Weight loss success stories are everywhere. Every person I have ever told about this project has understood “weight loss success story” as a narrative in which a fat person becomes a visibly thin person, with the implicit message that life is better when you are thin. Yet, the lexicon of body size that forms the basis of these texts is deeply contested in both popular and

academic discourse. Viewing fat/thin as binary antonyms does not adequately represent the vast spectrum of possible human size variations, and even the practical application of fat or thin as adjectives varies in effectiveness. Fat/thin as gradable antonyms across a spectrum raises important issues for classifying and organizing who is and is not *fat*. Debates rage throughout the Internet as to whether certain celebrities, often current or former female fashion models, are fat. Mimi Nichter, in her research on the communication phenomenon “fat talk,” explains that the phrase “I’m so fat” is “much more than an observation about how a girl looks or feels. It is a call for support from her peers. The response she receives is an affirmation that she is, in fact, not fat, and that things aren’t as bad as they seem” (47). So, “fat,” in its current use, does not necessarily apply to people who experience discrimination and harassment because of their large body size. The current political project of reclaiming “fat” as a neutral descriptor of body size further complicates word choice.

Fat Acceptance (FA) activists roundly reject the “pathologization of body size” and refuse to engage with medicalization of fatness, leading to a writing convention that fat studies scholars who use the words “obese” and “overweight” in their work qualify the terms with “scare quotes” (Rothblum and Solovay xxxi). Once, I would have advocated for “fat” as a “neutral descriptor,” following the call of nearly every FA activist and scholar to self-identify and show solidarity with the project of destigmatizing large body size in this way. However, situating my work in disability studies has complicated my views on the meaning, impact, and effects of unfairly and unnecessarily pathologizing human variation that harms disabled people. For example, the inclusion and subsequent removal of homosexuality as a mental illness as classified by the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM) represents the complex and unstable interplay of cultural interpretation and clinical medical processes that determine who is ill, deviant, or

abnormal, as well as how those experiences are represented autobiographically. I argue that failure to address how “obese” functions semantically further stigmatizes and alienates individuals whose body size impacts their ability to participate in public life. Therefore, I use the word “obese” to refer to bodies marked by their size as large enough to experience stigmatization, discrimination, or harassment, as these bodies always represent the Before in weight loss memoir. While I disagree with the refusal of fat studies scholars to use the word “obese,” I respect the language practices of the field, and will use the construction “fat/obese” when discussing weight loss narratives in a fat studies context.

Having explained my interpretation of “fat” and “obese,” I will now offer a brief glossary of terms relevant to the body size narratives that I will use in this project:

Weight Loss Success Story

This narrative trope relies on the convention that Elena Levy-Navarro identifies as one in which an obese “Before” body, consistently described in grotesque, animalistic terms, is reconfigured through a process of intentional, extreme weight loss to occupy a normative, thin, “After” body (340). “Dieting” and “weight loss” are generally understood as interchangeable referents to the practice of restrictive eating for the purpose of reducing body size, but “diet” still refers to a somewhat obsolete way of thinking about the practices, methods, and technologies of weight loss broadly described across texts. Body size manipulation techniques that include intentional exercise, surgical procedures like liposuction, and taking medication or supplements can produce weight loss results in some people, and may or may not be used in conjunction with restrictive eating methods while still being considered “dieting.” Further, dieting and weight loss as terms often point to a result or state of being, as in common phrases such as “I’m dieting” or “Have you lost weight?” Cressida Heyes, in her Foucauldian analysis of Weight Watchers,

encourages a process-oriented perspective on dieting for weight loss as it “needs to be understood from within the minutiae of its practice, its everyday tropes and demands, its compulsions and liberations” (64). Therefore, weight loss success stories are embedded with an implicit morality even if the form is simply one Before picture to the left of an After picture. Throughout this dissertation I will use “weight loss success story” when referring to this narrative trope, regardless of the form in which it appears.

Weight Loss Memoir

I define weight loss memoir as published, book length, autobiographical representations of extreme weight loss, a form most closely associated with “the memoir boom.” As I explain later, “memoir” and “autobiography” can be used interchangeably, but in this case I want to distinguish a specific commercial product from other acts of autobiography in which weight loss success stories can appear. Different in some ways from other autobiographical acts such as diaries, food journals, or medical forms where weight loss success stories circulate, weight loss memoir is an example of autobiography as “a public form where private lives circulate” (Rak 30). Some example texts that I use throughout this project are *Passing for Thin: Losing Half My Weight and Finding My Self* by Frances Kuffel, *Half-Assed: A Weight-Loss Memoir* by Jennette Fulda, *It Was Me All Along* by Andie Mitchell, and *Stranger Here: How Weight-Loss Surgery Transformed My Body and Messed with My Head* by Jen Larsen. These texts are not only bound together by the weight loss success story narrative, but also by generic and paratextual conventions that contribute to their commercial success.

Levy-Navarro’s work on compulsory confession in diet discourse offers a useful description of the “Before/After” narrative structure characteristic of weight loss memoir, but because her aim is to theorize the role of confession within this structure, she does not

specifically address issues of genre. However, she does refer to *I'm Not the New Me* by Wendy McClure as a “diet memoir” (340). Kathryn Linder notes that the book-length texts she calls “fat memoir” can include descriptions of “weight loss or body transformation, with the memoirists expressing unhappiness with their current weight and lifestyle” (219). Her main argument, that these texts needlessly reinforce the negative representations of the fat/obese body as diseased and powerless, makes an important point about the presence of the autobiographical subject of these texts. She rightly notes that metaphors of disease “unnecessarily strengthen and reify negative and harmful representations of the fat body...rather than accepted as ‘other’ in itself” (232). However, I disagree with Linder’s assertion that fatness is a “permanent identity” (233). To accept fatness as a stable, fixed identity supports the idea that weight loss only functions in the visible and extreme, denying the possibility of psycho-physical change that can occur through a variety of intentional and unintentional processes including weight changes due to prescription medication or other medical treatments. G. Thomas Couser notes that the “nobody memoir,” theorized by Lorraine Adams as distinct from the celebrity memoir, is often the memoir of “*some body*” [emphasis in the original]. “The nobody memoir is often about what it’s like to have or to *be*, to live in or *as*, a particular body—indeed, a body that is usually odd or anomalous” [emphasis in the original] (*Signifying Bodies* 2). In order to complete the narrative arc, even the shortest weight loss success stories (e.g., “At 200 lbs, I couldn’t climb the stairs. Now I can run a marathon!”) describe what it feels like to live in not just one, but two particular bodies. Therefore, weight loss success stories constitute weight loss memoir not as a narrative of a particular body, but as a narrative of subject formation through processes of intentional, dramatic weight loss.

Body-Based Autobiography

This term is an attempt to capture both weight loss narrative and disability autobiography categorically, and to imagine an expansive future for this kind of scholarship. Although significant treatment of the representation of body size through the lens of posthuman studies and critical animal studies is beyond the scope of this project, issues of human, non-human animal, and machine interactions have a clear place in representations of Othered embodiment in autobiography.

In the following sections, I introduce foundational theories and issues that form the basis of my study in the fields of life writing studies, disability studies, and fat studies. With the exception of fat studies, I avoid a comprehensive overview of these fields in favor of directly addressing overlapping issues of representation of Othered embodiment that are already a part of ongoing scholarly conversations.

Disability in Life Writing

Now in its second edition, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson remains one of the primary comprehensive taxonomic studies of life writing genres, and is considered a fundamental text for students and scholars new to life writing studies. Their catalogue of more than fifty distinct genres of life narrative omits weight loss memoir, but does acknowledge disability life narrative as an emerging site for critical analysis (147-148) and includes a brief entry on autopathography, or illness-based life writing (187). Smith and Watson acknowledge that their catalogue “could be much longer,” but their explanatory notes on recent developments in life writing and life narrative scholarship leave room for the inclusion of additional subgenres. *Memoir: An Introduction* by Couser, a survey text for audiences new to life writing theory, also makes no

mention of weight loss memoir. Couser is a respected authority on disability life writing, but he addresses weight loss memoir only once, in *Signifying Bodies*, his most recent work in the genre. He suggests that obesity is one of the medical conditions recently represented through memoir (cerebral palsy, bipolar illness, and chronic fatigue syndrome are examples of others) that has “produced a small number of titles,” and includes Judith Moore’s *Fat Girl: A True Story* as the only example text (2). However, weight loss memoir titles have appeared consistently on publishers’ best-selling title lists since the 1950s when mass-market paperbacks became readily available in the United States. (Bonn 17). I suggest that Couser’s oversight stems from a common misconception that weight loss memoir is not about the anomalous obese body. Rather, these texts are traditionally interpreted as a celebration of the normalized body through the constitution of an appropriately disciplined weight loss subject.

Of the 1,200 weight loss titles under the category “Biographies & Memoirs,” on Amazon.com, 214 can be further categorized under “Woman,” suggesting that narratives of weight loss match the prevailing statistics on women’s dissatisfaction with body size (cf. Bordo; Nichter). Magazines and websites that target women as their primary audience regularly include autobiographical weight loss success stories as a regular feature, and female celebrities receive more critical attention to changes in body size than their male counterparts. It is not surprising, then, that most weight loss memoirs are written by “nobody” and “somebody” women, and it is even less surprising that women who publish book-length weight loss memoirs are white, affluent, heterosexual, and otherwise able. By having their book published at all, authors of weight loss memoirs rely on these privileges to position themselves as the appropriate subject of autobiography with the means and access to publication that comes standard with a traditional “success” narrative (Couser 113).

As mass-market publications, weight loss memoir does not fit neatly into the definition of literary texts most often addressed through life writing scholarship. Julie Rak notes that scholars of genre fiction struggled to legitimize their work as elitist attitudes in literary studies once prevented robust scholarship of genre fiction for its perceived “cheapness” and its tendency to “raise the specter of the ‘market’” (19). Increasing attention to the literary merits of romance, science fiction, and horror genres have diffused much of this criticism, but the study of mass-market non-fiction generally, and mass-market autobiography specifically “has not yet followed this path” (20). Weight loss memoir is only one type of autobiographical act through which the weight loss success narrative trope circulates, so taken together, the repeated exposure to this narrative supports dominant ideologies of the proper weight loss subject.

Weight loss memoir circulates through mass-market commercial publication, a commercial enterprise closely tied to the bio/medicalization of obesity in the 20th century. Tracing these developments using a genealogical approach theorized by Foucault as “an analysis of descent” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 83) resists assumptions that obesity and other deviations from “normal” body size are inherently unnatural and undesirable, and that autobiographical representations of body size like the weight loss memoir reveal a natural, inner truth about the lived experience of a fat/obese body moving through public space. Judith Butler posits a Foucauldian genealogy of gender, and I argue similarly that body size can be included as a category of identity that is “constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body” (*Gender Trouble* iii) that includes reading and writing weight loss autobiography. Megan Brown draws on Foucault’s different but related theories of governmentality, confession, and biopower to argue for the usefulness of these concepts in understanding and reading memoir as a form of self-care in service of “the government of

oneself and of others” (“Learning to Live Again” 360). While her study focuses on self-help memoir in the form of addiction narrative, the same argument can be applied to weight loss memoir. Self-care, extending to matters of health, longevity, birthrate, and emotional well-being, serves “the broader goal of governing at a distance as subjects learn and perpetuate norms for a healthy, productive citizenship” (361). Despite claims of many memoirists that altruism drove their decision to write their weight loss story, tracing weight loss memoir through its antecedent genres shows a direct link between commercialization and the promotion of self-care through product consumption. The connection between economic productivity and the resulting stigmatization of disability has long been a concern for disability activists and scholars, and has a direct impact on representations of disability called “overcoming narratives”.

Weight Loss Success Stories as Overcoming Narratives

Disability advocates and scholars studying disability life writing have routinely remarked on the damaging effects of the “overcoming narrative” trope on the lives of disabled people. Couser notes that while overcoming narratives, also called “Supercrip stories,” may involve true life experiences, triumph over disability does not represent the lives of most disabled people. “This approach removes the stigma of disability from the author but leaves it in place for other individuals with the condition in question” (*Signifying Bodies* 34). Sami Schalk also notes that these narratives “focus on individual attitude, work, and perseverance rather than on social barriers, making it seem as if all effects of disability can be erased if one merely works hard enough” (73). This perspective marks a conceptual move from thinking about disability as an individual issue along the lines of Goffman’s call for the disabled to “pass” or “cover,” toward a social model of disability that considers broader issues of access and discrimination. A traditional reading of weight loss memoir in which the After subject is hailed for a triumph over

obesity fits squarely within the parameters of an overcoming narrative. The alternate reading I propose more closely aligns with the social model of disability while taking into account the contested position of obesity as a disabling condition.

Alison Kafer explains that the medical field traditionally describes disability in terms of time. “Remission,” “frequency,” “onset,” “acquired,” and “delay” are temporal terms that define illness and disability (25). These theoretical discussions of time lead her to the concept of “curative time” as “a *curative imaginary*, an understanding of disability that not only *expects* and *assumes* intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention” [emphasis in the original] (27). For weight loss as an obesity intervention, “Before” and “After” become the temporal marks that determine how to write an obese life. Levy-Navarro’s succinct explanation of the work of weight loss memoir—to “make the fat person into the ‘before’ that must be rejected for the ‘after’”—hails a traditional reading of weight loss memoir as an overcoming narrative within a normative construct of time (“I’m the New Me” 340). But it is her next claim that suggests a possibility for a counterreading, that Before/After discourse “makes life uninhabitable for fat people” (340). In other words, the traditional subject of weight loss memoir is a Supercrip figure who, through extreme, intentional weight loss, proves that conforming to an ideal body is not only desirable but also possible. Many fat studies scholars cite research that long-term, sustainable weight loss is possible only for a small fraction of individuals, and that widespread promotion of weight loss, because of its high failure rate, contributes to further stigmatization of obesity as a lifestyle choice, higher rates of eating disorders, and increased risk of depression as a co-morbidity (Rothblum and Solovay xxi). When viewed through the critique of the Supercrip trope as harmful, the “I can do it, so can you”

attitude of weight loss memoir and the weight loss industry at large reveals this metanarrative as atypical and not representative of most obese people's experiences.

While the prevailing popular opinion that obesity is a disease remains, due in no small part to its classification as such by the American Medical Association (AMA) in 2013, accepting this would mean that the After body has been "cured" of obesity. The "new me" of weight loss memoir in its traditional reading relies on a linear, progressive temporality. Levy-Navarro's suggestion that the obese, Before body, is "replaced" by the normal, After body, is a time cue that means the reader can assume that "the new [normal] me" is permanent ("I'm the New Me" 341). Kafer's interpretation of crip theory complicates the notion of a disabled identity as permanent, and troubles the time associations commonly and uncritically assigned to disability. Kafer expands on Joan Scott's explanation of "collective affinities" instead of fixed definitions to suggest that people who are marked by bodily conditions but not traditionally considered disabled could "all be discussed in terms of disability politics, not because of any essential similarities among them, but because all have been labeled as disabled or sick and have faced discrimination as a result" (*Feminist, Queer, Crip* 7). For Kafer, rethinking disabled identity in terms of collective affinities does more than interrogate the ways in which identity generates from the material location of the body. Her relational/political model of disability also makes space for questions about when and for how long individuals can "claim crip." She asks, "Is someone who had cancer years ago but is now in remission disabled?...What about people with large birthmarks or other visible differences that have no bearing on their physical capabilities, but that often prompt discriminatory treatment?" (11). Both of these questions hail anxieties about obese people claiming crip: that weight loss success does not represent a cure, only a temporary remission state, and the false assumption that claiming a disabled identity indicates

something is “wrong” with the obese body. Claiming crip also rejects the notion that disabled identity is or should be based on impairment or constructions of abnormality, instead acknowledging the social and cultural forces that marginalize certain types of bodily configurations (23). For the purpose of exploring how, when, and why obese subjects of weight loss memoir have the potential to claim crip, temporal frameworks in crip theory does the most salient work to dismantle the overcoming narrative and Supercrip trope that make a counterreading possible.

Obesity as a Disabling Embodied Condition

For the most part, FA activists and scholars define obesity/fatness as a purely aesthetic issue through their refusal to engage with the medicalization of body size. Marlilyn Wann’s foreword for Rothblum and Solovay’s *The Fat Studies Reader* makes a pointed declaration about language: “Calling fat people ‘obese’ medicalizes human diversity” (xiii). The convention of placing quotes around obese or obesity in work located within fat studies is common, as is adding qualifiers like “alleged” or “so-called” obesity. She goes on to note that Body Mass Index (BMI) calculations, the standard metrics to quantify weight for an obesity diagnosis, have always been an arbitrary moving target depending on how dominant structures view fatness (xiv). I agree with this assessment, and also with the claim that “people all along the weight spectrum may experience fat oppression” (xv). This concern for all people who experience fat oppression guides my theory of obesetic subjectivity. No matter how strongly the overcoming narrative of weight loss memoir suggests that After bodies have transcended the emotional, physical, and mental anguish of living in a body that does not fit, the pressure to stay thin is the same pressure that prompted their initial weight loss. In this way, individual bodies cannot transcend stigma. Further, while many fat people do not view obesity as a disease, Wann ironically notes that the

dominant attitude that supports obesity as a disease “inspires a misplaced ‘cure’ for naturally occurring difference” and that “if [cures] do not work, it is the fat person’s fault” (xiii). She adds, hailing disability as a pitiable condition, “Such hateful attitudes are acceptable because no one really believes that being fat is any kind of disease. If fat people suffered from a real illness, our detractors’ attitudes would be unacceptably cruel” (xiii-xiv). Similar situations of unfair and stigmatizing treatment based on dominant discourses of medical science that seek to define disease, treatment, and cure already exist in other disabled communities, such as deaf communities and people living with chronic pain, that struggle with community identity because of these attitudes. In this dissertation study, I do not intend to submit a definitive answer to the debate of whether or not obesity is a disease. Instead, I want to use a theory of obesetic subjectivity to make space for questions that account for the many ways individuals live in larger-than-average bodies, and understand the forces that influence those decisions. If we can accept that, for some people, obesity is not simply aesthetic but also has components of disease, what are the effects of considering weight loss as one of many treatment options? For Wann and others, reconceptualizing fatness/obesity as a disabling condition might mean that their choice is no treatment. From a FA or fat studies perspective, this is a dangerous suggestion indeed, but what if individuals who lose enough weight to be considered “normal” are simply in remission from obesity?

Perhaps under a strict social model, succinctly defined by Tobin Siebers as a “social location, complexly embodied” (*Disability Theory* 13), fatness could remain an individual issue of aesthetic self-definition. However, for many people, obesity is more than a condition of not fitting ideal beauty standards. Living with obesity is often painful, can intersect with other oppressions based on race, class, and gender that affect access to healthcare, and may impact

how other medical conditions are treated. Whether or not FA/SA activists and scholars agree, medicalization is more than a matter of discourse. As Alison Kafer explains, a reliance on the social model “can marginalize those disabled people who are interested in medical interventions or cures” (7). For this reason, I find that theories of complex embodiment, illness, and deviancy in disability studies and crip theory offer a more useful framework to theorize what I call obesetic subjectivity in the weight loss memoir. Subjectivity is grounded in the body as it works to shape interpretations of the self. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain it simply: “cultural meanings assigned particular bodies affect the kinds of stories people can tell” (39). Weight loss memoir exists because of the strength of longstanding cultural messages of fat/obese bodies as deviant and immoral, and authors who narrate their lives according to this cultural script reinforce the single story.

Fat activism/fat studies, as it seeks to highlight weight discrimination as a social justice issue, views weight loss as an attempt to “eradicate” people based on a socially-constructed view of what normal body size should be (Rothblum and Solovay 38). The move away from “obesity” to “fatness” in an attempt to de-medicalize body size also calls to this political project. However, this reliance on what would be considered a strict, social model of disability, refusing to incorporate obesity treatments (which range from no treatment to extreme, surgical weight loss methods) into a larger discussion about living with obesity erases the effects of the physical, mental, and emotional pain some people may experience and want to treat with medical intervention. Critical weight studies, an emerging interdisciplinary approach that combines theories of clinical medicine with intersectional feminism, offers a perspective that can bridge social, medical, and cultural issues on fatness/obesity (Rich et al 3-4). Emma Rich, Lee Monaghan, and Lucy Aphramor note that the debate on obesity “is often packaged as a polarised

dichotomy with little room for more nuanced engagements: people are either for or against the idea that obesity is a (self-inflicted) problem” (4). Similar to crip theory, which moves away from dichotomies of disabled/non-disabled identity and social/medical impairment in determining who should be included in conversations about bodily identity, critical weight studies attempts to balance clinical medical definitions with social and cultural considerations that influence “obesity discourse” (5). I argue that through these lenses, the weight loss subject represented in the Before/After narrative trope in autobiographical narratives of weight loss can be reimagined as an obesetic subject. As such, experiences of living in a fat/obese body are not diminished through weight loss, but instead are brought to the center as evidence of disciplinary power at work in compulsory diet discourse.

In the next chapter, I begin a genealogical project to argue that the American freak show modeled a way to interpret bodily difference that became the origins of the weight loss memoir. I also use an example of an early “true life” autobiographical pamphlet to show that the commonplace idea that fatness has always been an inherently negative, undesirable embodied state is invalid. Attitudes about body size have influenced the texts used to exploit bodily difference, while true autobiographical representations have been constrained.

CHAPTER II: THE PITCH MEETS THE PACT:

FREAK SHOW ORIGINS OF WEIGHT

LOSS MEMOIR

This chapter puts Robert Bogdan's concept of "presentation modes" in freak show promotion in conversation with the "autobiographical pact" theorized by Philippe Lejeune. Freak show managers relied heavily on the rhetoric of autobiography when writing the fictional, "true life" pamphlets used to advertise their acts. These pamphlets purported to represent the typical, everyday experiences of the freak show performer, but these texts were written by the managers specifically to sensationalize the act. As such, the presentation mode determines how the "true life" facts would be presented, often in conjunction with popular attitudes about bodily difference, in order to sell more tickets. The autobiographical pact as a rhetorical device authorized the assumption that the narrator of the pamphlet and the person performing in the freak show were the same person. Therefore, audiences also assumed that the experiences represented in the pamphlet were historically and factually accurate. The presentation modes of the freak show worked in conjunction with the autobiographical pact to encourage audiences to accept exaggerated, fictionalized bodily difference as representing typical lived experiences. This model has been used as the foundation for the weight loss success story. I then compare the text of a "true life" pamphlet from a "giant/giantess" freak act from the 1870s with the autobiographical promotional materials of "fat lady" freak acts of the 1920s. The vast shift in the language and imagery in these acts from the late 19th to the early 20th century suggests that interpreting large body size as anomalous difference is not based on an essential quality of what it is like to live in and among large bodies, but a representation designed to respond to changing attitudes about fatness.

Introduction

In 2013, I attended the annual meeting of the Circus Historical Society, a mixed group of showmen, performers, and academics who strive to preserve the important and sometimes troublesome cultural legacy of circus in the United States.ⁱⁱⁱ After presenting my research on a diary kept by a showman's wife that I found in the Circus and Allied Arts Collection at the Illinois State University Milner Library archives, I found myself standing next to Ward Hall in the lunch buffet line. Outside of the circus world, Ward (as he told me to call him) does not appear to have any unusual talents or expertise, but those in the know admire him as one of the most impassioned talkers and hardworking sideshow managers in the history of American sideshow. Ward recently retired from managing his "World of Wonders" show, the last traditional ten-in-one sideshow currently on tour in the United States. He has employed performers who specialized in nearly every kind of freak act—born, made, gaffed, and working acts—and he does not shy from controversies that have plagued the sideshow business since the early 1960s.^{iv} According to sideshow historian James Taylor, "If you want to climb the highest mountain, you go to Mt. Everest. If you want to talk to the King of the Sideshows, you talk to Ward Hall" (52). I wanted to talk to Ward because I thought he could answer the question I had been thinking about since the freak show first piqued my interest in the beginning of my graduate school research: how do you know when a body is unusual enough to be a freak? To me, this question formed the tenuous connection between all of my research questions about bodies, performance, visibility, disability, and "normal," and the intersection of materiality and commerce. How unusual do you have to be for someone to pay to see you? Why are some visible bodily abnormalities, like the body undergoing chemotherapy treatment, absent from the freak show stage? Why was Ann E. Leak's absence of limb made remarkable by her ability to sew and

use a typewriter, while a combat veteran with limb loss did not perform on stage in this way?

After conference sessions ended for the day, I found Ward telling stories to an enthusiastic group of scholars mesmerized by his cadence and easy patter. During a rare lull in conversation, I introduced myself and asked Ward how he knew which bodies were unusual enough to be profitable. I waited with bated breath, sure that his answer would provide the base on which I would build every future research project on performing (and paying for) bodily difference. “Well, young lady,” he said without missing a beat, “I can get you an audition tomorrow.”

I hoped my bruised ego would not show as Ward went on to describe how he thought I would make a great Spidora, the classic gaffed sideshow act pitched as a woman (always a woman) who turns into a half-spider after accidentally receiving a bite from a radioactive spider. Of course, Spidora is just a woman in a dimly lit, wooden box with a head hole on top painted to look like a spider. I left the conference disappointed that the key I needed went unfulfilled by the person best suited to address it. However, in the years that followed I came to realize that Ward had given me my answer. In the freak show, the body of a human performer matters very little in the grand scheme of human oddity performance.^v The fantasy created by sensational advertising prose and theatrical embellishments like costumes and props transforms an everyday body into an extraordinary body. Freaks represent “a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people” (Bogdan 3) that change over time as attitudes about bodily difference and abnormality shift. No matter the content of the message, the freak show developed the same formula for delineating difference through “the flexible mold, the instructions, and the perspective” by which Jack Earle could become the Texas Giant, Charles Stratton could become General Tom Thumb, and I could become Spidora (25). The freak show offered a model for dominant discourses of interpreting bodily difference, and it also offered a prototype for the

future entertainment media to carry forward this interpretation into everyday life: a guide for how to become extraordinary.

Presentation Modes in Freak Show Performance

In his pioneering work on the freak show as a social and cultural institution in the United States, Robert Bogdan identifies two major formulaic approaches to exhibiting human oddities that he calls “presentation modes,” a standardized set of techniques, strategies, and styles that showmen used to construct freaks. The two presentation modes, aggrandized and exotic, “provided the formulas for the fabrications that made up the ‘true life stories,’ the staged appearance, the freak portraits, the banners, and other aspects of the freak promotion” (103-104). These presentation modes determined not only the practical application of how to use theatrical elements to achieve the greatest dramatic effect for the audience, but also shaped possible readings of difference available to the audience. For example, Lavinia Warren, who performed under the name “Mrs. General Tom Thumb” in reference to her marriage to Tom Thumb (Charles Stratton), had *carte de visites* made that depict her standing next to tall chairs and wearing elaborate dresses, accessories, and shoes. She is described in her “true life” pamphlet as “perfectly formed” despite her short stature. The pamphlet suggests, “We may look at her, and we know that her diminished stature does not arise from compression or mutilation, but from natural causes alone, and we are led to exclaim, ‘How rare and remarkable the phenomena!’” (*Sketch of the Life* 8). The presentation mode guides the reading of the “true life” pamphlet, and the pamphlet reinforces the validity of the visual imagery that symbolizes high social status.

Bogdan explains the aggrandized presentation mode as an exhibit in which the freak, “with the exception of the particular physical, mental, or behavioral condition, was an upstanding, high-status person with talents of a conventional and socially prestigious nature”

(108). Often cast as prototypical American tropes like “the girl next door” or “the down home Southern gentleman,” aggrandized freaks represented as best as possible what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the normate, “ a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 8). Though the normate concept is based primarily on narrative possibilities of the ideal rather than any real person, promotion in the aggrandized mode touched on many of these elements to reinforce not only the freak’s normalcy, but also their exceptional goodness. Status aggrandizement could take the form of emphasizing exceptional family life, membership to social clubs, naming that carries a distinction of royalty or military service, or costuming that included fashionable or expensive-looking clothing and accessories. Freaks exhibited in the aggrandized mode were also emphasized as physically normal with the exception of the abnormality that allegedly led to their fame. Showmen often claimed that freaks of size (in height or width) were “physically attractive and perfectly formed in every way, and, in no way distasteful as to offend the audience” (109). Within the aggrandized mode, performances were of two types. In the first, the freak would perform tasks not usually assumed to be possible for someone with a similar impairment, such as a person without legs who walks on their hands and performs acrobatic feats. The other focused on superior talents and accomplishments like singing, dancing, or playing a musical instrument (110).

The constant need for novelty meant that the unusual body, even with all possible theatrical embellishments, could not hold an audience’s attention on its own for very long. Rachel Adams notes that “by the 19th century, freaks had no inherent significance, although their anomalies seemed to cry out for interpretation. As a result, they required narratives...that might give coherence to bodies that otherwise suggested an intolerable fragmentation and dissolution of

meaning” (*Sideshow U.S.A.* 5). In the case of the fat boy or fat lady, an unusually large body alone no longer conveyed any inherent meaning or explanation of natural origin. In the late 19th century, the narrative that began to develop about the genesis of very fat bodies was no longer attributed to strong, healthy families or divine gifts of strength, but instead derived from critical moral failure, which remains the dominant narrative today. Bogdan suggests that toward the last decade of the 19th century, the presentation of extremely fat exhibits “came closest to pure mocking mode” (*Freak Show* 114) as shifting attitudes about large body size moved from an admirable sign of power and prosperity to moral failing and indisputable sign of poor health. This narrative was documented in the “true life” pamphlets as representing the real experiences of everyday fat people, referred to by the aggrandizing term “giant.” In the next section, I briefly trace the development of the “true life” pamphlet as a semi-autobiographical advertisement, and explain how the autobiographical pact functions in these texts.

The Development of the Historical True Life Pamphlet

In the United States during the early 19th century, before encyclopedias and zoos and the Internet, curiosities about the world were primarily satisfied by faith, and not by sight. The absence of evidence-producing technologies that those living in the globalized 21st century might take for granted like photographs and easily accessible books eluded the average antebellum citizen. However, for the low price of one dime (five cents for children), what religious leaders could only speculate, entertainers claimed to show. P.T. Barnum, a showman well known for his marketing savvy, devised a way to exhibit what he called “curiosities” in a safe, family-friendly way. Prior to the opening of his American Museum in New York City in 1840, human oddities and other curiosities could only be seen one at a time, usually in unwholesome locales like taverns. Science-based entertainment venues did not appear in the

United States until the opening of the Central Park Zoo in New York City in 1860, and Washington D.C.'s American Museum of Natural History in 1869, so Barnum's American Museum and other small dime museums offered a unique learning opportunity that went unchallenged on an institutional scale for many years (Davis 135).

In addition to selling tickets to the performance, showmen like Barnum sold *carte de visite* photograph cards and "true life" pamphlets as souvenirs. With photography as an art form in its infancy, collecting *carte de visites* of famous or unusual people quickly became a popular Victorian pastime. The "true life" pamphlets were less popular in terms of sales, but offered a more detailed description of the freak while still retaining some collectible value. Though the pamphlets do not name an author, Barnum takes credit for this innovation in his autobiography *Struggles and Triumphs*, claiming they reassured his audience of his scientific and moral credibility, setting him apart from what he considered lesser, morally suspect showmen who had no interest in scientific education (2-3). He often wrote the pamphlets himself, then later delegated the task to his first press agent W.C. Coup (120). No stranger to the powerful effects of self-promotion, Barnum frequently used life writing as an advertisement tool rather than a pursuit of literary self-expression.

By 1860, a narrative pattern emerged in true life pamphlets. First, a short biography of the subject that included where they were born, details of their family life, and how their condition led to their discovery by their manager, followed by a description of their recent travels and appearances. Next, endorsements from religious or governmental authorities vouched for the authenticity of the freak and their propriety for public viewing. Finally, if the freak was said to be from an "exotic" land, the pamphlet contained a brief description of the geography, people, and animals of that place. Most pamphlets also contained the text of poems or songs used as part

of the act or written in celebration of the freak (Bogdan 19). “Some pamphlets were forty and more pages long, going on in elaborate, fraudulent detail about the trek through the jungle that resulted in finding the lost tribe of which the exhibit was a member—when in fact the person was born and raised in New Jersey” (20). No matter how obvious the characterization to the showman and the performer, words like “real,” “genuine,” and “true” that appeared again and again in promotional materials bolstered the illusion that the performer and the freak were one in the same person sharing the same experiences. These slippery boundaries between public and private bodies, truth and fiction, and performer and freak rest on a deceptively simple premise: what is written or seen *is*. Charles Stratton *is* General Tom Thumb. Jojo the Dogfaced Boy *is* a Mexican prince. Dolly Dimples *is* 733 pounds.

Promotional strategies employed by showmen, also known as “the pitch” in circus slang, describe both the act of selling show tickets and merchandise as well as the packaging of marketing strategies designed by the sideshow manager to promote an act (Taylor, J. 38). “Talkers” (also known as “blowers” or “outside lecturers”) relied on the same kinds of persuasive appeals to sell tickets as other entrepreneurs who sold consumer goods, with each presented as “unique, or the best of their kind, or one of a category never seen before” (Bogdan 104). By presenting the freak, the talker acts as a paratextual intermediary, literally standing outside of the tent at the boundary between inside and outside. According to Gerard Genette and Richard Macksey, “paratext is what enables a text to become a book,” as it acts as a threshold between the reader and the text. Taken together, all paratextual elements used to develop a freak’s persona through their presentation mode work together to form the paratextual surround that Genette and Macksey argue “provides some commentary on the text and influences how the

text is received” (*Paratexts* 7). Freak presentations could include as paratextual elements names, credentials, costuming, and through subordinate texts like “true life” pamphlets.

Phillipe Lejeune’s concept of the autobiographical pact relies heavily on paratext as providing the clues necessary to determine if the author, narrator, and principle character are identical as a book’s cover or title page is “a ‘fringe’ of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text” (Lejeune qtd. in *Paratexts* 2). Similarly, freak presentations must maintain a consistent relationship between the name of the freak in promotion, the first person voice used to interact with the audience, and the name signed as an autograph on *carte de visites*. Lejeune places a heavy emphasis on the “signature” of the author as verification of the sameness of the identity of the author and their name. “The autobiographical pact comes in very diverse forms; but all of them demonstrate their intention to honor his/her *signature*” [emphasis in original] (*On Autobiography* 14). That the author verifies both truth of identity and name suggests that the signature is more than a name, it is also an endorsement of the identity constituted through the text. The autobiographical pact formed by paratext is at work in freak performance due to the talker’s persistent, confident assurance that the person on stage and the person in the advertisement are identical, reassuring the audience of a genuine signature.

In the freak show, theatrical conventions like costumes, props, and staging techniques worked in conjunction with print media (advertisements in newspapers, broadsides, *carte de visites*, “true life” autobiographical pamphlets, etc.) to manipulate a freak narrative. The pitch relied heavily on co-opting the literary language of autobiography to convince a paying audience that, after they paid, they would see that the freak on stage was a real, extraordinary person. As more sophisticated framing and marketing strategies developed to sell lives through freak show performance or popular autobiographical non-fiction, the key to commercial success rests on the

power of the autobiographical “I,” as it represents for the audience or reader an indisputable claim to truth and identity. Though many freak show pamphlets were printed on low quality paper, some examples have remained intact and are housed in university library archives, private collections, and local historical societies. One such pamphlet from the 19th century illustrates not only the method of promoting obese men and women as freaks in the aggrandized mode, but also highlights the generic authority of autobiography as providing historically and factually accurate information about the performers’ lives. In the next section, I analyze a rare, extant “true life” pamphlet from the late 19th century for “giants” John and Mary Powers to show how the narrative about large bodies was crafted to reflect the belief in large bodies as extraordinary.

“True Life” Pamphlet: John and Mary Powers

Mary Jane Kesler began performing as “Mary Jane Powers” under the management of P.T. Barnum first at his American Museum in 1865, and then went on tour with his first traveling circus in 1871 (Circus Historical Society). In her *carte de visite* images, she fills the frame from head to mid-torso, which makes Mary appear larger than she would in a full body shot framed farther away. She wears a low-cut, bare-shoulder lace gown embroidered with flowers, and her hair is styled and adorned with more flowers. Her accessories include earrings and a long pearl necklace. The text under the photograph reads, “Barnum’s Original Fat Lady—Mary Powers—THE KENTUCKY GIANTESS—5ft 2inches high, weighs 807 ½—measures 96in around the waist and 36in around the arm—SHE WAS BORN IN FRANKLIN COUNTY, KENTUCKY—SHE WEIGHS 200 POUNDS MORE THAN ANY OTHER FAT LADY IN AMERICA” (“Barnum’s Original Fat Lady”). These *carte de visites* contain very little information about their subject, and support body size as the most important “true life” fact for fat ladies. Due to Mary’s status as one of Barnum’s exhibits, she was also the only fat lady of the 19th century whose story

appears in an extant true life pamphlet. *The Lives of Master John H. Powers, The Wonderful Kentucky Giant Boy, and of His Sister, Miss Mary Jane Powers, Known as Barnum's Fat Lady, Who Weighs 175 Pounds More Than Any Other Lady in America, A True Narrative of Their Parentage, Birth, Early Life, Astounding Growth, Habits of Live, Remarkable Travels, and Interesting Experiences* (1873) alludes to the first person narrative conventions emerging through the novel genre, and co-opts the language of literary autobiography as a “true” narrative to reassure the audience that the information contained in the forty page text is historically accurate and faithfully recounts the true experiences of real people John and Mary Powers.

The pamphlet begins with a flowery, patriotic account of their father Lewis Powers’ birth in Philadelphia and presence at the Battle of Detroit during his military service during the War of 1812. “[W]hen England and their allies, the Savages, endeavored to wrest from our country the palm of liberty and peace...he rallied as one of the first gallantly under the dear old flag and went cheerfully where his country and duty called him” (3). Lewis eventually settles in Kentucky, meets his wife Agnes Blumenthal, “one of the F.F.V.’s to which state her great-grandparents had immigrated from the sunny banks of the river Rhine” and had ten children “all of whom are alive and of which our heroine, Mary Jane is the seventh and our hero, John Howard, the youngest and pet of the family” (5).^{vi} Mary, “the older of these two magnificent specimens,” is described as being of average weight throughout her early childhood but “weak and delicate” due to constant illness (6). At six years old, Mary experiences “a miraculous and astounding change” wherein “her health became strong and vigorous and her quick and extraordinary growth and incredible gain of weight called forth not alone the utmost astonishment of her family, but also the whole vicinity” (7). The following section on Mary and John’s habits notes that Mary has always enjoyed good health since then save a brief bout of

brain fever (10), and that she is “very moderate, and very temperate in every respect” (11). The details of her equally moderate diet are included with a note that “[o]ne would hardly believe how little nourishment such a heavy person needs and takes” (11). Following the true life pamphlet formula, an explanation of her entry into sideshow work comes next. “The world renowned” Barnum approaches Mary’s respectable parents about the prospect of her tour and they eventually agree after “the omnipotent Barnum had made golden offers and promises” (14). John joins Mary on a later tour after the final fire at Barnum’s American Museum, and they go on several national tours headed by other managers that are then described in detail. The main pamphlet text ends with an address to the reader hoping they enjoyed the “truthful and short sketch of these two great people,” noting that “their earnings are small and hardly reach to cover their most necessary wants” (28) and acknowledging the financial benefit provided to John and Mary by the sale of the pamphlet.

Considering the historical and cultural context of the text, *The Lives of Master John H. Powers...and His Sister* should be categorized as fiction. However, paratextual design positions the text for the reader as a biographical, non-fiction narrative according to Lejeune’s characterization of autobiographical texts (*On Autobiography* 7). There are enough paratextual and textual clues left for the reader to surmise that, although John and Mary did not write the text, given the repetition of “truth” language and the presence of their *carte de visites* illustrated on the cover, the nameless author has faithfully retold John and Mary’s life story. However, in true freak show fashion, the details of their life story have been so romanticized, exaggerated, and falsified that very little historical truth remains. The first and most glaring of these distortions is that Mary and John were not brother and sister. Scattered secondary sources, including James Taylor’s *Shocked and Amazed*, acknowledge that Mary and John were married,

and public record research confirms that they were married in Danville, Indiana, two years prior to their first tour on Barnum's traveling circus (Town of Danville). Next, the surname Powers is a pseudonym. *Shocked and Amazed*, in its revelation that John and Mary were not siblings, also notes that Mary's maiden name was Kesler but does not provide a source for this information.^{vii} The online public record search database Ancestry.com is typically used for genealogy research, but it can also be useful for researching obscure circus and sideshow performers.^{viii} After much trial and error, I found an 1850 Federal census record listing a Lewis Kesler, born in Philadelphia in 1791, and currently living with his wife Elizabeth and their 10 children, including his 24-year-old daughter Mary Jane, in Danville, Indiana. Further research revealed more inconsistencies in the pamphlet, further diminishing its truth value as a historical document. While it is true that Lewis was born in Philadelphia, the Kesler family moved to Kentucky in 1800, where Lewis served in the War of 1812 as part of the Franklin County militia, an outfit that was not present at the Battle of Detroit (1800 Federal Census; War of 1812 Pension Application; *The War of 1812*). The pamphlet does accurately report that Lewis Kesler moved his family to Indiana, but not after the Civil War as reported (1840 Federal Census). Mary was 15 years old at the time of their move, and 40 years old when she married 23-year-old John Craig in 1869. Published two years later, the pamphlet reports that John is 17 years old in 1872, and that Mary is 27 years old. Barnum frequently manipulated the ages of his exhibits to sensationalize their position. The aging of Joice Heth, promoted as 150 years old and once President George Washington's nurse, is a notable example. Barnum also changed Tom Thumb's age frequently, aging him when Charles Stratton was a boy, and making him younger as he aged out of novelty (Davis 67). Although skeptics challenged many of Barnum's claims about his human oddity exhibits, the recirculation of these texts seems to suggest that they were not viewed as fictional documents

connected to fictional entertainment, but instead were accepted as historically accurate biographies.

While it would be impossible to discern whether audience members believed that the freaks on display carried the same name and life facts as the performer, extant true life biographies are routinely used as historical reference documents in biographies that seek to recreate performer's lives. Although life writing scholarship routinely insists that auto/biographical texts do not represent objective truths, the same cannot be said for the general public. It would have been impossible for the real Lewis Kesler to be present at the Battle of Detroit as military pension records and company lists verify his service in the Kentucky militia during the War of 1812. In Kesler's case, the pamphlet seems to have been used as the basis for his biography in the *Atlas of Hendricks County Indiana* published in 1878. "Farmer, Section 4; born in Philadelphia, Feb. 14, 1791...Mr. Kesler served in the war of 1812; was at the battle when Tecumseh was killed." The inclusion of this anecdote and the Kentucky boosterism that followed did not provide the reader any additional information about their lives, but did position the alleged Powers family as respectable and patriotic Americans. In some respects, this inconsistency represents a harmless tall tale, but the alarming recirculation of true life pamphlet narratives as historical fact continues into the 21st century.

The 2012 travelogue book *Weird Indiana* features a section on "Bigger Than Life Hoosiers," and includes short profiles for John Hanson Craig, "Baby Ruth," and Robert Earl Hughes (Marimen et al). Ruth Smith is the only person listed as her stage name, and the photo included with her profile is a promotional photo. Neither Craig nor Hughes is referred to by their stage names, "John Powers, the Kentucky Giant Fat Boy" and "The World's Biggest Santa Claus," respectively. The biographical profiles all contain little more than information on weight

at various life stages, an overview of their sideshow careers, illness, and death. In freak performer biographies, discrepancies between identity and the stage name collapse the difference between the performer and their freak character, and more often than not, the freak persona stands in for the performer. In this way, historical fact, poetic license, and commercialism can come together in a way that uses the lives of real people to promote an agenda in ways that strip them of their agency and ownership of their life story. In the absence of autobiographical life writing from fat ladies in their own words, their weight, health, and manner of death are all we have to remember them by.

Shifting Attitudes about Obesity in the 20th Century

As popular attitudes about large body size shifted toward the end of the 19th century, fat ladies were no longer being promoted as healthy and robust giantesses. The aggrandized pitch that emphasized Mary Jane Power's robust health as a "giantess" is consistent with attitudes about large body size in the 1870s as symbolic of prosperity, fertility, and power (Schwartz 57). Large body size, or "bulk," fascinated Americans in the 1850s and 1860s. "No one in antebellum society had befriended a height-weight chart, and the few physicians studying corpulence refused to underwrite any weight standards. The only common markers of weight were for infants...and freaks" (58). However, by the turn into the 20th century, fat people were "increasingly self-conscious, and society was more embarrassed for them" (88). Obesity, as a medical condition, had not yet entered into the public vernacular, but no cure other than weight loss was offered the fat man or woman who suffered from "surplus fat" (76). However, advances in scientific technology seemed to assuage the stout, early 20th century American's fear of fat. Home scales allowed individuals to track their weight regularly, a social habit that persists today. Advances in nutrition science that led to discoveries about macronutrients made the mechanics of weight loss

easier to understand, and the quantification of the calorie as a unit of measurement made “reducing” possible (95-120). No longer forced to endure a bodily condition assigned by fate, fat people who did not pursue weight loss were seen as consciously choosing a less than ideal body. The moral ineptitude of their defiance translated into a social ill for celebrities and medical professionals promoting weight control.

In the years after World War I, Dr. Lulu Hunt Peters wrote an advice column called *Diet and Health* that was syndicated in over 400 newspapers across the United States. (Jou 3). She became one of the most vocal proponents of weight control through calorie counting, and in 1918, she published one of the earliest best-selling autobiographical diet books, entitled *Diet and Health: With Key to Calories*. Peters, former chairman of the Public Health Committee of the California Federation of Women’s Clubs, lost weight through calorie counting, and promoted this method to her readers. In the foreword “Read This First,” she breaks the fourth wall by addressing the reader to point out the specific choices she and her publishers made in the book’s production. “I am sorry I cannot devise a key by which to read this book...for sometimes you are to read the title headings and side explanations before the text. Other times you are supposed to read the text and then the headings. It really does not matter much as long as you read them both. Be sure to do that. They are clever. I wrote them myself” (7). She then explains that she asked her publishers to produce a paperback edition, “thinking that more people could have it, and thus it would be doing more good” but that her publishers claimed that “the more you paid for it, the more you would appreciate it” (7-8). In the first chapter, “Preliminary Bout,” Peters lays out a mathematical formula based on height for calculating ideal weight and boldly proclaims that she is not interested in the reader’s perspective, thus asserting her authority on weight loss for having written the book. “How any one can want to be anything but thin is beyond my intelligence.

However, knowing that there are such deluded individuals, I have been constrained to give you advice” (11-12). She insists that individuals who follow her advice will lose weight, and addresses the reader directly:

Now fat individuals have always been considered a joke, but you are a joke no longer. Instead of being looked upon with friendly tolerance and amusement, you are now viewed with distrust, suspicion, and even aversion. How dare you hoard fat when our nation needs it? [...] You are in despair about being anything but fat, and —! how you hate it. But cheer up. I will save you...” (12-13)

She then continues with her own story of weight loss before detailing how exactly the reader should use calorie counting as she did to lose weight. The reader should “[t]ell loudly and frequently to all your friends that you realize that it is unpatriotic to be fat while many thousands are starving, [...] If you belong to a club, round up all the overweights and form a section. Call it the ‘Watch Your Weight—Anti-Kaiser Class.’ Tax the members sufficiently to buy a good, accurate pair of scales. [...] Do this whether or not you belong to a club” (78). She provides a sample chart of how to track each member’s weight, and any fees they will be assessed due to weight gain (79). The book ends with sample daily menus including Peters’ personal diet (85-95).

For Peters and her calorie-counting devotees, fat people were naturally and inherently disgusting, selfish, immoral, and even potentially dangerous. This message, that obesity can and should be avoided at all costs, became engrained as a commonplace trope in media and medicine. Faced with a public that did not perceive fatness as a marvelous sign of robust health, showmen pivoted their presentation of fat ladies as fetish objects. Weights continued to be wildly exaggerated. The framing of promotional photographs changed to close-up full body shots, and

poses often involved the woman bent slightly in a seated position, holding up the bottom of a dress, or with slightly open legs to reveal more skin and exaggerated fat folds. Fat lady costumes also transitioned from gowns to loose fitting babydoll dresses with few accessories (Circus Historical Society). Some fat ladies like Carrie Holt performed using their real names, but many women took on childish-sounding performance names like Baby Ruth (Ruth Smith), Dolly Dimples (Celesta Geyer), and Jolly Irene (Amanda Siebert). The true life pamphlet had gone out of fashion at the turn of the century in favor of interviews published in newspapers and magazines, and these interviews began to take on the same formulaic quality as the pamphlets. Measurements were always given first, followed by an explanation of the lady's childhood and how they came to be so fat. Then, the interviewer would describe her demeanor, comportment, and eating habits. Finally, if the lady had any words of advice or interesting life facts, she would share those with the interviewer. These interviews also co-opted the terminology of autobiography by insisting that the lady provided a "real" and "true" account "in her own words."

In 1922, *American Magazine* published an interview with Carrie Holt by reporter Allan Harding. Except for the occasional editorial interjection, the interview contains stories about the sideshow and personal anecdotes from Carrie. Harding describes how he was introduced to Carrie in her tent between performances. "'Miss Holt! Called the circus man...Here's someone that wants to see you.' It seemed a rather unfortunate way of putting it, I thought, to tell a 468-pound lady that someone wanted to see her." The premise that Harding meets Carrie off-stage nods to her role as a performer, and also reinforces the idea that Carrie Holt on stage is the same as Carrie Holt off stage. That the interview is published in a non-fiction magazine also supports the autobiographical pact and the reader's expectation of absolute, factual truth. The subtle

gesture of Holt's humor shocks the reader as she positions her body as extraordinary. "When I sit down," she said with a sigh of relief, "I never know how far I'm going. I generally keep right on, till I land on the floor. But I will say"—with a beaming smile—"that I'm in a good deal better shape than the chair is when they come around to pick up the pieces." Unlike Mary Powers' pamphlet that paints her as something of a gentle giantess—calm, temperate, and delicate—Harding guides the reader to interpret Carrie Holt's demeanor as brash and her appetites excessive. Referring to her childhood, she says, "I was hungry all the time. I'll bet I was hungry in my sleep; but I couldn't stay awake to find out. I just love to sleep. But when I was awake I could eat any time I had the chance. Ham! Oh my, how fond I was of ham! And molasses and bread and butter and cake—" Again, she rolled her eyes rapturously." She also reveals some tricks of the sideshow business that show how inaccurate exaggerations can be used for dramatic effect. "Mr. Edwards—he's the man that goes around in the sideshow and lectures on the freaks—always tells the crowd that I haven't seen my own feet in twenty years. That ain't so... You know, they often put me on the platform next to the Living Skeleton because they think he makes me look fatter and I make him look thinner."

She goes on to describe the difficulty she has getting dressed and finding clothes, and her fear of getting stuck in bathtubs, which represents an undignified and grotesque way of living firmly planted in the exotic presentation mode. Finally, Holt implores Harding to print her rebuttal to a remark she overhears in the sideshow tent:

There isn't a day that I don't hear it a dozen times. People look me over and then they say, 'It must be a disease!' Now, I'm just as well as they are... I don't even eat as much as an ordinary person does... Not that I want to reduce. My face isn't my fortune, my fat it. I don't want to lose it... The fact is, I was just born to be fat.

So why not make the best of it? One thing is certain: whatever else I may worry about, I don't have to worry about getting fat. That's more than most women can say.

By 1922, fear of fat had become so ingrained in the popular cultural consciousness that Carrie could casually reference the fear “most women” have about “getting fat.” Furthermore, her desire to correct a common assumption that large body size is a disease speaks to the burgeoning medicalization and subsequent pathologization of obesity in the years before the AMA's first weight management conference in 1928 (Schwartz 36). Medical science research and discoveries in genetics that led to explanations of bodily difference played a part in the descending popularity of the freak show. In the absence of unexplainable, metaphysical reasons for difference, scientific medicine provided the illusion of control. Where 19th century freak show audiences left the tent either satisfied or disappointed that they had been spared a fate of extraordinary physical difference, 20th century audiences looked for ways to make sure freakery did not happen to them.

Conclusion

Semi-autobiographical freak show pamphlets provided the model of how to write large body size as extraordinary, and this tactic was soon adopted for use in weight loss product advertisements and self-help dieting texts of the mid-20th century. “I did it, and so can you” sustained a narrative about weight loss based on the transformation of the anomalous body made possible by the supernatural mind. Marketing strategies and rhetorical moves used in the aggrandized mode have become more sophisticated, but consumer-readers still presume weight loss narratives to be a historical document of an individual's experience. Perhaps this phenomenon can be best summarized by what Ward Hall told me when I asked him what

happened when people felt bamboozled if they learned the true identity of a gaffed freak: “Well, by that time, we already have their money.”

In the next chapter, commodification continues to play a role in representing fatness. Dieters, with pressure from the diet programs they belong to, write autobiographically to produce their own guided narrative of the experience of fatness. Using Weight Watchers as the center of my analysis, I explore confession as a disciplinary tactic in weight loss autobiography, and use my own history of dieting to explore the implicit and explicit ways dieters are taught how to write a fat life.

CHAPTER III: “YOU BITE IT, YOU WRITE IT”: COMPELLED

CONFESSION IN DIET DISCOURSE

This chapter puts Michel Foucault’s theory of “technologies of the self” in conversation with his theory of “biopower” to argue that confessional, autobiographical acts of weight loss function as biopolitical technologies as they seek to define and regulate the performance of the ideal weight loss subject. I focus on how the commercial weight loss program Weight Watchers offers explicit instruction on how to read and write autobiographical confession as an example of how these texts come to be seen as a practice that is necessary to complete a performance of the self-in-progress. Compulsory diet discourse has a distinct historical and cultural context in the United States, and the development of Weight Watchers in the mid-1960s marks the beginning of how dieting and the performativity of the weight loss subject became ubiquitous lifestyle features in American culture. I focus on Weight Watchers as emblematic of compulsory diet discourse because of its popularity and longevity as a commercial weight loss program. As it remains the standard for a “moderate” and “safe” weight loss program, the weight loss practices promoted by the program have modeled appropriate weight management behavior for millions of dieters in the United States since its inception in 1964. Currently, Weight Watcher boasts 48,000 weekly, in-person “meetings” held in over 30 countries (“Weight Watchers FAQ”). Almost everyone I know who has dieted for weight loss has either been on the Weight Watchers program at least once or is aware of its existence. I learned how to be a weight loss subject on the program, as did every dieter in my family. Prior feminist scholarship on dieting for weight loss has focused on Weight Watchers for all of these reasons, and my work builds on these analyses. This chapter is also a genealogy that seeks the origins of compulsory diet discourse in the ways in which this system of weight loss subjectivity acts on individuals to “expose a body totally

imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (Foucault "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 83). As an example of how individuals enact and perpetuate this performance, I offer my own archive of autobiographical confession and reflect on how I learned to write a life as a weight loss subject.

Feminist discourses within the academic fields of life writing studies, disability studies, and critical weight studies can reveal systemic processes of making meaning of production, consumption, and oppressive power structures that influence an individual's agential possibilities. This work stresses the problems with relying on an individual story to stand in as representative of the whole, and also resists the authority of a single, coherent self in favor of collective, interdependent subject positions. Telling my own story does not stand in as a representational narrative for all women who have lived under the rule of compulsory weight management, but my experience is not exceptional. When I talk to other women about this project, they tell me their own stories of after school snack surveillance, diet talk at the dinner table, and bonding with their female family members over weight loss products. The effects of compulsory diet discourse are far reaching, and by sharing my story (a confession, perhaps), I show that the power of autobiographical narratives of weight loss does not exist in the abstract.

Weight Loss as Dietetic Regimen

Dietetic regimen, or dieting for weight loss, is not a practice enacted by an individual independent from the social, cultural, and historical forces that determine its use.

Autobiographical practices of dieting, which can include food journaling, weight tracking, and behavioral self-reflection, have a particular role in constituting the ideal weight loss subject. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault outlines the development of dietetic regimen as a set of systemized bodily practices including food, drink, exercise, sleep, and

sexual relations explained by the ancient Greeks as a process of medical inquiry (99). Regimen represents a “fundamental category through which human behavior could be organized” (101), separate from animal behavior, and, as such, it involves both the practical considerations for enacting bodily practices of regimen as well as the “essential moral firmness that made its observance possible” (103). The disciplined body and soul are connected by regimen because “the resolve to follow a measured and reasonable regimen and the diligence one manifested in the actual task were themselves evident of an indispensable moral fortitude” (103). Foucault argues that the practice of regimen becomes an “art of existence,” or “technology of the self” as “a whole manner of forming oneself as a subject who had the proper, necessary, and sufficient concern for his body” (108). Regimen exists as a whole system of choices about the body that also reflects on the morality of the subject. Foucault defines morality as “a set of values and rules of action that are commended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies” and suggests that these rules are taught in various direct and indirect ways to produce a “moral code” (25). Individuals respond to the moral codes under which they are subjugated in various ways, moving within the margins of an acceptable code of conduct that governs how and to what extent an individual conforms, as well as their capacity to resist (25-26). In the case of a weight loss regimen, writing is an essential tool of self-surveillance as it creates a record that an individual then uses to reflect on the benefit of past choices to make decisions about the future.

Foucault explains that Socrates’ conception of regimen included self-reflective writing with a recommendation of self-surveillance through note taking to determine “what sort of meat and drink and which form of exercise suits his constitution, and how he should regulate them” (qtd. in *The Use of Pleasure* 108). This self-reflective writing practice allows an individual to record and respond to their own physiological patterns. Foucault insists that regimen was not

thought of by Socrates as a passive practice provided by a doctor and followed mindlessly by the individual. Rather, regimen was “intended to be a deliberate practice on the part of an individual, involving himself and his body” (107). Recommendations for the right regimen for an individual to follow should be a matter of persuasion and circumstantial adjustments rather than mandates from a doctor. Beginning in the 19th century in the United States, a new field of “medical professionals” would, aided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), assert authority over dietetic regimen with sweeping suggestions about appropriate food choices.^{ix} Later, “fitness professionals” and “diet gurus” would capitalize on the power granted by these industries to influence the transition from note taking in dietetic regimen to food journaling as a technology of the self.

Foucault argues that note taking in dietetic regimen, as a technology of the self, reflects “good management of the body” and should include “a setting down in writing carried out by the subject concerning himself; with the help of his note taking, the individual would be able to gain his independence and choose judiciously between what was good and bad for him” (108). Foucault expands on this explanation of the link between writing and self-care in *Technologies of the Self* by noting, “[t]aking care of oneself became linked to a constant writing activity” and “the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing” (28). At this point, Foucault’s concept of life writing for the purpose of observing and potentially modifying dietetic practices has a limited trajectory. These texts are private to the individual, written with the intention of better understanding the self. The introduction of an interlocutor, obtained by sharing the note taking of dietetic regimen with a doctor, for example, “requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (61-62). In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault suggests that sex

and discourse are connected by “confession that compels individuals to articulate their sexual peculiarity.” Confession, enacted as a “ritual of discourse,” moves sex from an individual, physical act with parameters determined by its participants to a site of inquiry “that unfolds within a power relationship” (61). Similarly, note taking used in dietetic regimen becomes a compelled confession once shared. In this way, writing about the self becomes a “mode of self-care for both the confessing subject as well as the listener/reader” as both parties enact the rituals of dietetic discourse (Brown 360-361). Levy-Navarro calls these rituals “compelled diet discourse” as listener/readers take turns in each role, offering advice and absolving (“I’m the New Me” 340). In other words, it is the transition from self-surveillance to group surveillance through the mechanism of confession that makes note taking for dietetic regimen, commonly referred to in contemporary diet culture as “food journaling,” from technology of the self to biopolitical technology.

Confession constitutes subjectivity through autobiographical writing in regimen as it deals with “everything having to do with the self,” without being limited to secrets, deviances, or transgressions (Taylor, C. 9). The practice of dietetic regimen as a technology of the self becomes, through autobiographical confession, a biopolitical technology, “serving to govern at a distance as subjects learn and perpetuate norms for healthy, productive citizenship, for contributing to society” (Brown 361). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note the extent to which autobiography allows readers to “consume” the lives of others, and become “co-creators of the text by remaking the story through the social codes and psychic needs of their times” (79-80). For weight loss narrative, specifically, acts of co-creation take the form of compelled confession as readers perpetuate the cycle of using the example of regimen provided by the authors to guide not just their behavior, but their adherence to the prescribed codes of ideal citizenship. Where

note taking for dietetic regimen normalizes diet practice, food journaling normalizes the dietetic subject. Autobiographical narratives of extreme, intentional weight loss can be the main focus of a book-length text as in a weight loss memoir, layered into the testimonials of a diet book, the subject of a personal blog, featured as a sidebar in a magazine, or subtly hinted at in a commercial for a weight loss product. Reality television programs like *The Biggest Loser*, *My 600lb Life*, *Extreme Weight Loss*, and *Fat Chance* make the weight loss success narrative infinitely repeatable as representations of “real” people. Commodification of confession through the consumption of others’ lives acts as a ritual of surveillance, forming the basis for commercial diet programs.

Existing scholarship on diet culture tends to focus on processes of weight loss such as food restriction, undergoing weight loss surgery, or engaging in sustained, intentional physical activity. Sandra Bartky calls attention to dieting for weight loss as a set of disciplinary practices that requires coercive attention to the body’s functioning, rooted in patriarchal power realized as creating “docile bodies” (63-82). Susan Bordo examines the normalizing effects of diet culture in “popular representations through which their cultural meaning is crystalized, metaphorically encoded, and transmitted” (186-187). Through this normalization, eating disorders and other forms of self-harm become desirable rather than pathological. Cressida Heyes turns her attention to dieting for weight loss, generally, and the practices promoted by Weight Watchers, specifically, as enacting a Foucauldian concept of self-care, constraining as it claims to liberate (70-73). I argue here that the coerced production of autobiographical acts of confession in dieting, including food journals, weight trackers, and behavior journals, promoted by commercial diet programs serve a similar surveillance function. The imperative to consume the dieting lives of others as lifestyle guides, often at the same time a dieter is expected to produce her own

confessions, perpetuates the cycle of consumption and production of dieting autobiography that fuels the notion of “inspiration” as a necessary form of disciplinary surveillance.

The Role of Confession at Weight Watchers

Jean Nidetch started Weight Watchers in the mid-1960s as an informal gathering of women sharing tips and tricks for weight loss, breaking from strict governmental authority by using personal narratives within groups, allowing members to self-regulate and monitor each other. Nidetch thought that the New York Department of Public Health weight loss program on which she based Weight Watchers was “too dry” and focused too much on nutrition. She also felt that it did not adequately address the specific challenges of what Nidetch calls “fat housewives” (11) whose feelings of boredom and isolation result in overeating behavior. In her memoir, Nidetch describes confessing her overeating behaviors to other women in the group, and the feeling of relief when other women admitted to similar feelings and behaviors (18-21). In part, Nidetch’s efforts to unite a community experiencing a shared struggle with humiliation, shame, and frustration as fat women in America empowered women to dedicate an hour of their time each week as an act of self-care separate from the pressures of caring for others that drove them to use overeating as a coping mechanism.^x This rhetoric of group confession as “support” minimizes the effects of surveillance by downplaying the program as a product and upholding it as a holistic social group formed by an essential, inherent shared concern about weight management.

The original group meeting format has not changed much since Weight Watchers first came to church basements and community rooms across the United States fifty years ago. Kandi Stinson stresses the importance of ritualized confession as a surveillance technique. “To the extent that members feel they are being watched, they are less likely to break the rules” (137).

She describes how the leader takes time at the beginning of each meeting to enact a positive confession as she distributes milestone awards, and to invite each member to share NSVs (non-scale victories) from the past week. This performance of reciprocal confession repeats weekly, recirculating disciplinary power as members alternatively serve in the roles of confessor and examiner, alternating reciprocity by celebrating and being celebrated. In addition to the surveillance between members, the model of “leaders” deputizes a small number of members who have met the requirements for success.^{xi} These leaders hold no sovereign power over the other members, and are positioned rhetorically as peer mentors. Weight Watchers leaders are trained to “support” members’ weight loss efforts by soliciting the same advice week after week: “Stay within your Point range. Practice portion control. Exercise” (Heyes 73). Levy-Navarro notes that these confessions, such as “I stayed within my Points today,” not only follow a generic pattern that can be easily coded within a range of acceptable responses, but also compel the interlocutor into providing a similarly confessional response (“I’m the New Me” 353). Each disclosure builds an identity of “the weight watcher,” constantly on patrol for herself and others in the project of “the new me.” In all instances, the confessional performance requires repetition that “enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler 13), invoking the autobiographical “I” as the speaker constitutes herself as a weight loss subject.

The autobiographical “I” authorizes the reader/listener of confession to act as a surveilling figure, or an agent of government according to Foucault’s definition of governmentality in which subjects are guided by expert knowledges that seek to monitor, observe, measure, and normalize individuals and populations. The ritual in which Weight Watchers member are invited to share their weekly successes or failures at the beginning of their hallmark “meetings” models the appropriate narrative of a well-managed weight loss subject,

and functions as one of the disciplinary “techniques and procedures for directing human behavior” (“On the Government of the Living” 81). An early print advertisement for Weight Watchers highlights the importance of the group meetings as confessional spaces. “I don’t care how bad the weather is. I’m going to my Weight Watchers meeting. I can’t wait to tell my lecturer and the rest of the class how beautifully I slipped past all the temptations this week” (“I Wouldn’t Miss a Weight Watchers Meeting for Anything”).^{xii} The disciplinary practices that Cressida Heyes observes in her regular leader had the effect of “reducing a delinquent member to the role of a naughty child” (74). When I first encountered Weight Watchers, I was a child, and I quickly learned to fear reprisal from my leader for bad behavior just as much as I did from my parents at home. Weight loss, as I have been told repeatedly, is a matter of life and death. Any missteps, cheats, or defiant behaviors represent the most basic lack of self-care. The rhetoric of “lifestyle change” fully immerses the dieting member in a disciplinary surveillance paradigm that defers control over matters of self-care to the performance of ideal weight loss subject.

Taking a broad view of confession explains how autobiographical narratives of weight loss success function in Weight Watchers as verbal speech acts in the meeting room, through food journaling, and through autobiographical testimonials of weight loss success. The Weight Watchers Research Department claims that “Self-monitoring is integral to the Weight Watchers philosophy,” offering “many useful tools to self-monitor food intake” including paper and digital models. Confessional self-monitoring for dieting, a practice often referred to as “tracking” in the Weight Watchers lexicon, resembles note taking for dietetic regimen described by Foucault. Weight Watchers suggests tracking food intake, water intake, exercise, sleep patterns, “and more, along with notes about how you’re feeling about your personal progress. And you can compare your results with those aspects of your journey” (“Your Track to Success”). Related

articles in the Weight Watchers online knowledge base include “Habit Guide: Monitoring Yourself,” “Why You Should Keep a Workout Journal,” and instructional videos on how to use tracking tools. The section of the online knowledge base “Success Stories” carries the taglines “Read About Someone Like You” and “Starting Writing Your Success Story,” and features short autobiographical weight loss success narratives. “Looking for inspiration? For more than fifty years,” the introduction to the section boasts, “we’ve helped millions of people lose weight and lead healthier lives. But don’t take our word for it! Read our members’ success stories to see how Weight Watchers can work for you!” (“Success Stories”). The implication here is that inspiration means interpreting another person’s life narrative as one to emulate, which in turn positions the narrative as a lifestyle guide. As reading success stories and producing autobiographical confession through tracking are positioned as an important part of the self-monitoring process in dieting, leaders and other members serve as confessors.

Robyn Longhurst remembers her first experience with Weight Watchers, attending with her mother, her best friend, and her best friend’s mother. “I also recall that whoever put on the most weight each week had to take home a large, pink ornamental pig which we were told by the organizers to put on the top of the fridge to remind us to curb our appetites” (10). Presumably, the leader would have made it known to the group who gained the most weight that week, forcing a confession from an unwilling subject or disclosing the information without the member’s consent. Non-human animal metaphors—this time in the form of a ceramic pig—also allude to the sin of gluttony as an inability to control behavior or impulses like a rational, disciplined subject should. Weight loss products have always preyed on the real or imagined threat of social isolation due to fatness, and in many cases, the same products that offer a solution perpetuate marginalizing attitudes. The group meeting format is supposed to offer

refuge from the judgment of outsiders who cannot comprehend the struggles of being a fat person. As Longhurst suggests, the frequency with which dieting, generally, and Weight Watchers membership, specifically, acts as a bonding activity between women friends and family complicates the efficacy of these spaces as sites of self-care.

I spent many years performing as weight loss self, and many of those years were spent as a paid member of Weight Watchers. Once I stopped dieting for weight loss, I realized that the “problems,” “issues,” and “struggles” with my weight were not mine alone. A family history of perpetual dieting shaped many of my attitudes and beliefs about how I should present myself to the world—as someone invested in and loyal to the processes of self-surveillance in weight management. In what follows, I describe my own autobiography with confessional dieting texts. My experience is not limited to any essential, individual truth, but was a process through which I learned to know myself as a subject with the identity of Weight Watcher.

How I Learned to Keep a Food Journal: A Case Study

Shortly after my tenth birthday, I learned to keep a food journal for a real, powerful audience who possessed the authority to make decisions about my life based on my writing. At my annual physical, my mother mentioned to my pediatrician that kids at school teased me mercilessly about my weight, and it had started to affect my mood. Noting my off-the-growth-charts height and weight, the pediatrician urged my parents to enroll me in Weight Watchers, citing its reputation as a safe and moderate diet program. The program, for which my parents paid a weekly sum so hefty it precluded me from taking part in any number of organized social, cultural, or sport activities, consisted of a nutrition program regularly referred to not as a diet but as a “healthy eating plan.” My mother and I attended weekly group meetings led by a leader, a peer mentor employed by Weight Watchers and trained in program delivery, whose primary

qualification was that she reached her “goal weight,” maintained that loss for six weeks, and was currently within a 10 pound range of that goal weight. Each week at our 9:00 a.m. meeting at a Weight Watchers center,^{xiii} the leader weighed me and each of the other meeting attendees privately on a scale behind a screen, and wrote my current weight in a booklet that listed all past weights, the loss or gain each week, and blank, ominous spaces for future weigh-ins. After the meeting, my mother and I would go visit my grandmother and aunt, greeted as we walked through the door with, “So, how’d you do?” My response determined whether I would have coffee cake or dry toast for breakfast.

With every loss in five-pound increments, I received a sticker to put in my weight booklet. If I gained weight, the leader would demand recompense as if I had wronged her personally, disappointed but eager to know what went wrong. “Show me your food journal,” she ordered. In this journal, separate from my weight booklet,^{xiv} I had to keep track of all the food I ate throughout the week. The food journal came pre-printed with the days of the week, each compartmentalized by breakfast, snack, lunch, snack, and dinner, with one line per food item. At first, I wrote the quantity of food, its name, and the corresponding calorie expense (example: *1 apple = 80 calories*).^{xv} Later, Weight Watchers changed to a Points™ model in which an algorithm produces a number of Points based on calorie content, fat grams, and fiber grams, replacing calories counts (example: *1 apple = 2 Points*).^{xvi} My days revolved around how many Points I was allowed and what foods I would “spend” them on, with each item faithfully recorded. Each week at the meeting, I produced a neat, ordered food journal that I put as much concentrated effort into keeping it as I did my schoolwork.^{xvii} After pointing out that I should have skipped an afternoon snack on pizza night or passed on cake at a birthday party, the leader concluded with the standard Weight Watchers mantra of food journaling: “Remember: you bite

it, you write it.” During the weeks after a recorded gain, I paid special attention to writing down what Weight Watchers colloquially calls BLTs—Bites, Licks, and Tastes.

The food journal, as a daily account of all food eaten, serves a unique function as a weight loss tool of regimen. Writing a food journal and reading the journals of others does not directly result in weight loss like biological processes such as food restriction, intentional dehydration, and exercise can. In this way, food journals functions as “technologies of self” that can, according to Foucault, “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves” (“Technologies of the Self” 18). Learning to write a food journal involves subjection, so that the practice requires “certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes” (18). In other words, keeping a food journal not only allows the writer to track and comment on daily food choices, but reinforces the autobiographical weight loss subject as compliant and well-managed. Weight Watchers offers explicit instruction on how and why to keep a journal. “Using a journal can help you win the war against your weight,” it suggests (Sperl, “What Can Your Journal Do for You?”). “Weight is a battle” is only one of many primary metaphors Weight Watchers uses to promote journaling, including thinking of the diary as a scientific journal to record data and track patterns or as a checkbook that accounts for food surplus and deficit. This data-driven quantification of the diary obscures narrative subjectivity, giving the false impression that it is simply data, not the autobiographical self reflected in the pages. Yet, the increasing pressure to keep diaries or journals in a way that reveals patterns as a way to monitor and regulate behavior speaks to the project of weight loss as a disciplinary process rather than one of self-care.

The food journal also offers another point of self-care commodification. Just as one could practice food restriction without buying any literature from a commercial weight loss program, so could any writing medium serve as a food journal. At various points in its product history, Weight Watchers offered, at additional cost, pre-printed food journals, a digital pocket calculator that stored Points information, a clicking device that counted Points, and a three-ring binder to store program materials, the weigh-in booklet, and a separate food journal. Their current food journal, offered for separate purchase in the online store at WeightWatchers.com in addition to being included in the “Starter Kit” provided to each new member, features a quote from Jean Nidetch on the front cover: “It’s choice—not chance—that determines your destiny.” The product description lists the price as \$9.95USD, and the 12-week journal includes not only pages pre-printed with lines for recording food eaten and exercise, but also self-reflective prompts. “Writing down what you eat helps you lose weight. Simple as that. So think of this journal as an essential tool, your go-to guide and a great point of reference to see how far you’ve come” (shop.weightwatchers.com). The implication in this description and all instruction on food journal practice provided by Weight Watchers and other programs positions the journal as an objective, quantifiable historical record. Omissions or falsifications count as “cheating,” as the absolute truth value of the text directly reflects on the writer’s character. Suzanne Bunkers and Cynthia Huff insist that “the self-presentation in women’s diaries often tells the truth slant by leaving out as much as leaving in” (*Inscribing the Daily* 19-20). What Weight Watchers considers cheating may be better understood as “silences and gaps” that “invite us to interrogate the public/private construction of the diarist as well as the truth value and presumed historical objectivity of the diary record” (20). Using the food journal to cast oneself as the right kind of weight loss subject requires careful management of the autobiographical self.

The food journal Weight Watchers currently sells holds twelve weeks' worth of entries. Weight Watchers' own corporate data suggests that members tend to quit the program at ten weeks on average (Heyes 84), so after twelve weeks most members will have abandoned the journal or will need to buy a new one. Starting a new journal always represented a "blank slate," my writing practice directly connected to my potential success on a new diet. Daily writing proved my commitment to the program, and demonstrated the seriousness with which I approached weight loss. As soon as my writing practice began to fade, my weight loss stalled. I started and left behind more food journals than I can count, forcing a narrative disconnect between the undisciplined self who stopped writing and the moral self that would finally, this time, make it.

I do not remember how much weight I lost that first time at Weight Watchers, but it did not stick. My parents tired of paying week after week for gained weight, so I stopped going and regained all the weight I lost. While I floundered in the face of BLTs, my mother succeeded, losing over 100 pounds over the next three years. Desperate for inspiration to maintain the loss, she gained employment as a Weight Watchers leader and tried to emulate the women who led her during her weight loss "journey." To motivate others, she used her inclination for arts and crafts to design t-shirts and tote bags in which she carried her leader supplies. One popular design featured an image reminiscent of a "Wanted" poster showing a fat stick figure on the left and a thin stick figure on the right. "LOST—100 Pounds! If found, do not return. Go immediately to Weight Watchers!" As for me, the bullying at school continued and I started experiencing panic attacks. Three years after I stopped going to Weight Watchers for the first time, my mother and I went back to the pediatrician for a physical and to discuss my anxiety issues. This time, the doctor referred me to an endocrine specialist who convinced my mother

that the prescription drug Fen-Phen, a wildly popular combination of appetite suppressant medications, would help me lose enough weight to stop the bullying. (I realize now how misguided this perspective is, but my saying so is an invocation of what Augustine calls “the present of things past.”) The doctor asked me to keep a food journal. I did. I lost a lot of weight. She lowered my dose. I gained a lot of weight.

After regaining the weight I lost while taking Fen-Phen, I rejoined Weight Watchers in 1999 with my mother as my leader. Longhurst notes in her recollection of attending Weight Watchers with her mother, her best friend, and her best friend’s mother that the model of social support “united mothers and daughters against the common enemy fat” (“Becoming Smaller” 10). Heyes also describes bonding with female family members at Weight Watcher meetings, (74-75). My mother’s status as my Weight Watchers leader diminished our ability to bond over weight loss practices as we had before, and her reminders to stay on program felt doubly disciplinary. Every Monday during my junior year of high school, my mother and I packed the car with meeting supplies and drove to her assigned meeting in the basement of a Lutheran church. After I helped her set up and weighed in, my mother led the meeting while I retreated to the church basement reading room to do my homework while eating a whole box of Weight Watchers *Just 2 Points!* snack bars. I always recorded this in my food journal as *1 snack bar = 2 Points*, knowing that the true count, *6 snack bars = 12 Points*, would be frowned upon.

In 2002, during my third and final time as a Weight Watchers member, I started keeping an online diary dedicated to weight loss in addition to my paper food journal. The posts typically combined conventional food journaling by listing a quantified account of what I ate that day with the addition of a self-reflective narrative. I called the diary *Skinny Wiener*, taking the title from a line in *Heavyweights*, my favorite movie about kids at summer fat camp. By this time, I was

well-versed in the language of food journaling, and modeled the appropriate confessional techniques expected in my writing as a weight loss subject while adapting to the new-to-me form of the online journal:

November 2, 2002: I'm already worried about Friday. Friday is my WW day. I have this notion that since I've failed so many times my body has given up and decided that I will not be able to lose weight no matter what I do.

April 16, 2003: I know I have no Points left. In fact, I was probably over. But at risk of being anti-social and alone, I chose to go. My only option (in my head) was to forgo the ice cream. But that's much easier said than done. So I had my Mickey D's vanilla cone. And boy, was it tasty. So why am I guilt-ridden two days later?

June 2003: I eat every 2 hours now. It's interesting. One would think it's easy to stay within Points eating so little, but it's not. It's really hard. But I think I've got a system down. It took me a few days to figure it out, but I'll let you know how everything works out. I came up with a new plan today. Every time I eat (remember, every two hours) I drink a bottle (16oz.) of water. It's working so far. Let's hope I'm not water-logged by noon.

October 2004: It's really hard doing this alone. Since I'm at school there isn't anyone to watch me. It's all about me. I'm responsible for myself. If I cheat, I'm only cheating myself, which was true no matter what, but this time I'm the one who's paying monetarily and otherwise.

I also used Weight Watchers terminology to position myself as an experienced Weight Watchers member, bolstering my authority. Many Weight Watchers members eagerly embrace the emerging medium of the online diary as a confessional platform, and leaders encourage their members to read popular blogs regularly. No longer limited to the experiences of members in the meeting rooms, online diaries dedicated to weight loss, or “weight loss blogs,” offer an opportunity for constantly available surveillance. I learned how to write a weight loss diary by reading other diaries and weight loss blogs like *Dottie’s Weight Loss Zone*, *Roni’s Weigh*, and *BitchCakes* that provided autobiographical narratives of weight loss alongside advice for following the Weight Watchers plan. Laurie McNeill summarizes online diaries as confessional modes in which “the diarists adopt self-reflexive and self-deprecatory perspectives about their online lives, and acknowledge their personal and textual shortcomings with tongue in cheek” (“Teaching an Old Genre” 24). According to McNeill’s summary of the genre, I kept an online diary typical of newly established conventions.

During the time I maintained my first (but certainly not my last) online weight diary in which I actively and predictably adopted confessional writing modes, I had yet to disclose to anyone the sexual abuse I endured during the time I took Fen-Phen, which resulted in using binge eating as a coping mechanism. The drug’s effect—that I would lose weight no matter what I ate—allowed me to hide my binge eating as well as my trauma. Weight Watchers members often use the sanctioned strategy of “banking” Points to allow for restriction and binge cycles of disordered eating. For example, eating small meals during the day to “save” a large number of Points for a large meal in the evening, or exercising to “earn” additional Points for the day. I don’t know what kept me from writing about these binge eating episodes, but I understood that my food journal should reveal an objective, true, inner self that I subverted by not revealing what

I ate during those episodes. What is clear to me now is my understanding of the clearly defined parameters of appropriate dieting confession. I admit to my presumed blog readers that I falsified my food journal, but I assured my doctor that what I produced represented an objective truth about my eating habits to play the part of the compliant patient. I knew my audience, I understood how this audience could use my diary to make decisions about my life, and so I continued to write myself as a compliant weight loss subject.

Writing a Life After Weight Watchers

Through my life writing study, I learned about the Fat Acceptance (FA) movement. Coming into this political consciousness prompted a gradual rejection of dieting that was not entirely welcome. Without a clear trajectory of how to write my life, blogging for a public audience seemed less important. How would I frame my subjective experience without the guiding framework of confessional weight loss autobiography? I sought out books, blogs, and independent zines about fatness, obesity, and deviant bodies that did not rely on weight loss as a narrative device. Thanks to FA activists and scholars, I found these counternarratives in spades. Yet, many of these accounts of non-normative bodies relied on what Stacy Bias calls “good fatty archetypes,” a way of writing about fatness that neatly separates embodied conditions of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability from body size. For example, “The Fat Unicorn” eats mostly health food, engages in fitness activities, and touts a clean bill of health from their doctor. The Fat Unicorn is often seen in narratives of the body positioned rhetorically from the FA movement as a rejection of the notion that fatness can be considered universally bad (“12 Good Fatty Archetypes”). Dissatisfied by these narratives as well, I sought out narratives of the body that did not seek to collapse the complex, messy, and aesthetically diverse nature of bodies marked by gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability. During my search, I discovered

Samantha Irby's essay collection *Meaty*. In the next chapter, I argue that *Meaty* offers a "grotesque" model for writing narratives about body size that does not shy away from including body size as one of the many embodied conditions that contribute to complex subjectivity, and disrupts the expectation of body-based autobiography as a biopolitical technology.

CHAPTER IV: YOUR DISGUSTING MEAT CARCASS:

THE GROTESQUE BODY IN SAMANTHA

IRBY'S *MEATY*

This chapter compares characterizations of the obese body in traditional weight loss memoir with a vision for how subversive counternarratives of complex embodiment can constitute the obesetic subject in weight loss memoir in the 21st century. I argue that Samantha Irby's autobiographical essay collection *Meaty* represents a way of writing the body that disrupts normative representations of obesity as a rejected condition in weight loss memoir to include it as one of many embodied conditions that affect subjectivity. Irby narrates the visceral experience of living in a body marked as Other by race, class, gender, and ability at the same time she confronts the pressure to be normal. This complexity plays out in the text of *Meaty* as she both conforms to and violates normative notions of how to write about the body as demonstrated in traditional weight loss memoir and politically oriented fat autobiography. I use Mikhail Bakhtin's related concepts of "grotesque body" and "carnival," which Mikhail Bakhtin defines as a celebration marked by "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibition" (10) to explain how Irby uses non-chronological narrative trajectory and appropriation of derogatory animal metaphor to create an atmosphere of carnival in the text. Whereas traditional weight loss memoir seeks to restore humanity to the author by way of distancing the thin, After body from animality as much as possible, Irby's exploitation of the "grotesque" body in *Meaty* addresses the possibilities for resistance against Foucauldian notions of the "docile body" that may be "subjected, used, transformed and improved" as modeled in weight loss memoir (*Discipline and Punish* 136). Rather than assert the validity of her humanity

by characterizing her body as “normal” despite her fatness, femininity, disability, and blackness, Irby brings taboos of illness, ugliness, dysfunction, and death to the center. *Meaty* offers resistance to the rhetoric of weight loss memoir discussed in previous chapters, and through that resistance teaches alternate ways of reading and writing body-based autobiography.

The *Meaty* Carnival

In previous chapters, I drew on Foucauldian analyses of power that addressed how discipline enforces normative conceptions of embodiment that constitute subjectivity. These analyses focus on how power circulates to define what constitutes a well-managed subject but do not fully consider possible sites for resistance. Foucault advocates for the possibility of “a different economy of bodies and pleasures” to create change, but Margaret McLaren notes that Foucault “does not provide a road map of what these new bodies and pleasures look like” (110). While some feminist scholars take issue with the primacy of the body as a site of resistance, McLaren suggests that bodies do not operate outside of discourses, knowledges, and practices that recirculate power, and that “the multiplicity of knowledges, bodies, and pleasures works together as a possible site for resistance” (110). As a representation of lived experience, life writing demonstrates the interdependence of discourse and the body, and therefore, body-based autobiography can model resistance-in-action. But a question remains: how do we “take a step toward writing different stories that make our lives matter in very different life-affirming ways” (Levy-Navarro 354). Samantha Irby’s essay collection *Meaty* models a dialogic approach to writing about the body explained through Bakhtin’s theories of carnival and the grotesque body as one possibility to disrupt the disciplinary power embedded in weight loss memoir.

In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin outlines his theory of carnival in which the “bodily element” in grotesque realism “exaggerates and caricatures the negative, the inappropriate”

oriented in satire (306). Imagery of the “grotesque body” in literature represents a universal body that represents all people. As such, it is not a private or egotistical body, but a collective body, always growing, regenerating, and “not isolated to the biological individual” (19). Grounded by the “lower stratum” of bowels and genitals, the grotesque body “ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and complete phenomenon” (318). Bakhtin argues that the orientation of women is with the lower bodily sphere, and so the role of women in carnival is one of degradation. “She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys” primarily through laughter brought on by the satire of carnival (240). In literature, Mary Russo argues that grotesque tropes of the female body, fueled by Bakhtin’s image of the “senile, pregnant hag” (26), include the earth mother, crone, witch, and vampire (1). However, Russo also notes that “[i]t is an easy and perilous slide from these archaic tropes to the misogyny which identifies this hidden inner space with the visceral” (2). Weight loss memoir often reproduces these misogynistic archetypes by characterizing the feminine Before body as a crone or hag, closely related to Russo’s conception of the “uncanny” grotesque. The “uncanny” grotesque figure differs from the “carnival” grotesque most closely associated to Bakhtin as it serves as a foil for the “classic” body that serves as a “cultural projection of the inner state” (9). In this chapter, I argue that Irby’s use of the grotesque body in *Meaty* aligns with the carnival grotesque “to conceptualize social formations, social conflict, and the realm of the political” (8) in response to the tropes of the “doubled, monstrous, deformed, excessive and abject” uncanny grotesque body often used in weight loss narrative.

Samantha Irby’s 2013 collection *Meaty* features twenty-six autobiographical essays with topics ranging from her dysfunctional childhood, sex and dating, and body image issues, to living with Crohn’s disease, budgeting, the death of her parents, and a concept for a sitcom. The

essays are arranged non-chronologically, but are bookended by “At 30” and “I Should Have a Car with Power Windows by Now,” essays that depict her life at age 30 and 33, respectively. The final essay of the book, “Le Foods” contains five original recipes: pork tenderloin, beef taco casserole, fried chicken, pistachio-crust halibut, and tempeh sloppy joes. Many of the essay titles, like “Sorry I Shit on Your Dick,” “Massive Wet Asses,” and “How to Get Your Disgusting Meat Carcass Ready for Some Hot, New Sex” convey the profanity-laden style marked by liberal use of graphic imagery that Irby has honed on her blog, *bitches gotta eat*. Irby considers herself a comic writer, and describes her language choice as “hyperbolic,” specifically deployed “to let these dudes know you mean business” (“ETHS Grad”). *Meaty*, as an extension of Irby’s public persona, is often described in terms of shock value. Journalist Christopher Borrelli calls the essays “horrifyingly graphic,” and notes that Irby “often writes in all caps, speaks in all caps, and seems to exist in all caps” (“Blogger”). In Borrelli’s implication that Irby is simply “too much,” he reinforces the idea that there are rules, and she has broken them. For example, in the essay “Forest Whitaker’s Neck,” Irby takes stock of her physical “flaws,” which include “dark brown inner thigh meat” and “gross green veins.” Her reasoning for creating the list is a resistance to the pressure to be upfront with a new romantic partner. “It’s always that first shower after the breakup when I’m lifting my tits up to rinse the crumbs from underneath that now I have to go out and find another person who won’t balk at these flabby arms or whatever” (31). She perceives this disclosure as a required component of starting a new relationship, but resists the impulse by claiming, “I don’t want to do the ‘I’m sorry this is my disgusting body’ apology jig ever again” (32). According to the Amazon.com reviews, many readers hail the book as “honest,” which I read as code for an empathetic understanding of the demands to curate and maintain a docile body, or confessing faults if one possesses an unruly body. Irby’s

acknowledgment of disciplinary structures that support normative embodiment opens up the possibility to resist them in the spirit of carnival.

Irby's writing—both content and style—contains features of a political affinity described by McKinstry and Bauer as “feminist dialogics” in which private and public discourses can be “a means of cultural resistance and intervention” and are determined by positionality (3). Irby claims intersectional feminism as her only political affinity while recognizing the difficulty in assigning priorities to any particular project. “I’m a need my social, political, and economic rights to be equal to those of men. Forever. But I’m also black, which means I gotta be on the lookout for racism first; then I can focus on sexism” (“Eating Out”). When asked in the same interview if she identifies as a fat activist, Irby passes, explaining “I’m a fat person trying to eat food, fuck responsible dudes, keep my eyebrows under control, and make jokes about dumb shit. Activism sounds exhausting, but if I get to be some cult antihero for attempting to do all of these things while also being overweight, I can accept that shit.” Irby’s implication, that private practices can intersect public discourse without necessarily privileging the public sphere as the “real” space of resistance further suspends hierarchies that seek to create order rather than accept the polyvocality, or multiple voices, that may emerge through the cacophony of conflict. As Bridget Boyle argues, “the self-consciously transgressive female physical comedian can never truly occupy the normative subjective space” (“Take Me Seriously” 86), so whether or not Irby claims to speak on behalf of any particular political project, her comic voice contributes to the “queering” of carnival in body-based autobiography. *Meaty* models the possibility for narratives about complex embodiments that do not seek to regulate behavior, but make clear “the multiple and overlapping possibilities for feminist, queer, crip futures” (Kafer 170) in which the body is not presumed to be an improvement project. Irby’s comic voice in *Meaty* mixes with the voices

of dominant culture that she seeks to resist, and the effect is a representation of lived experience that embraces constant change and renewal rather than an assumption of progressive transformation.

On *Meaty* Time

As I discussed in Chapter 3, weight loss narrative functions as a biopolitical technology that models appropriate behavior as a “lifestyle guide” (Brown 360) in which the obese body is always positioned temporally as an After-body-in-waiting. The comic plot present in both traditional weight loss memoir and disability memoir is identified by Couser in *Signifying Bodies* as a narrative structure in which the disabled subject, through cure, development of a new self-awareness, or shift in political relationship to disability, is better off than when they started. Likewise in dramatic literature, comedy is defined by its commitment to birth and renewal as well as everyday characters who engage in unusual but plausible scenarios (Hokenson 211). Above all, conventional weight loss memoir is defined by a “Before/After” narrative structure in which the obese, rejected, animalistic “Before” body is reconfigured through a process of intentional, extreme weight loss to occupy the normative, thin, “After” body (Levy-Navarro 340). Much like comedies can be defined by a marriage or birth of a baby, weight loss memoir achieves its comedy not necessarily through laughter, but through the construct of “better than before,” thus positioning the obese and/or disabled body as lesser states of being. Disability memoir and weight loss memoir alike follow a single, linear temporal trajectory that reinforces the assumed potential for the improved body based entirely on the presence of a degraded body.

To set up the conditions for “the new me” of conventional weight loss memoir, authors typically begin from their birth or their first memories in childhood of experiencing fat stigma, establishing a pattern of evidence for the uninhabitable obese body. Levy-Navarro argues that the

confessional mode in weight loss memoir necessitates a complete division between the Before and After selves as dieters move between stages. The Before/After narrative is “apocalyptic in the sense that they focus on this absolute break with the past” (“I’m the New Me” 344). For example, Frances Kuffel begins her memoir with a story about her family not recognizing her on a visit home. “My family was at the restaurant, waiting for me, my moods, my body and face, and my eating. For the first time since I was an infant, they’d be seeing me—Frances, Francie—for what I looked like without the muffle of fat, without the veil of the unhappiness of being fat” (*Passing for Thin* 19). Jennette Fulda also explicitly states her newness in technological terms, reinforcing a permanent break with the past. “I’ve changed so much through this experience that I wonder if I should add an upgrade number to my name to alert people to all my new features. Introducing Jennette 2.0, now with less fat and a more huggable interface” (*Half-Assed* 232). In these characterizations, typical of weight loss narrative, the obese body represents an undesirable burden and source of pain.

The grotesque body in *Meaty* represents the potential breakdown of the linear trajectory of traditional weight loss narrative, insisting instead on multiple, contradictory subject positions that are constantly up for renegotiation, achieved in part by the episodic structure of the essays. Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body “is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (317). In weight loss memoir, the After body is not only presumed to be finished (stable and permanent), but it also serves as the mark that begins a “new” life. Weight loss narratives carry the expectation that dramatic weight loss as a “cure” for obesity should reveal a deeper, more authentic inner self that fatness obscures. In “The Tapeworm Diet,” a *Meaty* essay, Irby takes a critical perspective on weight loss without rejecting it completely. She satirizes compulsory

dieting while offering a nod to aesthetic normativity. “I need to lose some weight, though. Everybody and their mother is always taking goddamned pictures of my motherfucking skin bead and the Internet is already full of my unflattering fatness” (*Meaty* 167). After commenting on the absurdity of a number of fad diets including The Tapeworm Diet, The Cabbage Soup Diet, and The Blood Type Diet, she resolves to take a more moderate approach. “I just tossed out all my full-fat salad dressings and gave the college boys across the hall my emergency frozen burritos. Tomorrow I might even take the stairs. Baby steps” (177-178). This contradiction between asserting the reality and validity of her current fatness while pursuing weight loss speaks to Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque as it relates to weight loss memoir. The grotesque body differs from a conception of the body as an object to be improved because the change of becoming differs from the change of improvement. Improvement has a set beginning and end, while becoming does not rely on the presumption of completion.

Retrospection establishes a pattern that constitutes the obese body as uninhabitable, and justifies the worthiness of the present, After body as constituting the “real” self. Kafer questions the validity of denying the disabled self as illegitimate. “Why is disability in the present constantly deferred, such that disability often enters critical discourse only as the marker of what must be eliminated in our futures or what was unquestioningly eliminated in our pasts?” (*Feminist, Queer, Crip* 10). The present self that narrates weight loss memoir is the rhetorical starting point on which the security and hope of the future rests. As such, the future self awaits inscription after making a complete break from the past. The imagined future of weight loss memoir is one in which health, well-being, longevity, and happiness are promised. Obese embodiment, like disabled embodiment, is not “permitted to exist as part of a desired present or a desirable future” (Kafer 42). For Irby, past, present, and future desires lack hierarchy, suggesting

that time in the processes of becoming has no hierarchy, and therefore no specific body at any given time is better than any other.

“At 30,” the opening essay of *Meaty*, begins with a list of goals and accomplishments that Irby has not achieved. “Today, 2/13/10, is my birthday. I am excited because I am 30 years old and I don’t have a man in my life. I haven’t had any children. I haven’t finished college. I don’t have any major accomplishments of note” (9). Any retrospection at this point is summative, drawing on dominant, heteronormative expectations of what an adult should have experienced by this stage of life mixed with observations about her preferences and desires. “I am a cat person (sad). I’m ridiculously tormented and moody. I can’t have multiple orgasms. I would eat Toaster Strudel every day if I could. Dudes don’t promptly return my calls. I can’t stand Alicia Keys. I have vomited on the train three times in a row, and I fell asleep in a bar two weeks ago” (10). Irby ends the essay with a list of what she needs and wants, including her parents, “a brand new MacBook Pro with endless gigs of RAM,” a lint roller, a piano, patience, a bottle of Maalox, and “fresh flowers delivered to me every day” (11). Rather than mark her experiences of race, sexuality, body size, disability, and poverty as past, present, or future, Irby marks them by circumstance and desire, characteristic of carnival.

The final essay in *Meaty*, “I Should Have a Car with Power Windows by Now,” follows the same structure as “At 30.” “Today, 2/13/13, is my birthday. I am excited because I am 33 years old and the idea of a man in my life totally bores me. I don’t have a college degree. I don’t know how to make coffee in a French press. The filter in my humidifier needed to be changed three weeks ago” (239). Irby calls back to the past by the word “still,” suggesting a condition of the past that exists in the present. “I still have two VHS tapes,” she explains (242). Again, the repetition of her wants and needs has no hierarchy as “I need to add more potassium in my diet”

and “I need to be more compassionate” seem to be of equal importance (240). Irby denies the reader the expected outcome of the end of a body-based autobiography. She is not better off than she was when she started. She has many of the same needs and wants as she did at the beginning of the book. She has not made significant leaps in personal growth. She did not learn anything. The suspension of the status quo that the self-in-becoming must be better than a self of the past suggests that what “better” means is regulated by the same dominant power structures that compel Irby to confess in both essays that she does not have a man or a college degree in her life. If readers of weight loss memoir expect a lifestyle guide, *Meaty* offers a way to conceptualize self-improvement and the becoming body as a mix of the material, the philosophical, and the mundane. In the next section, I explore Irby’s use of subversive animal imagery in *Meaty* to characterize the grotesque body.

The *Meaty* Animal

The centrality of human-as-animal imagery in Irby’s descriptions of health, disease, and bodily functions violates the expectation of animal/human dualism in traditional weight loss memoir that strips the out-of-control, irrational, inhuman obese body of its humanity only to restore it after evidence of sufficient control through weight loss. The reader’s first encounter with Irby’s use of subversive animal imagery is the cover of *Meaty*, which features a close-up photograph of a rooster looking directly into the camera lens.^{xviii} Book covers are considered a primary paratextual element tied to the conventions set out by Phillippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact that ties the identity of the author to the subject of the same name (19-21). In weight loss memoir, cover images of the author may be blurred, out of frame, or otherwise manipulated from reality, but the referential figure is still human. By using an image of a rooster, the expectation that a photograph used on a cover should represent the author’s identity is doubly

contested because of the difference in species and sex of the animal. In this way, Irby symbolically equates herself with non-human animals and sets up a challenge to the term “meaty” as a euphemism for large bodies and an adjective that often refers to food. Other euphemisms for large human body size reference animals that humans eat including cows, pigs, hippos, and whales, so the choice of a relatively small chicken as the conceptual meaty referent further plays on expected conventions.

By centering her experience around human animality, Irby makes more important contributions to the lexicon of embodiment with the terms “meat carcass” (1) and “pre-corpse” (2, 3):

- 1) How to Get Your Disgusting **Meat Carcass** Ready for Some New, Hot Sex
(essay title, 135)
- 2) OH MAN, right now I am living in a post-breakup body. A totally destroyed meaty **pre-corpse**, hairy and dirty and kind of smelly despite my Earth-friendly deodorant. (28)
- 3) And, thankfully, I have the lowest possible standards when it comes to acceptable maintenance of this feeble **pre-corpse**. (139)

Irby’s images of the grotesque appear in her use of “carcass” and “corpse” as referents to the living body. Bakhtin explains that this contradiction complements grotesque imagery in which “death is not a negation of life seen as the great body of all the people but part of life as a whole—its indispensable component, the condition of its constant renewal and rejuvenation” (*Rabelais and His World* 50). Breakdown and renewal are both inevitable in the carnival spirit. Recognition of bodily decay and death as part of life alludes to Rosemarie Garland Thompson’s assertion that disability is “the most human of experiences,” unlikely to escape anyone if they

live long enough (“Re-shaping” 3). The insistence of characterizing decay and death as a part of life also resists a longevity imperative as it relates to weight loss.

Meaty offers a model of writing about living in a body marked as Other by disability, race, and body size that is not dependent on moving toward normalcy, and this suspension makes it possible to address the ways in which various bodily configurations of age, impairment, and aesthetic influence subjectivity over time. Irby writes, “Being ugly affords you a unique sort of freedom...and I became comfortable with how effortless some aspects of life are when you aren’t considered physically attractive” (46). This ugliness, she explains, equates to an invisibility that means she is not held to the same standards of behavior as other women particularly in terms of compulsory heterosexuality. Irby notes, “It’s pretty clear whether you are or are not beautiful... But once I’d drawn the conclusion that the face and body I was born with were the reason why I had so much extra study time, I tried to stop feeling so bad about it. Because really, what can you do?” (47). Ugliness, as it relates to feminine sexual currency, makes it possible for Irby to define herself in ways she could not if she were expected to conform to feminine beauty ideals. “I’m not sure that there is a time that I really feel beautiful. I still have the same face, the same lazy eye that is a dead giveaway when I’m tired, the same skin beard, the same weird dark spots and unexpected patches of hair” (48).

One of Irby’s contributions to the lexicon of embodiment, “skin beard,” references what might politely be called a “double chin,” a hallmark of embodied fatness that is traditionally understood to be a source of shame and something to be concealed. Fulda describes a default pose when having her picture taken that minimizes the appearance of undesirable parts of her body. “The desire to look good was evident in my ‘fat girl angle shot.’ Classic signs: looking up at the camera to hide a double chin, high contrast, cropped from the neck up” (87). Also, the

masculinity of “beard” upsets the gender norm that women should not have perceptible facial hair. Taken together, Irby’s claim of ugliness that allows for self-definition combined with her invention of “skin beard” makes it possible for her to upturn some of the common non-human animal metaphors typically used as insults in a carnivalesque way that can model possibilities for how non-normative language can expand the characterization of complex embodiments.

Sarah Bramblette, a member of the Obesity Action Coalition and advocate for obesity justice, notes that despite attempts at reclamation, *fat* continues to be used as hate speech and can be perceived as more stigmatizing than *obese*. “I’ve never had someone call me an ‘obese ass’ or ‘obese bitch’” (@Born2lbFat). Bramblette’s observation alludes to the use of non-human animal metaphors as a central issue of body size pejoration. Historically, livestock and human babies increase in cultural or economic value when they are considered *fat* (OED Online). Trends in pejoration begin in these undesirable contexts, and can be explained in part by the tendency to apply animal-based insults to humans. Dagmar Schmauks indicates that even though the ecological gap between humans and animals has decreased, many people still consider animals “other” (95). Using animal-based characteristics as insults renders the target as “non-human,” the strongest reproach (99), and her list of examples in Present Day English (PDE) and modern German “show how frequently we criticize human shortcomings with respect to specific animals” (106). She matches the allegation to the animal for personality traits such as “sly” (fox), “subversive” (mole), and “cowardly” (cur, worm), as well as personality traits like “show-off” (peacock), “talkative” (parrot), and “lazy” (dog, sloth). Of thirty-three allegation/animal combinations, only two address conditions of the body: “fat” (pig, hippo, walrus, whale) and “ugly” (rat, toad, warthog). “Fat” and “ugly” appear on her list as embodied “human

shortcomings,” which indicates that other plausible connections between human embodiment and characteristics of animals such as “tall (giraffe)” contain neutral or positive connotations.

Mitchell concludes *It Was Me All Along* with a list of what she will and will not miss about her formerly obese body. “I will miss the reckless abandon...I won’t miss the staring. I won’t miss the names—‘fat’ and ‘pig’ and ‘whale’” (225). Fulda describes an encounter at the beach when a girl her age tries to connect with her by suggesting that fat girls need to stick together. “Had she just called me fat?...Looking back at photos from that trip, I have to admit I resembled a morbidly obese flamingo. Regardless, I couldn’t believe she’d actually said that. How could she call me fat? Shouldn’t she realize how much that hurt?” (2). Judith Moore suggests that if fat people really cared about friends and family they would not “wander the earth looking like a repulsive sow, rhinoceros, hippo, elephant, general wide-mawed flesh-flopping flabby monster” (1-2).

The pejorative language of fatness consistently denies, diminishes, or otherwise manipulates humanity through non-human animal metaphors. In traditional weight loss memoir, the obese, Before body and the normal, After body are often characterized by a restoration of humanity. Elena Levy-Navarro suggests that the characterization of the Before body must be crafted so that it can be wholly rejected for the “new me” and that this identity is the one most closely aligned with a fuller version of humanity as “the fat person is imagined to be all that we do not want to be: lazy, gluttonous, unsexy, and unhappy” (“I’m the New Me” 340). Non-human animal metaphors often used in Before characterizations, such as “pigging out,” “big as a whale,” and “lazy cow,” fulfill this characterization based on a view of non-human animals as uncontrollable, impulsive, and irrational, making the obese body as far removed from humanity as possible. Insofar as weight loss memoir functions as a biopolitical technology used as

“lifestyle instruction, telling readers how to recognize, assess, and respond to ‘shortcomings’” (Brown 360), the ideal subject is a wholly human subject secured by triumph over animality.

Kuffel highlights this dualism in her assertion that “[f]at people take nothing in the material world for granted...A fat person doesn’t fit the human comforts and imperatives of rest and warmth. What’s left? The other necessity of biology—food” (*Passing for Thin* 36). After her weight loss, she celebrates “passing for human” by dating, joining a gym, and asking for a promotion at work. These very human accomplishments place Kuffel squarely within the “overcoming narrative” that portrays disability or the abnormal body as “something to be overcome through hard work and perseverance” (Kafer 141). In this narrative, the “supercrip” figure triumphs over their body to complete great achievements like climbing a mountain, but very mundane tasks like those taken on by Kuffel after her weight loss can also qualify as extraordinary.

Petra Kuppers argues that “[t]he same language of overcoming used traditionally in relation to nature conquests also informs much writing about disability: conquest and vanquishing, lording over or being lorded over, climbing the mountain or perishing on its slopes” (qtd. in Kafer 141). The language of triumph over nature appears often in weight loss memoir. Fulda describes how she could bend down to change a flat tire on her bicycle after weight loss. “I felt like I could conquer anything, fat or flats. Now that I was basically thin, I’d have to start looking for a new goal. I could be so much more than the girl who lost all that weight. Now that I’d lost the weight, I felt I could do anything” (214). Kuffel relishes her new mobility at her weight loss program group meeting. “It was the Stepfords’ eyes I first dared to look into while announcing the triumph of having, just now, bent over to tie my shoe. Whoa! Check it out—bent over. I didn’t have to find a ledge or a fire hydrant. I just—bent over. This meant I could now—

here's a bit of humanity I never thought about—tie my shoes at any time" (65). The predominance of normative bodily functions in traditional weight loss memoir suggests that the obese body is not normal, and that shoe tying represents the definitive human experience.

Irby rejects the notion that her ability to tie her shoes indicates the vibrancy of her humanity. "I am too old and tired to wear shoes with complicated laces. I wear Birkenstocks and shit. And, as a matter of fact, I was just on Zappos looking at Velcro New Balance sneakers" (18). For Fulda and Kuffel, the shoe example represents diminished physical capacity based on their size under a normative model that bases worth on mobility. Irby's solution to the problem is to wear different shoes, representing a political vision of disability that does not put the burden on an individual to change their body to overcome everyday obstacles. Language, as an everyday tool of discourse, can be approached in a similar way. Feminist scholars have taken up Bakhtin's view on the heterogeneity of discourses and styles that "suggests both the constructing role and the disruptive possibilities of language" (McKinstry and Bauer 189). Irby appropriates the construction of non-human animal metaphors as hate speech to self-define in a carnivalesque way, modeling for the reader how language can be used to disrupt normative expectations of how to narrate their own experience.

As efforts to promote weight loss as a cure for obesity have risen sharply in the 21st century, "fat people have been hearing more and more insistent death threats" (Rothblum and Solovay xvi). Traditional weight loss memoir tends to "focus on the way that the 'successful' dieter has now achieved maximum longevity, which had hitherto eluded her," quoting physicians' claims that they would have most certainly died if they had not slimmed down ("Fattening Queer History" 18). The insistence on longevity also supports a view of disability as an undesirable future, presenting weight loss success as nonnegotiable if one wishes to avoid

future impairment (Kafer 2). Irby describes her relationships with her gynecologist and the team of doctors who treat her Crohn's disease as cooperative and congenial in the essays "Skin Rashes and Arthritis" and "The Many Varieties of Hospital Broth." Illness and death are treated as a part of life rather than separate and avoidable processes (at least in the short term).

The rhetoric of obesity that insists on weight loss as a cure echoes the idea that control over nature, illness, and impairment is a possible, desirable, essentially human experience. Where animals are subjected to natural forces that govern birth, life, illness, and death, the true mark of humanity is the ability to manipulate these processes. An emphasis on human animality as modeled in *Meaty* calls into question the expectations that have been constructed for what it means not just to be human, but also to be a proper human citizen. Other projects that use reclaimed language to center subjectivity on experiences of human animality also model ways in which language can resist normative constructions. Artist Rachel Herrick recognizes how disciplining discourses mediate language use and has worked with the term "obeast," a neologism based on blending "obese" with "beast" intended to "satirize the ways that stigma (especially fat stigma) is created and perpetuated by legitimizing institutions like science and the media." Her organization, the Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies, also plays with language through the acronym MOCS. Through art installations, books, an online museum, and documentary filmmaking as "culturally trusted authorities," Herrick promotes the "conservation of the North American Obeast." While Herrick's work is currently part of a Fat Activist art subculture, her example of obeast shows how creating a new word has the potential to dislodge normative concepts of *obese* on its own. Substantia Jones appropriates "adipose" in her photography collection "The Adipositivity Project." Resisting *fat* and *obese* entirely, Jones brings back the archaic *adipose* in an attempt to reinvent the word. Like "obeast," blending

“adipose” and “positivity” as “adipositivity” provides an opportunity for bending the meaning of a new word against possible pejoration. However, Jones states that the project “aims to promote the acceptance of benign human size variation and encourage discussion of body politics, not by listing the merits of big people, or detailing examples of excellence (these things are easily seen all around us), but rather through a visual display of fat physicality” (*The Adipositivity Project*). Like Irby, Jones’s choice of terms—*fat physicality*, *benign human size variation*, *big people*—suggests that changing the lexicon changes the terms of discussing body politics in ways that can influence how people with larger bodies can represent their experiences in meaningful ways.

The *Meaty* Model

In September 2016, the American television network *FX!* announced that *Meaty* had been picked up for development as a new half-hour sitcom written by Irby in collaboration with veteran TV comedy writers Jessi Klein and Abbi Jacobson. Details about the show have not been released, but its inception points to the generative role of counternarratives as meaningful in larger discussions of representation. However, the announcement of the show drew controversy almost immediately. In some of the promotional news articles, headshots of all three writers were placed side by side. In others, most notably the white feminist news site *Jezebel*, Irby’s headshot was replaced with an image of the *Meaty* cover art. The erasure of Irby, flanked by two white writers working on a show about “failed relationships, taco feasts, [Irby’s] struggles with Crohn’s disease, poverty, blackness, and body image” (Reynolds), confused some *Jezebel* readers because Irby’s position as author was obscured by the presence of the book cover. Readers bristled at the idea of two white, female writers developing a show about blackness. Other readers pointed out that Samantha Irby is a black woman, and her being replaced by the book cover was not only insulting, but also misleading. The autobiographical pact strikes again.

Still, the potential of phrases like “skin beard,” “pre-corpse,” and “meat carcass” reaching millions of mainstream television audiences is no small victory for inventive lexical representation. As autobiographical texts like *Meaty* continue to be accepted into the mainstream, it is possible that these texts will have a meaningful impact on the kinds of stories that can be told about living with complex embodiment. As one *Jezebel* reader and Irby fan puts it, “[I] cannot wait until I get to recount the halcyon days...before there was a book, let alone a canon” (ohbunnybunny). So long as space continues to be held for counternarratives, a literary future with a carnival of fat-positive, queer, crip autobiographical narratives may not be so far off.

In the next chapter, I use a case study of an undergraduate literature course to explore how the related rhetorics of reading, writing, and resisting weight loss memoir as biopedagogy function in traditional pedagogical spaces. I problematize normative functions of “participation” in the classroom using theories of critical pedagogy, and explain how I used these theories to create assignments and equitable expectations of participation in my course design. Then, I reflect on my perspective as an instructor participating in the emotional labor of teaching in an Othered body.

CHAPTER V: PARTICIPATION, DISABLING
DISCOURSES, AND TEACHING
FROM THE MARGINS

This chapter chronicles my experience designing and teaching an undergraduate general education course on women's disability life writing that included weight loss narratives as required reading. Influenced by critical pedagogy theories about the student's role in education, the course design sought to problematize the concept of "participation" as a normative expectation of schooling. I explain how I used women's disability life writing as primary texts in the course not only as an introduction to the ways in which women write about their experiences with disability, but also because I wanted to show how disabled people often have the burden of requesting access and accommodation. By gaining a greater awareness of how bodies move and are prevented from moving through public space, I hoped that this would help students translate the authors' experiences with their own need for access and accommodation in their education spaces, because, as Miriam Fuchs and Craig Howes argue, life writing texts can serve as "a conduit to other subjects and debates" (14). While I conclude that aiming for students to make these conclusions on their own was a lofty goal for a 16-week general education course, some students did take initiative in the course to self-advocate. This suggests that introducing the concepts had a purpose beyond simply making students aware of these texts.

In this course, policies, required reading lists, schedules, and assignments all took into account the various ways that participation can be demonstrated by students. I argue that teaching disability literature requires an interrogation of the rituals of schooling, and that starting with the primary expectation of participation is a good place to start. Proactive accommodation measures in course design and teaching attempt to avoid what Jay Dolmage calls a "retrofit"

when bringing disability from the margins to the center of the classroom (“Disability Studies Pedagogy”). Ultimately, this chapter merges two main arguments that I make throughout this dissertation. First, that weight loss memoir should be included alongside disability life writing as part of a broader body-based autobiography category, and also that teaching body-based autobiography in literature courses complements learning and teaching about Othered embodiment outside the classroom. Representations of embodiment teach explicit and implicit lessons about how to negotiate public space as and among different body sizes, shapes, and configurations. Critical attention to how students come to this literature having been taught by dominant narratives about the body can help understand how people with disabilities learn how to move among the normal.

In the first part of the chapter, I provide an overview of the practical application of student participation in the classroom, focusing specifically on sample syllabi from comparable courses. Next, I give an overview of the critical pedagogy theories that influenced my course design, and then outline salient points in course design intended to challenge normative expectations of student participation. In particular, I focus on the assignment I call “Access Points” as a particularly productive example of engaging students in conversation. I then offer a self-reflective analysis of my experience teaching the course. The course design that I originally developed only considered how participation impacts students. I had not considered the double pedagogy of formally teaching life writing texts and theories while also teaching students an “insider” perspective on life as an obese person through my presence in the classroom.

Part One: Compulsory Participation in the Classroom

In normative pedagogy, participation is typically understood as actions performed by students that can be observed for evaluation by an instructor (e.g., raising a hand and waiting to

be called on to speak, looking at the person speaking, writing notes during lecture, and so on). Margaret Price summarizes the effect of these gestures as setting up an expectation that the student will contribute to a “productive” class session (*Mad at School* 73-74). Any deviations translate to student distraction or laziness, signaling poor academic achievement and/or disinterest in the subject matter (e.g., silence when prompted to speak, arriving late to class or not at all, not staying “on topic,” using digital devices in class, not looking at the person speaking, and so on). Price notes that existing scholarship on participation in higher education tends to insist that classrooms should be “civil spaces,” where participation management focuses on how to avoid “disruptions” during class sessions without considering disability rhetoric that attends to non-normative understandings of engagement (74). Price’s analysis of the role of participation as one of the common places (“topoi”) of academe in the “kairotic space” of the classroom “where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged” (6) centers on the students’ experience of marginalization when instructors reproduce normative participation expectations. “[W]hat does participation mean for a student who is undergoing a deep depression and cannot get out of bed? Or a student who experiences such severe anxiety, or obsession, that he can barely leave his dorm room or home?” (5-6) She later asks similar questions for teachers under the umbrellas of “productivity” and “collegiality,” but participation as an issue for classroom spaces seems to remain the right and responsibility of students. As power circulates in the kairotic space of the classroom, the teacher is responsible for setting the rules of engagement, which renders participation an unshared, and therefore unequal, concern.

Sample participation policies from syllabi available online reveal exchanges of power at work. Common conventions typically include an outline of what the instructor defines as participation, a description of actions or conditions that violate those expectations, and an

explanation of punitive measures for violations. Participation can also be called “conduct” or “presence” as a way to signal engagement with classroom activities and course content. However, even in courses that claim to examine critically disability as an identity category, instructors often demonstrate a lack of connection between theory and practice by placing a high priority on normative participation to signal engagement with classroom rituals and course content. Bridget Marshall, in the syllabus for her disability literature course, lists a wide range of activities that she considers inappropriate classroom behavior, including “text messaging, listening to music, cell phone use (other than the campus alert system), late arrivals, early departures, use of laptops for other than class purposes, disrespectful comments or behavior, intentional disruptions, failure to follow faculty directives” (“Disability in Literature”). She does not qualify this policy with a rationale, nor does she define “inappropriate” behavior within the context of disability rhetoric. Other participation policies taken from sample disability literature course syllabi available online suggest participation can also manifest as physical presence unmediated by technology. “More than 4 absences results in a zero for participation...Tardiness may also result in participation grade deductions...Electronics misuse (social networking, reading for other classes, IM, texting, etc.) may result in an F for participation” (Ahuja “Syllabus”). Punitive measures like grade reductions reward docile bodies not for their increased capacity to demonstrate learning, but for following arbitrary rules set out by the instructor. Participation is not positioned as a set of practices that should be performed because doing so leads to greater understanding of course material and more effective learning outcomes, but something done to avoid punitive measures.

Teachers can also send mixed messages regarding what participation is and how it will be evaluated. “Participation is a significant amount of your grade and you cannot participate if you

are not in class. You should participate in at least two ways: 1) Attend all class meetings; 2) Participate actively in our class discussions. I take your active participation in this course very seriously—it comprises 15% of your total grade” (Thompson “CAST 251”). In this example, participation is physical presence in the classroom and also engagement through in-class discussion. Thompson does not explain how students can demonstrate “active” participation in class discussions, and it seems disingenuous to claim that participation is simple presence in the first requirement, but that presence itself is not enough when it comes to class discussion. Applying critical pedagogy to Thompson’s policy would necessitate a definition of active participation and flexible guidelines for how active participation could be demonstrated with student input on implementation. Although students may not be interested in or feel empowered to offer feedback on course policies (especially early in the semester), making the opportunity available can start a process that helps students understand their own agency in the classroom.

Part Two: Theoretical Foundations

In order to effectively challenge student participation as a normalizing ritual of schooling, I needed to develop a course design that equitably addressed all the ways in which students could demonstrate their learning and exercise their agency. Critical pedagogy, as a set of theories and practices that examine and challenge constructs of power in the classroom, proved to be a useful interpretive construct on which to base my course. Using Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a foundational text, critical pedagogy considers how student learning can benefit from postmodern, anti-racist, feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories that also seek to critique oppressive power structures. One of the most common criticisms leveled by critical pedagogy against traditional educational processes is its reliance on what Freire calls the “banking model” of education, which places students in the position of passively receiving knowledge through the

instruction of the teacher (57-60). Many critical pedagogues, including Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and bell hooks, encourage conceptualizing learning as a process of subject formation in which students become capable of exercising their own agency, thereby directly challenging institutional oppression. Critical pedagogy resists the traditional hierarchy of power between students and teachers in the classroom by identifying and resisting privileged tensions among subjectivities that affect teaching and learning processes. This approach encourages students to acknowledge and act according to the capacity of their own agency to become full participants in classroom discourses. The notion that students should be encouraged to act as agents rather than passive receptors of knowledge remains the key contribution of critical pedagogy scholarship. Further scholarship that developed from this core principle attends to other ways that students give “voice” to their agency through written and extraverbal performances, and also considers disability, in addition to race, class, and gender, as an identity category that can impact a student’s potential to achieve the ideal of full participation in the classroom.

As discussed earlier, many classroom policies not only privilege voice as the primary way to demonstrate participation, the imperative to speak is often required as part of the course grade. Often, critical pedagogy also demands voice as an exercise in agency. However, silence can be considered for its generative potential. In his article “Rethinking Critical Pedagogy: Implications on Silence and Silent Bodies,” Richie Neil Hao addresses the claims of critical pedagogy that voice and expression lead to equalizing outcomes among marginalized groups. Interpretations of silence vary between cultural groups, sometimes signifying respect for a teacher or elder, or reflecting a desire to save face in front of peers. A teacher who practices critical pedagogy in its strictest sense may interpret the silent student as voiceless, even though pressuring the student to speak, even in service of challenging marginalization, runs counter to

the aim of encouraging the student to actualize their own agency. The teacher imposes the dominant ritual of her classroom, while the student performing contextual silence becomes oppressed. Hao argues “one way to reframe critical pedagogy is to consider silence as an active performance of human subjectivity, agency, and voice in other cultures” (276-277). Rather than view silence reductively as the opposite of speaking, Hao asks critical pedagogues to consider silence as a culturally informed performative action that can also communicate resistance. The view that silence functions as an action necessarily involves the body as a site of agency, and offers a more nuanced conception of “voice” in critical pedagogy.

Nirmala Erevelles similarly challenges the poststructural turn in critical pedagogy that fails to account for the material conditions of disabled bodies in the classroom. Her primary criticism stems from theories of critical pedagogy that use the body/subject as a site for signification without considering how disabled bodies are impacted by both the discursive and material oppressions of schooling. Erevelles frames her work using material disability studies and fills a gap in critical pedagogy scholarship by attending to the ways in which traditional rituals of schooling rely on controlling bodies:

One context where students learn to experience their bodies is education, where students learn the importance of disciplining their bodies so as not to distract from the ‘mental efforts’ of the mind. In an attempt to control these ‘disruptive excesses’ of unruly bodies, schools have developed elaborate practices that support the rigid organization of classroom space and time, the overriding emphasis on discipline, and the careful monitoring of the curriculum (33).

Erevelles positions disabled bodies as always already “unruly” in the classroom, both for the normative signification of the disabled body as less productive, and for the implications that

students with bodies that can adapt easily to disciplining rituals are more worthy of receiving an education. However, Erevelles' theory should not be read as only applicable for disabled bodies in the classroom. A student who needs to go to the bathroom in the middle of class has, in a sense, an unruly body. Absence from class signifies a period of time in which the student does not participate and is, therefore, not as productive as possible. Erevelles explicitly ties access to education as directly connected to potential economic output, and disabled bodies with diminished economic viability face real physical and ideological barriers to education in ways generally unaccounted for by critical pedagogy. Unfortunately, like other scholars working within disability studies, Erevelles fails to consider how large bodies represent "disruptive excesses" in the classroom and how that impacts their status as always already unruly. The organization of classroom space is highly regulated and often disproportionately assigned, which limits the possibilities for large bodies to move through classroom space freely.

Hao and Erevelles continue to focus on student experiences of silence and unruly presences in their work, leaving space for similar questions about the instructor's presence as affecting and affected by normative expectations of presence and productivity. Elisabeth Johnson and Lalitha Vasudevan argue in their study on critical literacy practices in a high school classroom that the teacher's physical presence constructed as authority figure has a significant influence on how students responded to in-class assignments. The collaborative effect of teacher and students performing participation in normative ways allows affective responses to go unacknowledged in the classroom because they "exceed logical, rational, verbal, and written responses" that students generally perform for teachers and that teachers expect from students (34). Johnson and Vasudevan show that students and teachers alike have a sense of appropriate classroom behavior, and students may be less likely to share in the presence of a teacher critical

responses that 1) transgress whatever stance the student believes to be the “opposite” of the teacher’s, and 2) embody a physicality counter to what is normally considered appropriate (language, gesture, volume, tone, body positioning, etc.). Teachers cannot easily attend to these critical responses if the classroom is governed by disciplinary decorum. Johnson and Vasudevan suggest that teachers “will likely need to acknowledge and even break classroom norms and taboos—modeling their own critical performances that...might not fall under the readily recognizable rubric of critical literacy” (40). Something as simple as asking students to write on the board has the potential to disrupt power hierarchies and unseat students’ perceptions of which bodies have authoritative potential in the classroom.

Part Three: Course Design

When designing my internship course, I focused on two main goals. The first was to teach disabled women’s life writing texts in order to explore with my students the concept of disability, broadly defined as physical, mental, and/or social constructs of impairment that affect quality of life.^{xix} The second was to investigate the concept of “participation” through the same broad concept of disability to theorize a critical pedagogy in which accommodation is already built into the course rather than a reactive response to individual students with disabilities. If critical pedagogy calls for a reexamination of power relations that encourage marginalized students to assert their “voice” and “presence,” participation is a cornerstone of classroom “infrastructure” that can be manipulated in service of liberation as much as, if not more than, physical and digitally mediated classroom places. Price claims that “a classroom’s infrastructure comprises not only its tables and chairs, its technologies, and its participants, but also the beliefs, discourses, attitudes, and interchanges that take place there,” and so embodied rituals also necessarily impact the structure of a classroom (61). When designing my course, I considered

each component of the infrastructure as equally important. Instead of waiting for a student to ask for a specific accommodation due to disability, I considered accommodation broadly to avoid “retrofit” in my course. Dolmage argues that reactive processes of accommodation that respond to a need for making an existing object or practice more usable renders invisible the experience of those who use it (“Mapping” 20-23). A classic example is the wheelchair ramp added to a pre-ADA building that must be placed in an undesirable location away from the main entrance. Both ramps and stairs allow access to the building, but the inflexibility of the original design means that the ramp and its users are never fully integrated as having equal status. Original inception matters here, as it considers users who benefit from multiple access modes as an inclusive process.

Where the retrofit example does not translate neatly to teaching is that people who want access to a building already have a vested interest in getting in the door. None of my students admitted to reading the course description I posted on the English Studies department website before registration started, and several students told me that they registered for my class because it was the only elective course for the Women’s and Gender Studies minor that had open seats. For a teacher working under these conditions, asking students to identify reasons to study unfamiliar material may go no further than doing enough work, at the right time, and in the right way to pass the class. According to these (but not all) students, the teacher’s job is to outline all of the expectations for the course ranging from what a student should learn to how students should behave in the classroom. The belief that the teacher has total control over every element of the course including the bodies of students was evident to me when students continued to ask for permission to go to the bathroom even though I explicitly asked them to stop and explained that their insistence on this ritual unnerved me. In other words, from my students’ perspective,

their investment in class participation began with the syllabus and ended with their final course grade.

As a general education course that also served as an elective in the Women's and Gender Studies minor program, I anticipated that most students who enrolled in this course would be situated in a wide variety of home disciplines without formal training in literary analysis. One graduating senior with a Marketing major remarked that they "never read this much for one class" (via email). Other student remarked in class that they did not know how memoir differed from fiction, nor did they know how to look for paratextual clues to assist in genre identification. In addition to providing explicit instruction in basic literary analysis skills, I also provided students with background information on general life writing concepts such as differences between fiction and non-fiction, nuanced distinctions between autobiography and memoir, and how certain privileged autobiographical forms can authorize who can write a life writing text. For required reading, I chose two book-length, mass-market memoir texts (*Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy and *Two Whole Cakes* by Lesley Kinzel) and a widely available graphic memoir (*Marbles* by Ellen Forney), supplemented by essays and short excerpts by Audre Lorde (*The Cancer Journals*), Nancy Mairs ("On Being a Cripple"), Ann Patchett (*Truth and Beauty*), Marya Hornbacher (*Wasted*), Lauren Slater (*Lying*), Eula Bliss ("The Pain Scale"), and Kate Bornstein (*A Queer and Pleasant Danger*). A few weeks into the semester, I decided to add a selection from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring: How We Look* based on issues that came up during class discussion about public space, passing, and how bodies read as texts. The original reading schedule did not include any disability studies theory, so *Staring* filled that gap and challenged students to respond to a text that complicated their responses to the primary texts. Also, I knew that students would need to research disability studies in literature to complete their

final project, and they would benefit from familiarity with Garland-Thomson's work as a prominent scholar in the field of feminist literary disability studies.

The readings were scaffolded from more traditional constructions of visible, physical disability that would be familiar to students (Grealy and Mairs) toward more complicated constructions of disability as an identity category that includes invisible conditions such as mental illness, epilepsy, and chronic pain (Forney, Slater, and Bliss). I ultimately chose *Two Whole Cakes* over a traditional weight loss memoir based on what I perceived to be a need to introduce students to FA-oriented memoir. Because Kinzel discusses weight loss critically in the text, I believed this would also be a way to connect what students already know about weight loss memoir with the idea that weight loss is not a cure for obesity. This scaffolding also mirrors a shift from more common autobiographical forms—the essay and book-length memoir—to forms that would ask students to expand their boundaries of “literary” works—the graphic memoir and mixed-genre text. Several students mentioned never having read any different genres of life writing texts, and my suggestion that social media updates fall within its scope sparked lively discussion on multiple occasions. Students seemed most engaged with life writing as an element in their own lives through social media, but had difficulty with the concept that their self-selected disclosures were “authored” rather than borne of a spontaneous social impulse.

Discussions about social media as life writing also made it possible for additional topics on life writing, such as whether or not reading and writing on digital devices “counts,” and how rhetorical technology use in the classroom impacts learning and perceptions of participation. One related consideration for future course design is whether or not to exclusively select texts that are available in a variety of formats. *Autobiography of a Face* and *Two Whole Cakes* are widely available in print and as e-books, and all the supplemental articles were delivered electronically

for students to print or access on screen readers. However, texts like graphic novels are not available in any other format and would require the services of Student Access and Accommodation to make the text available in a digital format. The choice to teach *Marbles* in this course again would depend on accommodations that could be made for students who have difficulty reading a graphic novel. In a small way, reading selection exemplifies the suggestion that the traditional and its alternate can coexist as most students chose the print copy of the required texts, but did not have to identify as disabled to have access to the e-book. Similarly, providing opportunities for multiple discussion formats allowed students to self-select their preferred method of in-class participation.

In-class discussion was driven by an assignment I call “Access Point,” an opportunity for students to submit questions or observations about the texts prior to the next class meeting, and then respond in multiple ways over the course of the semester. The impetus for developing this assignment came from the pedagogical issue of how to engage students with the assigned reading while being attentive to the ways in which traditional assessments like in-class quizzes can put some students at a disadvantage. The Access Point assignment had two different components that reoccurred multiple times during the semester. First, students were asked to submit questions, observations, or highlights from the readings to the next class meeting. Students could submit via email or write their Access Point on a piece of paper. Students provided Access Points at will and I did not require certain number to be submitted. After class, I posted all the Access Points without author identifiers in a Google Doc. This document acted as an archive that would facilitate the second step of the assignment.

Students were asked to provide six formal responses to Access Points of their choice. I required a minimum of six formal responses throughout the semester as the main formal

assignment, but many students opted to complete more as part of their learning contract. This assignment was intended to take the place of “participation” commonly included as part of a student’s overall course grade. Critical embodied pedagogy is at work here in four distinct ways: 1) participation as a formal part of the course grade is not behavior based, 2) this type of participation assessment takes the place of reading quizzes that demand immediate and spontaneous responses from students, 3) allowing students to reflect on the reading both before and after it is discussed in class creates space for productive silence that may help students develop a more nuanced analysis, and 4) it reinforces the students’ position as active learners rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Using this approach, students do not feel pressured to develop a coherent argument immediately after being asked to consider a complicated issue, or produce responses under a time restraint by using a quiz to test reading comprehension. Instead, it stresses the process of learning and respects students as embodied readers and writers by reinforcing learning as a process that requires time and focus.

While the majority of the discussion topics came from the Access Point assignment, we also spent a lot of time as a class Googling medical conditions—a practice borne out of students’ curiosity, but one that necessarily enhanced our discussions about how life writing authors write disability, pain, and impairment. For example, when reading *Autobiography of a Face*, students were curious about how Lucy Grealy’s cancer and series of reconstructive surgeries affected her facial structure. One observant student noticed that prior to our Googling, I used the term “Ewing’s sarcoma” to refer to Grealy’s cancer even though she does not name the condition in the text. This led to an intense discussion about the rhetoric of the author’s book jacket photo (Grealy appears in a slight shadow, but facing front in the most recent edition). I took this opportunity to ask students to consider how autobiographical writing on disability can

purposefully distance the reader from the author and/or their condition based on the information they leave out of the text and what effect this has on the reader. A similar discussion happened during our group research on epilepsy while reading Lauren Slater's *Lying*, which was further complicated by the invisibility of the condition and Slater's admission that epilepsy functions as a literary metaphor. Some students found an edition in which the subtitle *A Metaphorical Memoir* does not appear on the cover. One particularly agitated student remarked that they felt "duped" by Slater because her metaphorical design is not revealed until the end of the memoir. Again, issues of visibility, truth value, the burden of proof for the disabled, and the issues of how clinical diagnosis (or lack thereof) affects the author's representation of the lived experience of impairment served as excellent gateways to meaningful investigation of difficult topics. As students developed more confidence using the terms of autobiography studies and disability rhetoric in class discussions, the questions and reactions they posited demonstrated a deeper level of engagement with the texts.

Students would frequently ask that we watch a particular video that they saw on Facebook that reminded them of the previous class period's discussion, or report that they read an article about disability on a personal blog, "which is like a memoir!" (in-class discussion). When I found out that Australian comedian Stella Young died, I emailed the class because we watched her TED Talk, "I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much" and I thought they would want to know. A student emailed back to say that they knew that Stella died because they began following her on Twitter after we watched the video because, "the way she talked about being a teenager was so funny." Their attentiveness to connections between class texts and disability in media they consume also expanded my knowledge of how disability appears in unexpected digital spaces. I may never have known about the open access database of Tourette's

syndrome tics available for audio remix and sketch interpretation without a student bringing this connection to class (“Tourette’s Hero”).

Accepting that the temporal axis of participation extends beyond the sixteen weeks of the course, it is reasonable to assume that making the connection between disability life writing and real, personal experiences with accommodation is the beginning of a process. It is impossible to know for sure, but the student who stopped me in the middle of a lecture to request that I zoom in on the small font of a website may ask for an accommodation in another class or anticipate issues of access while organizing a campus event. Surely, the next time Oprah Winfrey endorses another memoir, someone who took my course will wonder what allowed that person to publish a memoir in the first place. The students who performed participation “correctly” without evidence of anything more than superficial engagement with the material represent the outliers. The majority of students remained attentive to deeper issues of representation in the texts, and expressed concern for learning how to read, write, and talk about women’s experiences with disability in a responsible way. As a group, the class quickly picked up on the distinctions between the medical/individual and social models of disability, and incorporated this foundational disability studies concept into their analyses of the literature. However, when students read *Two Whole Cakes* near the end of the semester, they began to reproduce fatphobic language and concepts in their anonymous Access Point responses but remained mostly silent during in-class discussions about the text, with the exception of the chapter on plus-size fashion. On that day, we had a rousing discussion on how all women are discriminated against when it comes to vanity clothing sizes. Despite missing the point entirely, they did not ask me to Google “obesity,” nor did anyone offer an anecdote about a family member living with obesity as they

had with childhood cancer, borderline personality disorder, or epilepsy. It did not take me long to realize why that might be.

Part Four: Teaching from the Margins

The following is a list of all the Access Point responses submitted by students over the three days we discussed *Two Whole Cakes* in class (no changes made to punctuation, grammar, or spelling):

- By promoting Fatshion we would also be promoting that it's okay to be that size. My only worry is that we overlook the health concerns in our strive for body acceptance. How can we find a balance of body acceptance and health awareness?
- On pages 21 & 22, Kinzel describes how she cannot understand the mocking and hate that teenage girls spew at her. But she doesn't care about teenage boys. Why do you think this is and do you feel the same way?
- Based off of what Kinzel was discussing on page 33 & 34 about shopping online & the struggle to find clothing that fits in stores, Kinzel wants there to be more clothing to fit people her size. How will the obesity epidemic change what clothing is in stores? 1/3 of the population will be in her shows. The stores will have to respond.
- Why does the author assume that "non-fat" people don't have a problem finding clothes as well? Do you think that the point she has on compliments is a bit over-excessive?
- Page 24. How does "fatshion" relate to other ideas or programs? (For example: Dove Love Your Body Campaign)
- One page 27, Kinzel says, "The sweatpants and stained shirt represents not only a disregard for fashion at a given moment, but a systematic failure to adhere to the most common standards of appearance." What system is failing? Why can one outfit corrupt such a system?
- On page 28, Kinzel talks about liberal and radical feminist solutions. How do these solutions affect how we perceive overweight people?
- Why (or why do you think) does society make it so that fat people think they have to dress a certain way? (Is this okay?) Annoying. You do you, girls!
- How do you feel about Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" campaign? Do you feel that "fat" children need to be eradicated?
- "Excellent produce and other whole foods are expensive and often impractical when we can get processed foods in greater volume for less money" (114). Do you think this contributes to the "obesity epidemic?" Are there any solutions to this?
- Kinzel spends pages 100-107 going over different descriptive words for bodies. Do your definitions align with hers? Why or why not?

Access Point submission was voluntarily, anonymous, and not graded, so none of these responses were required under threat of grade reduction or other punitive measure. Also, I was

not the intended respondent for these questions, which changes their interpretation slightly (particularly the last question about descriptive words for bodies). Although the Access Point assignment produced the largest number of questions, in-class discussion only revolved around students' autobiographical anecdotes related to these topics. In response to the first question, I posted a link in the Google Doc to an activist's blog explaining the concept of Fatshion and its relation to compulsory thinness. I did my best to address the problems with students using the phrase "obesity epidemic" in relation to FA texts and cited passages from *Two Whole Cakes* as representing an FA perspective. The student who wrote the "Is this okay?" sub-question identified herself and explained that "this" referred to using the word "fat" to refer to fat people with obese bodies. But the most glaring example of the disconnect between the fat rights concepts introduced in *Two Whole Cakes* and students' understanding of fatness as it relates to health and fitness emerged during a discussion on what obesity actually is.

After two class days spent discussing vanity clothing sizes and whether or not "health" could be influenced by diet and exercise, one student finally asked, "Wait. What even *is* obesity?" I explained that the BMI chart is currently the only diagnostic tool to categorize obesity, and without further explanation, I found a BMI chart online and displayed it to the class on the projector ("Lean Body Mass Index"). After a few moments, the same student spoke up again. "Hold on," she said. "That says I'm overweight but I eat, like, nothing but salads and work out all the time!" Others disclosed their own BMI status, aghast that they would be considered "slightly overweight" or "obese." In this moment, my students showed me what I suspected to be true but never could prove—that "obese" people held a somewhat mythical status. Phrases like "the obesity epidemic" conjured an image of the monstrous obese person so far removed from real life that students could not connect the harmful effects of stigma and discrimination with

actual people. I finally exclaimed, “I’m morbidly obese, and I have been my entire adult life.” Another student responded, “No, you’re not! You’re just a little chunky is all.” As if, somehow, their assurance made everything okay again.

Prior to this moment, I considered my willingness to share my own autobiography a testament to my feminist commitment to reflexive teaching. I had no difficulty sharing my identities with my students even though, as Victoria Kannen argues, “personalizing one’s pedagogy can create an avenue for personal attacks, intimate connections, and emotional exposures” (35). I assumed my obesity was obvious to my students, but at this moment I realized that they interpreted my prior claims of fatness to be an example of Nichter’s “fat talk.” To them, I was not reclaiming “fat” as a radical gesture. So, when I said that “the obesity epidemic” is a phrase that harms fat/obese people, they did not see it as harming *me*. Linda Bacon argues that it makes sense for students who identify as fat not to trust instructors who appear thin as “we’ve been set up to hate each other” (“Reflections on Fat Acceptance” 10), but should fat instructors not trust their thin students? The discussion on *Two Whole Cakes*, especially on the last day, left me feeling not just exposed and vulnerable, but also like I had lost something fundamental in the relationship with my students as their teacher. Kannen posits, “the fat pedagogy that comes out of my thin body may be met with less resistance than if I were a fat professor” (35), but I doubt that is true. In a room where the fat pedagogue is the largest person in the room, my students resisted in their silence. As Elena Escalera suggests, fat teachers may cause students to “feel discomfort with their own emotional reactions to a fat person, their beliefs about fat people, and their uncertainty of how to respond to the professor without making offensive comments” (207). Prior to outing myself as obese, students felt free to ask questions and make observations about

fat/obese people that aligned with the dominant perspectives on fatness. After I claimed my fatness/obesity, I became the Other for them.

When I began to conceptualize my course and my goals for disrupting normative expectations of participation and disability, I did not anticipate that my own needs for accommodation would go unaddressed. I felt confident that I could model ways to disrupt the rituals of school and oppressive expectation of “Teacher.” It turns out that disrupting the status quo involves addressing the deeply embedded, embodied rituals of what it means to be a Teacher. I first tried to manipulate expectations spatially, but none of the options felt comfortable. I tried sitting at my students’ level, but when they did not move their desk-chairs from their row configuration, I had to sit in the chair and twist to face them. I did not try teaching from the back of the room because the crowding of desks made it difficult to move my larger body fluidly around the room, a hesitation that betrayed my own bias that I would be taken more seriously in a body that moves in a steady, controlled way. More often than not, I retreated behind the teacher’s station. Even moving from behind it to write on the whiteboard made me feel vulnerable. From behind the teacher’s station, I could maintain my position as an authority—a mindset that is problematic in its own right. Students did not have to fear my incompetence when I had physical control of the computer. Price, Dolmage, and other disability scholars argue that people with disabilities are often disabled rhetorically—presumed incompetent and not readily accepted as an expert or authority. Although the status of obesity as a disability is still highly contested, based on my experience in this course I would argue that fatness is also considered a rhetorical liability—when it cannot be covered. While I cannot fully account for my students’ misinterpretation of my size or refusal to accept my self-identification as obese, based on the research of this dissertation I conclude that fat/obese people are extreme

Others. It is key to continue teaching body-based life writing in undergraduate classrooms and making narratives about what it is like to live in particular bodies more diverse and accessible. In and out of classroom spaces, lessons about how to interpret the body are being exchanged, and weight loss narratives should be the only story told about what it is like to live in a body like mine.

CONCLUSION

On December 4, 2016, FA activist and artist Stacy Bias released a short, animated video entitled “Flying While Fat.” The documentary-style video is the result of a collaborative research project with Bethany Evans of the University of Liverpool that “centers around the actual voices of fat air passengers as recorded in live interviews” describing their experiences with commercial air travel. The responses of several interviewees serve as the voiceover for the animated story of fat women boarding airplanes and settling in their seats. One participant says, “[i]t’s like I have a hyper-awareness of my body at all times that other people don’t have to think about. They don’t have to think about their space and how much or how little they’re taking up. But I’m always trying not to burden someone else with my body.” Other participants echo the feelings of anxiety that come with the pressure to take up less space, while others describe physical pain caused by fellow passengers who slam down armrests into the bodies of fat passengers. Despite taking all the right action, participants still have anecdotes of painful harassment. “The worst that ever happened—I picked the window seat. I pre-boarded so I wouldn’t be in the way. And I was settled in my seat. And this woman...was still complaining about having to sit next to me.” I wrote the introduction to this project well before Bias released the video, but I was still surprised to hear nearly identical story to the autobiographical anecdote that I included in the introduction about reading *Stigma* on an airplane. The similarities are no mere coincidence; the reality that flying while fat can be dreadful for fat people who face a very real risk of abuse and harassment needs to be addressed as a broader political issue.

Deeply entrenched social codes have created patterns of movement, behavior, and expectation that seem to create a universal narrative that flying while fat is a miserable experience for everyone. The difference between this video and the experience of flying as

portrayed in weight loss memoir is Bias' focus on the harm done to fat people because of these attitudes, and on the need to change expectations about what it means to share public space. The suggestion that fat people should take up less space through dramatic weight loss in order to be treated with dignity has no place in the video.

One video participant suggests a solution that speaks directly to my goal for this project. "I don't necessarily know if there's some way to fix this," she explains, "unless people learn that it's okay to be different sizes." Through the stories we tell about what it is like to live in our bodies, and how it feels to move through the world among other bodies, we teach each other that it is, in fact, okay to be different sizes because we *are* different sizes. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the sensational exaggeration of bodily difference in weight loss memoir has taught us to fetishize dramatic transformation at the expense of understanding how typical, everyday experiences constitute a life. Narratives that support the validity of one body size/shape/configuration over another, like weight loss memoir or the overcoming narrative of disability memoir, authorize harmful practices of exclusion that impact how individuals are allowed to participate in public life. Couser suggests that disability life writing has already influenced legal and cultural change, and has "responded to, and helped to create, greater opportunity and access to public life" (*Signifying Bodies* 5). As much as the conventions and limitations of published memoir determine who gets a life, the possibility that autobiographical subjects can emerge from inclusion within an established genre may lead to writing that centers on more diverse embodied experiences that can "take a step toward writing different stories that make our lives matter in very different life-affirming ways" (Levy-Navarro 354).

Like Bias' video, I have designed this dissertation project to address issues of representation in a way that calls into question the dominant narrative of how body size should

be characterized in favor of advocating for holding space for different kinds of stories. Life narrative has an important role in the effort to resist dominant ideas about body size and expand the possibilities for how to write a life. Published, book-length memoirs written by authors aligned with fat activism are beginning to reach mainstream audiences. Journalist Lindy West's memoir *Shrill* became a New York Times bestseller shortly after its 2016 release. *Bad Feminist* author Roxane Gay's forthcoming memoir *Hunger* is also expected to subvert traditional expectations of how to write about health, fitness, and body size outside the traditional expectations of weight loss memoir. In addition, social media sites like Twitter and Facebook allow life writers who may not have access to traditional publishing media to share their stories in these spaces. A colleague posted the "Flying While Fat" video on her Facebook timeline and explained that she was flying for the first time in three years and looking for support. One commenter suggested she join the "Flying While Fat" Facebook group, and others told their stories of recent air travel experiences. As digital communication media continues to evolve, these spaces will no doubt be one of the most important influences on how we reshape narratives about embodiment to drive change through empathetic connection.

This dissertation used a study of weight loss autobiography to synthesize ongoing conversations in life writing studies, disability studies, and fat studies that address a shared concern for representations of bodily difference. These fields have already responded to the need for intersectional analysis when considering representations of difference in identity categories of race, gender, and disability, and I hope that this study shows why including body size in these discussions is an important, albeit complex, consideration of embodiment. The scope of this study was limited to weight loss success stories in life writing, but future research on weight loss narratives in non-fiction genres, the novel, film, television, and blogs would also work toward a

more comprehensive consideration of body size narratives in media. The role of technology in body size manipulation and identity construction would also merit further consideration, both as a mediating tool for understanding health and fitness, as well as a theoretical concern for posthuman studies and critical animal studies. Some of this work is already underway, as evidenced by life writing studies conference calls for papers that specifically include body size as a point of analysis. This suggests that space is being held for questions about how life writing studies as a field of inquiry further investigates how discourses of body size fit into literary representations of embodiment.

As this dissertation project shows, it is possible to find meaningful narratives at work in literary sites often taken for granted as part of our everyday lives. Possible areas of research that could benefit from an analysis of weight loss memoir are popular non-fiction genres like cookbooks, diet books, and government health and fitness texts. The continued popularity of the weight loss memoir has also contributed to trends in publishing that include connections between blogging and weight loss memoir as a catalyst for the career of an author. For example, Andie Mitchell's blog led to her memoir that served as leverage for her second cookbook/memoir on moderation and healthy eating. Another commercial analysis could include how weight loss memoir produces series memoirists. Frances Kuffel went on to publish four more memoirs, including a second weight loss memoir, *5 Angry Fat Girls: 5 Women, 500 Pounds, and a Year of Losing It All—Again*, which chronicles a second attempt at intentional, dramatic weight loss after the publication of *Passing for Thin*. The weight loss success narratives embedded in these documents are also culturally and historically situated, and have a widespread influence on how individuals make health and fitness choices.

An analysis of the uptake of government-sponsored nutrition information through the USDA was beyond the scope of this project, but their 100-year history as part of the public health landscape suggests that their texts have an important but unexamined effect on American expectations of control, surveillance, and the role of government in regulating health behaviors. The interplay between government, media, medicine, and commerce has become increasingly complicated, and further study on weight loss narratives can further contribute to scholarship in life writing studies, disability studies, and fat studies. The issue of how to negotiate shared public space will likely continue to influence interdisciplinary scholarship and activism as webs of technology, commerce, government, and science policies determine who can participate in public life and to what extent they are allowed to do so. Therefore, as long as obese bodies are marked as abnormal, and fat people are pressured to take up less space than they need, then weight loss memoir will continue to be a social justice issue. The introduction of body-based memoir as a site of analysis can contribute to interdisciplinary projects to further understand how representations of body size/shape/configuration recirculate or resist dominant power structures. As autobiographical narratives of embodiment emerge in response to these policies, the ability to tell more than one kind of story about body size becomes increasingly important. My analysis insists that “what it’s like” to live in a body of anomalous size is not a natural given, but an experience shaped by historically and culturally situated ideologies, like those espoused in weight loss memoir, that teach us how to care for ourselves and others. I have shown in this dissertation that the experience of writing a life from the perspective of a particular body size is culturally and historically situated, and these narratives have the capacity to be reshaped again by writing against a “one size fits all” template.

NOTES

ⁱ At the time of this flight, I occupied the amount of space commonly known as a women's size "US 18." Over the years in which I worked on this project, I ranged in size from 16-20, and at one point early in the project experienced the changes in body size, shape, and configuration typical of a full-term pregnancy. Body sizes in this range are all considered "motrbidly obese" based on my height, but I would be considered a "small fat" by FA standards closer to the size 16 space. I submit my autobiography as evidence of the complex social location of obesity and the fact that personal fluidity of body size figures prominently as a feature of everyday life rather than a once in a lifetime transformation.

ⁱⁱ The panic over "the obesity epidemic" has led to an increase in weight loss products for companion animals, meaning that weight loss promotion saturation is even more prevalent in U.S. culture. See the YouTube video "Overweight Pet Challenges: Funny or Sad?" created by pet food company Hill's Science Diet at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90PU44jyhR0>.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Circus Historical Society incorporates worldwide circus scholarship, but the majority of scholars focus exclusively on its legacy in the United States. Though my work with circus is also limited to its unique cultural and commercial presence in the United States, it would be a misrepresentation to say that the organization limits scholarship to one geographic area.

^{iv} In 1977, Ward and his management team came under scrutiny for including a "pickled punk" exhibit. Popular in the early 1930s, these exhibits showcased fetuses preserved with formaldehyde in jars. Ward's partner Chris Christie was arrested and charged in Lake County, Illinois, with illegal transport of human remains, an incident Ward remembers fondly as providing a boon of press coverage for the rest of the season (Taylor, J.).

^v The language of the freak show has evolved from its original usage to a more compassionate, nuanced system of describing these performances in part based on the work of disability rights advocates to reclaim "freak" from its pejorative connotations. Historically, "freak" referred to human oddity performance, not a disabled person. Even in its common 19th century usage, some performers rejected it in favor of "human oddity." Here, I follow the lead of freak show scholars like Robert Bogdan, James Taylor, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Janet Davis, and Rachel Adams and refer to exhibitions of bodily difference in its broadest sense as "human oddity performance." "Freak show" is a type of performance historically situated from about 1840 to 1940 that only includes human performance,

and “sideshow” refers to the same performance that also can include non-human animal acts and museum-like exhibits.

vi Although “Agnes Blumenthal” is an entirely fabricated character, the “F.F.V.” designation seems to be a nod to aggrandizing status as “F.F.V.” stands for “First Families of Virginia” (wiki).

vii It is not unusual for sideshow or freak show insiders to share gossip confidentially. James Taylor is a well-known biographer of circus personalities, so it is likely that he did not have a written source for his information.

viii Ancestry.com databases contain public records, census data, and other historical records such as passports, church records, and military records. Certainly, the information contained in these records also do not reflect absolute, verifiable truth. I always approached information I found there with a hearty dose of skepticism, and consulted multiple sources for accuracy when possible.

ix A full explanation of the history of diet culture and the shifts toward medicalization and biomedicalization in the United States from the mid-19th century on is beyond the scope of this project. For more information on these topics, see *Never Satisfied* (Schwartz) and *Biomedicalization* (Clarke et al). For an overview of USDA food guides, see “A Brief History of USDA Food Guides” (<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/content/brief-history-usda-food-guides>).

^x Overeating, generally, and overeating as a response to emotional stress, specifically, has been the prevailing attitude about why people are obese. However, it is the one that Nidetch cites in her own experience as having the most effect on her weight, and (whether true or not) the one expressed by her members as their primary weight-as-health concern.

^{xi} As of June 2016, Weight Watchers outlines the requirements for employment as a leader as “achieving and maintaining (or continued loss) for a minimum of 12 consecutive weeks.” Weight loss is defined as “10% weight loss or healthy BMI weight with minimum five-pound loss (if joined outside the healthy BMI range); or five pound loss (if joined within healthy BMI range) on Weight Watchers program” (“Meeting Positions”).

^{xii} Weight Watchers changed its terminology from “lecturer” to “leader” in the 1960s. Recently, their “Beyond the Scale” program reboot co-opts the more peer-oriented term “coach.” It is too early to know if the term leader has been officially replaced or whether it will catch up in common usage.

^{xiii} Weight Watchers meetings are often held in community centers or church spaces, but in 1972, Weight Watchers opened its first single-purpose centers in the United States, which doubled as product showrooms (Schwartz 222).

^{xiv} Weight Watchers famously provides a seemingly endless variety of branded products for every weight loss need. In this case, my mother bought me the Weight Watchers portfolio, a small three ring binder in which I could keep my weight booklet, food journal, and weekly program literature. It also contained a small number of blank “Notes” pages. Each of these pages contained a quote at the top of the page featuring classic Weight Watchers motivators like, “Nothing tastes as good as thin feels.”

^{xv} I have been so conditioned to memorize the caloric content of food that I listed the calorie count of the apple from memory.

^{xvi} Until a few years ago, the “Points” system was the prevailing method of food tracking for the Weight Watchers program. It became such a recognizable concept that it would not be uncommon to hear non-contextual phrases like “I’m under my Points” in everyday conversation. Even though Weight Watchers has reduced its reliance on the Points system, many packaged food products manufactured by or endorsed by Weight Watchers still carry a “Points Value” alongside the nutrition facts label.

^{xvii} I was a “straight-A” student in a gifted program at this time in my life, so I mean to say I put a lot of energy and focus into keeping my food journal.

^{xviii} This cover is not Irby’s first use of subversive paratextual animal imagery, nor will it be the last. Her blog, *bitches gotta eat*, invokes bitches as slang derived from a referent to female dogs. The current cover image for her forthcoming essay collection, *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life*, shows an angry kitten fresh from a bath.

^{xix} I began using the term “body-based autobiography” after I taught the course. In a revised article, this is the term I would use, but at the time I designed the course I did not have a clear conceptual trajectory for how weight loss memoir would be categorized with disabled women’s life writing.

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